

# **‘The Informal is Political’**

## **How Karenni Women Build Peace Amid Protracted Conflict and Displacement in Myanmar**



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For the Karenni People,

*“The future does not make us.  
We make ourselves in the struggle to make it.”*

– Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the multifaceted engagement of Karenni women in peacebuilding, recognising the challenges posed by entrenched gender hierarchies and prolonged conflict in Myanmar. Utilising a critical intersectional feminist approach the research highlights how the capacity-building initiatives of Karenni women in exile and inside Karenni State create new spaces for leadership within their households, communities and political institutions. By focusing on women's daily experiences and their engagement in peacebuilding mechanisms in the wider Karenni community, essentialist assumptions about gender and peace are questioned. The exploration of women's diverse peace practices reveals the power of the informal sphere, challenging prevailing notions about the impact of women's small, creative acts on social transformation and policy development. The case study on Karenni women highlights how capacity-building projects have enhanced their skills and knowledge thereby strengthening their ability to advocate for gender rights and peace. Central to the theoretical debate is the conceptualisation of 'everyday peacebuilding' and 'capacity-building,' which provide crucial insights into the progress of gender-just agency, whereby 'capacity-building' is presented as a transformative process that allows women to translate resources and opportunities into social transformation. This process is argued to foster a beneficial cycle of empowerment that not only advances more gender-just realities but also challenges traditional norms.

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>IEC</b>	Interim Executive Council
<b>HHDA</b>	Household Development Approach
<b>KNPP</b>	Karenni National Progress Party
<b>KNPLF</b>	Karenni National People's Liberation Front
<b>KNWO</b>	Karenni National Women's Organisation
<b>KSCC</b>	Karenni National Consultative Council
<b>WSP</b>	Women's Study Program

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Map 1: Political map of Myanmar (new names)<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Political map of Myanmar (new names)*, 2020, map, in "Women's Invisible Labor in Peacebuilding: Gender, Ethnicity, and Power in Transitioning Myanmar" (PhD diss., Northeastern University), 15.



Map 2: Political map of Myanmar (old names)<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> *Political map of Myanmar (old names)*, 2020, map, in "Women's Invisible Labor in Peacebuilding: Gender, Ethnicity, and Power in Transitioning Myanmar" (PhD diss., Northeastern University), 16.

## 1. Introduction

The conflict in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), is deeply embedded in the lives of its people. With 135 distinct ethnic groups, each has its own unique history of violence and oppression. Towards the East, at the border of Thailand, Karenni State with its diverse ethnic communities, embodies yet another narrative of ethnic diversity, conflict and peace. Ever since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Karenni people<sup>3</sup> have been fighting for freedom, autonomy and recognition under a brutal military regime which has established a culture of violence in many communities.<sup>4</sup> Amid the complexities of conflict, Karenni women have emerged as key architects of peace, subtly challenging traditional narratives through their resilience and agency. The Karenni Women's Organisation (KNWO) powerfully articulates this sentiment, stating:

Until the Karenni women are freed, the Karenni community cannot be freed. If women are not freed, the oppressed people in the whole country cannot be freed,' we declare to abolish military dictatorship and patriarchy to build a federal democratic union.<sup>5</sup>

This perspective reframes the discussion on women's roles, positioning them at the forefront of resistance against oppression and violence. It highlights their agency in the pursuit of self-determination and equality, not only within Myanmar but also within their communities and the broader socio-cultural context of entrenched patriarchal norms.<sup>6</sup> The intersectionality of gender and ethnicity, alongside the intricate relationship between gender and peacebuilding, represents a pivotal yet underexplored field within academic discourse.<sup>7</sup> Particularly the challenges of Indigenous ethnic minority groups like the Karenni are often underrepresented

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<sup>3</sup> 'Karenni' constitutes an umbrella term for seven sub-ethnic groups. Officially, the group is referred to as 'Kayah.' However, this name was imposed by the military regime in 1952 without the consent of the Karenni people. Given its political implications and disregard for the diversity of ethnic communities, the term 'Karenni' will be used in this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Naw Wai Hnin Kyaw and Soe Soe Nwe, "From Margin to Center: Experiences of Political and Social Marginalization of Ethnic Minorities in Karenni State," *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Myanmar Office and Peace Leadership and Research Institute* (2019), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15641.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> KNWO (@KNWO), "The images from the 7th Congress of KNWO, which was held in the Thai-Karenni border on June 11–13, 2024," Facebook, June 20, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/CAoiBaEWuQjiEYce/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mollie Pepper, "Ethnic minority women, diversity, and informal participation in peacebuilding in Myanmar," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13, no. 2 (2018): 61-75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2018.1472030>; KNWO, "7th Congress of KNWO."

<sup>7</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor"; Linnéa Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency: Care and Silence in Women's Everyday Peacebuilding in Myanmar," (Master's thesis, Umeå University, 2020), <https://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?dswid=-3751&pid=diva2%3A1472774>.

in academic research.<sup>8</sup> This thesis aims to bridge this gap by examining the peace-generating practices of women within the Karenni communities in Myanmar and the Thai border region. By utilising a reflexive feminist approach focusing on the intersectionality and lived experiences of Karenni women, this study seeks to amplify the voices that mainstream discourse frequently neglects.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.1 Myanmar's Conflict

Myanmar with a population of 55 million is known for its significant ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, encompassing around 135 distinct ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> The country is divided into seven ethnic states—Karen (Kayin), Mon, Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, Karenni (Kayah), and Chin—that encircle a central plain primarily inhabited by the Bamar people who constitute the ethnic majority. Formerly known as Burma<sup>11</sup> the country was under British colonial rule from 1886 until 1948 which reinforced a racial hierarchy categorising the population into 'indigenous' and 'alien' groups.<sup>12</sup> This hierarchical structure persisted under subsequent military regimes and contributed to a strong centre-periphery divide, whereas the ethnic minorities continuously resisted forced homogenisation policies.<sup>13</sup>

Since gaining independence, Myanmar has experienced significant political turbulence largely due to the military, known as the Tatmadaw, which has entrenched itself as a central political force. This influence has manifested in four military coups occurring in 1958, 1962, 1988, and most recently in 2021.<sup>14</sup> After a coup under General Ne Win in 1962, military dominance was institutionalised and economic mismanagement through the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) led to widespread resistance and the country-wide 'People Power Uprising' in August 1988 (8888 Uprising). The military responded with yet another coup and

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<sup>8</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor."

<sup>9</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency"; Roger Mac Ginty, "Indigenous peace-making versus the liberal peace." *Cooperation and conflict* 43, no. 2 (2008): 139- 163, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836708089080>.

<sup>10</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> In 1989, the military junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar, claiming that it includes all the country's Indigenous groups. However, few minorities state that the word historically includes them. Today, the Karenni still use 'Burma' due to the political associations of 'Myanmar' with the oppressive Junta.

<sup>12</sup> Thant Myint-U, "Myanmar's Coming Revolution: What Will Emerge from Collapse?," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2021): 133.

<sup>13</sup> Myint-U, *Hidden History of Burma*.

<sup>14</sup> David I. Steinberg, "The military in Burma/Myanmar: On the longevity of Tatmadaw rule and influence," *Trends in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2021), no.6: 1-37, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814951722>.

established the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) which resulted in Myanmar's political and economic isolation.<sup>15</sup> Throughout decades of military rule, ethnic minorities in Myanmar have faced severe oppression including forced labour, extrajudicial killings, and displacement, especially through the so-called 'Four Cuts Strategy', a counter-insurgency policy aimed at depriving ethnic armed groups of essential resources and dismantling civilian support.<sup>16</sup> Despite some political openings in 2011 and the 2015 elections that brought the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi to power, aspirations for regime change were thwarted by the 2021 military coup.<sup>17</sup> Since then, peaceful protests were met with violent force from the junta regime which continues heavy bombardments on villages in all parts of the country. Politically and militarily most of Myanmar's population has shown resistance and allied across ethnic backgrounds with several Ethnic Revolutionary Groups regaining large territories by successfully forming alliances against the junta forces. Nevertheless, fighting is at its height, leaving civilians with no safety.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2 The Karenni Struggle

The Karenni people predominantly live in Karenni State (also known as Kayah State). The name is an umbrella term for seven sub-ethnic groups, the Kayah, Kayan, Preh (Kayaw), Kay Ba, Yataleh, MaNu- Ma Naw (Kaw Yaw), and the Paku – Karen, who exhibit a rich cultural heritage.<sup>19</sup> During British colonial rule the Karenni region enjoyed a degree of autonomy as a protectorate state. However, post-independence, the Burmese government's efforts to centralise control over ethnic territories, including Karenni State, led to increased conflict.<sup>20</sup> As one of several political groups, the Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP), emerged in 1957 to fight for greater autonomy and formed a military wing to engage in armed resistance against the central government.<sup>21</sup> Exacerbated by the recent military coup, the struggle for autonomy and against

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<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, "military in Burma/Myanmar."

<sup>16</sup> Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan and Vahpual, "What is the Myanmar military's 'four cuts' strategy?," *Alljazeera*, 5 July, 2021. <https://aje.io/tp8wm4>.

<sup>17</sup> Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, and Khun Noah, "Myanmar's military coup and the elevation of the minority agenda?," *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 297-309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.1912620>.

<sup>18</sup> Caleb Quinley, "Fighting spirit': How Myanmar's resistance is taking new ground," *Alljazeera*, 26 March, 2024, <https://aje.io/zg9xb1>.

<sup>19</sup> Kyaw and Nwe, "From Margin to Center," 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Caleb Quinley, "Fighting spirit': How Myanmar's resistance is taking new ground," *Alljazeera*, 26 March, 2024, <https://aje.io/zg9xb1>.

ethnic oppression continues until today, exposing the Karenni people to continuous military targeting, forced labour, sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, land grabbing, and environmental exploitation causing many to seek refuge in Thailand.<sup>22</sup> The situation in Karenni State has seen little improvement despite ceasefire attempts and political reforms. The 2021 military coup d'état worsened the humanitarian crisis with thousands seeking renewed refuge in Thailand's Temporary Shelter Areas,<sup>23</sup> such as Karenni Sites 1 and 2.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the years Site 1 has increasingly become a pivotal centre for Karenni political activism and peacebuilding, hosting various organisations including the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) and the Karenni National Education Department (KNED).<sup>25</sup>

### 1.3 Women, Refugees and Peacebuilding

Women in the Karenni community play a central role in peacebuilding, albeit within the constraints of prevalent gendered social hierarchies.<sup>26</sup> Their involvement in community-based work and active participation in networks and organisations such as KNWO underscores their agency in everyday peacebuilding. Integrating ethnic and women's perspectives is therefore vital for developing sustainable peacebuilding mechanisms within Karenni State and the broader context of post-revolutionary Myanmar. This thesis empirically builds on recent contributions to this topic employed by Linnea Blomqvist, Jenny Hedström and Mollie Pepper. These three female scholars have extensively added to the everyday peacebuilding literature in Myanmar, and Karenni State. Based on extensive evaluations and contextualisation of lived experiences, their publications serve as an important foundation for this research. They provide analyses of women's perceptions in the Karenni community and align with critical feminist approaches to conducting research.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Karenni Human Rights Group et al. *Atrocity Crimes in Karenni State* (Karenni Human Rights Group, February 2023). <https://karennihumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Atrocity-Crimes-Karenni-State-Report.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Thailand never signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees therefore the Temporary Shelter Areas are not officially called 'refugee camps'. At this moment Thailand hosts around 90.000 refugees from mainly Karenni and Karen State in nine Temporary Shelter areas along the border (UNHCR, 2023 report).

<sup>24</sup> The Border Consortium, Annual Report 2023, (Thailand: TBC, May 15, 2024), [https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/3.-Book\\_Annual-report-2023\\_ENG-compressed.pdf](https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/3.-Book_Annual-report-2023_ENG-compressed.pdf); The Border Consortium, "Camps in Thailand." Accessed July 2024, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/where-we-work/camps-in-thailand/>.

<sup>25</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report WEAVE II 2020/23" (Donor Report for tdh Germany, Chiang Mai, March 2024), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor."

<sup>27</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75; Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency"; Jenny Hedström, "The political economy of the Kachin revolutionary household," *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 4 (2017): 581-595, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1273254>.

### 1.3.1 Locating Feminist Peace

The analysis presented throughout this thesis corresponds to Catia Confortini's feminist critique of Galtung's typology of positive peace.<sup>28</sup> She argues that his framework lacks the inclusion of gender as a social construct that entails power relations and influences the social construction of violence. She asserts that conventional approaches to peace often neglect the structural and cultural manifestations of violence that disproportionately affect women.<sup>29</sup> Confortini's work highlights the importance of intersectionality, emphasising how race, class, gender, and other social categories shape experiences of conflict and peace. Finally, she advocates for a vision that includes social justice, equality, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures by suggesting a '*feminist positive peace*' that incorporates feminist principles.<sup>30</sup>

In response to this conceptualisation, Blomqvist argues that feminist peace embodies the transformation of social structures.<sup>31</sup> In her work "Ambiguous Agency: Care and Silence in Women's Everyday Peacebuilding in Myanmar", she uses the 'everyday' as an analytical focus yet argues that to be truly feminist and 'gender-just' the analysis must start from the assumption that the everyday itself is constituted of structural inequalities. Her work initially locates social reproduction, care work, and peace in one discussion, highlighting how daily gendered dynamics curb women's benefits from peace. Nevertheless, she views care and strategic silence as forms of agency and resistance, and not as signs of passivity or powerlessness.<sup>32</sup> Importantly, her extensive fieldwork in Karenni state concludes that everyday peacebuilding and rigid gender hierarchies cannot be detached from one another.<sup>33</sup> She argues that care and silence as 'arenas' of peacebuilding are therefore also limiting the scope of women's agency and might reinforce gender inequalities.

Pepper further contributes to the discussion about women's agency, by adding to the debate on the gendered politics of peacebuilding.<sup>34</sup> She criticises recent literature on Myanmar's peace processes for focusing too much on the formal sphere, thus leaving the

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<sup>28</sup> Catia C. Confortini, "Galtung, violence, and gender: The case for a peace studies/feminism alliance," *Peace & Change* 31, no. 3 (2006): 333-367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2006.00378.x>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

variety of women's contributions unnoticed. She uplifts the marginalised voices of Karenni women by focusing on ethnic women's activism and organisations such as KNWO, primarily locating women's agency in the informal spheres of peace negotiation. Moreover, Pepper identifies the cross-border activism of ethnic women's organisations in building positive peace through affective and reproductive community work. She highlights that gendered social norms enforce expectations for women to perform affective labour, which aligns with Blomqvist's assertion that women's agency is often rooted in a fundamentally gendered division of labour, ultimately leading to the devaluation of their contribution.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Pepper proceeds with a continuous exploration of Confortini's 'feminist positive peace'. She expands upon feminist conceptualisations by delving into the meaning and process of constructing peace among intersecting identities.<sup>36</sup> By emphasising a holistic conceptualisation that acknowledges the interconnectedness of gender, ethnicity, and social structure, Pepper identifies a 'gendered political consciousness' that influences women's agency and their perceptions of peace.<sup>37</sup> This comprehensive approach proves valuable in assessing the feasibility of feminist just-peace within the specific context of the Karenni community.

By recognising the longstanding history of conflict in Karenni State, Hedström and Cárdenas correspondingly emphasise the crucial role of women in understanding the needs of families and ethnic minority groups in peace negotiations. In their publication "Armed Resistance and Feminism" they counter the notion of 'care and silence', underscoring the significant impact of women's agency during wartime in Myanmar.<sup>38</sup> This challenges the conventional andro-centric perspective on conflict, highlighting women as proactive agents rather than passive victims.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3.2 *Towards a New Ontology of Peace*

The situation of women in Karenni state and exile has been complex and developed over decades of civil war. The constant presence of conflict influenced how Karenni women engage

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<sup>35</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 87.

<sup>37</sup> Mollie Pepper, "Feminist Peace Building at the Grassroots," *Waves of Upheaval*, ed. Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius (NIAS Press, 2023), 102.

<sup>38</sup> Magda Lorena Cárdenas and Jenny Hedström, "Armed resistance and feminist activism," in *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, ed. Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, Catia C. Confortini (Routledge, 2021), 148-156.

<sup>39</sup> Cárdenas and Hedström, "Armed resistance," 148-156.

in peacebuilding for their communities and societal position. The exploration of the diverse peacebuilding endeavours in the face of violence, displacement, and generational trauma in Karenni state is of paramount importance and underscores the significance of women's dynamic agency. This leads me to the question: How do Karenni women participate in peacebuilding, and how does their engagement in peacebuilding mechanisms enhance their agency and promote gender-just peace?

The case study explores women's peacebuilding activities at the household, community, and institutional levels, examining which undertakings are pursued and how they intersect with and challenge existing gendered hierarchies. All of them reveal context-specific insights about women's involvement, challenges, and capacities and the triangulation of all three spaces is crucial to understanding the wider impact of women's engagement. Their inclusion is pivotal to exploring the meaning and development of agency, here defined as: "...the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity [...] or 'the power within'."<sup>40</sup> Notably, the concept carries transformational implications linked to the power of making decisions and the extent to which women's choices carry transformative significance through their potential to challenge gender inequalities. To understand how women's participation in peacebuilding mechanisms enhances their agency it is essential to examine how their ability to make strategic life choices develops and how this growth fosters a transformative awareness, enabling them to translate resources and opportunities into tangible outcomes.<sup>41</sup> I argue that although women's agency is prevalent, it often remains under-recognised due to its informal nature. Strikingly, the 'formal' in Burmese *amyothayay*<sup>42</sup> is traditionally seen as a male domain, whilst the 'informal' *amyothameeyay*<sup>43</sup> is primarily framed as a female sphere.<sup>44</sup> This research challenges this strict dichotomy, arguing that it can misleadingly devalue the informal everyday contributions of women. By showcasing the

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<sup>40</sup> Naila Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment," *Development and change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 438, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>.

<sup>41</sup> Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements."

<sup>42</sup> *amyothayay* (အမျိုးသားအရေး) means 'men's affairs' and translates to 'national affairs.'

<sup>43</sup> *amyothameeyay* (အမျိုးသမီးအရေး) means 'women's affairs' and is related to the provision and protection of social services for women.

<sup>44</sup> Sophia Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement," *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 4, no. 1 (2023), [https://ijbs.online/?page\\_id=4603](https://ijbs.online/?page_id=4603).



diversity and significance of women's contributions within the Karenni community, the outcomes of this research provide insights into the broader implications of women's capacity-building for the achievement of gender-just peace. They aim to demonstrate that everyday practices not only reinforce gender hierarchies or serve as coping mechanisms but also embody social transformative capacity building and challenge patriarchal structures. Finally, the constructivist analysis presented in this thesis, adds to the ontological discussion about the nature of peace by describing it as a context-dependent social construct influenced by human agency.<sup>45</sup> This approach addresses the complexities of peacebuilding by including the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals during conflict, acknowledging their vital role in understanding peace.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Joanne Wallis, "The Social Construction of Peace," in *Peacebuilding, Statebuilding, and Peace Formation*, ed. Oliver P. Richmond & Gëzim Visoka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 77-90.

<sup>46</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This thesis presents a qualitative study that captures the active practices and challenges of women in contributing to everyday peacebuilding in the Karenni community. I performed a critical content analysis of reports from non-governmental and UN organisations and academic secondary literature. Additionally, I conducted four interviews to complement the insights. These methods are particularly well-suited to my research, as the peacebuilding actions of ethnic women must be analysed and understood within the specific context of their community. This thesis challenges traditional views on women's peacebuilding roles in marginalised areas by examining the Karenni community. Through a critical intersectional feminist approach, the case study provides in-depth insights into Karenni women's practices and socio-cultural contexts, highlighting the connection between gender, ethnicity, and conflict. A focus on intersectionality helps to understand the particularities of women's roles based on the intersection of these components and identifies structures and obstacles to women's peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, the approach is feminist, as it deconstructs conventional narratives that systematically marginalised and misrepresented women, by acknowledging the interconnectedness of social identities and power distribution.<sup>47</sup>

### 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

#### 2.2.1 Primary Sources

Primary data was collected from February to May 2024 during my work at WEAVE (Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment). Established in 1990, WEAVE has supported women from Myanmar, especially those from the Karen and Karenni communities, who are residing in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. In these three months, I worked as a Program Support Intern and was involved in *projects* for the women in Karenni Site 1 (Ban Nai Soi), one of the nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Given their expertise some of WEAVE's organisational reports were incorporated, including a final and annual report of their three-year project *WEAVE II* (2020-2023) and a foundation report about their annual

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<sup>47</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 49.

activities in 2023 and 2024.<sup>48</sup> I conducted a critical content analysis of the reports, which were instrumental in enhancing the understanding of women's roles within various sectors of the Karenni community. Moreover, locally operating organisations like the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO), The Border Consortium (TBC) and UNHCR were assessed to enhance knowledge about the present case, specifically about the situation of women after displacement and their involvement in the refugee community.<sup>49</sup> Lastly, four interviews with key interlocutors from the Karenni community were conducted in Karenni Site 1. These insights are highly valuable, as their lived experiences and knowledge about women's role in peacebuilding enrich the discussion and conclusions of this thesis. All interviews were conducted with the participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed. Respondents were selected based on their roles and experiences within the Ban Nai Soi refugee camp, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of women's positions and activities related to peacebuilding, the evolution of female agency, and socio-cultural obstacles faced by women. These individuals were identified as knowledgeable stakeholders by WEAVE employees, who are integral members of the Karenni community and have long-standing relationships with the respondents. However, it is important to acknowledge that bias may arise due to the subjective nature of the recommendations provided through personal networks and the limited sample size. Given the three-month timeframe of my visits to Karenni Site 1 and the language barrier, my ability to establish a personal network and gain access to the community was limited. Consequently, the assistance of my co-worker in identifying respondents proved to be immensely valuable.

For the interviews, I prepared my questions in English and each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, depending on the availability of the interviewees. My translator rendered the questions into Burmese and translated the responses back into English. It is important to note that Burmese is not the native language of the interviewees; they belong to various sub-ethnic groups within the Karenni community, each with its own mother tongue.

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<sup>48</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report WEAVE II 2023," (Donor Report for tdh Germany, WEAVE, Chiang Mai, March 2024); WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>49</sup> The Border Consortium, Annual Report 2023, (Thailand: TBC, May 15, 2024), [https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/3.-Book\\_Annual-report-2023\\_ENG-compressed.pdf](https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/3.-Book_Annual-report-2023_ENG-compressed.pdf); The Border Consortium, "Camps in Thailand," accessed July 2024, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/where-we-work/camps-in-thailand/>; Prungchit Phanawathanawong, *Strengthening Protection Capacity Project Livelihood Components. Phase One. Mae Hong Son Province*, (Mae Hong Son: UNHCR, accessed July 25, 2024), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/thailand-livelihoods-programme-mae-hong-son-provence>.

Although Burmese is commonly used for communication in the camp, it carries a stigma as the language of the military junta. I acknowledge that my lack of proficiency in the informants' native languages necessitated reliance on external translation and interpretation by my translator. However, given her deep integration into the community and her own experience living in a refugee camp, her deep cultural understanding and background were instrumental in providing valuable insights and fostering a trusting environment for the interviews. To minimise the bias for this thesis, I critically evaluated and compared the interview results with related research of Mollie Pepper and Linnea Blomqvist<sup>50</sup> in Karenni State about the peacebuilding engagement of women. Moreover, I incorporated the insights gained through the additional primary and secondary sources presented in this thesis into the assessment of the interviews.

### *2.2.2 Secondary Sources*

A flexible methodology was adopted, integrating a preliminary literature review with grounded theory. Most of the theoretical insights and case study background are drawn from secondary literature including published academic articles, journal articles, dissertations, master theses, and topic-related books. For the case study analysis, literature emphasising a theoretical connection to everyday peacebuilding and critical feminist analysis was selected. Additional relevant case studies about everyday peacebuilding strategies in other regions were chosen to augment these insights and compare my observations to draw broader conceptual conclusions. As the case study covers a particular ethnic group, the published field research of Pepper and Blomqvist<sup>51</sup> provided valuable insights into women's agency in the Karenni community, in Karenni State and the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. These publications served as complimentary sources for my fieldwork to broaden the database on women's experiences in the respective locations. They are the initial stage of my analysis, highlighting individual women's experiences and informing broader claims about households, communities, and institutions. The triangulation of my interviews, reports, and a wide range of secondary literature about everyday peacebuilding and postcolonial feminism aided in conducting a

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<sup>50</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor"; Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

<sup>51</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

critical feminist analysis. It helped me critically assess ethnic women's agency during protracted conflict and assisted in identifying gaps in the broader academic debate on everyday peace.

### 2.2.3 Coding

For both, my primary and secondary sources I started with a set of codes in mind (women's agency on the household, community and institutional levels), to filter the information specific to women's spaces of influence. While evaluating the chosen sources, I introduced the codes 'capacity building' and 'everyday peacebuilding' to label my data on women's practices within one of the three spaces. 'Capacity building' as an important concept for this research implies a process through which people's inherent abilities and knowledge can be fostered through learning and personal experiences.<sup>52</sup> Data linked to this code reveals important insights about women's agency and the term itself was repeatedly mentioned by scholars of everyday peacebuilding and my respondents. Its full meaning will be clarified in the theoretical framework. Notably, the coding process for the interviews was more challenging and concerned with identifying patterns linked to specific interview questions and assessing the interviewees' backgrounds, especially their occupations and gender. I remained open to new insights allowing divergence from my initial concepts and used open coding to let patterns emerge naturally from the data. For the coding process of the reports, axial coding assisted in connecting patterns to my theoretical framework and identifying overlaps with the conclusions drawn from the interviews. Finally, selective coding helped me refine my theory by aligning it with the collected data, thereby adding conceptual insights to the academic debate despite a limited sample.

## 2.3 Ethics and Limitations

As a Western European researcher, my methodological approach has been profoundly influenced by several key factors. Firstly, while my formal education at a European university has provided me with critical analytical skills, it is important to acknowledge that this education may also introduce certain biases into my perspective. Secondly, my firsthand experiences at the border have offered me unique insights into the complexities of displacement, and my

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<sup>52</sup> John Paul Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding" In *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington: Unites States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 108.

active involvement in a refugee camp has enriched my understanding of the lived experiences of refugees. Notably this engagement carries the responsibility to handle the gathered sources and observations with a heightened sense of contextual awareness and sensitivity. Moreover, when discussing my work, I clarified that it is purely academic and not intended for any foreign government. My background may have influenced the conversations, potentially leading to the omission of certain political issues. In general, participants were enthusiastic about discussing women's roles in community peacebuilding, and I noted significant parallels in their observations.

Furthermore, several limitations emerged during the research process. Firstly, the case study focuses on a specific group which restricts its generalisability. To address this, I drew on the field research by Pepper and Blomqvist, which offered valuable insights into women's agency in the Karenni community and the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Their findings along with my interviews and a broad literature review based on everyday peacebuilding and postcolonial feminism, informed my critical feminist perspective. Secondly, the limited number of interviews conducted is insufficient to fully address my research question. Nonetheless, I integrated the collected data within my broader theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive analysis.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Towards a Critical, Feminist and Intersectional Analysis

To challenge White feminist discourses in Western academia and several international policy circles, Women of Colour and Postcolonial feminisms emerged criticising hegemonic structures and the ignorance of context-specific experiences.<sup>53</sup> During the 1970s and early 1980s, socialist feminists and feminists of the global south increasingly connected different types of oppression that women in specific contexts experience daily. In the late 1980s, Dorothy Smith made groundbreaking contributions to feminist literature with her publication: "The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology."<sup>54</sup> She emphasised the significance of acknowledging social and institutional structures' profound impact on women's everyday experiences. Ann Tickner and Cynthia Enloe, pioneers in the study of women and peace additionally argued that the field of international relations ignores women's experiences and lacks explanations on how war and militarism are labelled as 'male', and peace is perceived as 'female'.<sup>55</sup> To build a critical feminist framework, the insights of scholars like Kumari Jayawardena and Deniz Kandiyoti are profound as they locate women's experiences in different parts of the world and challenge the notion that feminism is Western-imported. Central to this discussion is their claim that cultural and historical contexts shape how women resist or adapt to patriarchal constraints, underscoring the importance of these factors for this thesis.<sup>56</sup>

#### 3.2 Everyday Peace

The everyday peacebuilding literature offers a good foundation for identifying and analysing women's peace practices and experiences. Scholars like Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, Roger Mac Ginty, Oliver Richmond, Linnea Blomqvist, Jenny Hedström and Mollie Pepper have fundamentally challenged the concept of 'peace' and Western positionality in academia and policymaking. Moreover, they laid a critical and proactive foundation for a more inclusive,

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<sup>53</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under western eyes' revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles," *Signs: Journal of Women in culture and Society* 28, no. 2 (2003): 499-535.

<sup>54</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> Cross, "Critical Feminist Justpeace."

<sup>56</sup> Kumari Jayawardena. *Feminism and nationalism in the Third World*, (Verso Books, 2016); Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," *Gender & society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274-290, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>.

tangible and intersectional view on peacebuilding.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, Mac Ginty and Richmond state in their critique of liberal peace: "The prescriptive biases of the liberal peace [...] are based on a misplaced confidence that we have the legitimacy to recommend a type of peace for anyone else."<sup>58</sup> The final part of this statement is important for this thesis, as it emphasises conceptual fluidity and its role in the ongoing theoretical discourse on the diverse conceptualisations of feminist peace and their implications for conflict resolution.

In his publication "Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies", Mac Ginty presents three key premises that aid in conceptualising everyday peace and become particularly important in this case study.<sup>59</sup> He emphasises the fluidity of the social world, the heterogeneity of groups, and the significance of environmental factors such as location and the cycle of violent conflict.<sup>60</sup> The Karenni's ongoing struggle for recognition, autonomy, and peace since Myanmar's independence highlights the fluidity of the social world.<sup>61</sup> Social interaction may adhere to strict cultural and religious norms, yet social structures such as families and communities continually evolve during protracted conflict.<sup>62</sup> A fluid conception of peace recognises the dynamic, often unforeseeable changes in living conditions especially for minority groups and those relegated to the margins of nation-states through centralised policies.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, acknowledging group heterogeneity is paramount as women's agency in the Karenni community is strongly influenced by the diversity of cultures and internal group disputes. Especially the Tatmadaw's attempts to homogenise Myanmar's cultural landscape caused reoccurring displacement and turned ethnic homogeneity into a political issue.<sup>64</sup> Leaving out this premise would prevent any critical analysis of women's agency. Thirdly, changing political dynamics and prolonged conflict directly impact the stability of places where peacebuilding can be pursued.<sup>65</sup> The development of a theoretical framework for this

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<sup>57</sup> Thawngmung, "Politics of Everyday Life," 641-656; Roger Mac Ginty, "Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies," *Security dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548-564, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614550899>; Oliver P. Richmond, and Roger Mac Ginty, "Where now for the critique of the liberal peace?," *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 2 (2015): 171-189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836714545691>; Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household"; Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor"; Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

<sup>58</sup> Richmond and Mac Ginty, "critique of liberal peace," 184-85.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 549.

<sup>61</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Kyaw and Nwe, "From Margin to Center," 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace:Bottom-up," 548-564.



thesis, therefore aims to reread women's activities as highly political and imbued with meaning shaped by the armed conflict. In doing so it challenges scholars and practitioners to take women's engagement seriously especially if they are embedded in discriminatory gender norms.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.3 The Gendered Nature of Peace

Today's literature on peace increasingly stresses the indispensable adoption of gender as an important category of analysis.<sup>67</sup> Feminist scholars in the field like Confortini, contribute to the acknowledgement that peace is a process embedded in social institutions constituted of gender relations of power.<sup>68</sup> She suggested an alliance between peace studies and feminism to dismantle binary categories and anticipate pathways for change and empowerment.<sup>69</sup> To analyse 'peace' and more specifically 'everyday peace', her suggested gender-sensitive theory of violence criticises essentialist claims about women as inherently peaceful and men as violent.<sup>70</sup> Confortini locates violence and gendered power relations in all spheres of social life, asserting that violence and peace exist on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. This perspective is crucial in the present case study where peacebuilding efforts are undertaken amidst ongoing violence. The interplay of violence, peace, and gender forms the basis of her argument for a 'feminist positive peace' which asserts that structural peace can only be achieved by acknowledging that the gender order within communities, reproduces violent social relations.<sup>71</sup> Notably, understanding how violence is gendered allows us to draw parallels to the gendered nature of peace as well.

Furthermore, Pepper's holistic conceptualisation of feminist peace recognises the interconnectedness of factors such as gender, ethnicity, and structure in Karenni State.<sup>72</sup> To develop a critical intersectional feminist framework she makes some profound clarifications. She highlights that the idea of 'women' as a singular, cohesive group is a fundamental flaw that could compromise the principles of diversity feminism.<sup>73</sup> This also implies that 'the Karenni

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<sup>66</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 155.

<sup>67</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household."

<sup>68</sup> Confortini, "Galtung, violence and gender."

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>71</sup> Confortini, "Galtung, violence and gender."

<sup>72</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>73</sup> Cross, "Defining Feminist Justpeace."

women' as a group includes seven sub-ethnic communities with different cultures, traditions and understandings of peace.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.3.1 Gender-Just Peace

Contributing to the debate on feminist peace, Cross introduces the concept of 'feminist justpeace,' which incorporates justice into the discussion. This approach critiques traditional liberal peace frameworks and is rooted in feminist political theory.<sup>75</sup> She initiates an important conversation by studying women's grassroots peace-building initiatives and further links them to both liberal and critical feminism. She defines 'critical feminist justpeace' as a process which promotes social justice within all spheres of human relationships, achievable through individual and collective endeavours to reduce structural and direct violence.<sup>76</sup> Cross explicitly critiques an earlier notion of justice by John Paul Lederach claiming that it misses a feminist lens and therefore ignores crucial particularities important for women's role in social transformation. Cross's approach is useful for investigating women's daily peace practices and creating an intersectional feminist conceptual framework that considers ordinary conflict experiences and peace practices based on a feminist approach to justice.

Building on that, Björkdahl synergises gender and justice by introducing the concept of 'gender-just peace'.<sup>77</sup> Reformulating concepts like 'feminist positive peace' and 'critical feminist justpeace' offers the advantage of making these ideas more operational and underscoring the intrinsic link between gender and justice. Björkdahl defines it as a "positive peace that provides for social justice and equity and that recognises women's social and reproductive roles and [their] agency."<sup>78</sup> To be gender-just, peace must contribute to a shift in gender relations and the provision of equal gender rights. Her approach contributes to the discourse on gender and informality in peacebuilding,<sup>79</sup> by criticising the gendered construction of a private-public dichotomy whereby the public sphere of authority and power is predominantly male. Contrary

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<sup>74</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 47.

<sup>75</sup> Cross, "Defining Feminist Justpeace."

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>77</sup> Annika Björkdahl, "A gender-just peace? Exploring the post-Dayton peace process in Bosnia," *Peace & Change* 37, no. 2 (2012): 286-317.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>79</sup> Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace:Bottom-up," 548-564.

to this stereotypical perception both Björkdahl and Confortini emphasise the transformative potential of women in conflict-torn societies and the importance of their informal agency.<sup>80</sup>

The transformative potential of peacebuilding processes is essential for converting hostile and oppressive relationships within communities into equitable and interdependent ones.<sup>81</sup> Lederach suggests that such transformation is enabled by people's capacity to manage conflicts through non-violent methods. This includes a web of individuals, connections, practices, and societal mechanisms essential for upholding transformation across all levels of society.<sup>82</sup> He further notes that social change requires agency and can be amplified by training community members, whereby 'training' is described as a process of strategic capacity and relationship building.<sup>83</sup> He defines capacity building as a "process of reinforcing the inherent capabilities and understanding of people related to the challenges of conflict in their context and [...] the generation of new, proactive, empowered action for desired change in those settings."<sup>84</sup> To develop capacity therefore means to create a mindset within people and communities towards 'I/we *can* achieve desired change' and develop tools to operationalise this transformation.<sup>85</sup> Notably, capacity-building tools yield the best results when employed by groups and communities since relationship-building is intrinsic to peacebuilding and crucial for maximising social impact.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, 'training' is not solely about the transfer of content but also about key actors who focus on context-specific realities and empower inherent capabilities to strengthen their agency.<sup>87</sup> Capacity-building presents an important concept for analysing Karenni women's peacebuilding engagement in intersectional settings.<sup>88</sup> The concept assists in identifying the activities and venues where capacity is built by assessing the transformative characteristics of women's actions and their implications for agency. To answer how women's involvement in peacebuilding activities promotes gender-just peace, the process of capacity-building is a necessary step to respond to the 'how'. It categorises and situates their involvement within the feminist structural critique of peacebuilding, functioning as a tool of

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<sup>80</sup> Confortini, "Galtung, violence and gender"; Björkdahl, "A gender-just peace."

<sup>81</sup> John Paul Lederach, "An Integrated Framework for Peacebuilding," in *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>83</sup> Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding," 108.

<sup>84</sup> Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding," 108.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding," 109.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Snyder, "Developing Refugee Peacebuilding Capacity," 177–98.

empowerment within patriarchal structures.<sup>89</sup> Lastly, it challenges gender hierarchies through its emancipatory implications and sheds light on the structural daily inequalities women face by revealing the consequences of capacity-building activities.

### 3.4 Identifying Peacebuilding Agency Amidst Conflict

Together these inputs underline the importance of context particularities and the 'everyday' as an inherently political space.<sup>90</sup> Collectively, these scholars enrich feminist discourse by exploring the distinct challenges and experiences faced by women across various cultural and historical contexts. They reject false presupposed universalist assumptions and an emphasis on women's intersecting and multifaceted oppressions and forms of resistance on the ground.<sup>91</sup> Having identified the everyday as an analytical focus, the following section will integrate it into the broader theoretical framework for this thesis. It will be argued that the 'everyday' is not just an analytical tool, but rather a feminist method to critically assess and locate peacebuilding strategies.

The present theoretical framework aims to explore the dialogue between women's peacebuilding and critical intersectional feminist theory, shedding light on the agency of Karenni women in peacebuilding processes.<sup>92</sup> Mac Ginty's conceptualisation of everyday peacebuilding—as continuous, collective, and comprehensive—will be integrated into this study, treating daily experiences not as peripheral to peacebuilding but as significant political phenomena that shape peace and conflict.<sup>93</sup> Consequently the everyday peace approach is well-suited to reveal the context-specific social practices that define women's peacebuilding efforts in the Karenni community, challenging the notion of women as mere victims of conflict.<sup>94</sup> By exploring the daily practices of Karenni women, this theoretical framework applies a critical feminist methodology to highlight their agency and the political dimensions of their actions within households, communities, and political institutions. These three levels were chosen based on the insights gained from other related case studies, the primary data collected

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<sup>89</sup> Snyder, "Developing Refugee Peacebuilding Capacity," 177–98.

<sup>90</sup> Smith, *The everyday world*; Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>91</sup> Ranjoo Seodu Herr, "Reclaiming third world feminism: Or why transnational feminism needs third world feminism," *Meridians* 12, no. 1 (2014): 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.12.1.1>.

<sup>92</sup> Cross, "Defining Feminist Justpeace"; Cross, "Critical Feminist Justpeace."

<sup>93</sup> Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace: Bottom-up," 548-564.

<sup>94</sup> Cárdenas and Hedström, "Armed resistance," 148-156.

throughout my work experience in the refugee camp Ban Nai Soi, and the reports of the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) and WEAVE. Firstly, these dimensions illustrate the very tangible spheres of everyday life and aim to structure the manifold agency of Karenni women in nonabstract categories. Moreover, these levels are meant to be relatable to women's engagement in other contexts, serving as simple, yet significant labels that tell us a lot about everyday life. Secondly, they advanced my research by creating approachable points of reference. The tangible and real nature of protracted conflict and everyday peacebuilding efforts in a refugee camp requires a theoretical framework that translates primary data into a meaningful analysis by creating proximity to the case study itself. Throughout this research, activities within the household, community, and institutional spheres have been identified and observed as recurring patterns. The household as a unit of analysis has been particularly underrepresented in comparison to the community and institutional spheres. Consequently, this research seeks to underscore the significance of the household as a pivotal domain for future scholarly investigation into everyday peacebuilding. Lastly, this theoretical framework also identifies the new structures that enable Karenni women to act upon structural inequalities thereby fostering a more inclusive, intersectional, and gender-just comprehension of peacebuilding in conflict-affected settings. Building on the theoretical foundations established in this section the concepts will be applied to the present case study.

## 4. The Household Level

While the household is often viewed as an informal space the family, seen as society's backbone, plays a crucial role in shaping community dynamics, extending its influence well beyond the immediate household.<sup>95</sup> This chapter explores the diverse facets of Karenni women's participation in household peacebuilding mechanisms, highlighting how their engagement strengthens their agency and contributes to achieving gender-just peace. The family assumes a vital role in educating children and imparting values, norms, and behaviours that shape individuals' future trajectories. Additionally, household dynamics can further reinforce or dismantle gender stereotypes and power imbalances as the household challenges and transforms traditional gender hierarchies.<sup>96</sup> Finally, families contribute to economic resilience in their communities through small businesses, labour participation, and income generation.<sup>97</sup> This chapter will identify the everyday practices and culturally embedded roles of Karenni women by critically applying an intersectional gender-focused lens. It aims to reveal how these practices augment women's agency within the household and contribute to broader peacebuilding efforts in both the household and the community.

### 4.1 Household Disputes and Gender-based Violence

The post-coup conflict dynamics have significantly increased poverty and violence at the household level, amplifying a cycle of violence within families.<sup>98</sup> When asked to define her conception of peace a member of Karenni Site 1 responds:

[I]f we look at the family, [...] the husband, wife, and children need to have peace. If there is violence, then there will be no peace in the family.<sup>99</sup>

The causality implied in her answer suggests that good relationships and communication can strengthen the capabilities of family members to expand these dynamics to the wider

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<sup>95</sup> Linnea Blomqvist, Elisabeth Olivius, and Jenny Hedström, "Care and silence in women's everyday peacebuilding in Myanmar," *Conflict, Security & Development* 21, no.3 (2021): 223-244, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1933031>.

<sup>96</sup> Makiko Takeda, and Chosein Yamahata, "Reinforcing social cohesion in Myanmar's borderlands: Strength, solidarity, and sustainability of ethnic women organisations," in *Social Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand- Social, Political and Ecological Perspectives* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2021), 313-348; Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household."

<sup>97</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household."

<sup>98</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor."

<sup>99</sup> Respondent 2, interview by author, Ban Nai Soi, March 29, 2024.

community. Strikingly, displacement and protracted conflict change family dynamics as men who leave the camp to fight the junta are victims of deadly attacks or return with heavy injuries.<sup>100</sup> Although men are traditionally seen as the heads of families, women are often responsible for most household activities and decisions especially if the conflict is protracted.<sup>101</sup> After the military coup in 2021, resurgent fighting has led to increased displacement of civilians and recruitment for the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF). Ever since, Karenni women have increasingly taken on roles traditionally held by men including leadership in community governance, business management, and technical and mechanical tasks. Notably, they have expanded their role in peacebuilding by engaging daily in conflict management, household decision-making, and income generation.<sup>102</sup>

As a considerable part of socialisation happens within the family, the household can be both: a force of gendered social reproduction and an enabler of women's empowerment by breaking traditional assumptions about what women can and cannot do. Feminists have long argued that 'the personal is political,'<sup>103</sup> highlighting how events in the private sphere can challenge gendered hierarchies. These hierarchies often prevent women from building the capacity needed to resist oppressive structures and gender-based violence or to participate in formal decision-making processes.<sup>104</sup> The reports of WEAVE and The Border Consortium<sup>105</sup> reveal that good relations and communication within households are challenged strongly by conflict, peculiarly due to the loss of income and future opportunities.<sup>106</sup> The decline of children's education, a rise in drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence are issues women are increasingly confronted with, especially once they arrive in the IDP areas<sup>107</sup> or refugee camps.<sup>108</sup> As a new report of the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) reveals, cases

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<sup>100</sup> Blomqvist, Olivius, and Hedström, "Care and Silence," 223-244; Karenni Human Rights Group, "Atrocity Crimes Karenni State."

<sup>101</sup> Jessica Harriden, *The authority of influence: Women and power in Burmese history* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household"; Interview with respondent 2.

<sup>103</sup> Carol Hanisch, "The personal is political," in *Radical Feminism – a documentary reader* (New York: NYU Press, 1969).

<sup>104</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor"; Joan Scott, and Debra Keates, *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> TBC provides food, shelter, and support to around 87,000 refugees from Burma/Myanmar in nine western Thailand camps, while also aiding recovery and community development in conflict-affected areas of southeast Burma/Myanmar (Website TBC)

<sup>106</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>107</sup> IDP areas are regions where Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) reside. These individuals have been forced to leave their homes due to conflict, violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters, but they remain within the borders of their own country.

<sup>108</sup> Kantarawaddy Times, "KNWO Reports Doubled Cases of Physical Violence Against Women During Post-Coup Conflict," *Kantarawaddy Times*, June 26, 2024, <https://ktnews.org/knwo-reports-doubled-cases-of-physical-violence-against-women-during-post-coup-conflict/>

of physical violence have doubled since the coup, where most are linked to domestic violence. Perpetrators frequently evade punishment leaving women in precarious situations marked by severe bodily harm and enduring trauma.<sup>109</sup> Patriarchal structures prevalent in Karenni society have long denounced a connection between civil war and women's plight arguing that women's issues can be discussed after the civil war.<sup>110</sup> Consequently women's lived experiences are often trivialised as *amyothameeyay* (women's issue), denying any relevance for Karenni national-level attention.<sup>111</sup>

## 4.2 Approaching Household Development

Having identified the structural nature of violence in the family, enhancing decision-making capacities within the family seems necessary for gender-just peacebuilding.<sup>112</sup> An interesting approach is facilitated by WEAVE which implemented the so-called Household Development Approach (HHDA) throughout its three-year program *WEAVE II*.<sup>113</sup> Essential to HHDA is the promotion of women's capacity building which implies a transformative process in which inherent capabilities are strengthened through active learning, fostering a shift from a sense of inability to a mindset of "I/we can effect change".<sup>114</sup> The approach seeks to enhance household well-being by addressing various dimensions including household economy (income generation), relationships (communication), health, education, and social empowerment.<sup>115</sup> A critical gender-focused perspective shows that this shift frequently confronts culturally imposed family responsibilities that undermine women's ability to effect political and social change simply due to their gender.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kantarawaddy Times, "KNWO Reports Doubled Cases."

<sup>110</sup> Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement."

<sup>111</sup> *amyothameeyay* (အမျိုးသမီးအရေး) means 'women's affairs' and is related to the provision and protection of social services for women.

<sup>112</sup> Björkdahl, "A gender-just peace."

<sup>113</sup> WEAVE II was in place from 2020-2023 in cooperation with tbf Germany and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

<sup>114</sup> Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding," 108-109.

<sup>115</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>116</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."



#### 4.2.1 Economic Capacity-Building

One way to enhance women's capacity building is by leveraging economic opportunities and household management. In Karenni Sites 1 and 2 this involves the implementation of targeted training programs, the provision of micro-funding to support small-scale businesses, and the facilitation of market access to ensure sustainable economic growth. Between 2021 and 2022, 928 women participants in *WEAVE II* received so-called 'adult education' composed of education about gender, women's and children's rights, women's reproductive health rights, Fair Trade, social entrepreneurship, peacebuilding and basic numeracy during four-month education sessions. Those attending were mothers of preschool children and women above 26 years.<sup>117</sup> These training sessions were facilitated by 381 young individuals in Karenni Sites 1 and 2, who were trained in their capacities to facilitate HHDA and 'adult education' beforehand. Of these 381 around 75% were women, who served as household trainers.<sup>118</sup>

Moreover, 333 women from both refugee camps engaged in social enterprise development and managed to rebuild and sustain household economies. From 2020 to 2023, these women actively applied their new skills and successfully set up eight social enterprises to tackle social and community issues by employing a Fair-Trade approach in their social business endeavours.<sup>119</sup> The enterprises encompass a range of activities including pig and hen farming, agricultural production, organic fertiliser manufacturing, textile sales, weaving, operation of a noodle shop, consumer goods retailing, and repair services. Nearly all of them generated income and at least 65% of their members are starting to pick up sales and managed to generate additional income between 12 – 17 US dollars.<sup>120</sup> Altogether the social enterprises involved 304 individuals contributing not only to individual household economies but also supporting other community members in generating income.<sup>121</sup> Developing household economies challenged traditional gender norms by enabling women to earn their own income and expand their financial capacity, undermining the view of men as the primary breadwinners.<sup>122</sup> The active participation of women in capacity-building programs elevated their agency within the families, turning them not solely into victims of household poverty and

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<sup>117</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report" 13.

<sup>118</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report," 16.

<sup>119</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 14.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>122</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 3.

food insecurity but into active agents of poverty alleviation.<sup>123</sup> This in return has contributed to peace within households as income reduces families' existential threats, opens new opportunities, and increases cultural reputation.<sup>124</sup>

The skills and knowledge gained through training and education sessions empower Karenni women to manage household resources effectively, contributing to local economies and establishing socio-economic support networks. All of them are essential components of peacebuilding, by creating some stability in the daily lives of Karenni family members, valuing individuals' skills, and anticipating self-growth.<sup>125</sup> Importantly, once learned the skills and awareness acquired by the women are difficult to unlearn. The capacities built increasingly address structural discrimination and tackle family-internal gender hierarchies, essential for working towards a gender-just peace.

#### 4.2.2 Social Capacity-Building

According to WEAVE, violent conflict displacement causes the disintegration of family cohesion due to a lack of communication about questions of return, resettlement, or income generation.<sup>126</sup> The economic stability increasingly achieved through women's involvement in business has initiated household sensitisation to communication and relationship issues and fosters growth and resilience in supportive environments.<sup>127</sup> Through their participation in the *WEAVE II* project, many couples in Karenni Site 1 have begun to initiate future household plans supported by the enhanced capacity of women to facilitate household planning.<sup>128</sup> Reports of WEAVE illustrate that this development contributes to the improvement of family members' mental health and capacity to deal with the ongoing conflict by seeking new hope through involvement in domestic affairs and household economy building.<sup>129</sup>

Notably, the ongoing fighting in Karenni State revives old trauma and mental health issues, which render strong family relationships ever more important. Karenni women often leading in family and community management, leverage improved family relations and

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<sup>123</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>124</sup> Harriden, *The authority of influence* 277.

<sup>125</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75; WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>126</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 3.

<sup>127</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>128</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 3.

<sup>129</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

economic stability to actively participate in decision-making.<sup>130</sup> From a critical feminist perspective the attempts to see the household as an influential sphere have increased women's empowerment. They actively address structural violence in conflict situations, directly and indirectly, by mediating household conflicts, promoting education, and ensuring family well-being. Many of these everyday practices are fundamental to sustaining a degree of peaceful coexistence.<sup>131</sup>

#### *4.2.3 Gender and Capacity-Building*

Household-related capacity in the form of women's education, household management, and income generation must be built to participate in community decision-making processes. However, this development is highly gendered and opportunities are often limited due to the expectation that women must perform affective labour.<sup>132</sup> Based on extensive field research in Karenni state and Chiang Mai, Blomqvist highlights care and silence as key strategies for everyday peace among women in Karenni state. Strikingly caretaking encompasses involvement in social welfare, community outreach, education, and conflict resolution.<sup>133</sup> However, these expectations often restrict women's participation in formal peacebuilding efforts due to the time and effort required for household tasks. Furthermore, her research reveals that in contexts of conflict marked by precarious security conditions, women adopt strategic silence to mitigate exacerbating tensions.<sup>134</sup>

Contrarily, through their engagement in trainings about HHDA, and their visible commitment to active income generation through the establishment of small businesses and micro-finance, some of the 928 participating women were able to challenge their culturally assigned role.<sup>135</sup> These women became the breadwinners of their families and took a position where it was easier to break the silence about oppressive structures and gender norms.<sup>136</sup> Women-led households show growth in resilience and independence in managing the

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<sup>130</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 130-152.

<sup>131</sup> Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement."

<sup>132</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household"; Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement."

<sup>133</sup> Blomqvist, Olivius, and Hedström, "Care and Silence," 223-244.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>136</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report."

household.<sup>137</sup> Facilitating community assistants in the refugee camps reported that families have begun improving their communication and relationships by creating future household plans and involving family members in income-generating activities. Moreover, there has been an improvement in women's roles within the home showing advancements in their status and importance within their families and communities.<sup>138</sup> By enhancing the livelihoods within the community, they facilitated the re-establishment of coordination and unity among households and elevated their presence as catalysts for positive social change.<sup>139</sup> Besides arguing that everyday practices for peace contribute to impunity and silence, this example shows how women also contribute to social transformation by fundamentally challenging their position in the household.

#### 4.2.4 Women's Household Agency

Within a critical feminist and intersectional framework, it becomes evident that household relations are deeply gendered, shaped by family displacement, and interconnected with previous experiences and expectations informed by ethnicity and cultural norms. Although structural gender dynamics need to be considered, women's practices drive social transformation enhanced by newly acquired skills for better income generation and household resource management. Next to caretaking and silence, women's transformative practices to build capacity contribute to a gender-just peace. Strikingly, everyday household affairs in Karenni Sites 1 and 2 are discussed in newly created spaces, enabled through women's livelihood-building. These spaces in return facilitate conversation and push for the prevention of domestic violence by alleviating women's voices and family-internal authority.<sup>140</sup> Notably this development does not simply eliminate gender hierarchies, as the reproduction of gender relations is developed in a patriarchal framework of political and economic power.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, they can be challenged by daily intra-household bargaining dynamics.<sup>142</sup> If women's existing everyday practices in the household are fostered through capacity-building

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<sup>137</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>138</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household"; WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>139</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>140</sup> Confortini, "Galtung, violence and gender"; Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>141</sup> Harriden, *The authority of influence*, 130-152.

<sup>142</sup> Bina Agarwal, "'Bargaining' and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household," *Feminist Economics* 3, no. 1 (1997): 1-51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135457097338799>.

efforts, enabling income generation, family members' education and relationship-building, the everyday becomes an emancipatory space that gradually shifts gendered power dynamics.<sup>143</sup>

Locating agency within the household is a start to identifying Karenni women's roles and contested positions while acknowledging that the problem lies within the gendered socio-cultural context. The Karenni community often expects women to occupy certain roles in social life, showing that there is nothing 'natural' about women's capacity for peacebuilding.<sup>144</sup> The resulting agency, often informal, receives little recognition and therefore women often strategically assert their claims and establish credibility within everyday spaces like the family.<sup>145</sup> This section emphasised that women's capacity-building efforts can strengthen their role in the household during conflicts, helping to create a sense of security and reduce disputes, poverty, and domestic violence. Having examined the small, creative acts of everyday peace within the household it can be argued that these family dynamics translate to the broader community.

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<sup>143</sup> Thawngmung, "Politics of Everyday Life," 641-656; Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household."

<sup>144</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor," 47.

<sup>145</sup> Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement."

## 5. The Community Level

Mary O’Kane once said: “The very possibility of emancipatory political practices by women activists of Burma is grounded in their ability to create alternative spaces of collectivity, belonging and recognition”.<sup>146</sup> Entities enhancing these alternative spaces in the two refugee camps (Karenni Sites 1 and 2) and Karenni State, are primarily Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and Women’s Organisations like the Karenni National Women’s Organisation (KNWO). Around 80-90% of the CBO leadership and employees are women,<sup>147</sup> whose work strongly engages with peacebuilding activities such as awareness raising, education, justice for victims of domestic violence, and vocational and leadership training.<sup>148</sup> This chapter will identify the diverse spaces and activities of women in Karenni Site 1 and Karenni State by addressing the initiatives of KNWO, educational programs such as the Women’s Study Program (WSP), Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), and Ethnoarts for Peace Workshops. It will show how women’s engagement in capacity-building activities fosters their agency as community leaders in the educational, cultural, and health sectors fundamental for sustainable community peace in and outside Myanmar.<sup>149</sup> Lastly it will unveil the contribution of KNWO as a women-led force involved in community peacebuilding and women’s rights advocacy.

### 5.1 KNWO Capacity Building

One key actor that actively contributes to these efforts is KNWO. The ethnic women’s organisation was established on March 10, 1993, by Karenni women within the confines of the Nai Soi refugee camp situated along the Thai-Myanmar border, to advocate for women’s equal political, economic, and social rights.<sup>150</sup> KNWO’s connection to refugee women and their knowledge about the Karenni communities in the country and exile is an important asset which enables community access and trust.<sup>151</sup> KNWO plays a pivotal role in capacity building for its members to facilitate peacebuilding in Karenni State. This is achieved through a multifaceted approach involving training, workshops, advocacy, and grassroots engagement. Their activism inside the country was significantly higher before the 2021 coup as interventions in Karenni

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<sup>146</sup> Mary O’Kane, "Blood, Sweat, and Tears," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 15, (2007).

<sup>147</sup> Respondent 4, interview by author, Ban Nai Soi, March 28, 2024.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with respondent 4; KNWO, “Peacebuilding,” accessed July 2024, <https://knwo.wordpress.com/peacebuilding/>.

<sup>149</sup> Snyder, “Developing Refugee Peacebuilding Capacity,” 177–98.

<sup>150</sup> KNWO, “About,” accessed July 2024, <https://knwo.wordpress.com/about-knwo-4/>.

<sup>151</sup> Pepper, “Women’s Invisible Labor.”

State have become increasingly challenging during the armed conflict.<sup>152</sup> Despite significant challenges, KNWO continues to advance gender policies and peacebuilding initiatives to protect women and incorporate their experiences into policymaking.<sup>153</sup> KNWO regularly organises training sessions and workshops for women in Karenni Site 1 and Karenni State. These educational activities are designed to equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage in peacebuilding and advocacy. The training sessions cover various topics including gender, peace, and women's rights and provide a comprehensive understanding of present gender inequalities.<sup>154</sup>

A significant assessment exemplifying this approach was conducted from August to September 2016.<sup>155</sup> During these two months, KNWO members went to seven townships in Karenni state to conduct village and home visits and engage directly with communities. Through discussions on human rights issues, women's participation in politics, violence against women, socio-cultural norms and gender with 1.760 people in Karenni state, 1.115 of which were women, KNWO gathered documentation on women's overall situation.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, the staff managed to raise awareness about the discussion topics. As cultural norms do not support the idea of women in decision-making processes these discussions and trainings helped to raise awareness and encourage women to participate in decision-making. They created a space for women to speak about their opinions on political topics and gender discrimination, assisting women's capacity building through working towards a mindset of 'I/we can'. Notably, they found that village women who understand human and women's rights employ better self-confidence to raise their voices and therefore strengthen their agency to push for inclusion in peace talks.<sup>157</sup> The final documentation of this project, served as the foundation for advocating for better gender policies at the Karenni State level and formulating

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<sup>152</sup> Respondent 1, interview by author, Ban Nai Soi, March 27, 2024.

<sup>153</sup> Interim Executive Council of Karenni State, "A brief account of the establishment of the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC)," Facebook, 12 June, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/6xpBWNHbDW1N2vmZ/>; Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>154</sup> KNWO, "Projects & Campaigns," accessed July 2024, <https://knwo.wordpress.com/programs-campaigns/>.

<sup>155</sup> Karenni National Women's Organization, *The Report on the Process of Collecting the Voices of Karenni Women and Policy Brief for Peace Process* (Loikaw: KNWO, October 2016), [https://knwo.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-report-on-the-process-of-collecting-the-voices-of-karenni-women-and-policy-brief-for-peace-process\\_english.pdf](https://knwo.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-report-on-the-process-of-collecting-the-voices-of-karenni-women-and-policy-brief-for-peace-process_english.pdf).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Karenni National Women's Organization, *Collecting the Voices*.

a 'Policy Brief for Peace' to stakeholders such as NGOs, CBOs, donors, the Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw (military) and Ethnic Armed Organisations.<sup>158</sup>

## 5.2 Economic Empowerment & Community Resilience

To improve women's economic prospects, KNWO staff continues to deliver vocational training in fields like sewing, bamboo craftsmanship, and basic business and financial competencies. Moreover, they collaborate with WEAVE on a textile weaving and sewing initiative aimed at empowering women economically and fostering their financial autonomy.<sup>159</sup> As presented in the previous chapter, these economic efforts primarily improve women's household agency through income generation. Nevertheless, the social security and hope gained through economic empowerment in the household, also contribute to a broader everyday peace in the community. Feminist visions promote a transformation in social structures whereby gender equality and socio-economic justice count as forms of peace.<sup>160</sup> From an intersectional feminist perspective, these trainings and workshops can be seen as peacebuilding strategies. Through open discussions, they establish a basis for peace by promoting the recognition of shared experiences of gender inequality, ethnic discrimination and protracted conflict. Traditionally the intersection of these categories puts women into a social position which assumes incapability and powerlessness. The ability to speak about socio-economic and political gender discrimination is therefore a capacity in itself that is fostered by women's participation in these initiatives.<sup>161</sup>

Many women in Karenni Site 1 have reported an improvement in their livelihood situation. Their ongoing efforts in social enterprises and Fair-Trade artisan work demonstrate their agency and serve as exemplary models for the wider community.<sup>162</sup> By forming a livelihood network of women and households across intersectional identities, women's economic agency on a household level transfers to the community and serves as a means for

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<sup>158</sup>Karenni National Women's Organization. *Policy Brief for Peace* (Loikaw: KNWO, September 2016), [https://knwo.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-report-on-the-process-of-collecting-the-voices-of-karenni-women-and-policy-brief-for-peace-process\\_english.pdf](https://knwo.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-report-on-the-process-of-collecting-the-voices-of-karenni-women-and-policy-brief-for-peace-process_english.pdf).

<sup>159</sup>KNWO, "Women's Livelihood," accessed July 2024, <https://knwo.wordpress.com/womens-livelihood/>.

<sup>160</sup>Björkdahl, "A gender-just peace."

<sup>161</sup>Cárdenas and Hedström, "Armed resistance," 148-156.

<sup>162</sup>WEAVE, "Final Report."



peacebuilding. Although it is a process it continues to strengthen community resilience.<sup>163</sup> These activities represent small spaces where women actively build everyday peace. They contribute to feminist peace as their work embodies the transformation of social structures from within the community through capacity-building tools like awareness-raising, skills training and advocacy for gender-just policies.<sup>164</sup> Community-internal awareness raising between women is one strategy to mobilise female community members to defend their right to social recognition and to work towards a peace which is sustainable and able to exist in a post-conflict scenario.<sup>165</sup>

### 5.3 Women's Education

According to a KNWO member, various peace initiatives and awareness-raising activities were implemented in Karenni schools as well. Despite a decline in these activities following the coup, she asserts that:

[W]e need to spread community-internal awareness about what [...] peace really means to them.<sup>166</sup>

Her statement shows the urgency to define and address the concept of peace, to enable effective community peacebuilding. Keeping in mind the cultural diversity within the Karenni community there is no 'one definition' of peace. Awareness-raising activities as a tool to build community members' capacities for intersectional peace may therefore be a starting point.<sup>167</sup> In Karenni Site 1 the educational sector highlights strong female representation with most teachers being women.<sup>168</sup> To build girls' leadership capacity from a young age onwards the Women Study Program (WSP) was created in 2006 through a partnership between WEAVE and KNWO, allowing around 40 young women to engage in a thorough ten-month educational program. This program is designed to cover key topics such as 'Women's Issues,' 'Community Development,' and 'Peace Education.' According to one of the teachers, many girls never

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<sup>163</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>164</sup> Björkdahl, "A gender-just peace"; WEAVE, "Final Report"; Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>165</sup> Elisabeth Olivius, Jenny Hedström, and Zin Mar Phy, "Feminist Peace or State Co-optation? The Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Myanmar," *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5, no. 1 (2022): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821x16359327302509>.

<sup>166</sup> Respondent 3, interview by author, Ban Nai Soi, March 28, 2024.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with respondent 1; Interview with respondent 2; Interview with respondent 3.

<sup>168</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

learned about peace before as protracted conflict became normalised.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, the tailored 'Peace Education' module teaches them about peace and various methods of peacebuilding during class.<sup>170</sup> Additionally, the WSP students train to conduct home visits and extend their knowledge to women in the community. As a result, the program fosters sustainable peace while empowering young women to become key actors and decision-makers within their communities.<sup>171</sup> Many participants and alumni have noted that the program has shaped their daily lives and helped them discover a sense of future direction. However, this impact is not universal as the unpredictable changes and ongoing restrictions in the refugee setting continue to limit opportunities for women.<sup>172</sup>

WSP is a crucial step in preparing for the patriarchal realities that shape much of daily life. Importantly, programs like WSP build women's capacity from a young age onwards and therefore push for social change in which women's agency is recognised and included in key decision-making processes which are still male dominated. Since 2021, several selected student leaders have been trained every year to become mentors for their fellow students. They are trained by NGOs or KNWO in the 'Household Development Approach' and 'Adult Education' to give their skills and knowledge to their peers. Afterwards, the WSP students serve as community leaders and become part of a broader capacity-building network in which their capabilities are encouraged.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, KNWO plays a vital role in providing them with a wide array of training programs. In the domain of women's rights, they deliver education on sexuality, gender, and the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>174</sup> Their initiatives also encompass legal and human rights education, where they organise sessions to raise awareness of legal assistance and human rights regulations. Many alumni have leading roles in community-based organisations, are involved in the advocacy work of KNWO, attended further education in Karenni Site 1, or are representatives and trainers of awareness-raising campaigns for women's empowerment

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with respondent 2.

<sup>170</sup> WEAVE. "2024/25 English Curriculum WSP," March 2024 (unpublished material); WEAVE. "2024/25 Burmese Curriculum WSP," March 2024 (unpublished material).

<sup>171</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report."

<sup>174</sup> CEDAW stands for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979.

and peace.<sup>175</sup> Consequently, criticism was raised by older generations, especially men, as a redefinition of the women's agency challenges deeply rooted gender norms. Nevertheless, many have recognised the value of young female leaders in community peacebuilding due to the realisation that an end to the protracted conflict needs a diversity of actors.<sup>176</sup>

#### 5.4 Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

The same goes for Karenni women's involvement in the so-called Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), where their role as teachers is key to contributing to an embodied peace through fostering indigenous identity.<sup>177</sup> MTB-MLE is an educational strategy that prioritises students' native languages in the first year of nursery school before proceeding with additional languages like English and Burmese in the second year.<sup>178</sup> For Karenni Site 1 the first language is Kayah.<sup>179</sup> MTB-MLE addresses the lack of quality education often faced by ethnic minority groups and promotes sustainable education by preserving indigenous languages and respecting indigenous rights. In places like Karenni Sites 1 and Site 2, where Karenni and Karen languages are actively promoted in schools, MTB-MLE is crucial in revitalising these languages and strengthening their presence in the community.<sup>180</sup> The teaching strategy was primarily advanced by women involved in children's education, who promoted it through advocacy meetings and collaboration with leaders of the Karenni National Education Department (KNED). As a result, MTB-MLE was adopted as a new language policy in all Karenni regions in 2023.<sup>181</sup>

Also here, women are the main bearers of educational agency and create spaces for children and young adults to express themselves freely in their familiar languages. Language and arts are important pillars of cultural peace but most importantly of an embodied everyday peace which acknowledges marginalised groups and is built through everyday practices.<sup>182</sup> The Karenni community has been systematically oppressed due to their cultural identity and as an

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<sup>175</sup> WEAVE, "Final Report"; Interview with respondent 2.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with respondent 2; Interview with respondent 4.

<sup>177</sup> Berents, "An Embodied Everyday Peace," 1–14.

<sup>178</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 23.

<sup>179</sup> Kayah is the majority language of the Karenni people. However, multiple other languages are spoken by sub-ethnic groups which implies that Kayah is not everyone's native language.

<sup>180</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 4, 23.

<sup>181</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 23.

<sup>182</sup> Berents, "An Embodied Everyday Peace," 1–14.

assessment reveals, students of MTB-MLE experience a higher appreciation and pride in their cultural identity, heritage, and history.<sup>183</sup> As peace is reflected in the free expression of culture and language, women in Karenni Site 1 help revitalise cultural traditions for children and young adults, countering the military's efforts to suppress such expressions amidst ongoing conflict.

Whether as community leaders and trainers in WSP or as MTB-MLE teachers, women's teaching capacities can translate to active educational and cultural agency for peace and social transformation. Women's agency in teaching contributes to everyday peace as it develops modes of thinking for community members, utilised to navigate through life.<sup>184</sup> Whether it is indigenous language revitalisation, vocational and financial training, or education on women's rights, their agency helps to build the capacity of community members to deal with life circumstances in a conflict-torn environment. Strikingly, their multifaceted identity as (young) women, refugees, and members of an ethnic minority illustrates the intersectionality of oppression women must deal with. The development of skills for themselves and the community further contributes to the broader peace efforts of the Karenni people, with educational capacities embodying a vital foundation for resilience and progress.<sup>185</sup> An intersectional feminist approach reveals that being a woman and an ethnic minority are two characteristics linked to structural discrimination. Women's role within education challenges these assumptions. Their role as teachers is important for sustainable community peacebuilding by strengthening women's and ethnic empowerment through the topics they teach. As educational agents, they have an important influence on their students many of whom were educated under the junta's propaganda-tailored curricula which aimed to oppress ethnic language.<sup>186</sup> Therefore, women also help to maintain an important part of endangered ethnic culture and linguistic everyday peace.

## 5.5 Ethnoarts for Peace

Another way to contribute to everyday peace for individuals and groups is by facilitating so-called Ethnoarts workshops. It entails teaching about different forms of artistic expression

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<sup>183</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report," 23.

<sup>184</sup> Mac Ginty, *So-called ordinary people*.

<sup>185</sup> Herr, "Reclaiming third world feminism"; Naw K'nyaw Paw and Maggi Quadrini, "Women's Leadership for Transformative, Feminist Change at the Grassroots Level in Karen State," in *Waves of Upheaval*, ed. Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius (NIAS Press, 2023), 150-56.

<sup>186</sup> Marie Lall, "Ethnic Education: Recognising Alternative Systems Run by Ethnic Armed Organisations," in *Myanmar's Education Reforms: A Pathway to Social Justice?* (UCL Press, 2021), 238–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13xprwx.13> .

related to the diversity of Karenni culture.<sup>187</sup> Examples are weaving and embroidery, designing posters with Karenni traditions, clothing and festivals; performing music with traditional bamboo flutes or singing.<sup>188</sup> Facilitated by a member of the Karenni community, these workshops are intentionally called 'Ethnoarts for Peace' as they aim to create a space for emotional and cultural expression for women.<sup>189</sup> Introduced in Karenni Sites 1 and 2 after the military coup in 2021, the workshops have consistently received positive feedback from the participating girls and women.<sup>190</sup> Ethnic culture and arts are often deeply rooted in personal memories evoking a sense of belonging and peace as they express what is frequently suppressed by the central government or at times other ethnic groups.<sup>191</sup>

While this practice may not directly contribute to immediate social transformation, it embodies a meaningful women-to-women initiative.<sup>192</sup> By addressing trauma and fostering emotional healing these workshops create new spaces for women to engage in meaningful dialogue and mutual support.<sup>193</sup> During a two-day Ethnoarts training in Karenni Site 1, women stated that the workshops helped them to develop creative skills to produce cultural items through sewing and drawing.<sup>194</sup> They could present their cultural identity and future dreams to remind themselves of their strength and agency to build peace. Many participants added that the workshops reminded them of their homes and enhanced their capacities to create and critically challenge the existing understanding of gender in Karenni culture. Moreover, they claimed to be more confident in presenting their opinion in front of others as the environment allowed them to speak up freely.<sup>195</sup> The supportive female-based environment enhanced their confidence in public speaking and cultural expression before leveraging the learned skills to the wider community. Consequently, women's new capacities from the workshops translate into agency the moment these new skills of cultural expression, critical thinking towards gender roles, confidence in public speaking, and community advocacy help to create more inclusive and just societies. This is evident as more participants began speaking out against gender-based

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<sup>187</sup> Shee, Hsar, "Ethnoart Initiative for Community Development" (Power Point Presentation, February 12, 2024).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> WEAVE, "Annual Report."

<sup>191</sup> Shee, Hsar, "Ethnoart Initiative for Community Development" (Power Point Presentation, February 12, 2024).

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> WEAVE, *Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE) foundation quarterly report 2024*, unpublished material, March 2024.

<sup>195</sup> Shee, Hsar, "Ethnoart Initiative."

discrimination in cultural traditions. Alongside trainers and KNWO, they are now involved in community advocacy for women's empowerment in Karenni culture, aiming to reduce disenfranchisement.<sup>196</sup>

Women's agency manifests itself in the diverse spaces and practices, activities, and occupations of everyday life.<sup>197</sup> Agency implies active engagement and influence within social networks. Women's roles as teachers contribute significantly to the advancement of women and ethnic minorities, thereby amplifying their transformative agency. It contributes to a positive feminist peace which recognises the underlying power structures and cultural particularities, by supporting those relegated to the margins in advancing their capacities to decrease their structural dependence.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, they push for a gender-just peace by challenging patriarchal assumptions and predetermined social positions by criticising prevalent gender injustices during training, classes, or workshops. Through community involvement, they build capacity by assuming leadership roles in cultural, educational, and economic spheres. Along the way they gain insights into their opportunities, develop their skills, and learn about intersectional challenges related to gender, ethnicity, and conflict. By passing on their knowledge and skills, they further contribute to the capacity building of community members and strengthen resilience. Throughout this capacity-building process, women frequently encounter resistance due to deeply engrained assumptions about women's role in society. Nonetheless, this process helps break down gender hierarchies as the newly acquired skills empower women to assert their agency for gender justice thereby promoting feminist peace.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> KNWO, "Staff," Accessed July 2024, <https://knwo.wordpress.com/staff/>.

<sup>197</sup> Thawngmung, "Politics of Everyday Life," 641-656.

<sup>198</sup> Cross, "Defining Feminist Justpeace."

<sup>199</sup> Mollie Pepper, "Feminist Peace Building at the Grassroots," *Waves of Upheaval*, ed. Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius (NIAS Press, 2023), 97-117.

## 6. The Institutional Level

Having touched upon the household and community level, this chapter will analyse women's agency on an institutional level. Political institutions are key in developing policies that include women and identify them as crucial agents for wider peace-building efforts. Therefore, it is essential to examine how Karenni women's grassroots agency synergises with formal political efforts to enable gender-just governance within patriarchal structures. The analysis will be guided by the example of the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) as a vital actor in formal feminist political advocacy.

### 6.1 Karenni Governance During Civil War

Karenni State is home to multiple stakeholders and political parties. As of the military coup in 2021, the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) was established in the same year by ethnic resistance organisations, women representative groups, Youth and civil society organisations, strike committees, the Karenni State Interim Parliament, and political parties.<sup>200</sup> In June 2023, the Interim Executive Council (IEC) was formed to coordinate regional governance and deliver essential public services in opposition to the junta regime in Myanmar. It is led by six officials, including two women who are members of Karenni armed and civil society groups.<sup>201</sup> The primary objective of the IEC is to pave the way for a smooth transition towards a prospective federal union and for now it has introduced eight departments, including one for children and women's affairs, defence, education, health, human rights, humanitarian relief and the judiciary.<sup>202</sup> A member of the Karenni National Education Department (KNED) reveals that women's involvement with the IEC is essential to wider party politics by stating:

KNPP depends a lot [...] on KNWO. Whenever; [...] we make a decision, we invite KNWO to participate and to get the input. KNPP's left hand is KNWO and KNPP's rights and is KNYO, so [the] Youth.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup>KSCC, "About KSCC," Accessed July 2024, <https://kscck.karennistate.com/about-kscck>.

<sup>201</sup> English Editor, "Explainer: The Karenni Interim Executive Council Leadership," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, June 17, 2023, <https://english.dvb.no/explainer-the-karenni-interim-executive-council-leadership/>.

<sup>202</sup> J. Esther, "Karenni governing council offers political alternative to junta control," *Myanmar Now*, August 17, 2023, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/karenni-governing-council-offers-political-alternative-to-junta-control/>.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with respondent 4.

He further explains that especially in education around 90% are women and their knowledge and skills on a community level are very high. While this is not a new development, the advocacy of groups like the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) highlights the necessity to cooperate and rely on women's input.<sup>204</sup> This is particularly due to their agency and knowledge within the household and community, offering valuable insights into community and gender-related needs. Strikingly, these insights mirror everyday challenges and can be translated into more effective and inclusive policies to assure a degree of everyday gender-just peace.<sup>205</sup>

## 6.2 KNWO's Strategic Advocacy

KNWO strategically advocates for gender-just policies on an institutional level since its existence in the 1990s. Their asset lies within their community-wide network built around the knowledge of women's (conflict) experiences, political demands and humanitarian needs.<sup>206</sup> According to a member of the organisation, KNWO is increasingly involved in addressing the urgency for gender justice through policy writing and reporting.<sup>207</sup> They continuously engage with the broader Women's League of Burma (WLB), an umbrella organisation of twelve women's organisations with different ethnic backgrounds from Myanmar, to file policy proposals and reports.<sup>208</sup> Advocacy on topics such as gender equality, conflict-related violence against women, and peacebuilding has led to increased awareness among political parties and decision-makers in Karenni State regarding women's discrimination and the need for gender equality.<sup>209</sup> This process is supported by experiences of women's multi-layered involvement from the household to the community and finally to the institutional level. Despite security threats inside the country, members of KNWO are still active in acquiring information about women's experiences in conflict zones by visiting communities.<sup>210</sup> The last big assessment took place in 2016 with the aforementioned 'Policy Brief for Peace' which gathered gender

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<sup>204</sup> Interview with respondent 4; Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor."

<sup>205</sup> Interview with respondent 4.

<sup>206</sup> Snyder, "Developing Refugee Peacebuilding Capacity," 177–98; Karenni National Women's Organization, *Collecting the Voices*.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>208</sup> Women's League of Burma, "Background." Accessed July 2024, <https://www.womenofburma.org/background>.

<sup>209</sup> Women's League of Burma, *Analyzing the Principles of Gender Equality*, Myanmar: Women's League of Burma, 2018, <https://www.womenofburma.org/sites/default/files/202004/WLB%20Analysis%20of%20Principles%20from%20UPC%20eng%20web.pdf>.

<sup>210</sup> Karenni National Women's Organization, *Collecting the Voices*.



recommendations for the Karenni State Peace Process.<sup>211</sup> In the current conflict environment, these recommendations are more relevant than ever and serve as a pivotal document for the IEC. Recent examples include the Interim Government's general policy statement on women, which encompasses the development of a special Commission on Women and Children for emergency legislation.<sup>212</sup>

Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, community outreach and consultation activities are ongoing in Karenni Site 1. These initiatives encompass continuous engagement with the community, to gather feedback and insights about the daily insecurities of women. The exchange with community members during workshops, educational and skills training, or home visits is a vital source for KNWO to assess the situation on the ground. Essentially, their involvement is key in translating women's everyday household and community agency to an institutional level, contributing to a transformative and emancipatory cycle of agency. It is transformative because they uncover the engagement, challenges, and demands of Karenni women and incorporate these experiences into their advocacy agenda. Moreover, it is emancipatory as it seeks to promote the social and political freedoms and rights of women. KNWO's demands are thus a translation of their grassroots work aimed at uplifting women's informal agency which often goes unnoticed in Karenni national policymaking.<sup>213</sup> Their involvement has led to successful advocacy campaigns on the Elimination of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, the principles of CEDAW, International Women's Day celebrations, and the annual KNWO Congress to discuss the status of Karenni women.<sup>214</sup>

### 6.2.1 Empowerment, Peace and Advocacy

KNWO is actively involved in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and survivor support through the facilitation of home visits, family talks, GBV coordination groups and group discussions. Moreover, they engage in campaigns against gender-based and domestic violence by offering a Safe House in Karenni State<sup>215</sup> and a space for women in Karenni Site 1 to share

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<sup>211</sup> Karenni National Women's Organization, *Policy Brief for Peace*.

<sup>212</sup> Karenni State Consultative Council, "General Provisions", in *Interim Arrangements of Karenni State*, (Karenni State: KSCC, 2023), 43. <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/8742d3c7-cb19-4fb8-a9d7-dc21d623d9b5/Karenni-Interim-Arrangement-English-print.pdf>.

<sup>213</sup> Day Myar, "The Marginalization of Women in the Karenni National Liberation Movement."

<sup>214</sup> KNWO, "7th Congress of KNWO."

<sup>215</sup> Due to the precarious situation, projects may be stopped temporarily.

their experiences and seek judicial justice.<sup>216</sup> Due to the constraints imposed by the current political situation in Myanmar, the scope of intervention within the country remains limited. However, similar initiatives and sustained advocacy for gender justice continue to be pursued within Karenni Site 1. The judicial services and emergency response mechanisms implemented on a community level directly respond to gender-related issues encountered within a household. These initiatives channel women's experiences of gender-based violence, allowing KNWO members to elevate these issues to an institutional level. The relevant collected data is then systematically communicated to the IEC for evaluation and the formulation of new policies.<sup>217</sup>

This observation subscribes to the role of Karenni women as active agents in filtering and translating information from the grassroots level to the formal political sphere. Through their engagement within women's organisations like KNWO, and participation in workshops and trainings mentioned in the last chapter, many women collaborate in advocacy campaigns for women's rights.<sup>218</sup> The insecurity faced by Karenni women in war is increasing and women's groups like KNWO are using strategic advocacy and documentation of human rights abuses to draw attention to the everyday violence perpetrated against women.<sup>219</sup> Notably women have long been engaged in strategic and gender-just peacebuilding initiatives. However, it appears that the Karenni government, despite its entrenched patriarchal structures, is increasingly acknowledging the necessity of including women in peacebuilding processes and policymaking. The protracted conflict together with women's active and continuous advocacy for peace backed by an institutionalised organisation like KNWO established a higher resilience against patriarchal ignorance and exclusive policymaking. Recent results are the publication of an IEC policy document for the 'Interim Arrangements of Karenni State'. It includes a section on 'Plans concerning Women and Children', stating that the IEC will work for equal opportunities,

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<sup>216</sup> KNWO, "GBV Prevention."

<sup>217</sup> Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>218</sup> Magda Lorena Cárdenas, and Elisabeth Olivius, "Building peace in the shadow of war: women-to-women diplomacy as alternative peacebuilding practice in Myanmar," *Journal of intervention and statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (2021): 347-366.; Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>219</sup> Cárdenas and Hedström, "Armed resistance," 148-156

women's participation in decision-making, the prevention of sexual violence, and the provision of mental, physical, and health support.<sup>220</sup>

### 6.2.2 Policy Translation Issues

However, there is a twofold issue. Simply acknowledging women's important contributions to decision-making does not automatically result in social transformation. What is required is the enhancement of women's capacities.<sup>221</sup> The Karenni government's policy to include 30% of women in politics exemplifies this ambiguity. Although their objectives are clearly stated only 8-10% of women are able to participate, mainly due to limited capacity resulting from the deeply entrenched gender hierarchies in Karenni culture.<sup>222</sup> Therefore, the challenge lies in the interplay between men's limited support for gender-inclusive governance and women's lack of opportunities, motivation, and time which obstructs their ability to build personal capacity. According to a member of KNWO:

All men are leading everywhere [...]. To achieve peace, women need to be involved in this role. We are given the opportunity to take on leadership roles, but we as women are not yet ready due to a lack of capacity. The state needs to prepare many things to better support women.<sup>223</sup>

This quote indicates that gendered hierarchies establish significant barriers rooted in the socially ascribed positions of women within society. Strikingly these rigid boundaries ignore women's active and necessary agency which makes communities work and lays the foundation for community peace and formal peace processes.<sup>224</sup> To achieve a gender-just peace for social justice and equity the acknowledgement of women's daily contributions and the consideration of their social and reproductive role within the wider Karenni community are necessary.<sup>225</sup> As indicated above a simple policy is insufficient to ensure women's inclusion in political decision-making processes. Instead, capacity building must be facilitated first, to uplift the transformative potential of women's agency within households, communities, and political

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<sup>220</sup> Karenni State Consultative Council, "Fundamental Rights and Plans to be Implemented During the Interim Period," in *Interim Arrangements of Karenni State*, (Karenni State: KSCC, 2023), 15, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/8742d3c7-cb19-4fb8-a9d7-dc21d623d9b5/Karenni-Interim-Arrangement-English-print.pdf>.

<sup>221</sup> Snyder, "Developing Refugee Peacebuilding Capacity," 177–98.

<sup>222</sup> Day Myar, "Marginalization of Women"; Interview with respondent 2.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with respondent 1.

<sup>224</sup> Thawngmung, "Politics of Everyday Life," 641-656; Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>225</sup> Blomqvist, "Ambiguous Agency."

organisations. Importantly, advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns as facilitated by KNWO play a crucial role in dismantling gendered hierarchies that initially limit women's opportunities based on their ascribed positions in Karenni culture.<sup>226</sup> The application of a gender analytical lens further reveals that this institutional agency embodies women's household and community agency which receives little recognition in formal peacebuilding policies. It demonstrates that synergy across all three levels is essential to effectively challenge and ultimately dismantle patriarchal structures that either overlook or reinforce the unique experiences of violence and peace faced by women.<sup>227</sup>

### 6.3 The Cycle of 'Informal' and 'Formal'

To encourage women's capacity building that assures peace through institutional means, existing abilities can be enhanced by designing institutional structures for peaceful conflict resolution.<sup>228</sup> This includes the promotion of cultural values which leverage women's agency and act upon gender equity and equality. As discussed in previous chapters a critical feminist analysis reveals that the transformation of cultural values occurs in the mundane spaces of everyday lives, experiences, and relationships.<sup>229</sup> However, the particularities of women's gender-related insecurities especially during war, have received little recognition on a formal political level.<sup>230</sup> KNWO's advocacy plays an important role in recognising women's everyday experiences of violence and discrimination to raise awareness on an institutional level to design gender-tailored policies. The IEC's establishment of a Department for Women and Children is therefore an important step in the Karenni governance system to pave the way for gender-just peace. It is a good example of how strategic gender-focused advocacy can lead to new political foci that place previously 'informal' issues on the formal political agenda.<sup>231</sup> This achievement supports gender-equitable governance that acknowledges and incorporates women's agency at the grassroots level into future policy frameworks.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Pepper, "Women's Invisible Labor"

<sup>227</sup> Confortini, "Galtung, violence and gender."

<sup>228</sup> Cárdenas and Olivius, "Women-to- women diplomacy."

<sup>229</sup> Olivius, Hedström, and Phyo, "Feminist Peace or State Co-optation?" 25-43.

<sup>230</sup> Pepper, "Ethnic minority women," 61-75.

<sup>231</sup> Elena Di Padova, "Women's 'marginal voices': Diverse perspectives on peace and security in Myanmar," in *Women, Peace and Security in Myanmar*, (Routledge, 2019), 108-121.

<sup>232</sup> Julie Marie Hansen, "Women building peace in displacement: the transnational peacebuilding potential of Myanmar women in Norway," (Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, 2016), <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2384020>.

Capacity-building involves strengthening individuals' inherent abilities and understandings of conflict within their specific contexts.<sup>233</sup> The understanding of conflict for many Karenni women is linked to gender-related insecurities, knowledge about community dynamics, and household organisation.<sup>234</sup> Their inherent abilities often originate from their grassroots engagement and informal efforts towards fostering stability and peace within families and the Karenni community. Instead of separating informal and formal peacebuilding women advocate for recognising their grassroots engagement and representation in government institutions, aiming to synergise peacebuilding practices for sustainable and gender-just peace. Rather than attributing the 'informal' to women and the 'formal' to men, the dynamic nature of peace and the significance of everyday actions demonstrate that peacebuilding is a fluid process.<sup>235</sup> It involves continuous interaction and mutual reinforcement among individuals, households, communities, and institutions. The 'everyday' matters for gender-just policymaking and peace, just as policymaking matters for the everyday experiences of women. Consequently, the institutional level relates to everyday peace through its power to formally recognise women's informal agency. Although everyday peace does not stem directly from institutional power it can be further manifested through policies that contribute to structural peace.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Lederach, "Preparing for Peacebuilding," 108-109.

<sup>234</sup> Hedström, "Kachin revolutionary household."

<sup>235</sup> Mac Ginty, "Indigenous peace-making," 139-163.

<sup>236</sup> Mac Ginty, *so-called ordinary people*.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has reflected on the multifaceted engagement of Karenni women in peacebuilding mechanisms on the household, community, and institutional levels. Recognising the challenges of building peace amid entrenched gender hierarchies and prolonged conflict, all chapters identified practices that enhance women's agency in peacebuilding efforts. Their roles and daily efforts across these three levels illustrate a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding that addresses both immediate and systemic challenges within the Karenni community. To gain new insights into women's agency the conceptualisation of 'everyday peacebuilding' and 'capacity-building' proved paramount in identifying the transformative potential of their engagement. An intersectional feminist lens illuminated the intricate connections between peacebuilding and gender, exposing the roots of prejudice and traditional assumptions about women embedded in Karenni culture and everyday life.

A significant finding of this research is the profound impact of the Karenni's long history of conflict on women's peacebuilding engagement. The protracted civil war has both constrained and catalysed women's efforts in distinct ways. On the one hand, generational trauma and displacement have exposed women to persistent threats of violence, perpetuating patriarchal gender hierarchies that undermine their capacity-building initiatives and deprioritise gender equality. This conflict environment often relegates women's needs and contributions to the margins making their struggle for agency more rigorous. On the other hand, it has created unique opportunities highlighting the essential role of women in peacebuilding. Conflict-induced disruption of everyday life has emphasised the importance of organisations like the Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO) and necessitated the emergence of women-led community initiatives, which play a crucial role in community resilience. The war-related absence of men has further allowed women to step into leadership roles traditionally occupied by men, thereby redefining gender norms and expanding the scope of women's agency.

Through capacity-building projects conducted in exile and within their communities Karenni women have developed innovative strategies to navigate the complex landscape of conflict and peacebuilding. These projects have improved their skills and knowledge and cultivated a sense of solidarity, thereby enhancing their capacity to advocate for their rights and interests. By engaging in these initiatives women actively contribute to weaving a social

fabric, that supports community cohesion and peace. The analysis of their engagement has shown that women's agency in peacebuilding is not a static or isolated phenomenon, but a dynamic process influenced by various socio-political and cultural factors. An intersectional feminist approach reveals the dual impact of conflict on women's peacebuilding efforts, highlighting it as a source of significant challenges and a catalyst for transformative change. This becomes further evident in the capacity-building initiatives of Karenni women which show that addressing gender justice during conflict—rather than deferring it to post-conflict situations—is crucial. By actively engaging in peacebuilding amidst conflict, Karenni women underscore the importance of integrating gender justice as a fundamental component of sustainable peace efforts

Achieving gender-just peace relies heavily on the interconnectedness of household, community, and institutional levels. The case study presented in this thesis further clarifies the meaning of 'capacity-building' as a transformative process which develops women's abilities to translate resources and opportunities into essential achievements of empowerment and justice. Such achievements strongly depend on how the potential for social transformation in a group is perceived and operationalised as prevalent cultural assumptions about women and peacebuilding run the risk of reinforcing inequalities by pushing for androcentric agency. The critical awareness required to question traditional views on gender roles, conflict, and peacebuilding in the broader Karenni community is increasingly achieved by enhancing women's inherent capabilities and fostering alternative forms of agency. An intersectional feminist approach reveals how the capacity-building efforts of Karenni women create new spaces in their daily lives allowing them to assume leadership positions in both their homes and communities. This community involvement subsequently enhances their advocacy at the institutional level as they gain the skills and knowledge needed to engage in political processes and policy advocacy. Institutional support and policies that acknowledge and promote women's contributions further empower them at the community and household levels. The synthesis of all three levels may result in a beneficial cycle of empowerment, strengthening their ability to make a difference, define their goals and act upon them. The triangulation of capacity-building processes in these spheres of everyday life strengthens the power within their actions and fosters more gender-just realities. These findings challenge our assumptions about peacebuilding and gender roles by moving away from essentialist assumptions and giving the small creative acts of everyday life a greater meaning. A bottom-up approach teaches us how

the sum of women's actions and relationships greatly impacts social transformation and builds an important foundation for policymaking. Peace can have multiple definitions, yet its inclusiveness strongly depends on who defines it. As the analysis revealed, women's position as 'co-definers' is not enough. It is the moment women start defining what peace means for a community whilst challenging the gender hierarchies within, that peace inherits gender justice. To 'have agency' therefore also means creating spaces for dialogue among women to foster stronger networks and challenge the notion that only the men-dominated formal political sphere is important. Peacebuilding is always embedded in its social structures and requires women as active agents to steer this process in a direction where larger parts of a community are included. The findings of this thesis affirm that incorporating women's voices in peace processes is not only beneficial but essential for the creation of resilient and just communities.

## 7.1 Limitations and Future Research

Notably, this research is limited in scope and does not fully represent the entire Karenni community in Myanmar or the refugee camps along the Thai border. Moreover, the ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar continues to impact the Karenni community both within and outside the country. These limitations hindered a more comprehensive exploration of women's everyday peace practices which are particularly significant within the dynamic and evolving conflict environment. This thesis only addresses a portion of these practices, primarily by incorporating the perspectives of individuals from Karenni Site 1 to address gaps in the existing literature concerning women's peacebuilding agency. To fully understand women's transformative potential future research should evaluate the sustainability and conflict resilience of their informal contributions to peace processes. Such an analysis would provide deeper insights into how these efforts can be maintained and adapted in different conflict settings. Achieving a truly gender-just peace requires an ongoing discussion and emphasis on women's everyday practices. A continuous dialogue and the use of 'the everyday' as a feminist method can reveal significant parallels across various times and conflict environments. Mac Ginty once described everyday peace as a social glue that prevents fragile societies from tipping over the edge, often serving as both the initial and last form of peace.<sup>237</sup> The daily contributions of women in the Karenni community embody this claim positioning them as key actors in

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<sup>237</sup> Mac Ginty, *so-called ordinary people*, 6.



advocating not just for any peace, but for a gender-just peace beyond the realm of the formal sphere.

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## Appendix A: Interviewees

No.	Gender	Role	Location	Date of Interview
1	female	Holds a position in the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) and has extensive experience in their advocacy work and strategy.	Ban Nai Soi, Thailand	March 27, 2024
2	female	Active in community peacebuilding, teaching and	Ban Nai Soi, Thailand	March 29, 2024

		capacity building for women in Karenni Site 1.		
3	female	Active member of Karenni Site 1 who has experience in camp activities and politics.	Ban Nai Soi, Thailand	March 28, 2024
4	male	Works with the Karenni National Education Department (KNED) and is involved in shaping policies for educational purposes.	Ban Nai Soi, Thailand	March 28, 2024

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

\* Questions are intended to guide the conversation instead of serving as survey-type questions.

- 1) By taking into account the historical background and political struggle of the Karenni people, what are the actions taken by the Karenni community to build peace amidst ongoing conflict?
  
- 2) How would you describe the role of women in the peacebuilding process within the Karenni community? (you may talk about Karenni Site 1 but also touch upon Karenni state)
  - a. What are women actively doing?
    - i) For example: Are there programs, initiatives, workshops etc. which aim to facilitate peace? (please give examples if possible)
  
  - b. Where are women actively taking responsibility? (e.g. household, community, policy-making level)
  
- 3) Why is it important to include women in the peacebuilding efforts for the Karenni people?
  
- 4) Having touched upon all these questions:
  - a. What does peace mean for you?
  - b. What is peace for the Karenni people?