Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements

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Karen Nationalism and Armed Struggle: From the Perspective of Zipporah Sein

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In late 2008 Burma watchers and members of Karen communities were taken by surprise when the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the oldest ethnicity-based organisations in Burma that has continued to engage in armed struggle against the current Burmese government, announced that Zipporah Sein would be its next general secretary. It was completely unprecedented for the historically male-dominated organisation to elect a woman. At the time, Zipporah Sein was serving as the general secretary of the Karen Women Organisation (KWO), the women’s wing of the KNU. Who is Zipporah Sein? What are the circumstances that gave rise to her ascendance to one of the most important positions in the ethno-nationalist movement in Burma?

In this chapter, we will describe the life of Zipporah Sein within the context of the emergence and evolution of the Karen nationalist movement and armed struggle in Burma. Particular emphasis will be placed on how Zipporah Sein perceives her role and articulates her political vision as a prominent civilian leader in an armed resistance organisation, how she believes her gender affects her relationships with her colleagues, and the role of women in the KNU struggle. The chapter is based mainly on interviews with Zipporah and her siblings and colleagues. A personal relationship between one of the authors of this article and Zipporah Sein has given us access to these primary sources of information, and allowed us to let Zipporah tell her story in her own way.
Zipporah Sein (second from left) with her mother, sister and nieces, 2009. Courtesy of Zipporah Sein

The armed resistance led by the KNU in 1949 emerged out of the desire to have genuine autonomy over Karen-populated areas and a distrust of the majority Burman population as a result of the communal violence during World War II. The KNU has articulated the concept of “nationalism” (known in Sgaw Karen as *hta eh kalu tha* or “love for one’s nation”) through the four principles articulated by Saw Ba U Gyi, the late president of the KNU. These four principles mainly emphasize the pursuit of an autonomous Karen State through armed revolt. This interpretation of Karen nationalism has not been shared by some Karens, who stress non-violent approaches to maintain Karen identity and culture and to promote social, political and economic development.

Zipporah Sein adheres to the official KNU interpretation of Karen nationalism, but perceives her role differently from those who took up arms at the inception of the Karen armed revolution. This chapter shows that while Zipporah’s rise to power may have been a product of an internal power struggle within the KNU, her new leadership also reflects the KNU’s broader strategy to adapt to current international trends and represents an attempt by second- and third-generation armed fighters to redefine the role of the KNU within the context of Burma’s evolving external and domestic political landscape.

**Emergence and Evolution of Karen Nationalism and Armed Struggle in Burma**

Contemporary Myanmar/Burma, with a population of about 54 million, is made up of a diverse array of ethnic, cultural, religious and language groups, including Burman (the largest, constituting 68 per cent of the population), Shan (9 per cent), Karen (7 per cent), Arakanese (4 per cent), Mon (2 per cent), and more than 100 smaller language groups. Burmans, along with Mons and pockets of Karens, live in lowland areas in the Irrawaddy Delta and central and southern Burma surrounded by minority populations inhabiting the highland areas bordering India, China, Laos and Thailand.

The term “Karen” is a polysemy for approximately 20 subgroups of the Karen language family that come from diverse religious, cultural and regional backgrounds. Their numbers in Burma are estimated at 3 million to 10 million. The two major groups are the Sgaw (predominantly Christians and animists living in the hill regions) and the Pwo (mostly lowland Buddhists). About 15–20 per cent of Karens
Karen Nationalism and Armed Struggle

Karen Nationalist Movement

1885  British occupy whole of Burma after waging three successive wars
1887  Founding of the Karen National Association, the first Pan-Karen organisation
1945  Establishment of the Karen Central Advisory Board, which makes the first demand to the British government to create a Karen State
1948  Independence of Burma
1949  KNU takes up arms for a separate state
1950  Assassination of Ba U Kyi, the KNU president
1976  National Democratic Front is formed in Manerplaw, the “capital” of KNU-controlled areas, bringing together key ethnic resistance groups
1990  First multiparty elections since the military took over power in 1962
1994  Democratic Karen Buddhist Army splits from the KNU
2004  KNU leaders engage in ceasefire negotiations with former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. Talks break down when Khin Nyunt is placed under house arrest
2008  Assassination of KNU General Secretary Padoh Manh Shah
2010  Military-controlled multiparty elections in Burma

are Christians, 5–10 per cent are animists, and the remainder are Buddhists. The Karens are spread all over lower Burma, from the Irrawaddy Delta region to the central Pegu Yoma mountain range and the eastern hills along the Thai border. In precolonial times, interactions between those who lived in the surrounding hills (including the Karens) and the majority Burman population were sporadic at best and hostile at worst. A popular Karen perception of precolonial history is that the Burmese monarchy looked down upon minority hill tribe populations as illiterate and uncivilised and occasionally employed them as protective shields against their enemies from neighbouring countries.
The British, who colonised Burma in 1885, further separated Burmans from minority groups by resorting to a classic divide-and-rule policy. Minority groups, such as Karen, Chin and Kachin, were deliberately recruited in the army and police. Many Karen people welcomed the British as a protector against the majority population and a source of opportunities previously denied them. Some accepted Christianity and became the main beneficiaries of American and European missionaries who promoted literacy (in both Karen and English), education and healthcare for the newly proselytised populations. Under British rule, Karen Christians held a disproportionately large number of positions in the civil service, military and police.  

The resistance movement against British rule was initiated and dominated by Burman nationalists who secretly went to Japan and China in the early 1940s to get military training for their campaign against the colonisers. In 1942 the group formed the Burma Independence Army, and returned to Burma at the head of the invading Japanese. Some members of ethnic minority groups, including Karen, remained loyal and fiercely defended the British. Nearly 2,000 Karen (as well as Burman) civilians in Salween District in the east and in the Irrawaddy Delta were killed during communal violence, initially instigated by Burma Independence Army members who went after the local Karen population for their perceived privileged status and close association with the British. While this collective memory of persecution had fuelled Karen nationalistic sentiment, Karen community leaders continued to uphold diverse views and approaches.  

Aung San and other nationalist leaders later turned against the Japanese and formed an anti-Fascist front in a secret meeting in 1944. They perceived support from Burma’s ethnic minority groups as crucial to national independence. After the end of World War II, nationalist leaders eventually negotiated the country’s independence with the British government. Initially the Shan, Karen and Karenni preferred to keep their areas autonomous under British rule. However, after a series of meetings with the Burman nationalist leader Aung San at Panglong in Shan State, some ethnic leaders, such as from the Shan, Kachin and Chin groups, agreed to be a part of independent Burma on various conditions. Many Karen believed that their case for autonomy would be favourably considered due to the support they had provided to the British government and the sacrifices they had made in fighting against the Japanese army. It was a major blow for many Karen people when the British administration cancelled its
original plan to retain the frontier areas under its direct rule. Instead, it allowed for the immediate election of a constituent assembly, leading to the country’s independence. The constitution of 1947 created three new states within the borders of Burma — the Shan, Karenni and Kachin — and established frameworks for the creation of new states in post-independent eras. The territories and status of the government’s territorial authority over three other major ethnic groups — the Mon, Karen and Arakanese — were left open in the constitution, to be decided after independence in January 1948. The current Karen State, which came into existence in 1952, encompasses only a minority of the Karen population.

From the very beginning of independence, the Burmese government led by the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League party experienced internal dissension. The government was also unable to accommodate demands by various ethnic groups for greater autonomy and independence. Towards the end of the 1940s, the Karen and Mon revolted. A decade later, the Shan and Kachin rebellions broke out. In 1962 the military took over power under the name of the Revolutionary Council, ostensibly to prevent the country from disintegrating into various units. It soon launched the “Four Cuts” policy, which forcibly relocated villages in areas controlled by resistance groups to deny them a source of food, funds, intelligence and recruits. These strategies succeeded in wiping out Communist and KNU resistance groups in the Irrawaddy and Pegu Yoma. General Ne Win, the leader of the military coup, imposed restrictions on civil and political freedom and established a one-party system led by the Burma Socialist Programme Party. He introduced a socialist economy, nationalised private enterprises (including the previously vibrant media), and put restrictions on internal and external trade. However, ethnic armed organisations continued to control extensive territories along the border areas, partly as a result of the abundant natural resources and taxes imposed on goods that crossed the borders between Burma and its neighbours. The KNU formed an alliance with other armed resistance organisations to establish a nine-party National Democratic Front in 1976, which agreed in 1984 to adopt a common federal goal, dropping any demands for separate independent states.

In the meantime, the isolationist and state-controlled economy in Burma soon resulted in a scarcity of basic food and consumer products, and poverty. It eventually culminated in the nationwide popular demonstrations that brought down Ne Win’s regime in 1988. The
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military ruthlessly repressed the anti-regime demonstrations and staged a coup d'état in 1988 to govern under a new name: the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Over 10,000 students and civilian activists fled underground into the resistance-controlled mountains, with many ending up in KNU-controlled areas.

The SLORC removed a few restrictions on foreign trade and investment and held a multiparty election in 1990 to promote its international image. The main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the leading nationalist Aung San who had been assassinated in 1947, won a landslide victory. The military junta refused to honour the results and instead cracked down on opposition parties. In the early 1990s a dozen NLD elected members of parliament fled into KNU-held territory, where they formed the exiled National Coalition Government Union of Burma.

By the early 1990s, the geopolitical situation was no longer favourable to armed resistance groups. The Thai government now adopted a “constructive engagement” policy towards Burma to secure lucrative logging, fishery and gas pipeline deals offered by the SLORC. Funds from this emergency sell-off of natural resources to Thailand enabled the Burmese junta to buy much-needed arms, ammunitions and aircraft from neighbouring countries, particularly China. The SLORC was also able to conclude successful ceasefire negotiations with 17 armed groups by the mid-1990s, which enabled it to launch a stronger military campaign against the remaining armed resistance groups, including the KNU. The biggest setback to the KNU was a major split that led to the formation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. Some attribute the cause of the split to the reaction of disgruntled KNU soldiers, many of whom were Buddhist, against corruption, abuse and religious discrimination by the Christian-dominated leadership. Many KNU members blame the Burmese military for enflaming these tensions to split the organisation. The formation of the Buddhist army organisation led to the collapse of the KNU’s headquarters in 1995. This was soon followed by a number of smaller KNU breakaway factions signing ceasefire agreements with the Burmese military regime.

By 2008, only four non-ceasefire groups — the KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party, Shan State Army-South and Chin National Front — maintained military forces of any strength, on dwindling
economic and recruitment bases. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the new name for the SLORC, unilaterally proceeded with its “road map” by holding the National Convention, which drew up a new constitution that gave a dominant role to the military. The SPDC used a combination of coercive and incentive measures and outright manipulation of votes to procure a very high approval rate for the constitution and held nationwide legislative elections on 7 November 2010. Three Karen political parties contested the elections, emphasising a non-violent approach to promote Karen nationalism within the legal boundaries. The Union Solidarity and Development Party, a pro-junta party, whose high level positions were dominated by retired military and government personnel, won an overwhelming majority.

Former SPDC Prime Minister Thein Sein was appointed the new president. He soon embarked on a series of reforms, including negotiation with armed groups, releasing political prisoners (notably Aung San Suu Kyi), and relaxing control over the economy, politics and media. Suu Kyi’s party then officially registered to participate in the by-elections in April 2012. She and 42 other members of her party won almost all the contested seats and have become the main opposition party in the parliament although they occupy only 6.8 per cent of the seats. The new government has adopted a more lenient approach towards ethnic armed resistance movements by signing provisional agreements with most of them, including the KNU but excluding those in northern Burma, where fighting recurred between government troops and the Kachin Independence Organisation. Detailed arrangements to end conflict with these resistance groups may take years, given their sheer numbers and the seemingly incompatible positions between them and the government.

It is during these critical years of Burma’s history that Zipporah Sein has taken over leadership of the KNU. The decisions she and her movement make are likely to have a major impact not just on the future of the KNU and the Karen people but also on the nature of political reconciliation and institutional arrangements for Burma’s diverse population.

Zipporah Sein’s Childhood and Education

Zipporah was born in a hamlet called Saw Kha Der in Kler Lwe Htu (Nyaung Lay Bin) District on 27 March 1955, the fifth of eight children
of General Tamalar Baw and Naw Laurel. By then, the Karen armed revolt was in full swing. Her family members had to flee from one area to the next to accompany the father, who was a leading figure in the Karen armed resistance movement. Zipporah's father joined the British Army at the age of 16 and took up arms against the Burmese government at the onset of the Karen armed revolt in 1949. Zipporah describes her precarious childhood growing up in a war zone as follows:

I do not have any special place I call my home because I have been living in so many places in my life, particularly in the mountainous jungle areas of eastern Burma. Because my father is an active member of the Karen revolutionary movement, our family members constantly had to run for our lives to avoid Burmese government soldiers.

Villagers did not usually let us stay with them for fear of government retaliation, so they built shacks in the field for us to stay outside the village. Quite a few of those in eastern Burma who knew nothing about the Karen revolution ultimately rejected us.22

Zipporah recalled growing up missing the presence of her father:

I hardly saw my father, and I only knew a few things about him. When we asked for our father, my mother would tell us that he had to travel with a big mission to liberate his people. We were the happiest children when he came back, no matter how short the visit was. However, this happiness never lasted long because we knew that our father would have to go away again.

It was Zipporah's resourceful mother who was single-handedly responsible for the upbringing and early education of Zipporah and her siblings. As a soldier, Zipporah's father was not paid a salary. Her mother worked as a schoolteacher and was provided food to feed her children. Sometimes Zipporah and her brother helped people harvest paddy in exchange for food. A devout Baptist, she and her family continued to pray together every morning and evening. Zipporah also mentions that her traditional Karen Christian family background has influenced her principles, such as honesty, kindness and generosity. She sees God as her “true friend” and has found comfort in prayer and communication with God to gain emotional and spiritual strength whenever she has encountered challenges.
Zipporah’s early awareness about Karen people and history came through her mother, who she says was a great night-time storyteller:

My mother would tell us about the Karen revolution and our father’s involvement in the struggle. She told us stories about Japanese colonisation, and how dominant Burmans oppressed Karen people, which led to the Karen armed insurrection. These stories played a very important part in my life as they inspired us and influenced our thoughts. My mother also said that if Karen gained autonomy we would not need to run away again and we could live happily with our father. I even had a dream of living with my parents and other siblings in a village where we settled permanently and did not need to move any more. As a child, I was deeply hoping for that special day to come. I am still waiting.

Zipporah acknowledges the powerful influence of her mother, who instilled a sense of duty and responsibility in the minds and hearts of her children. Most of Zipporah’s siblings are currently serving in important leadership positions in the KNU as military personnel, teachers and administrators. In a 2010 interview with Violet Cho, Karenni National Progressive Party General Secretary Khu Oo Reh considered Zipporah’s background as a strength: “In my view, their family’s participation in the revolution has become a sort of ritual, that is passed down the generations. She has got a good background and foundation in the movement.”

Zipporah and her siblings learned how to read and write the Karen language from their mother before going to formal primary, middle and high schools in the Karen-controlled area. In order to further her studies in a government university, Zipporah repeated her high school education in a government-controlled area. However, she gave up halfway when she heard that her friend who had sat for matriculation had to run for her life from local authorities who uncovered her familial connection with the Karen armed resistance. After giving up her dream to pursue a university education, Zipporah decided to go back to the Karen “liberated” area and dedicate her life to teaching.

Zipporah’s passion for teaching came at an early age, and she recalls fondly the fun she and her elder sister had when they occasion-ally replaced their mother as teachers:

I was only eleven years old when I first became a teacher. My older sister and I took over my mother’s teaching responsibility in the small school she’d set up, when she went secretly to a city
for medical treatment for her abdominal pain. It was really fun because we registered all the students who attended our school and we started teaching. Some students were my friends and some were older than me. We were supposed to take a 10- or 15-minute break during school hours but sometimes we would let it drag on for an hour. When we thought we had had enough playing we went back to the classroom to teach again.

From Teacher to General Secretary of Karen Women Organisation

While she was teaching in one of the districts controlled by the KNU, Zipporah began to get involved in a local women’s organisation that had been established to address the social and humanitarian needs of Karen residents. In 1985 she was elected general secretary of the Karen Women Organisation, a position she proudly accepted; but she soon realised that holding two jobs — as a teacher and the general secretary — was too much for her. She decided to leave the KWO and focus all her attention on teaching. Padoh Lah Say, Zipporah’s former colleague and a KNU officer, remembered Zipporah as follows:

I have known Zipporah since 1986 when I came to work as a schoolteacher in Hway Baw Lu. Zipporah had a passion for learning and teaching. She was a hard worker, and a dedicated public servant. I found her constantly learning new things and asking questions. She was also very patient and treated others with respect. Most people, including her colleagues, students and myself, loved her and enjoyed working with her.23

Zipporah’s teaching career came to an end in 1995, when the KNU’s main headquarters were overrun by government forces. Along with many Karen civilians who were now displaced, Zipporah and her family moved to Mae Ra Mu refugee camp, on the Thailand-Burma border. It was at the camp that she focused her attention on women’s and children’s issues.

The Refugee Camp: Working for Women and Children

By the time Zipporah got to the refugee camp the KWO was barely functional, due to the fall of the KNU’s headquarters and the ongoing war and displacement of Karen residents. Some leaders went back to Burma, while others resettled overseas. Zipporah recalled that it was a
challenging time for the KWO amidst many urgent needs that had to be fulfilled. In 1999, she quit teaching to dedicate herself to the KWO:

When I came to live in Mae Ra Mu camp, I saw that it was necessary to reorganise the women's organisation to address the needs of refugee families. We used to live in the jungle, where we had unlimited space and freedom of movement. However, the refugee camp was cramped and crowded so we need to change our living style. I set up a women's group in each section of the camp to make a list of their needs in the household and coordinated collection and distribution of essential items for pregnant women, new mothers and infants. I opened nursery schools and summer schools for children to learn basic reading and writing skills as well as to educate them with necessary health and hygiene knowledge.

She was also concerned with the prevalence of indiscriminate corporal punishment towards children:

There is a need to change our traditional perception about the role of children in our society. I was disturbed to see, while living in the camp, how children were punished physically, regardless of the severity of their mistakes. There were no rules and guidance for child-rearing. So while in the camp, I also organised training and education for parents on child psychology and development and how to raise children.

Financial need was the most challenging part of the KWO activities. The then treasurer fled with all the KNU money to government-controlled areas in Burma, and collection of dues from local women's units was hampered due to the war situation. Zipporah began to send applications overseas to get financial aid to run activities for the camp and slowly reorganised the KWO office. She was later invited overseas to talk about the situation of Burmese women and refugees, an experience that exposed her to new perspectives and ideas:

My first overseas trip was to Norway, where I made a presentation at the World Women's Conference. It was something I had never dreamt of. I started travelling regularly to Thailand. I worked very hard to speak, write and research in English in order to give presentations at international conferences. I did not turn down the offer to go for an EU lobbying trip to advocate for my people, even though I didn't understand how lobbying and campaigning worked. After coming back from that lobbying trip, I set up lots of programmes under the KWO.
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Zipporah set up a women’s rights school and other learning centres to train young women to work with local women’s groups. Their programmes continue to encourage Karen women to participate in major decision making, empower them to be self-confident and outspoken, make them aware of their rights, and encourage them to get involved in the movement against the military government. Noting the low rate of political participation of women in nationalist struggle in the late 1990s, Zipporah tries to send her women staff for further training and education whenever opportunities arise. She believes that education is key to women’s participation in politics.

Zipporah spent most of her time as KWO general secretary promoting education, health, family welfare and women’s rights. She first attended the KNU congress in 2000 as a women’s representative. When she attended the congress as a women’s representative again in 2004, she was elected to serve on the KNU Executive Committee, which had 11 members consisting mostly of the highest-ranking authorities in the organisation. She nevertheless continued to devote much of her time to the KWO.

From the KWO to the KNU

On 14 February 2008, the charismatic KNU General Secretary Padoh Manh Shah was gunned down at his home in Mae Sot. He had fled to the KNU area in 1966 at age 22 after graduating from college with a major in history. He worked his way up to the highest level of the KNU political machinery by first serving as a soldier, like other KNU male leaders. As a Pwo Karen Buddhist, Padoh Manh Shah represented an anomaly within the KNU leadership dominated by Sgaw Karen Christians. Speaking fluent Burmese and advocating for a federal union in Burma, he was highly regarded for his diplomatic skill in building trust among disparate members of the resistance. However, his uncompromising “politics-first demand” policy towards the Burmese military regime was at odds with the “peace-through-development policy of mutual trust building” strategy adopted by other ceasefire groups.24 This alienated some segments of the Karen population within and outside the resistance movement. The “politics-first demand” policy put political issues such as equal rights, the right to self-determination, and moves towards federalism as a precondition before negotiating a ceasefire arrangement.25
The KNU holds elections every four years for president, vice-president, general secretary as well as executive members. At the 14th congress in November 2008, Zipporah attended as a member of the executive committee. Tamalar Baw, Zipporah’s father, became the president of the KNU, and Zipporah Sein was elected general secretary. This new development came as a surprise to many, including Zipporah herself. Though she felt unprepared for the responsibility, she gracefully accepted the mandate given by her supporters, with the hope to inspire more women to take up leadership positions.

Numerous accounts were offered as to how and why Zipporah was elected to the highest position in the KNU. A member of KWO who attended the KNU congress recalled that approximately 100 delegates voted for candidates in the election through a series of screening processes. Zipporah Sein was one of the two most favoured candidates for the position of general secretary. The other candidate was reportedly Padoh David Taw (d. 2012), a former secretary of the KNU Foreign Department. The voting for David Taw and Zipporah was close, and therefore another round of elections had to be held, in which Zipporah emerged as a clear winner.

Zipporah and the KNU

It is difficult to uncover the motivations of delegates who voted for or against Zipporah Sein. Some suggested a possibility of vote rigging and manipulation by the KNU establishment, which was dominated by her relatives, while others speculated that she may have genuinely earned the votes due to her past accomplishments, experience and role as an internationally recognised humanitarian worker, which could potentially help the KNU’s image and raise its international profile. In the view of some male delegates who voted for her, it may have been in the best interest of the KNU to have a KWO woman activist within its leadership.

Burma activists, members of the Karen community, and foreign scholars and experts have offered a number of reasons for Zipporah’s ascendance to the KNU’s dominant position, which had previously been held by men. Most pointed out the role of “dynastic” politics, since many of Zipporah’s siblings occupied leadership positions in the KNU. Some common criticisms of Zipporah are that she lacks first-hand experience in politics; that she is the puppet of her father
or brothers or other leaders; and that she is merely reactive, and not proactive enough to develop new and pragmatic visions and strategies for the KNU in accordance with the changing nature of Burmese domestic politics.\textsuperscript{27}

Zipporah is well aware of these criticisms against her and her family. She said:

Some people think that I got this position because of my father. I may not have a lot of experience with KNU work, but I have so much experience working with grass-roots populations in promoting education and health, and in working with international organisations. All of these should be counted as strengths, but nobody seems to acknowledge them. People elected me because of my work with KWO, not because I’m the daughter of a KNU leader.

Zipporah also claimed that her father did not vote for her to become general secretary of the KNU. In fact, she mentioned that her father strongly objected when she became a member of the KNU Executive Committee in 2004, reasoning that women in general and Zipporah in particular should continue to work for the women’s organisations and help promote political awareness among women.

There are nonetheless others who view her victory in a positive light. Khu Oo Reh, general secretary of the Karenni National Progressive Party, for instance, thinks highly of her: “She became popular and gained recognition from ethnic armed groups, democracy forces and the international community since she was working with the Karen Women Organisation. As a single person with no familial responsibilities, she can devote her time to political work more than typical women.”\textsuperscript{28}

Others comment that Zipporah’s gender and rich experiences at the grass-roots level helped improve the image of the KNU among the Burmese opposition movement as well as the international community. Ehna, the head of the KNU Dawei District Information Department and the editor of \textit{Kwekalu}, said:

… the perception of women needing to be involved in the political movement is influenced by outsiders. The promotion of women’s rights is very popular these days. People will applaud and show their admiration for an organisation that appoints a higher proportion of women in leadership positions. The KNU leadership added an additional constitutional amendment to establish a quota for
women’s participation at every level of political leadership…. Since Zipporah was elected as KNU general secretary, the KNU’s image has become good again, and the Western media really likes that. She is a role model for other women, and she can inspire women to be aware of and promote their rights.29

Khu Oo Reh also pointed out Zipporah’s positive influence on women in the resistance movement and her impact on the image of the KNU: “She is a guiding star for women who want to be involved in political leadership. I’m really proud of her … I also think that the KNU will get more support and recognition from the international community and from ethnic and democracy groups for being open-minded and giving women opportunities to become a leader.” Zipporah speaks English and communicates well with the outside world, and she is the founder of the Women’s League for Burma, which has brought together women of different ethnic groups. Her good relations with other ethnic groups in the resistance movement and her ability to communicate with foreign media and NGOs may have put her in a good position and made her a preferred candidate to serve the KNU now that its international links are so important for funding and diplomatic strategy.

**Gender and Politics**

It is difficult to generalise about gender relationships in Burma, as they vary across generational, cultural and religious groups and within individual households. Buddhism (the religion practised by the majority of Burmese) prescribes a superior status for men and states that a person can attain enlightenment or become a Buddha only after going through the life cycle as a man.30 Although Christianity (mainly the Baptist Church) in Burma does not practise institutional discrimination against women leaders, there have so far been only a handful of ordained women ministers. Legal practices in Burma recognize equal inheritance between sons and daughters, but the Burmese government has exercised various forms of gender discrimination in higher education by setting a higher bar against women candidates for professional schools such as medicine and engineering. Women still occupy a minute proportion of high-level government and professional positions, and a greater degree of respect has continued to be accorded to men as heads of household in the majority of Burmese families.
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Zipporah offered an explanation for the existing political apathy among Karen women:

The majority of Karen women grew up in a society where politics is not openly discussed. Even in village-level meetings, women don’t really get a chance to speak out. Those who attend community meetings are often husbands. There is also a popular Karen maxim that discourages women from participating and engaging in political organisations. Consequently, women in our community have less interest in politics.

Those who live in rural areas and refugee camps always have to focus and think about their survival, so that stops them from getting involved in politics. When both wives and husbands work for the opposition movement it becomes difficult for the family to fulfil their basic needs. So it is difficult for a woman to be an active nationalist. Male politicians in the movement today don’t need to think about that because they know that their wife will take full responsibility for the family. If we look back in Karen history, most politicians including my father are supported by their wives. I believe that women would do equally well in politics if they were encouraged and supported by their husbands. I have a colleague in KWO who got full support from her husband. She travelled regularly for her work, and left her child with her husband. This kind of practice is growing in the Karen community, but it is still rare. For example, men can listen to the radio every morning but most women can’t do that because they have to prepare food early in the morning and do other stuff for their family, so they miss listening to news. It will be easier for young women to work in politics because they are free to make a decision and set goals.

Zipporah’s active involvement in social and political fields is helped by the fact that she has never married. Following the death of her fiancé during a military operation, she vowed to remain single to honour his legacy. Zipporah also acknowledges the different ways Karen women have contributed to the nationalist struggle:

Throughout the history of the Karen armed revolution, many women have been directly and indirectly involved in the struggle for freedom and self-determination. Women try to hold the family together while their husbands are supporting the movement as soldiers. There are so many women who are actively involved in the education sector by inspiring young people to love their people and become Karen nationalists. There are also women who work in the health, transportation and communication sectors, carrying
and delivering messages. In the past, a lot of women were involved in military operations and some even became officers and colonels. In addition, Karen women demonstrate strong interest in the community and social work.

Padoh Lah Say, a KNU official, also pointed out the crucial role of his wife, which enabled him to participate in armed revolution:

When I was elected to work in the Karen education department, the KNU could not financially support me. However, my wife raised pigs and chickens and sold them for money, which she used to support my work. I can travel and work with the money she saved for me. So in this way, she is supporting the Karen movement as well. If a Karen woman says she loves her people and wants to work for them, even if she is not actively involved in the movement, she can stay home and support her husband, which can be counted as a way of working for her people.31

Zipporah, however, felt genuinely disadvantaged by her gender in her workplace, and expressed her frustration as a female general secretary:

There are some male colleagues who hold the traditional views that women are not as competent as men, which really undermined my confidence. I felt like if I were a man I would be treated differently, with more respect. Most of the people who came and congratulated me on the day I was elected were women. A few male leaders came and congratulated me, but almost all of them just passed by without saying a word. I was very upset. Is that male culture that they don’t know how to compliment women?

Zipporah said the use of a secret ballot during the election for the general secretary prevented her from identifying her supporters, but she seemed quite sure that most of the people currently working with her in a high position did not vote for her. The fact that another candidate came very close to winning the position also explains her lack of popularity among some segments within the KNU leadership.

I often feel the superior attitudes held by some of my male colleagues even though they would not openly express their opinion. They demonstrated signs of unwillingness to work with me, or deliberately remained silent when I talked, raised and presented issues during our meetings. I don’t feel good about this, but I can’t do anything about it; all I can do is express my feelings. Sometimes male Karen leaders say that men and women have equal
opportunities and equal rights, but based on my experience, some still don’t want to agree and accept female leadership.

I despair sometimes. But I don’t want to give up because this is a duty and responsibility that I couldn’t stop doing. I always think that I’m working for all Karen people. Of course I know that everything I do won’t be perfect, but I have a motto that if people give me a duty, I will do my best. Sometimes when I’m feeling down, I pray to God to give me strength, intelligence to make good decisions. I also keep my own diary to write when I’m feeling upset. Fortunately, there are some people who understand me, respect me and try to work closely with me…. Because I have confidence and believe in myself, I can overcome whatever problem I encounter.

While gender may be an important factor in influencing the negative perception of Zipporah’s male colleagues in the KNU, other factors, such as her lack of experience in politics and disagreement over her political orientation among the committee members, could also contribute to the prevailing animosity towards her leadership. She encounters great resistance against her position from some segments within the KNU leadership who do not share her vision.

**Zipporah’s Political Vision**

As the general secretary of the KNU, Zipporah has the daily duties of addressing reports from the frontlines, responding to requests for information, finance and training, hosting members of allied resistance movements and journalists, attending meetings, and coordinating plans and urgent tasks. Unlike her predecessors and other KNU top leaders, she did not have any first-hand experience or involvement in KNU military operations. Zipporah has never fired a gun in her life, and would not give orders or suggestions related to KNU military operations. Professing her belief in non-violence, she nevertheless defends the Karens’ armed struggle as a mechanism for self-defence against authoritarian rule, while admitting the importance of other political and peaceful means of struggle. She interprets Karen nationalism as follows:

I don’t really think of myself as a nationalist who focuses on the interests of my community at the exclusion and expense of other communities. I believe in equal treatment of all ethnic groups, including Burman. As a Karen, I respect my culture and traditions. I also want people to respect my culture and traditions. At the
same time, I also respect other people's cultures and traditions. I don't want Karen people to disappear one day. There are a few traditions and cultural practices that are not good to practise nowadays, and they should be discarded, but many good cultural practices should be maintained. Of course, dominant groups have oppressed us for so many years, and their culture influenced some of our Karen people as well. When I talk about culture, I don't only mean clothing, music, literature, etc. ... but values like honesty, sharing, and hospitality, which should be maintained. This is a unique culture, but it has nearly disappeared. For example, in rural areas and refugee camps, people are losing the culture of hospitality because of continuing repression and hardship. Before, if you went to a Karen village, you'd be given food, but now it has become rare. I don't want this to become something that only exists on paper or in the national anthem. The main thing I want to see in my life is seeing my people develop and progress.

Zipporah measures progress for the Karen community through the protection of children and empowerment of women, equal rights, and the promotion of education, health, and culture to improve overall living standards at the grass-roots level. She perceives and describes her role in the armed resistance movement not as an armed fighter who leads the battle, but as an educator who is responsible for promoting awareness about the adverse consequences of civil war:

Good soldiers should not only be good at fighting, they should also have political views and they should make themselves understand contemporary politics. I always suggest and initiate the inclusion of political awareness training when there is a military training. We educate soldiers and officials to make them fully aware of international law, particularly related to landmines and child soldiers.

She disseminates information and conducts awareness training about landmines and child soldiers among Karen National Liberation Army soldiers.

**Ceasefire Negotiations with the Burmese Government in the Post-2010 Period**

A stalemate that characterised the relationship between the KNU and the government during the latter years of the SPDC regime came to an end when the new government made efforts to reopen negotiations
after 2010. The KNU’s army chief of staff led the first round of cease-
fire negotiations with the government team in January 2011 in Karen 
State, Burma. This was followed in April by a high-profile second 
round of negotiations where the Karen team was led by Zipporah 
Sein to work out detailed arrangements for the ceasefire agreement. 
Zipporah recalled her encounter with Burmese government repre-
sentatives as follows:

I was greeted by a crowd of ministers, uniformed military officers, 
and civil servants. I shook their hands, but I stopped smiling when 
I saw uniformed military officers and skipped them. Their ap-
pearance brought back so many painful memories to me. Most 
of the ministers I met in fact were former division commanders 
and battalion commanders who fought in major battlefields against 
the KNU. And I feel the head of the Burmese negotiation team 
treated me differently than he treated my male counterparts in the 
KNU. He seemed to be more at ease, friendlier, and tended to 
share detailed information with my male counterparts. I think we 
have mutual distrust towards one another.

The second round of negotiations nonetheless resulted in a tentative 
agreement to establish a code of conduct for soldiers from both sides 
as well as international and local monitoring mechanisms to form 
peace-building groups, to set up liaison offices in various cities inside 
Burma, and to resettle and rehabilitate internally displaced people and 
refugees. The talks also covered demining, citizenship, implementation 
of rule of law and “sustainable development”, land issues, and the 
release of all Karen political prisoners. The KNU team then travelled 
to the capital and Rangoon to meet with the president and Aung San 
Suu Kyi as well as Karen civil organisations.

Despite this progress, significant disagreements remain and mutual 
distrust persists. President Thein Sein, for instance, proposed a three-
step plan that would begin with a ceasefire truce and ultimately 
bring various armed opposition groups (presumably without having 
to disarm) to participate in the “all inclusive political process” within 
the framework of parliamentary politics to begin building mutual trust 
and confidence for a long-term political solution. The KNU, on the 
other hand, perceives the ceasefire negotiation as an integral and ini-
tial step towards political dialogue that should take place outside the 
parliament to resolve outstanding issues such as economic opportu-
nities and social equality. The KNU also advocates for a nationwide 
ceasefire, especially an end to hostilities and fighting in Kachin State.
Zipporah commented:

While I personally welcome the government’s initiative on the ceasefire agreement, I am deeply concerned that their action is economically driven. I believe that the government’s motivation to end civil war in the country is based on their desire to entice foreign investment and to promote economic development in areas occupied by ethnic populations. I feel they do not understand the roots of ethnic armed struggles nor care about aspirations of minority ethnic groups. They seem to neglect the very fact that we are struggling for equal rights and opportunity.

Zipporah also commented that they still have to work out detailed arrangements on the withdrawal of Burmese military troops from areas previously occupied by civilians and villagers who are currently internally displaced.

According to Zipporah, the role of the KNU (perceived by the government as an illegal organisation) remains uncertain under the current constitution, but it could be transformed into a parliamentary political party. Zipporah concluded, “We will seriously consider if our people think that the KNU should be a political party representing Karen people in Karen State or the entire Karen population in the country. If my people want, I am ready to represent Karen and be a member of parliament.”

**Conclusion**

The KNU has modified some of its official policies to respond to the changing international and domestic environments and dwindling resources over the 60 years of its existence. For instance, it has softened its demand for an independent separate Karen State and instead campaigned for an autonomous Karen State within a federal union in Burma in a bid to win both international and Burman-majority support. The new government itself has taken a more accommodating stance towards armed resistance groups by reopening dialogue with the KNU and facilitating preliminary ceasefire agreements. Outstanding disagreements have yet to be resolved between the two sides in terms of steps to be taken towards national reconciliation.

Zipporah’s rise to power may have been a combination of her gender, her past accomplishments, the broader strategy by the KNU to
show that it is pursuing a more peaceful negotiating strategy, and/or the result of factional struggle within the organisation which was won by those who were close to her. However, she has brought along her unique experiences to the KNU and redefined the means of pursuing Karen liberation. She may be perceived as part of the conservative and establishment force within the KNU, but she has continued to wage other equally important battles that are not necessarily defined in militaristic and militant terms. The KNU definitely is at an important crossroad where it will need to continuously redefine its role and strategies to position itself as a legitimate body representing the majority Karen populations in the new and evolving political landscape in Burma.

Postscript

At the KNU congress in December 2012, Zipporah Sein was elected vice-chairperson. It is debatable whether this means increased power for her in the organisation. Saw Kwe Htoo Win, a well-known “moderate” member of the KNU leadership, replaced her as general secretary, while General Saw Mutu Sae Poe, the KNU’s commander-in-chief, replaced Zipporah’s father, Tamalar Baw, who retired as chairman of the organisation. As of early 2013, the KNU continued its ceasefire negotiations with the Burmese government.

Notes

1. In 1989 the military junta replaced the existing English names for the country and its divisions, townships, cities, streets, citizens and ethnic groups with what it considered to be more authentic Burmese names. Thus, “Burma” became “Myanmar” and its citizens “Myanmars”; “Rangoon” became “Yangon”; and ethnic groups such as the Karen were renamed “Kayin”. The choice to use the old or new names has become one method of indicating one’s political stance towards the Burmese junta. We use the pre-1989 terms to avoid confusion, as these terms are commonly used in English-language publications, including the books, journals and other sources cited in this study.

2. The four principles of Ba U Gyi are as follows: (1) Surrender is out of the question; (2) The recognition of the Karen State must be completed; (3) We shall retain our arms; (4) We shall decide our own political destiny.


6. Ibid.


22. All interviews with Zipporah Sein were conducted between 15 and 30 May 2010 by Violet Cho via Skype. Cho was in Melbourne, Australia, and Zipporah Sein was in an undisclosed location in the Burma borderlands.

23. Interview with Padoh Lah Say conducted by Violet Cho by telephone on 12 August 2010. Cho was in Canberra, and Padoh Lah Say was in an undisclosed location in the Burma borderlands.


26. The KNU organised itself into seven administrative districts (Thaton, Toungoo, Nyaunglaybin, Mergui-Tavoy, Papun, Dooplaya and Pa-an), which were further sub-divided into townships and tracts. Each of the districts administered by the civilian wings of armed resistance groups was also controlled by a corresponding brigade, a parallel military formation of the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army). The KNU constitution stipulates that only official representatives from all seven districts and general headquarters (both administrative and military) can vote. Official delegates from the KNU district and KNLA brigades who attend the KNU congress nominate and vote for KNU’s central committee members. The 35 candidates who receive the most votes form the central committee, with the next five becoming alternate members. The central committee members then vote for an executive committee (11 members), which in turn decides within itself by secret ballot the five main positions: chairman, vice-chairman, general secretary and two joint secretaries.

27. This criticism also comes from some low-ranking, district-level KNU officials who have had tensions with the central KNU leadership. Some KNU district leaders perceive Zipporah’s father as authoritarian and a hardliner.
28. Interview with Khu Oo Reh conducted by Violet Cho by telephone on 8 August 2010. Cho was in Canberra, Australia, and Khu Oo Reh was in an undisclosed location in the Burma borderlands.

29. Interviews with Ehna were conducted by Violet Cho by telephone on 10 August 2010. Cho was in Canberra, Australia, and Ehna was in an undisclosed location in the Burma borderlands.
