



Statement on Report Launch on International Women's Day

By the Karen Women's Organization

Each for Equal!

8 March 2020: In recognition of International Women's Day, The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) is pleased to announce the release of our recent publication, *"Kill Me Instead of Them": A Report on the Resilience of Women Village Chiefs*. The report highlights the courage of women village chiefs in Karen State who have gone to extraordinary lengths to protect their communities. Like so many women leaders in the world, Karen village chiefs are faced with significant challenges which they handle with dignity and strength. This year's International Women's Day theme is 'Each for Equal' KWO today and every day calls for equal opportunity for all. Village Chiefs' fairness and willingness to stand for others serves as candle in our darkest nights and an example for all of us to learn from and work toward.

In our community, women are faced with long-held cultural beliefs that suggest they are not capable of holding leadership positions. However, as our report makes clear, women show an unwavering dedication to protecting their people in life threatening circumstances. Many institutions in Karen State continue to be male led and dominated, but that is only part of the story that is our community. For true and meaningful peace in Burma, all voices must be listened to. The stories women have as refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), women with disabilities, survivors of gender-based violence and other lived experiences represent vital perspectives. Many of the women village chiefs in our report spoke of experiences that challenged their instincts but never broke their spirit. Their insights in conflict mediation including strong negotiating skills and quick thinking are needed in all levels of discussion.

KWO recognizes the long way we have to go in achieving gender equality. However, we remain committed to working with all stakeholders to create more spaces for meaningful dialogue and capacity building. Indeed, we can only reach our goal when men and women work together in the quest for justice and empowerment in Burma. We live at a time when peace and human rights, including women's rights in Burma feel far away. The Burma Army continues to systematically perpetuate injustices against innocent civilians in our Karen State, across Burma and along the Thai-Burma border. Recent outbreaks of fighting in Mutraw district have forcibly displaced 253 families, including 864 women and 865 men as well as 417 children under the age of 5. The clashes have taken place over the Burma Road expansion despite a ceasefire pact. In early February, as families were forced to run they were surrounded by indiscriminate gunfire and shelling by the Burma Army. Women will never be safe until this ends.

Today, on International Women's Day and every day KWO recognizes the significant contributions women have made to the future of Burma. We will continue advocating for more women led representation and call on the international community to take seriously its commitment to put pressure on the Burmese government to uphold human rights for all.

Together, we can work towards a future where each of us is equal, a future with peace and justice, and a future where our community and every community can live with dignity.

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