



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Naw W---, October 2015

This Interview with Naw W--- describes the general situation in Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, in October 2015, including land confiscation, leadership roles, and healthcare.

- *After companies accessed this area and confiscated villagers' land, women have lost their jobs working on their land and now they have to do labour work to earn a living.*
 - *Before the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed, women held leadership roles serving as village heads, but since the ceasefire was signed men have started to take these leadership roles again.*
 - *The villagers who live in remote areas have not been able to access proper healthcare services.*
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Interview | Naw W---, (Female, 21), D--- village, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (October 2015)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Mergui-Tavoy District on October 1st 2015 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Single

Occupation: Hill field farming

Position: Village head

What is your name?

Naw² W---.

Age?

21.

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When conducting interviews, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

² Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

Do you think it is a good thing that we are doing our [KHRG's] next big report on women's [perspectives of human rights abuses in the region]?³

Yes, it's good.

Why?

If you publish this report, other people will get to know this information.

What do you think about women's rights? We have human rights, women rights. Do you think most people, most women in Karen State, know about women's rights?

They do not know what women's rights are in every sector.

Do you think women in Karen State are discriminated against in any way?

There is discrimination. Like for leadership roles. When women are elected to lead, their husbands think that they cannot lead and they do not respect them all of the time.

I think it is really good that you give us an example. It really helps us when you give us an example. So you said "yes" and gave us an example. So thank you for doing that. We talked about this a lot today. And I am sorry if we are going to be repeating a lot of the things we talked about today. We really want your opinion as a woman in Karen State. We will talk a little bit about the role women usually play in the family, the household, and the village. Can you briefly go over what women are expected to do in your village?

They usually work at home but now, as the land confiscation has taken place, and as the men go to [work in] offices and discuss these issues, women also go and discuss these issues with each other.

Did you submit a report on a palm oil plantation and a biofuel plantation in Brigade 4 [Mergui-Tavoy District]?

Yes.

Was that you?

Yes.

Do you have the maps from the company showing where the biofuel project is located, the one that we are going to go to? So to set up the biofuel project, before the company took the land, they asked for permission from the authorities. Did they send the map to the KNU [Karen National Union]? Did you send it?

No.

Was it MSPP [Myanmar Stark Prestige Plantation Company]?

For MSPP, I sent [information to KHRG] about the biofuel [project].⁴

When you sent the report, did you include the map?

The map was not included.

³ ["Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar,"](#) KHRG, August 2016.

⁴ ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Muh Lah and Ta Naw Th'Ree Townships,"](#) KHRG, October 2015.

So you submitted something about palm oil, right? And land confiscation? I think we just published that report. It was an excellent report. So you are seeing a lot of land confiscation and that is changing the role of women [in your community]. They have to do other things now, right? Like working [as labour workers] to earn a living?

Because of the land confiscation, some women do not have any land to work on and they have to be labour workers for companies.

Are we seeing more of this type of land confiscation after the ceasefire? After the 2012 [preliminary] ceasefire?⁵

It has been going on for a long time. Since 2000, before the ceasefire.

Has there been an increase in the number of incidents of that happening now, more than before the ceasefire?

Now, I have seen more development projects come to the area. MSPP Company comes and they ask for more land for their palm oil plantations.

So more development, more land confiscation. How do you think women's roles have changed, or what can women do now that they could not do before? Think about your parents' generation compared with your own generation, how have women's roles changed?

In the past, our parents' generation could not study and they had to run [flee], but now, we can study here.

Why do you think that has changed? Why do you think there was a change?

In the past, at that time war was happening and people could not study, but now, it is more peaceful and people can travel and live freely.

So what do you think are the biggest challenges or problems facing Karen women such as yourself? For example, somebody said livelihoods and access to land, and other people said education. Something along those lines? An example of a problem that women face is that land confiscation means women cannot earn a living. Could you give us an example like this.

We do not have money and now we do not have land to work on [because of land confiscation].

Do you think you can interview some women for us about those issues, in terms of land and livelihoods and how development [projects] affect them?

Yes.

⁵ The KHRG community member is referring to the preliminary ceasefire agreement that was signed on January 12th 2012 between the KNU and Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014. On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15th 2015.

That would be great. That would really help us. How do you think the 2012 [preliminary] ceasefire has changed women's lives? There is no wrong answer. This is your opinion. Do not worry.

Before the ceasefire, women did not feel safe to travel but after that, they feel safe to travel.

Let's talk a little bit about freedom of movement. How do you think being able to move around more and feeling safer has changed women's lives? For example, women feel safer to go to trainings so more women are becoming health workers. Do you see any other ways in which being able to move more freely has changed women's lives?

After women finish school, they can work with NGOs or CBOs, and, for example, work in an office.

So, do you see a lot of that happening? Since the ceasefire, are women working at organisations or working as teachers? Things like that?

Yes, it's happening more.

During the war period, as men were fleeing, more women became village heads but now that there is peace, or during the ceasefire, women are stepping down and more men are returning to village head roles. Do you see that in your district at all?

In the past, during the war, when Tatmadaw soldiers came and men ran away from the villages, women were becoming village heads.

So, is your village head a woman or a man?

A man.

Did you used to have a woman as the village head?

In the past, when we were children, there used to be a woman as the village head.

Did she leave after the ceasefire?

A long time ago.

How many female village heads do you know in the surrounding villages?

Now, I see that most of the village heads are male.

Another thing I thought was really interesting that came up today was about the fact that the ability for women to meet their livelihood needs is decreasing because of environmental destruction like [damage to] plantations. So you can no longer get firewood. Do you see that happening?

Yes, it happens. Because of the rich people and companies that come to the village, the villagers cannot work on the land and it becomes a challenge for them.

So, women collect firewood and are responsible for catching fish and cooking? So if the environment is polluted, does that affect their ability to help their families or do their daily jobs?

Rich people came to the area and confiscated villagers' land, and now they [the villagers] do not have land anymore to work on to earn a living. And [this] has become a challenge for them.

Do you think the upcoming elections are relevant to you? Do you think the 2015 [general] election will be beneficial and relevant for you?

It is beneficial for me.

Why do you think it is relevant? Why do you think it will be beneficial or relevant for you?

I do not know.

If you cannot answer now, you can think about it, we can talk to you tomorrow. Do you have a government ID?

Yes.

Are you going to vote?

My name is on the list.

Will you go and vote on Sunday?

I work as a township staff member and it is fine if I do not want to vote.

Do you have a clinic in your village?

No.

What do you do if you are ill? Where do you go?

Our village is near the town.

Which town is that?

Pa Lout Town.

Is that a KNU or a [Burma/Myanmar] government clinic?

Government [clinic].

Do you think you have proper access to healthcare?

Some villagers who live near the town can get access to healthcare, but people who live in remote areas cannot access [healthcare].

What do you think? How can healthcare be improved in your village?

It would be good if there were a clinic here, or, if there is no clinic, it would be good to have a dispensary.

What about access to healthcare for you as a woman? Like women-related issues like getting pregnant? Do you ever hear about women having problems because they cannot access proper healthcare when they are pregnant? Can you tell us a bit about that? Do you have any examples? Can you tell us what kind of problems there were? What happened? Has a woman ever died [during pregnancy]? Did she end up getting better treatment [after having problems]? What are the stories you have heard?

Yes, with some women, their husbands do not take care of them when they become pregnant and some die.

Are you taught in school about health for you as a woman, for example, in terms of tracking your period?

No.

So, how did you learn about that? Did you learn it from your mother?

My parents.

Did you finish high school?

Yes.

What standard was that?⁶

[Standard] 10.

Was that a KNU school, an independent school, or a [Burma/Myanmar] government school?

I finished high school in a government school and after Standard 10 I continued my studies in a KNU school.

Did you face any challenge accessing education because you are a woman?

No.

How do you think education can improve your village?

For the women, we have to try very hard to get education, but if we try, we can get education.

Do you hear about rape or other forms of sexual violence in your village or in your area?

No.

Do you feel safe as a woman in your community?

Yes.

We want to understand a little bit about how the community reacts to gender-based violence such as this? Can you openly talk about rape or sexual violence with your friends, your family, or in your community?

Yes.

Do you feel comfortable talking about that with your community?

Yes.

⁶ A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standards 6-9, and upper secondary school is Standards 10-11.

How do women protect themselves from violence? For example, one person said that they never walk alone. How do women protect themselves?

In my area, I do not [hear stories about] violent abuse.

So you feel quite safe then? What about women who have been abused in this way, are they discriminated against?

If the woman is raped, they are disrespected. People gossip about her.

Do they find it hard to get remarried or find a job [after being raped]?

Men will still marry them because they feel sorry for them.

What sort of capacity-building or training workshops do you think should be provided by the government or different organisations [NGOs or local authorities]? What kind of training do you think would benefit women?

[They should] Provide trainings on, for example, healthcare and protection.

If a woman has problems in the community, who does she speak with first?

Her family.

Who does the family go to? Who does the family talk to?

The village head. And then, the village head arranges everything.

So the village head will negotiate the compensation or go to the KNU, if necessary. What do you think we are missing in this report [on women's perspectives of human rights abuses]? Do you think that there are issues that are important to women that we have not talked about at all during the meeting?

No.

Further background reading on the situation in Mergui-Tavoy District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Muh Lah Township, November 2015 to January 2016," (August 2016)
- "Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar," (August 2016)
- "Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, June to November 2015," (July 2016)
- "Mergui-Tavoy Short Update: K'Ser Doh Township, June 2015," (July 2016)
- "Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K'Ser Doh Township, August to October 2015," (May 2016)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)