

RESEARCH SUMMARY: LIFE ON HOLD

Experiences of women displaced by conflict in Kachin State, Myanmar

Since the conflict reignited in 2011 in Kachin State, Myanmar, over 100,000 internally people remain living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. To date, efforts at brokering peace have not resulted in a cessation of armed conflict.

Wider awareness and a clear understanding of the experiences, needs and interests of women who have been internally displaced, is crucial to advocate for and create a gender-transformative peace process.

This research report aims to bring together the voices and memories of women who have been internally displaced by this conflict, as well as their hopes and priorities for peace in Kachin State. Women from 12 different camps in both government-controlled areas and Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)-controlled/non-government controlled areas share their feelings and needs.

The findings in this report feature testimonies of loss of family members, children, husbands, homes, and of everything the women owned before the conflict disrupted their lives. Violence, particularly physical and sexual violence against women, is heavily present in their past and current lives.

The report also assesses the exclusion women experience from receiving relevant information related to conflict and peace — and hence, their exclusion from negotiation and decision-making processes. The testimonies also explore women's deep desire for involvement in peace building.

This research report was commissioned by Trócaire and Oxfam as part of the Durable Peace Programme funded by the European Union.

Research consultant
Nora Pistor

Photographs
Dustin Barter,
Garry Walsh

Life on Hold: Main research findings

EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT

- ◆ In most families, during the period of being displaced from their villages, women bore the major responsibility for taking care of family members, and often said they had been overwhelmed by the situation.
- ◆ Most women shared cases of sexual violence perpetrated by armed forces present in Kachin State.
- ◆ Most women had either directly experienced physical violence, sexual violence or forced labour, or witnessed the instances of the same against a close relative, extended family member, neighbour, or villager. The women also said there was “no justice” for women victims of violence.
- ◆ Many stories of the women centre on the loss of their land, property and various belongings.
- ◆ Many women reported giving birth while they were hiding in the jungle without any medical support or mid-wifery services, as well as the illness and death of their children.

“Who shall give encouragement to the young children who feel depressed? When will this war stop that is killing our lives? Is it possible to live your life as a human being in grief and sorrow?”

— Research participant, Pa Kahtawng

LIFE IN IDP CAMPS

- ◆ Many women said they had lost hope for their lives and for their future.
- ◆ Women expressed high levels of sorrow about the past experiences, deep sadness and feelings of depression. They disclosed that children also often showed signs of mental illness.
- ◆ Many women reported the frequent occurrence of domestic violence in various forms.
- ◆ Most women reported a lack of health-care, particularly maternal healthcare.
- ◆ Most women claimed that the sanitary facilities in some camps were not sufficient.
- ◆ The majority of women were facing water shortages in their camps and lacked firewood to cook.
- ◆ All women stated that space in the shelters was very small and making life difficult due to lack of privacy.
- ◆ Most women were deeply worried about interruptions to school education.
- ◆ Women valued living in a community where they had the opportunity to attend social services, live in peace and receive enough food and shelter to survive.
- ◆ Some women had a chance to participate in trainings offered by NGOs, which were highly appreciated.



HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR PEACE AND RETURN

- ◆ Women did not have specific knowledge about topics discussed during the peace negotiations or the further steps envisaged in the process.
- ◆ Most women clearly requested to be involved in discussions related to the peace process.
- ◆ All women stated a high interest and need to receive more regular information, and to participate in training to receive basic understandings of political concepts, the political system and human rights.
- ◆ All women requested the withdrawal of military troops currently stationed in or near their home villages, in order to ensure a safe return to their places of origin.
- ◆ The women considered themselves unable to return to their livelihoods without the support of aid agencies.
- ◆ Women demanded justice for women who were survivors of sexual violence and for women who were killed in the armed conflict.
- ◆ The women stated the importance of forming and participating in women's groups to share information, experiences and discussion of peace and conflict-related matters.
- ◆ The women said they would like to create networks with other internally displaced women to raise their voices collectively and to foster cooperation with relevant actors working in the peace process.

“We should found a women’s peace group in the camps and elect our leader for that group. Then we can share and discuss information related to the peace process with the other IDPs.”

— Research participant, Bhamo

Summary of recommendations

ADDRESS WOMEN'S NEEDS IN IDP CAMPS

1. Support income-generating activities for internally displaced women in humanitarian programmes.
2. Establish sufficient and comprehensive services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).
3. Raise awareness and information on sexual and reproductive health, and enhance related services.
4. Increase awareness and information on health care and social services, and improve access to these services for women and children.
5. Create information programmes on the peace process targeted at women.
6. Establish appropriate feedback and complaint mechanisms specifically for women and girls to voice their concerns and needs, and provide feedback to humanitarian actors.
7. Raise awareness on silent “social problems”, including sex work and trafficking of women and girls and create viable strategies to address these problems.
8. Support the establishment of women's groups in the camps and women representatives to allow for improved participation in decision making.
9. Involve internally displaced women in planning for resettlement, return and rehabilitation.
10. Strengthen capacities of local women's civil society organisations to improve outreach and support for women.

SUPPORT AN INCLUSIVE AND GENDER-JUST PEACE PROCESS

11. Enhance cooperation with government stakeholders for establishing effective women's support services.
12. Include the issues of SGBV and gender equality in peace negotiations and in political dialogue.
13. Advocate for the political recognition of conflict related SGBV and for legal accountability.
14. Support the operationalisation of UNSCR 1325 and women-related UN resolutions.
15. Support integration programmes of IDPs and cohesion with host communities through the involvement of women's groups.
16. Systematically collect and use sex- and age-disaggregated data for all aspects of policy development and program design related to populations affected by the conflict.

To download the full report, please visit:
trocaire.org/myanmar

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. Oxfam provided technical support. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Trócaire and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Trócaire
No. 129, Building A,
Room A021, 2nd Floor,
Shwe Pyi Aye Condo,
Bagayar Road, Sanchaung
Township, Yangon,
Myanmar

Ph: +95 (0) 1 230 4799
trocaire.org/myanmar

Oxfam
No. 34, Corner of
Aung Taw Mu Lane
& Golden Hill Avenue,
Bahan Township,
Yangon, Myanmar
Ph: +95 (0) 1 539 986
myanmar.oxfam.org