

# STRONG ROOTS

Understanding the Importance of  
Myanmar's Indigenous Women as Leaders  
in Developing Climate Change Solutions



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# Contents

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Foreword and Acknowledgements	5
Editorial	6
Framing the Essays	9
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Behind Sustainability Stands the Supernatural Power of Indigenous Women</b>	14
by Naw Eh Htee Wah	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Developing Indigenous Women's Leadership in the Fight against Climate Change</b>	22
by Naw Ei Ei Min	
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Voices and Choices: Myanmar Indigenous Women in Climate Justice</b>	29
by Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>Indigenous Peoples' Rights in REDD+: Placing the Cancun Safeguards at the Centre</b>	41
by Stefan Thorsell and Lærke Marie Lund Petersen	
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>Indigenous Cultures and Access to Education</b>	50
by Nu Ra Maru	

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# Foreword and Acknowledgments

## Why IWGIA wanted to produce this publication

Up to 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity is located on Indigenous Peoples' lands. Their lands intersect with 40% of terrestrial protected areas – perhaps because communities have constantly and consistently used their Indigenous knowledge to adapt to any situation they face, adding to their knowledge with each challenge. Communities already use the knowledge they have and continue to gain to survive under new circumstances, however, the society-at-large is not recognising the value of this extensive knowledge, and therefore it is not being used for the benefit of all. Indigenous Peoples must be more fully and effectively involved at every level in order to safeguard biodiversity. Advancing Indigenous Peoples' collective rights to their lands, territories and natural resources contributes to their well-being and to the greater good by tackling problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Indigenous women play an important – yet often unappreciated – role in forest protection all over the world. Indigenous women are a repository and source of traditional knowledge on non-timber forest products and herbal medicine, and are often the keepers of seeds and thus in charge of preserving domesticated plant varieties. In our work at IWGIA, we have time and again come across strong, resilient women who fight for the protection of their forests, for their livelihood, for their identity and for the future of their children.

These unsung stories, however, are rarely documented, and the efforts of these Indigenous women to protect our common natural environment against biodiversity

loss and climate change are too often invisible and unacknowledged. With this publication, IWGIA intends to show the world how Indigenous women in Myanmar are contributing to forest protection in several ways – even though they face massive challenges doing so. This publication is intended to show our appreciation for the efforts and sacrifices Indigenous women make, and we would especially like to thank all the Indigenous women who have contributed their time and energy to contribute articles to this publication:

We realise it has not been easy, but hopefully you are proud of the results of your hard work when you hold this publication in your hands. This is your work, and we encourage all Indigenous women and men to use this publication to show the world the tremendous contribution and sacrifice Indigenous women bring in order for forests and their biodiversity to survive.

Without the resilience and hard work of the general editor of this publication, the quality of the publication would have been very different. We would therefore also like to thank Catriona Knapman for her continuous support to the authors and for her patience and perseverance to come out with a beautiful end product.

I would also like to thank my colleagues at IWGIA who have contributed to this publication: Stefan Thorshell, Lærke Marie Lund Petersen, Kathrin Wessendorf and Dwayne Mamo.

Finally, without the generous support from Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) this publication would not have been possible.

*Signe Leth, IWGIA Senior Advisor on land and women's rights in Asia, and co-editor of this publication.*

## About IWGIA

IWGIA – International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs – is a global human rights organisation dedicated to promoting, protecting and defending Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Since 1968, IWGIA has cooperated with Indigenous Peoples' organisations and international institutions to promote the recognition and implementation of the rights of Indigenous Peoples. IWGIA works to empower Indigenous Peoples through documentation, capacity development and advocacy on a local, regional and international level. To achieve our mission we provide documentation, support advocacy and empower Indigenous Peoples' organisations and institutions via global partnerships.

IWGIA was founded in 1968 by anthropologists alarmed about the ongoing genocide of Indigenous Peoples taking place in the Amazon. The aim was to establish a network of researchers and human rights activists to document the situation of Indigenous Peoples and advocate for an improvement of their rights.

Today Indigenous Peoples from all over the world are involved in IWGIA's global network. Still, the key drivers for change in our work are documentation, empowerment and advocacy.

# Editorial by Catriona Knapman

## Introduction

This book contains a series of essays predominately written by Indigenous women from Myanmar. The essays show Indigenous women to be at the crux of climate change in Myanmar. On one hand, their daily activities in forests mean they hold knowledge of how to grow seeds and plants, as well as care for native species and protect biodiversity. These roles create an important relationship between Indigenous women and the forests which surround their homes. On the other hand, Indigenous women are amongst the economically poorest populations in the world and reliant on renewable natural resources. As such, they are at high risk of being impacted by changes to the climate and they are vulnerable to (or already affected by) climatic shifts, with consequences for their health, food, housing, work life and personal security. As rural women tend to have less financial, physical and human resources than men, they have fewer options to respond to these changes.

As the essays in this book show, Myanmar's Indigenous women's unique knowledge means they should be at the forefront of discussions about climate change – however they are currently not playing a central role. Myanmar's unique political history, also means this knowledge is not widely available and has been little researched. It is also knowledge, which due to changes in culture and external pressures, is no longer being passed down between generations. In short, it is knowledge which is being lost.

## The Process of Developing this Book

Developing these essays has involved a long process of discussing, drafting, editing and rewriting which took place over 2 years. This has included extensive conversations between myself, as editor, and each of the authors. This has not always been easy, as the authors are not writing in their first language (and in most cases not even in their second language). I have also noticed a cultural (or logic) gap between me, who grew up in a city in Western Europe (generations separating me from ancestors living in land-based cultures) and the Indigenous authors from Myanmar (who either grew up in land-based cultures, or close to them). Despite the fact I have worked for many

years on gender and natural resource management in Myanmar and the authors have experience writing for NGOs and Western donors, we often had to dig deep to understand each other during this process. I think we all learned something from this exchange.

I noticed that there was something valuable about the process of us writing together. It required committing words to the page, attempting to work out a logic; to record and explain clearly the intricacies of practices and cultures. This process forced us to communicate, until we were able to fully understand the intention behind each other's words and ideas. In an interview, or testimony, we could perhaps brush over what we did not understand, or imagine we understood what was being said. However, to write together, meant we had to repeat many rounds of questions, until we fully understood each other. I think that this, sometimes admittedly frustrating, process of talking together, asking questions, asking again, has helped us shape an understanding which we would not have otherwise achieved.

I also noticed that this process of question-asking, of allowing space for 'saying what we know in the form we know it' was valuable when working not only across language barriers but with a type of knowledge which was not born of the same logics or philosophies in which these final papers were written; nor knowledge which was shaped by exchanges in English or even Burmese languages. The final essays contain the ideas of the authors, yet the English language used to express them and their overall logic is shaped by the requirements of Western academic structures. It is worth bearing in mind that this is not the natural container for this type of cultural knowledge or practice.

As all the writers are activists, often juggling busy personal lives with the demands of their careers, sometimes there were childcare emergencies, or health problems, other personal commitments or work demands, which we had to adapt to and which delayed our progress. These were, it struck me, issues that 'women tend to deal with'. The sort of crises that culture expects women to respond to, or which come about because women have too many commitments and, as a result, struggle to find the time to manage them all. As such, I found these little delays also a feminist aspect of the work, because they demanded a different time-frame and led this to become a pro-



cess which fit the writers' lives, rather than have the writers adapt to an external deadline.

This sort of slow process, is not one that many donor funding structures allow, yet it is a process which respects certain archetypical feminine values. It is a structure which respects the patience and space of the natural rhythms from which the cultural practices described in these papers have been born. With women systematically excluded from dialogues about climate, environment and natural resources in Myanmar, this suggests to me, not only the low value that has been placed on women's knowledge itself but also that the structure of working on climate issues does not respect the way that Indigenous women work or the other pressures in their lives. To protect the climate, we know there is much to learn from people who do have a connection with land, landscapes, local flora and fauna. Through working on this project, I have also considered that more needs to be done to build a conversational structure which, by its' very form, welcomes in those traditional knowledge holders.

Beyond structure and form, I was struck by the actions and practices in everyday life, which in first readings, I would sometimes dismiss as not fitting into the logic of a paper 'about climate change'. Yet, on review and in conversation with the authors, I saw how these daily processes all contributed to create a picture of ways of life which connects to biodiversity and land. They show how every part of life in the community examples, has a role to play in protecting and preserving biodiversity. This may seem obvious in reflection but it is not obvious in daily life in the West or in 'modern' cultures. In fact, the connection to biodiversity in many of these processes is invisible to us, when we meet our needs through the market. Yet, the essays show the clear connections between healthcare, childbirth, food sources, making clothes, creating shelters and local plant life, forest life and biodiversity.

Chapter 5, by Nura Maru, provides some of these examples. These included: storing of seeds in the kitchen – which she revealed were kept there because the smoke from kitchen fires acts as a preservation agent. She also highlights the connection between traditional weaving techniques and patterns and biodiversity; as certain plants are grown to cultivate cloth and dyes. Naw Ei Ei Min in Chapter 2 also mentions the biodiversity preserved within traditional shifting cultivation practices, which include a wide range of crops and ensure a nutritionally rich diet as well as communities' self-sufficiency and resilience.

I was aware of the personal nature of this process for the writers and in our many conversations, I heard the authors grapple with their own relationships with their Indigenous heritage and of the imperfect nature of the practices which were passed down to them. Some aspects of their cultures they revered as containing ingenious and sacred ways to protect and preserve nature; while other parts of these same cultures discriminate against women in ways which have harmed their personal development and confidence.

In Chapter 1, Naw Eh Htee Wah discusses the deep importance of the traditions of her Karen community in Dawei, in Southern Myanmar. This includes an important community connection to the forest, on which the Karen people depend for materials, nutrition and medicine. The forest has been a cornerstone of their lives for generations, is celebrated in ceremonies, as well as in everyday actions. In her essay, she shows how recent government and private investor projects in Dawei are threatening her community's way of life. For Naw Eh Htee Wah protecting the forest runs alongside protecting these long-standing community traditions and ways of life.

Other papers suggest it can be easy to over-romanticise traditional culture, especially in relation to women's rights. In Chapter 3, Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun, as gender experts, cast a more critical eye on some traditional practices and the limitations they place on women. Agatha shared with me that her mother, who does not know how to read or write, has strong intuition and knowledge about her local environment and weather patterns around her home, which Agatha does not have. Yet Agatha also recognises many of the limits that traditional culture places on women. She notes practices which mean women cannot enter forests or touch trees while menstruating, the limited home-based nature of women's traditional roles and the heavy burden of their workloads, as well as the discriminatory attitudes which prevail in wider culture, which prevents them from inheriting productive assets or having decision-making power over resources. These are all limitations which frustrate her, which have affected her personally and which she would like to change. In Chapter 2, Naw Ei Ei Min also discusses discrimination faced by Indigenous women within the national political sphere. She shows the barriers women face to become leaders, including attitudes that women are not good leaders, or men preventing women taking on roles outside the home. These are issues she has also faced in the advancement of her own career, which she has had to work hard to overcome.

I was also aware that the topics we were writing about broached many areas of life. In this sense, the authors often had contrasting examples to share. For example, on the topic of education, Agatha, co-author of Chapter 3, has a perspective informed by her choice, as an adult, to leave her home area to study a Master's degree in Gender Studies in Bangkok. She recognises that formal education has a role to play and a positive impact on her life. In contrast, other authors discussed lost opportunities to learn community traditional practices because, like many other Indigenous women, they had to leave their village to complete secondary school education. Chapter 5 captures this dilemma, of having to choose between a home culture, and a modern education system, which is a choice many Indigenous families in Myanmar feel they have to make. Some of the authors had the opportunity to attend school but in doing so, lost access to other information and knowledge, which was also important to them. This was a common question amongst the writers, especially as activists who are knowledgeable about the global climate change debate. In their positions as NGO workers and activists, they bridge two worlds and they can see very clearly the importance of their home cultures in relation to the global climate change discussion.

The essays also go beyond the specific circumstances in Myanmar, to highlight global dynamics in climate change policy and practice. In Chapter 1, Naw Eh Htee Wah discusses the potentially negative local impacts of the Myanmar Government's climate change policy for the Karen communities in Dawei. In Chapter 4, IW-GIA's team, Stefan Thorsell and Lærke Marie Lund Petersen also share their experiences from working on the global discussion around climate change, highlighting the debate around REDD+, and global resistance from Indigenous groups to this policy. These papers show the way that local practices link to global ones. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, these global strategies impact local communities and as such, have the potential to influence the Myanmar Government's current management of climate change and the role Indigenous women play in these debates.

## Bringing the Words Together

It could be possible to sum up the words of the Indigenous writers in the question: Why are we not valued and why is this important part of our heritage not

valued by our wider society? I would also posit: Can modern Myanmar find ways to value its diverse cultures? How can global climate change actors and organisers better value traditional women's knowledge in their search for adaptation and mitigation strategies?

Indeed, these essays show that as Indigenous women themselves, all the authors have had to fight to have a seat at the table, and once there, fight to show their opinions are important; worth being included and listened to. To an outside observer, the value of Myanmar Indigenous practices may seem evident, to many within Myanmar this is not the case, and this ongoing struggle of both knowing the value of one's own culture and asking for it to be acknowledged by the dominant culture, continues. Despite the value of their knowledge, structural discrimination against both women and Indigenous groups prevails. That seat at the table is not assured for Myanmar's Indigenous women, even when logic and evidence points to them being essential participants in this debate.

As NGO actors and donors, I wonder:

- How can we shift dynamics in our own work, so that we bring these actors to the forefront of the climate debate?
- How do we strike a balance between supporting and advocating for Indigenous culture and Indigenous women's rights? How do we ensure that Indigenous women lead and frame this debate?
- How do we create working structures which fit with Indigenous women's existing lives, rather than asking that they work around foreign or archetypal masculine models?
- What shifts are needed in our ways of seeing and understanding Indigenous women's world?
- Where can we create space in our programmes and cultures to ask questions, dig deeper, so we better and more realistically (not idealistically) understand this type of land-based heritage?
- What changes in our own values do we need to make in order to give Myanmar's Indigenous women national and global leadership roles in preserving and protecting the natural world?

These are questions to take forward. I hope the details in these essays inspire new projects and processes which create space for Myanmar's Indigenous women at the forefront of the climate change debate.



# Framing the Essays by Catriona Knapman

## A Guide to Terminology

Myanmar has over 135 ethnic groups. The Burmese people make up 68% of the country's total population<sup>1</sup> and all other ethnicities are considered minorities. Most ethnic minority populations live in the country's border areas, traditionally occupying hilly, forested land. As a result, their cultures are often closely connected to forests, land and local flora and fauna.

The word 'Indigenous' is not widely used in Myanmar; instead 'ethnic' is more widely used. Different legal documents propose similar treatment of these two terms. For example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s definition considers ethnic minorities as Indigenous Peoples, since their custom, dress, religious and cultural practices differ from the major population. Myanmar's 2015 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Procedure (Section

4) states that Indigenous Peoples are 'people with a social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society'<sup>2</sup> The National Land Use Policy does not use the term 'Indigenous' but recognises that Myanmar is home to a number of 'ethnic nationalities' and offers protections to ethnic nationalities. However, it does not offer a definition of the term: 'ethnic nationality'. Similarly, the Vacant Fallow and Virgin Land Law 2018 states that Indigenous practices are protected under its provisions but also offers no clear definition of this group.

This text recognises the complexities, and sometimes political nature, of these definitions and this terminology. It also recognises that many ethnic minorities in Burma self-identify as Indigenous Peoples and that they share many of the same discriminations, struggles and heritage of Indigenous groups globally.

A village in Chin State.  
CREDIT: Signe Leth



## Myanmar's Climate is Changing

Studies show that the climate in Myanmar is already changing. Furthermore, it is deemed one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change.<sup>3</sup> Germanwatch ranked Burma third in the world, in its Global Climate Risk Index, which measured a range of factors to show which countries were most affected by climate change over the past 20 years.<sup>4</sup> Other studies show that in the next 30 years, temperatures across the country will rise by a further 1.3°C–2.7°C. There is also a predicted hot season average temperature rise of up to 3°C.<sup>5</sup> Between 1981–2010, Myanmar had around one day of extreme heat per month. In the future, projections suggest this could rise to up to 17 days of extreme heat each month. It is also predicted that cyclones and extreme weather events will worsen.<sup>6</sup>

The areas expected to see the highest temperature rises are the eastern and northern hilly regions, which are home to many Indigenous communities.<sup>7</sup> These communities are heavily dependent on subsistence, rain-fed agriculture and local ecosystems like forests, for fuel, construction, food and medicines.<sup>8</sup> Women tend to use these resources more than men in their daily livelihoods, so women are more affected by changes.<sup>9</sup> Rural women also have fewer financial resources than men and so, also have fewer options to respond to the impacts of climate change.

While Myanmar is at risk of climate change, it is also a country with potential to support biodiversity preservation and expansion of green spaces. Almost all of Myanmar lies within the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot. This is one of the 35 global hotspots that support high levels of biodiversity and unique species.<sup>10</sup> In addition, forest covers 43% of Myanmar's land area, although half of this is degraded and the rate of loss is one of the highest globally: between 2010 and 2015 (forest lost was at 1.8% per year). Mangroves have been particularly hard hit, with over 42% of the total mangrove forest area cleared from 2001–2010.<sup>11</sup> Myanmar, has adopted the Paris Agreement, a politically binding agreement to combat climate change under the UN-FCCC.<sup>12</sup> Myanmar's nationally determined contributions (NDC) include forest conservation as one of its main measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

## Background of Peace and Conflict in Indigenous Myanmar

Most ethnic minority groups in Myanmar share a common history: marked by long-running civil wars with

the Burmese military and institutionalised discrimination against traditional ethnic cultures. This discrimination includes no formal recognition of Indigenous cultures by the state and lack of representation of Indigenous Peoples in government bodies and institutions. State education primarily takes place in Burmese, meaning that other native Indigenous languages have to be learned outside school hours.<sup>13</sup> Since the political transition to democracy, many of these discriminations persist within government institutions and state administration. As such, they continue to have an effect on the political, social and economic life of Indigenous groups.

Historic structural discrimination in Myanmar is still acting as an obstacle for Indigenous women's voices to be heard and valued. Indigenous groups, and particularly Indigenous women are often excluded from debates, overlooked by decision-makers and their voices and knowledge have not been widely harnessed in projects or policy development around climate change. Spaces for Indigenous cultures to share traditional practices are often limited to village and home environments. There has been some NGO and civil society support to bring forward these experiences to national dialogues but there is still limited space for these types of discussion, particularly within government processes.

Indigenous groups also bear the psychological impacts of long-term discrimination and conflict. On 30 March 2016, a newly elected National League of Democracy government took power in Myanmar. One of the priorities for the new government is to end long-running civil wars and work towards national peace. In 2015, eight groups signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), out of a total of 18 armed groups. Another seven have bilateral ceasefire agreements with the government. Despite the ceasefire agreements, conflict is on-going in Kachin, Northern Shan and Rakhine, with occasional unrest in other parts of the country.<sup>14</sup> There has also been no disarmament of post-conflict areas and armed groups remain reluctant to give up weapons until the details of the peace process are clearer.<sup>15</sup>

The NLD government held the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference in August 2016, including actors in the process who have not signed the NCA. The Conference brought together 1,600 representatives from Ethnic Armed Groups, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar army), political parties and Parliament to discuss

power sharing. Follow-up meetings have continued between these groups and this process is on-going. There is uncertainty around how natural resource management will be included in the negotiations and there is a risk that questions related to land governance and the significant forest resources in the ethnic regions of Myanmar become side-lined.<sup>16</sup>

Women are also under-represented in decision-making roles across Myanmar, in particular at village and township level, but also in state and national Parliaments.<sup>17</sup> Many customs and traditions assume that women are unqualified for leadership roles and that they do not possess the skills to represent their families or communities.<sup>18</sup> As a result, they are under-consulted and their voices are often excluded from national and local decision-making. This is particularly the case for Indigenous women, who also face a second layer of prejudice, as a result of their ethnic backgrounds.

Although there are many active women's groups, their voices are also largely underrepresented in the peace process.<sup>19</sup> Women have reported being largely excluded by government and armed group delegations in the peace process, protesting that they have been relegated to 'tea-break diplomacy'. As they were not invited to participate in the main meetings, they could only advocate to delegates during tea breaks.<sup>20</sup>

These structural obstacles also lead to women devaluing or not knowing the value of their own knowledge and experience; further exacerbated by the trauma and fear from the legacy of conflict, as well as traditional roles which limit women's participation. This all serves to preclude women from taking on leadership positions in their own communities and beyond.

## The Current Land Governance Dynamic in Ethnic Regions of Myanmar

Customary agricultural practices are not officially recognised in law in Myanmar. Central government maps are based on colonial cadastral maps, which have not been kept up to date during the period from the end of colonial rule to the start of the democratic transition. As a result, these maps do not accurately reflect current land use, nor do they reflect changes which have taken place in ownership/use over the past 70 years. This particularly affects communities living in ethnic areas, who practise shifting cultivation (a rotational farming method), and whose agricultur-

al/productive land is often classified as vacant, fallow or virgin land in central government records.

In 2012, Parliament approved the Farmland Law which allocates user rights to farmers through an individual titling system, managed by the government. While this law may strengthen farmers' individual land rights, some NGOs are concerned about the negative impact this system could have on traditional land use management through customary and communal practices. In 2012, Parliament also approved the Vacant Fallow and Virgin Land Law (VFVLL).<sup>21</sup> It further amended this law in 2018. The VFVLL, and in particular the 2018 amendment, poses a land tenure security risk for farmers in Indigenous areas because it requires farmers living and working on VFV land apply for 30 year concessions to use their land. Farmers risk eviction, fines or even two years' imprisonment if they occupy or use land without applying for a concession. The amendment excludes land under customary tenure, yet it does not provide any definition for what constitutes customary land nor any procedure to officially register customary land.<sup>22</sup>

As most VFV land is located in ethnic minority areas, people who do not speak much Burmese will likely be most impacted by this policy, especially as the government has not provided multilingual information about the changes.<sup>23</sup> There has been no research into the gendered impacts of the VFVLL, however, women farmers in ethnic areas will likely be most impacted. This is because they tend to have lower Burmese language skills<sup>24</sup> and be less familiar with government processes than male farmers. In addition, women farmers tend to have fewer sources to access information and in particular fewer official sources.<sup>25</sup> Studies about commercial land acquisition in Myanmar show that women tend to be less informed about land acquisition processes,<sup>26</sup> have weaker voices in compensation and consultation processes and can be at risk of domestic violence when livelihood sources change.<sup>27</sup>

Women in Myanmar also face significant obstacles to assess natural resources, such as land, water and forests.<sup>28</sup> In the agricultural sector, they have limited roles in decision-making around land,<sup>29</sup> few rights to inherit ownership of productive assets through traditional systems<sup>30</sup> and as state administration is appointed through male head of households, few legal rights under national land laws.<sup>31</sup>



The above-mentioned peace process and land governance changes have resulted in other changes for ethnic areas of Myanmar. These include the development of a number of government-promoted investment projects in Indigenous areas: from large-scale agricultural plantations to mining, the development of special economic zones and commercial agricultural projects, such as large-scale monocrop plantations of bananas, palm oil and rubber.<sup>32</sup> These projects have mainly been allocated through government concessions to companies on areas of land classified as vacant or fallow. Reports show that between 1991 and October 2016, around 5.1 million acres of land was allocated to agro-businesses and individual entrepre-

neurs.<sup>33</sup> While most of the large-scale schemes were granted before the democratic transition (signed off between 2007 and 2011) the development of these projects has on-going impacts today,<sup>34</sup> especially as these allocations tend to be concentrated in areas with large Indigenous populations: namely Kachin, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Shan.<sup>35</sup> With these changes comes a new range of challenges for Indigenous Peoples living in these regions, especially as outside investment often has impacts on their traditional forests and land-based livelihoods and cultures as well as bringing new environmental concerns.

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Indigenous women engaged in producing forest inventories.  
CREDIT: CAT (Cobseration Alliance of Tanawthari)



# Chapter 1

## Behind Sustainability Stands the Supernatural Power of Indigenous Women

by Naw Eh Htee Wah



Year on year, Tanintharyi Region, my home, is getting hotter. In recent years, we have experienced hotter temperatures, less tree cover and rivers drying up in hot season. The Myanmar Government and international experts now talk of expanding Protected Areas, or of replanting trees where forest degradation has taken place. Trees are of great importance because they absorb carbon dioxide and release vital oxygen into the atmosphere. Indigenous Karen communities in Tanintharyi have a distinct and unique relationship with the forest and surrounding biodiversity. Within Indigenous territories in Myanmar, forests have an important value and are conserved and protected. However, in non-Indigenous areas we see that there are no longer any trees and plants – we must ask ourselves: why?

The Karen people are the protectors of the forest here, and this forest is one of the final remaining areas of natural forest and biodiversity in South East Asia. WWF states that the Dawei area 'is one of the last large intact forest landscapes in the region, harbouring a rich array of endangered wildlife found in few other places.'<sup>1</sup> The Tanintharyi Forest Corridor (TFC) is being considered as a World Heritage site, as it has one of 'the largest remaining areas of unprotected low and mid-elevation, seasonal evergreen forest in Southeast Asia... and contains many globally threatened species including the Indochinese tiger, Asian elephant, gibbon, langur, Gurney's Pitta, and Sunda Pangolin.'<sup>2</sup> In addition, 53.2 % of intact forest remains in the area, making it an important area for conservation activities.<sup>3</sup>

Because of a number of recent business projects in the Tanintharyi area, we see that rubber and palm oil plantations are expanding and forests, nature and biodiversity are being destroyed.<sup>4</sup> In addition, areas of natural forest are being cut down and replaced with commercial monoculture plantations. These monoculture plantations do not have the resilience of natural forests and cause instability in the environment. They are highly flammable, they can get infected by diseases and they can cause soil erosion and landslides. As a result of the loss of natural forests, we Indigenous Peoples, who live close to the forest, risk experiencing environmental disasters, the loss of our ways of life and our homes.<sup>5</sup>

In Myanmar, lands and resources are controlled by a small number of people with financial or political power. In the Dawei area, certain groups have pursued harmful mining and development projects.<sup>6</sup> These

approaches prioritise making a financial profit from the land and cause devastation for the environment. Large-scale development and infrastructure projects such as dams planned on the Tanintharyi River are also being constructed in the territories of Indigenous People, who will not benefit from such projects.<sup>7</sup>

Today, in Kachin State, Karen State, Shan State and Tanintharyi Region, large-scale dams are being planned. In order to construct these structures, vast areas of forest as well as villages, sacred sites and farmland are flooded, emitting large quantities of methane as underlying biomass rot at the bottom of artificial reservoirs; this also contributes to climate change. Local communities, who depend on their rivers and forests are resisting these plans.

For this reason, as a Karen activist, I must question the impacts that this form of development has on the lives of local communities and Indigenous Peoples around the country.

## **The Myanmar Government's Approach to Forest Management**

In 2015, Myanmar attended the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) where they signed up to agreements to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and to protect remaining forest cover in order to prevent the onset of climate change. At this conference, Myanmar committed to expand government managed productive forests (known as 'Reserved Forests' and 'Public Protected Forests') to 30% and Protected Areas to 10% of national land by 2030. These targets were based on the Myanmar Government's National Forestry Masterplan (2001-2030), which seeks to expand the government's forest management throughout the country.

By expanding government controlled Reserved Forests and Public Protected Forests, the government aims to conserve and restore forest cover, thus supporting the global effort to prevent the onset of climate change. While this is a noble aim, it does not seem to be applied in a way which is entirely equitable. According to the 2018 Forest Law, the Forest Department is permitted to conduct business activities within these forest areas, such as logging and the establishment of agribusiness plantations.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of Reserved Forests and Public Protected Forests, according to the Forest Law, are to permit

the extraction of timber and forest products and the establishment of monocrop plantations for revenue generation. As a result, there is a clear contradiction between the aim of contributing to global efforts to reduce climate change onset and expanding areas of productive government forests. Far from protecting Myanmar's forests, these targets threaten to destroy remaining natural forests and biodiversity, and upset the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous People who depend on them and who live within these areas sustainably.

## What Is Conservation for Karen Indigenous Peoples?

Karen Indigenous communities have a long history of conserving their lands and territories. The interconnectedness of our culture with the forest has meant that we have developed a deep and Indigenous knowledge of environmental protection techniques which are embedded in our cultural practices. Our knowledge, beliefs, survival, health and cultures are interconnected with the conservation of forests and biodiversity. We follow the practices of our ancestors in order to ensure the sustainable management of our forests and biodiversity and to ensure that trees, fish and other flora and fauna are carefully managed and protected. We manage our consumption and the extraction of our resources, avoiding situations where resources are over exploited in order that they are conserved for future generations.

For example, traditional ceremonies to drink herbal medicine in the forest bind together our culture and the protection of the environment. Not only do these ceremonies take place within the forest and benefit health, they strengthen the relationship between communities and nature. As the teas need a rich biodiversity of herbs and roots, this requires that village practices protect and preserve the biodiversity in the forest to continue their traditions.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, local beliefs require respect for herbs, as they are seen as giving power to people and this creates a reciprocal relationship with forest products.

In our culture, we find all the things we need to eat and use for our households within the forest and do not need to pay money for these. We also take herbal medicines from the forest to ensure good health. Examples of the types of foods we can gather include: edible fern (*diplazium esculentum*), bamboo shoots,

purslane (*Portulaca Oleracea*), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), a type of amaranth (*Amaranthus spinosus*), ginger (*Zingiber zerumbet*), East Indian arrowroot (*Curcuma angustifolia*), korlan fruit (*Nephelium hypoleucum*), elephant apple (*Dillenia indica* fruit) and a variety of fig (*Ficus obpyramidata*). In the city, vegetables that people buy are often grown with the use of pesticides and fertilisers. As a result, we see that people in the city suffer from many diseases and illnesses that we have not experienced in our culture.

According to the traditional practice of Karen Indigenous People, there are rules and restrictions on how shifting cultivation<sup>10</sup> can be practised. In our territories, old trees have great value. In areas where animals live or pass through when they migrate, Karen people do not sleep or clear the forest for shifting cultivation. If they do this, they believe that their health will deteriorate. If they sleep in these areas, they will get nightmares. In this way, the lives and spirits of people and the forest are entwined and interconnected. And the traditional practices help to maintain this equilibrium between people and nature.

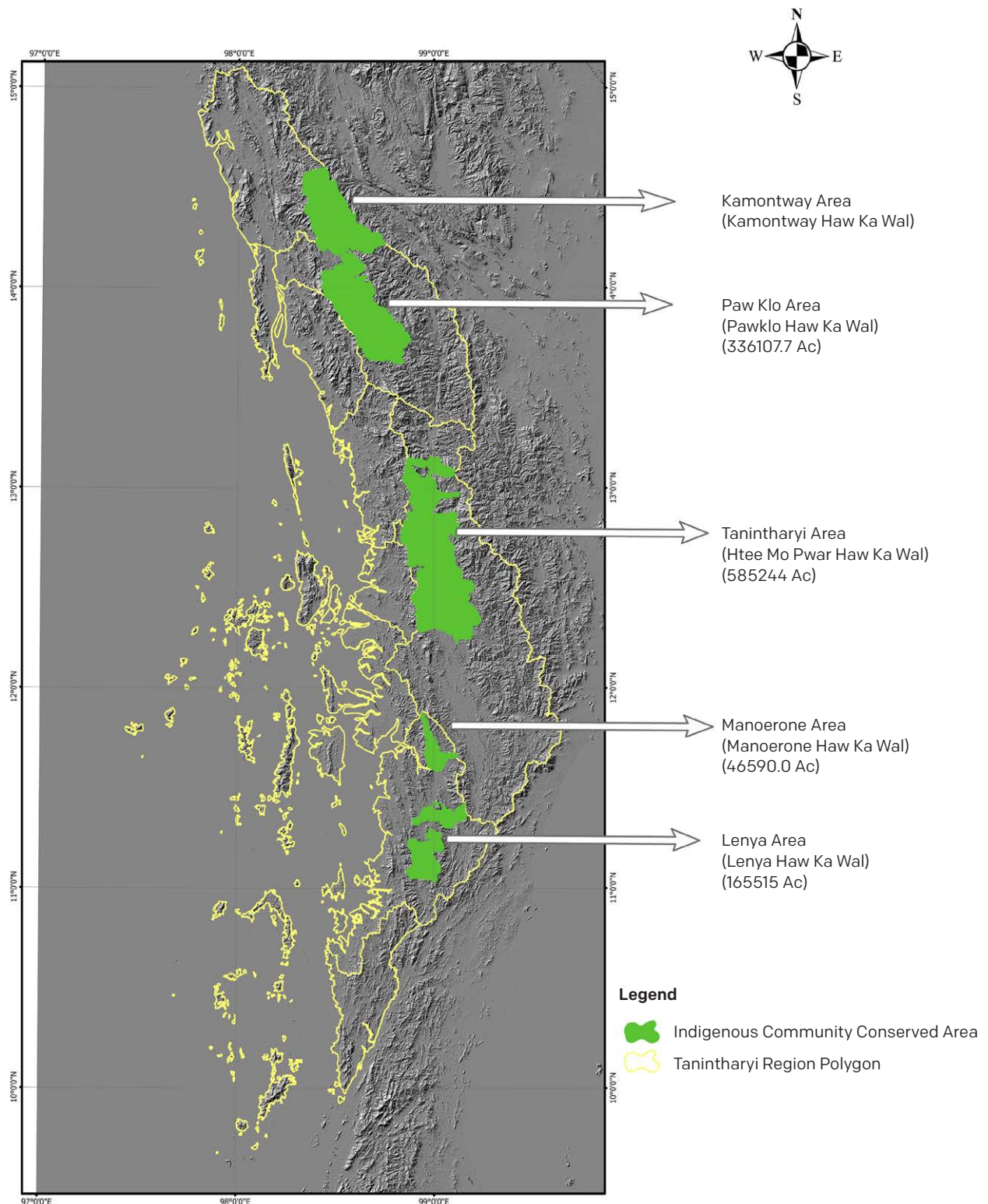
Karen do not cut trees along the banks of rivers and streams. Indigenous Karen people understand that if they cut trees along the river, there will no longer be shade and rivers and streams will start to dry up. They also know they will no longer be able to find fish, and if there are no longer any fish, we know that the water source will become dirty and undrinkable.

Trees are used by Indigenous People for domestic needs such as the construction of houses. In our tradition, the protection of the forest is vital for good health. We believe that forests take out poisons from the atmosphere, protecting us from disease and illness. Karen Indigenous People in Paw Klo (a Karen territory in Dawei District in Tanintharyi Region) believe that when flowers and plants bloom, diseases among the community are healed because the forest, flowers and plants absorb them. Moreover, they believe that diseases cannot reach them directly because of the buffer or protection of the forest. The Karen Indigenous People from Paw Klo believe that they do not suffer like people from the city. They believe that when they are in the city, they suffer from seasonal diseases that do not affect them in the forest. For example, people in the city suffer from seasonal diseases such as dengue fever, yet the Karen communities believe that such dangers do not exist within the forest. Local people believe that the forest and flowers act as a protection against outside dis-

eases. People also eat a healthy organic diet, largely sourced from forest foods and they prepare and drink herbal medicines from the forest, which could have a

preventative effect. Although it should be noted that there has been no scientific study on this practice, it is something that local people believe.

**Map of indigenous community conserved area Tanintharyi Region**





According to our knowledge as Karen Indigenous People, forests absorb water from the sky and they conserve the water. The forest gives life to every living creature. Within the forest there are many fruits, creepers, seeds and roots that can be used as medicines. Indigenous People in Paw Klo also believe that some wild animals can be used for medicines because the foods of the diet they eat include various kind of medicines in the forest. When people eat these wild animals, it gives not only protein but also this plant medicine. For Indigenous People, in the areas where wild animals live, there are tight restrictions on hunting and when animals are hunted, they must be eaten where they were caught, and not transported to other places or sold to outsiders. This practice is managed by the local Forest Committee which develops rules. The rules are created with the involvement of local leaders, youth and women (although the leaders of the committee are largely male elders). The whole village is made aware of the rules and if they are not respected, offenders must pay a fine.

The forest also contains water sources. For example, inside the forest there are creeper trees, known as Ka Late Thu in Karen language, that Indigenous People use to extract water when they are unable to find other water sources. These plants also have medicinal benefits and people use the water to cure dizziness and headaches. In the forest, there is cane and rattan that Indigenous People use as water sources when they are very thirsty. If communities do not have any rice to eat, they also depend upon the forest for replacement foods.

Indigenous Peoples conserve the forest because they depend upon it for food, water and medicine. The forest also protects them from natural disasters, illness and hardships. Indigenous communities protect the forest in return for protecting them.

## **The Importance of Indigenous Women in Protecting Forests and Biodiversity**

Today in Tanintharyi Region I am witnessing development projects causing the destruction of forests and biodiversity. These projects are impacting the traditional ways of life of Indigenous People. This is because the lives of Karen people depend on the forest. Without the forest, our ways of life, society, survival, health and cultural traditions will all be lost. People

rely on forest for all aspects of their lives, from food, to housing, to culture. They also protect and preserve this connection through ceremonies, such as cultivation ceremonies.<sup>11</sup>

For Karen people, food and water, housing, comfort and peace are dependent on the forest and biodiversity. In the home, women give priority to cooking and caring for the family. They rely on natural resources such as plants, leaves, roots and medicinal herbs and for this reason are diligent in conserving them. All of these items are vital for the survival of Indigenous families. For both men and women, biodiversity conservation is central to the maintenance of environmental services, survival and comfort. It also reduces the risk of climate change and protects them from other types of disasters.

Yet, women's lives are heavily connected to their natural resources, and so they have a deeper knowledge of their surrounding environments than men, including knowledge of certain plants and herbs. This underpins women's major role in environmental conservation. The lives of Karen Indigenous women and the forest are interconnected and interdependent. Women play a vital role in conserving and protecting their forests and resources including water, fish, herbal medicines, watershed areas, vegetable forests and umbilical cord forests.

The umbilical cord forest is a ceremony, which attaches the soul of the newborn baby to the soul of a tree, by placing the umbilical cord into a piece of bamboo and tying it to a tree. This is a Karen traditional culture. The ritual is for the baby's spiritual protection and it entwines the life of the baby and tree. It is believed that if the tree is harmed something could happen to that person. Because of these practices, people protect and do not cut down these trees. For these areas, Karen people have rules and regulations. It is prohibited to cut or destroy trees in this area and burning the forest in this area, for any purpose, is prohibited. Building or construction in this area is also prohibited. This umbilical cord forest has almost disappeared in Tanintharyi region. It is not clear why, however, it may be for religious reasons and because of this part of Karen territory evolving separately from other areas. However, Karen Indigenous People are maintaining and restoring this traditional culture in other parts of Karen State and in doing so, they achieve conservation and cultural protection.



Indigenous forest area, Myanmar.  
CREDIT: Signe Leth

Women depend on the forest for everything and give priority to providing food and clothes to their families. Women's roles include collecting water in streams and rivers. If temperatures continue to rise, women will face difficulties, as they may no longer be able to find water through the summer months. If women are unable to find water near their homes, it will pose serious threats to the future of their lives and livelihoods. It also risks making their working days longer by travelling further to obtain water, or requires them to spend money to buy water, which is a resource they previously could obtain for free.

Because Karen women in Tanintharyi Region know that the forests are critical for their survival, they are careful to protect them and use them sustainably. One example of this is that Karen communities often protect trees and forests surrounding rivers through traditional rules, regulations and traditional beliefs. This is in order to protect fragile water sources. As there is no electricity in Karen areas, our local communities rely on the forest for energy and cooking. When collecting firewood, women do not cut living trees, instead they collect dry wood that has already fallen from the forest floor. Women also collect foods and herbal medicines from the forest and their envi-

ronment, which is a central part of their way of life – in this way the forest heals the community, and the community protects the forest in return.

In Karen villages women are also involved in community land and resource management committees. As part of these committees, they take action to protect the forest and environment from outside threats. All the plants, herbal medicines and biodiversity are part of Karen women's lives. As they are dealing with these every day, they are given leadership roles by the community for the management of forests and the environment.

Without the forest, the vital leadership role that women play in the household would become much more difficult, as the base of their livelihoods and resources would be lost. Indigenous women are leaders in the protection and conservation of forests and biodiversity. They are the main group who are pushing for sustainable practices to protect the environment. Because they are trying to operate in a sustainable way, other people are inspired to follow their example. Women in Indigenous areas use the forest sustainably and protect it with care. It is because of Indigenous women who depend on the forest, that much of the world's remaining biodiversity is in the territories of Indigenous People.<sup>12</sup>

## The Example of How Women Use and Manage the Forest in Paw Klo

In Paw Klo, also known as Ban Chaung, in Dawei District in Tanintharyi Region, women play a leading role in caring for their families and a key role in conserving biodiversity. In this area, water is of great importance. Everything depends on water, and without easy access to it life would become very difficult for people and their families. In this area, Karen women know that if the forest is cut near the edge of rivers, the water will run dry and the temperature will rise. For this reason, women help their families to conserve and protect these resources. For example, they encourage others not to cut trees further upstream, as this can lead to water shortages in dry season.

Women in Paw Klo are involved with all of the problems faced by the community. Problems and challenges are discussed within the family, and these discussions help to prevent harmful impacts to their surrounding environment. Within the forest there are trees and wild animals, and women have an important role in protecting and managing these. Within the forest, women can find ample supplies of vegetables, meat, fish and plants which are used for eating and drinking, and for the construction of housing and local livelihoods. These resources allow forest-dependent families to thrive. For this reason, management decisions are taken to give priority to protecting these resources essential for communities' health and livelihoods.

Women play a leading role in the conservation of their lands and also as a result, in preventing the onset of climate change.

The village comes together to develop conservation rules and regulations which are agreed upon by the whole community. These rules help to regulate resource-use within the community, ensuring that all resources are used to meet our needs, not greed, and to ensure that outsiders do not come and exploit our resources. If they did not have these rules, they would no longer be able to enjoy the important benefits that the forest provides. They continue to conserve their territories in order to maintain their sources of food and water and peace in the region. Women committees also play a key role in policing certain issues, such as drugs and alcohol. In many villages, where there is a strong women's committee, the village is strong.

In Paw Klo territory, there is a strong belief in our Indigenous area that if women join herbal medicine taking walks and ceremonies, there will be no problems and it will be a peaceful trip, which shows the importance of Indigenous women as peacemakers. This belief is grounded in the supernatural power of women.

## Conclusion

While Indigenous Peoples in Tanintharyi Region depend on the forest, and manage it carefully to sustain future generations, this is not the case across the world and use of unsustainable quantities of resources, deforestation and destruction of biodiversity, emissions of greenhouse gases are all leading to the onset of climate change. Because of this rapid onset of climate change, people are urgently trying to plant trees and expand forest areas. While this is a good initiative, Myanmar's forest laws mean that the expansion of forest areas would mean the expansion of agribusiness concessions and logging contracts.

Among Indigenous Karen communities in Tanintharyi Region women take a leading role in supporting their families for healthcare, education, business, agriculture and running the home. Furthermore, women take active roles in village politics, religious groups, and social activities within their communities. Within these roles, Indigenous women in Ban Chaung play a vital role in the administration and governance of their villages, including ensuring the sustainable use and protection of the forest and biodiversity.

In Myanmar, Indigenous women are highly reliant on natural resources, although their rights are not recognised by government laws and they are vulnerable to land grabs and forest destruction. In fact, in the case of Tanintharyi, it is Indigenous Karen women who are leading the way in protecting and conserving forests and biodiversity. Recognising the central role that women play in the management of natural resources and biodiversity is key to addressing the onset of climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Their role must be recognised.



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**Naw Eh Htee Wah** is an Indigenous Karen woman from Dawei, Tanintharyi Region in Southern Myanmar. She has been working with environmental civil society groups since 2014, campaigning to save ancestral territories from the impacts of mining, industrial projects and agribusiness concessions. She works with Tarkapaw Youth Group, a Karen civil society group in Dawei, Myanmar, which works on community mobilisation and advocacy campaigns on land, forest and mining issues, aiming to support communities to

resolve their own challenges. She also coordinates an alliance of Indigenous Karen community organizations, called CAT – Conservation Alliance of Tanintharyi, who campaign against top-down conservation projects that dispossess people from their lands and forest, and promote Indigenous land and forest management practices that have maintained wildlife and biodiversity in our region for generations. She has been an honorary member of the ICCA Consortium since early 2019. With thanks to Jack Jenkins Hill for support in writing this paper.

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# Chapter 2

## Developing Indigenous Women's Leadership in the Fight against Climate Change

by **Naw Ei Ei Min**

Director of POINT,<sup>1</sup> Naw Ei Ei Min, reflects on the gender bias in Myanmar culture and proposes positive steps for CSOs to overcome discrimination faced by Indigenous women.

I was brought up in the old capital city of Myanmar, Yangon, however I am an Indigenous Karen woman and I was raised surrounded by the social and cultural practices of my ethnic group. Karen is one of the ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. My people traditionally live on an area of land in Eastern Myanmar, at the border with Thailand, as well as in parts of Bago and Ayarwaddy. As these are rural and forested areas, much of our indigenous culture is connected to the forest ecosystem and our traditionally rural livelihoods.

Now my work, as Director of POINT NGO, involves supporting Indigenous women across Myanmar. Throughout my career, I have found that my ethnic background has made it challenging to assume a role as a leader. I have often worked with men who were raised with traditional values which attributed certain gender roles within society. As such, it was difficult for them to work in subordinate positions to a woman.

For example, when I began my role as Director, I spent much of my time convincing my team to work on my ideas and plans. In addition, managing my work life and bringing up two children has been challenging. My team, and some donors, can be unsympathetic to the strains of my home life. With time, I have been able to overcome these attitudes. Yet, in order to do so I have often had to take strong actions to prove my knowledge and experience so that I can demonstrate to my team that I am capable. I have also had to respond to feedback provided by the team, dress differently and change some of my behaviours in the office, in order to gain their respect.

I see many echoes between my personal experience and the obstacles and barriers that Indigenous women in our project areas face to become leaders, or even to express their ideas and influence decision-making in their communities. This paper seeks to draw on my observations of working with Indigenous women in different regions of Myanmar. The paper will show the importance of Indigenous women's leadership for forest conservation and climate change prevention. It will also suggest how to better support Indigenous women in leadership roles.

## Historic Discrimination against Indigenous Women in Myanmar

For Myanmar's Indigenous women, a complex range of power structures act against our leadership poten-

tial. Indigenous women face discrimination in state structures both as a result of their ethnicity and their gender. Some studies show that younger women face greater discrimination than older women too.<sup>2</sup>

From 1962 – 2010, a military dictatorship governed the country. This dictatorship was led by people of Burmese ethnicity - the majority population of Myanmar. As such, many of their policies overtly or subtly discriminated against minority ethnic groups, such as the Karen. There were long running civil wars in ethnic areas, which contributed to widespread violence against women<sup>3</sup> and discrimination against use of minority ethnic languages and traditions.

Burmese language skills are needed to carry out effective activist and political work. Language often presents an obstacle for ethnic minority people to advance in education and the workplace. Minority ethnic households grow up speaking their Indigenous languages and only learn Burmese at school. For many rural Indigenous women, who spend their days doing household work and local agricultural tasks, this is a challenge, as they often do not have opportunities to use Burmese regularly when they finish their school education.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, in wider Burmese society, there are many social attitudes which consider that women are not able to take on leadership roles.<sup>5</sup> These include ideas that women do not make good leaders and are not knowledgeable about political or land issues.<sup>6</sup> Tradition often dictates a heavy household and childcare responsibility for women, which limits their ability to take part in activities outside the home. Many customs do not permit women to travel alone outside the village area, which also limits their ability to engage in political and leadership roles.<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic groups have their own customs and these can also have an impact on women's ability and confidence to take on leadership roles. Indigenous peoples manage land according to their customary tenure systems, designating responsibilities to customary institutions, like village councils and village chiefs. Under these systems, decisions are often made through discussions at village meetings. In some ethnic groups, it is usual to have a mix of men and women attend village meetings and contribute to discussions, while in others, typically only men attend. According to a study of customary tenure systems across different ethnic groups in Myanmar, only 6% of elected positions in these systems were held



by women.<sup>8</sup> In my native Karen State, many women took on leadership roles during the period of conflict. This created a positive attitude about women's leadership.<sup>9</sup> However, across most of rural Myanmar, it is still very uncommon to find Indigenous leaders or elders who are women.

The impact of these various forms of discrimination often means that women do not believe in themselves as leaders. I have noticed that many women we work with do not know the importance of the knowledge they have about the local forest or traditional practices. They also do not have confidence in themselves as leaders or representatives for their communities.

## Indigenous Women and Climate Change Management

Germanwatch, ranked Burma third in its Global Climate Risk Index on the long-term climate change risk table. This indicator considers the impacts of extreme weather events in terms of fatalities and economic loss over a 20-year period (1998 – 2017).<sup>10</sup> This echoes recent changes in Karen State, where local communities report water shortages, a hotter climate, droughts and flash flooding which washed away houses and farmland.<sup>11</sup> Climate change can have severe impacts on the socioeconomic rights of communities, impacting access to food, health, water and maintaining adequate housing and livelihoods.<sup>12</sup> And research suggests that Indigenous communities are often the most hard hit by these changes.<sup>13</sup>

Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar are particularly vulnerable to climate change because they are among the economically poorest populations in the world and they rely on renewable natural resources that are vulnerable to climatic change. They also live in regions which are themselves vulnerable to climate change. Their rights are often not recognised within national frameworks and their vulnerability to climate change can force them to migrate, leading to further risk. Discrimination against Indigenous women is also exacerbated by climate change, making this group one of the most vulnerable to these impacts.<sup>14</sup>

As rural women tend to have less financial, physical and human resources than men, they will have fewer options to respond to the effects of climate change. In Indigenous communities, women tend to rely more than men on natural resources, so women's liveli-

hoods are more affected by changes in these resources, due to shifts in weather or climatic patterns.<sup>15</sup> As managers of food and livestock, women are forced to seek new ways of managing resources when extreme weather or other climate events impact their access to these resources. This can increase the length of their working days and require them to work harder to maintain their livelihoods. Women's household roles include collecting water, food and fuel. As a result, climatic impacts and drivers, such as drought and deforestation, mean women travel further to collect these resources which adds additional hours to their already heavy workload. This can also make women more vulnerable to injuries and at increased risk of sexual harassment or assault when travelling further from their homes to gather resources. It can also have an impact on girls' schooling.<sup>16</sup>

Climate change has also been linked to the increased spread of infectious diseases. Women's health can be particularly impacted because women's daily roles expose them to water contamination and infectious diseases such as cholera and malaria.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in situations of displacement due to climate change, women are also at higher risk. For example, in 2015 in Chin State, communities were displaced due to flooding. Women in camps were afraid to leave their tents to go to the bathroom or collect wood, because of harassment by men in the surrounding area.<sup>18</sup>

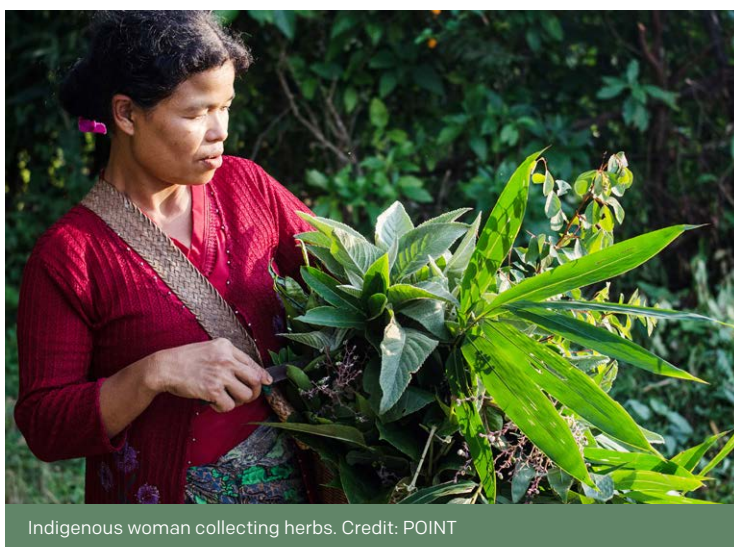
These examples go to show that Indigenous women are at the crux of climate change in Myanmar. They are vulnerable and at high risk of being the most impacted by changes to climate. However, my experience shows they also hold key knowledge which could help develop solutions. A climate change solution in Myanmar must involve Indigenous women who are traditional knowledge holders and forest guardians. If they are part of the solution – the solution will be more effective.

## Traditional Roles of Indigenous Women in Forest Management

Despite being undervalued actors, women play key roles in rural life. Globally, women are stewards of seeds and agricultural biodiversity as well as important food producers.<sup>19</sup> In Myanmar, Indigenous women have a daily relationship with forests. In many ethnic areas, they are guardians of native seeds, organise management of the local forest area, are healers and keepers of traditional medical knowledge and act as

custodians of traditional knowledge. They are also agents in the fight against hunger and malnutrition, as they are the main food producers for their families and they use their knowledge of traditional practices to source diverse and nutritious foods locally.

Women have different roles compared to men in their communities, and as such, have different knowledge about forests products and forest management. Traditionally, Indigenous women engage in activities like establishing nurseries for plantations; selecting seedlings and tree species; replanting timber trees; practising controlled burning for assisting regeneration; protecting germinating seedlings and new saplings. As such, they often play roles which prevent forest degradation. There is an important link between the prevention of forest degradation and the prevention of climate change. Not only do forests play a key role in carbon capture but they prevent adverse impacts in cases of extreme weather brought about by changing climates.



Indigenous woman collecting herbs. Credit: POINT

Indigenous women's traditional role links them closely to the protection of biodiversity. Women's daily activities in forests mean they hold knowledge of how to grow and collect seeds and plants and how to take care of native species. Research shows that biodiverse forests store significantly more carbon than monocrop forests, as such, women's roles in growing and caring for native species, assures the protection and preservation of biodiversity - a key element of climate change prevention in Myanmar. This translates to global trends which suggest that 80% of the remaining global biodiversity is within the lands of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>20</sup>

This points to the fact that Indigenous women are an important group of stakeholders in developing Myanmar's climate change strategies. Women's role in preservation of local biodiversity means they have knowledge that is important to capture, to pass on to future generations and understand to prevent extinction of certain species. If they are part of the solution - it seems logical that it will be a more effective solution.

## Community Forestry as an Under-Used Opportunity to Involve Women

Community Forestry is an important development in Myanmar. As customary land rights are still not recognised, it is one of the few models by which communities can collectively manage and control a resource on which they rely. Community Forestry also plays an important role in climate change prevention, as it offers a space for Indigenous and rural communities to have control over the management of the forest areas where they live.

According to Community Forestry Instructions, a Forest User Group can be formed by a group of interested people who depend on forest resources and have been living in the area for a minimum of 5 years. The group selects a Management Committee: Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer and two members. The Instruction does not provide for gender inclusivity in its language, nor does it provide any quotas to assure women's involvement in the Forest User Groups.

Some Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) support communities with this process. In doing so, they can help promote the inclusion of women in Forest User Groups. In my experience, a well-prepared CSO approach, which encourages women's participation, will be trusted by the community. Indeed, groups formed with CSO support often have a more gender-equal representation than groups formed by government processes alone. Some CSOs also keep track of the number of women that are members of Forest User Groups and encourage (or even require) women to be included in the Forestry Management Committee.

Yet, examples also show that even women's involvement does not directly correlate to their meaningful participation in forestry management. Many CSOs coordinate their work with community leaders who (because of traditional culture) are men. This can lead to key decision-making roles being allocated to men and women taking on support roles in the groups.

For example, in some projects, forming village tract level committees require that half of the representatives are women.<sup>21</sup> While this seems like a positive step forward, women have reported being appointed to supporting positions, such as notetaking and financial accounting within these committees.<sup>22</sup> Roles like treasurer or secretary are in line with traditional women's roles.<sup>23</sup> So, while these type of quotas lead to greater women's involvement, they do not assure meaningful contributions from women. It also does not allow for women's knowledge and experience to guide and contribute towards the groups' decision-making. Rather it reaffirmed and reasserted traditional roles and structures, which already devalue women's contribution. This reinforces patriarchal structures and internalised attitudes which consider that women must not express their opinions or challenge men.

An example of this can be seen from research POINT carried out in an Asho Chin community. In this case, Indigenous women from Ngaphe township said: "We women, do not want to plant trees in the community forestry because men do not take into account of what we want to plant."

In this case, men wanted to plant crops which meet the priorities of their traditional roles, notably cash crops to earn money or timber crops to build houses. Women depend on Non-Timber Forest Products mostly, for household use and small income generation, as well as for food and nutrition. Women's planting interests related more to these roles in their households and community, notably they wanted to plant traditional medicine or foods and other plants for household use.

The women in this community had their own ideas of what to plant, but because traditionally men are leaders, we noticed that they followed the men and helped them implement their vision. If planting decisions better combined both men and women's interests and priorities, it would lead to better biodiversity conservation. As such, ensuring their meaningful implementation is important for good forest management. If women have no voice, there is biodiversity loss.

If Community Forestry is implemented without a commitment to women's empowerment, it may entrench and formalise control over forests and forest products in the hands of local male leaders. The engrained mentalities mean that without specific awareness, they will not notice they exclude women and as such, this requires specific effort to change. As noted above, women's knowledge represents an important part of finding a solution to protecting biodiversity and combatting climate change. To build respect and space for women to contribute their knowledge, women need to be appointed to leadership roles.

## Challenges of Involving Women in Decision-Making

Although Indigenous women are the primary users and managers of forests, they do not have control over forest resources. Their rights have not been recognised in state laws, such as the Community Forestry Instructions<sup>24</sup> and their tenure over forests is not recognised by state or community structures. In addition, in forestry planning or management meetings and decision-making processes, women mostly do not attend, and their views are usually represented by their spouses.

Indeed, across Myanmar, women are also under-represented in decision-making processes about forests and land.<sup>25</sup> This is reflected in wider political representation in Myanmar, as women make-up approximately 10.5% of the national parliament and 9.7% of the state and regional parliaments.<sup>26</sup> While some ministries have closer to equal numbers of male and female staff, fewer women hold management positions. This pattern holds true for the ministries most involved in implementing REDD+, including the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC), the General Administration Department (GAD), and other departments involved in land and resource management. In addition, local government administrative positions are almost entirely held by men, including township administrators and village tract administrators.<sup>27</sup>

When POINT started to engage in community-level training and programmes, often the meetings were attended only by male participants. On one occasion, in order to involve women, I asked a Karen community leader if we could carry out a training on gender for women in the community. He agreed to support



this. However, during the training he sat in front of the women and answered the discussion questions on their behalf. In another example, in a community meeting in the Asho Chin community in Magwe region, we requested women representatives to join a meeting with village leaders. When we asked about decision-making, the village headman's wife stated that it is men who make all the decisions. After these events, I learned that to change these types of dynamics, it is essential to create spaces which are for women only, otherwise it is very difficult to create an environment in which Indigenous women can speak out or share their experiences.

As we continued with our work, we saw that bringing women together and letting them speak starts to build capacity. Change in attitudes within communities is slow, but our experience is that each opportunity for women to practise expressing their knowledge and skills, builds their capacity to become leaders. For example, we worked with a young, single woman from southern Shan state who belongs to the Danu Indigenous group. Initially she attended POINT trainings on land, forestry and leadership topics. These trainings allowed her to gain work as an employee of a local environmental organisation, a role through which she, in turn, passed on knowledge to female community members in her village area.

Through these activities she has started to be recognised as a leader, even though she is an Indigenous woman and she is quite young (three factors which are usually obstacles to obtaining a leadership position in Myanmar). She gained the trust of the wider Danu community, who now consult her when they have a problem relating to land rights and Free Prior Informed Consent - which are often very sensitive topics. She has been able to support local communities to protect their land and livelihoods against a mining project development in the area, and support women with domestic violence incidents. This shows that women can play important roles to help protect the community in environmental cases, such as from extractive industry projects which contribute to climate change.<sup>28</sup>

However, these activities have not been without risk, and she has faced threats because of her work. In my opinion, women need more positive role models, and more support networks to help counteract the problems and obstacles in this type of work. Organisations promoting and supporting Indigenous women leadership also should have systems of protection in place to support women taking on these important roles.

CSO project initiatives can also support in promoting effective and meaningful participation of Indigenous women and to encourage women's involvement in decision-making about forests and land resources. To achieve this, special measures are needed, as in most ethnic traditions their traditional culture prevents women working on land and forest governance.

I share these examples, to provide details of my own experience about working with Indigenous communities. They show that educating women and building skills through CSO projects can lead to women becoming local leaders and consequently supporting their wider community to protect their resources and the environment.

## Conclusion

By giving Indigenous women roles in committee and development activities around forest and land management, women can be empowered to believe in themselves and value the roles they play and the knowledge they have of their local areas. Increasing numbers of women in leadership also creates role models for other women. I have seen in many projects that this leads to a multiplication of women taking active community roles and engaging in promotion of environmental protection and good land management in their areas. In the long run, this means women's leadership in forest and natural resource management can be strengthened and recognised not only at the community but also at national level.

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## Chapter 2 Endnotes

1. Promotion Of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT) is an Indigenous NGO established in 2012. POINT is one of the few organisations in Myanmar applying a rights-based approach and clearly targeting Indigenous Peoples as beneficiaries, with specific focus on capacity building, REDD+ and women's rights. POINT is an initiator and founding member of the Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Nationalities Network of Myanmar (IP-EN Network) and widely recognised as the leading NGO working on Indigenous Peoples' rights in the context of REDD+ in Myanmar.
2. Agatha Ma, Poe Ei Phyu, Catriona Knapman (2018) In the land of wise of old men, Oxfam Gender and Development, Volume 26, Issue 3.
3. KHRG (2018) Suffering in silence? Sexual violence against women in Southeast Myanmar; HRW (2018) Sexual Violence by the Burmese Military Against Ethnic Minorities
4. See: Chapter 3, Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun, In Myanmar's New Legal Landscape The Voices of Indigenous Women Are Needed For Climate Justice,
5. CARE, ActionAid, Trocaire and Oxfam (2013) Women Leadership In Myanmar.
6. Women in leadership Gender Equality Network (GEN), (2015), Raising the Curtain, Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar.
7. This is the case both for single and married women. For a single woman, if they travel alone to city (which is long distance), traditions consider it is not safe and she can be seen by society negatively. For a married woman, especially if her husband has a traditional mind set, she will be treated like a problem in her family. This kind of practice is gradually changing.
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Corn harvest. CREDIT: Signe Leth

# Chapter 3

In Myanmar's New Legal Landscape the  
Voices of Indigenous Women are Needed for  
Climate Justice

by Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun



## Introduction

Since Myanmar's recent political changes in 2010, which saw the country transition from a military dictatorship to democratic regime, the government has undertaken major reforms of national policy, law and public services. As part of this process, Myanmar has been working with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) since 2013 in order to respond to climate change. This is being done primarily through short and long-term forest restoration and rehabilitation programmes. Yet, women, and particularly Indigenous women, are missing from this process.

We are gender experts and founders of the Gender Academy Myanmar, a think tank which promotes gender equality through provision of training and developing national discussions around gender. Through our work and personal experiences, we have witnessed that Indigenous women are important actors, with knowledge of the environment obtained through their daily lives and traditions and their life-long relationships with forests. They have a very particular knowledge, which is often context specific, and which includes very detailed practices for forest protection. We believe that Indigenous women's daily activities have the potential to be at the forefront of fighting climate change in Myanmar. However, they are not part of national discussions to develop laws and policies, nor are they regularly invited to trainings about climate change, which would allow them to expand their understanding of international expertise. It is time to revisit this dynamic in Myanmar and to listen to the voices of our Indigenous women when considering how we can maintain our national forests.

## About this Paper

This paper reflects on the ways that state law and policy - relating to land and forests - impact and exclude rural Indigenous women. The information we include here comes from a combination of sources. Firstly, from our field experiences, working with a variety of organisations across Myanmar. One of the authors, Agatha Ma, is from Kayah state and belongs to one of the Indigenous groups residing in the state. As such, she also draws from her own experience residing in this region.

The paper also draws on relevant secondary documents to develop arguments, where needed, including data from some previous studies we were involved in. Notably, we reference a participatory social assessment in the Sagaing region, a region where the government is working to restore 160 reserved forests and 89 public protected forests and to protect 5 natural wildlife sanctuaries. Forest User Groups (FUGs) are being created as part of this strategy.<sup>1</sup>

## A Word on Terminology

Over 70% of Myanmar's population live in rural areas. Large numbers of the rural population are ethnic minorities, who live mainly in hilly and remote areas. There are 135 ethnicities in Myanmar. Of these, Burmese people are the largest group, as they make up 68% of total population.<sup>2</sup> All other ethnicities such as: Shan, Kachin, Chin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Lisu, Danu, Pao, Ahkar, Lahu and others, are considered minorities. These groups share a common history of discrimination by the predominately Burmese government during the last century. They also share a common recent history of conflict and civil war.

According to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN's) definition, such minorities are considered Indigenous People since their custom, dress, religious and cultural practices are different from the major population. In national dialogue, we tend to use the word 'ethnic' rather than 'Indigenous' when referring to these minority groups. In this paper, we have chosen to alternate between the two terms, recognising there are complex dynamics and histories behind these terminologies, which are not the subject of discussion in this paper.

## Myanmar's New Laws on Natural Resources

Since the recent political changes, the Government of Myanmar has developed a number of laws regulating land, forestry, environment and natural resources. These include the New Community Forest Instructions 2019, the National Land Use Policy (NLUP) 2016, the Forest Law 2016, the Environmental Law 2012 and the Farmland Law 2012. Although Myanmar has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in July 1997, only the Community Forestry Instructions<sup>3</sup> and NLUP have provisions which reference gender equal-

ity.<sup>4</sup> The NLUP, in particular, has text which closely corresponds to the provisions of CEDAW, providing for equal opportunities for men and women over land resources, tenure rights and related decision-making (Article 8 (k)). It also provides that women and men have equal rights to land allocation and management, inheritance and rights to participate in land requisition (Article 75 (ix)). There has been no active implementation of the NLUP. In reality, only small numbers of women access and exercise this type of equality.<sup>5</sup>

Since there are few senior women in the forest department and land management committee, low numbers of women in Parliament and very few public consultations, the voices and opinions of women were largely not included in the development of these new laws. Although the recent political transition has created more space for women to participate in politics (and lead to increased representation of women in Parliament from 4.6% in 2012 to 10.2 % in 2015),<sup>6</sup> Myanmar government remains a predominately male arena. Myanmar's policy-making process takes a top-down approach.<sup>7</sup> When there has been public consultation about new law and policy, women are less likely to access consultation meetings due to limited access to information, language barriers, personal security

concerns and cultural practices, which limit women's travel.<sup>8</sup> While some consultation processes, organised by NGOs, included rural women, few Indigenous women could participate.<sup>9</sup>

These patterns are also evident in the formal committees established in most villages and village tract areas in rural Myanmar. These include land management, electricity, education, religious, and village administrative bodies and protection of the child committees etc.<sup>10</sup> Only a few women are elected as local leaders, into positions such as Head of 10 Households, Head of 100 Households or Local Administrators. In the case of land management, there are two local committees: the Land Management Committee and the Land Scrutinizing Committee, in the majority of cases men occupy all the positions in these organisations. Women often join village level meetings sessions related to social welfare, health and education but not meetings related to natural resource management.<sup>11</sup>

This reflects an overall pattern in Myanmar, where women's participation in decision-making (particularly related to natural resources) is very low, compared to that of men.<sup>12</sup> Traditional attitudes also uphold the idea that women are not leaders, nor knowledgeable about resource/governance issues. Yet, the more women are excluded, the less awareness they have about rights to resources and the legal framework.

These dynamics reflect other distances between ethnic women and the legal system. Many ethnic women distrust the legal framework because of the length of the trials, high costs associated with hiring lawyers, language and cultural barrier in courts and corruption among the judges and other officials. Even though local customary laws are the most accessible problem-solving mechanisms for rural women, there are many obstacles to obtain justice through these systems.<sup>13</sup> As the village administrative bodies and village elders group are made up largely of

Involvement of Men and Women in Local Committees. Sagaing example.		
Committees	Involvement	
	Men	Women
Land management Committee	✓	-
Electricity committee	✓	-
Education committee	✓	✓
Village head	✓	-
100 Household head	✓	-
10 household head	✓	✓
Village Elderly Group	✓	-
Religious group	✓	✓
First Aid working committee	✓	✓
Protection of the Child Committee	✓	✓
Natural Disaster Protection Committee	✓	✓
Social Protection Committee	✓	✓

men, they tend to not understand women's concerns, nor to make decisions which consider women's experience, nor protect their rights.<sup>14</sup>

## Impact of the Farmland Law 2012

As the majority of Myanmar's economy depends on agriculture, land is an important asset for people in ethnic regions. In 2012, the government introduced the Farmland Law, which allows rural farmers to acquire Land Use Certificates (LUCs) for the first time.<sup>15</sup> The law provides for individual (not joint) user titles and does not use gender-specific language. The Farmland Law also provides for registration through the head of household system. In Myanmar, the head of household is a role which is defined by culture and tradition and is allocated to men.<sup>16</sup> This means that although in theory, the law allows any household member to register their name on the document, in practice land titles are allocated predominately to men. This excludes women from legal rights to the land they jointly farm with their family and places them in situations of risk when their marital or family circumstances change.<sup>17</sup>

The law reinforces a culture in which men are regarded as head of the households, key decision-makers and the breadwinners of the family, while women are considered as economically dependent and followers of men.<sup>18</sup> In most of Myanmar, land and natural resource governance is considered the domain of men. These traditional values are widely accepted across the country and often reinforced from generation to generation. This leads to fewer women taking up positions in public and community life. It also creates obstacles for women to obtain the types of opportunities which would help them develop confidence and take part in local leadership.<sup>19</sup>

Participation in decision-making at household level of women and men varies based on their ethnicity, religion, wealth status and the ways they were brought up by their family and society. While women from urban areas (who are well-educated and financially independent) mostly have power to influence decisions in their families - because they earn an income and usually have completed their education - other women have low levels of education and are often entirely economically dependent on their husbands. Therefore, they tend to have limited decision-making power in their households.

As such, women (and in particular rural women) in Myanmar often have a lower status than men in their households. This means they have less influence over family resources, and decisions. This is a structural inequality which impacts ethnic women in particular due to the history of discrimination and conflict in ethnic areas. Notably, violence and conflict between the government and armed groups generated fear and submissiveness in women, that contributed to sustain the subordinate position of women in family and society.<sup>20</sup>

The Farmland Law does not provide any legal mechanism for joint ownership of property, although in practice some township offices do grant joint titles, if a husband and wife apply with both their names. However, this occurs in very small numbers of cases and it is unclear how it would be treated by the legal system, if that title became a subject of dispute. Furthermore, as it is not part of the standard process proposed by government officials, it requires prior knowledge by the applicants (usually obtained through NGO training) as well as the personal confidence to claim these rights. This is not often the situation for rural women.

In practice, many rural women face administrative challenges when attempting to claim and protect their land rights. There are often burdensome administrative procedures which require travel to different government offices. They feel intimidated filling in a number of forms and signing their names, especially when they have low literacy skills.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, it is useful to note the specific gender differences which impact ethnic women in navigating administrative processes. Although studies show that most women in Myanmar complete their school education and know how to read and write, ethnic women can still face problems engaging in processes requiring a high degree of Burmese literacy, especially when Burmese is not their native language. Even though the levels of education are more or less similar between rural women and men, men's traditional roles often require that they go outside the village, to meet with government or other groups, like traders. Traditional norms mean women are less mobile and cannot access outside knowledge to the same extent. Importantly, they often get few opportunities to practise reading and writing, especially if they earn their livelihoods from farming. If they do not practise, their reading, writing and speaking skills in Burmese decrease once they leave school.



This presents obstacles for women when they have to carry out administrative processes which require a degree of literacy skills, or when participating in meetings/trainings (especially technical trainings) which take place in Burmese. It also means men have access to a wider array of knowledge sources, from a wider social network, which reinforces their confidence to occupy leadership positions.<sup>22</sup> Women tend to have access to fewer and less formal sources of information.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, bias against women within government departments can also present an obstacle for women's land registration. We have observed cases where women have been asked to provide extensive documentation, whereas men are not asked for the same burden of proof. One woman had to show extensive evidence that her father had passed away before she could obtain a land title for a piece of land that she farmed. In another case, a woman, whose husband was working in Thailand, had to obtain his signature from abroad before being permitted to go through with a sales transaction. We have not witnessed these same kinds of demands of information from men who unilaterally want to register or sell a piece of family land. So, we believe there is a bias against women in the land administration processes.<sup>24</sup>

The only incidences when women can easily access Land User Certificates are female-headed households. These are households where the household head is a divorced or widowed women. As there is no adult male in the household, land titles are allocated in a woman's name. However, studies show that female-headed households own an average of 2.6 acres, while male-headed household hold on average of 4.4 acres. Also, in the Dry Zone, 20% of female-headed households were landless compared to 6% of male-headed households.<sup>25</sup> While these figures do not cover the whole country, they suggest that even in cases where rural women do obtain land documentation, there are still differences compared to men's ownership.

Furthermore, as there is no formal legal framework for women's land rights upon divorce or death of their husband,<sup>26</sup> these disputes are resolved through customary and religious laws, which can vary widely across the country. Many cases are often decided by village leaders or religious leaders, according to local religious or ethnic practices.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the potential for rural women to exercise their tenure rights often depends

on their marital status and their personal relationships with men and with male village elders.<sup>28</sup> This makes women's tenure rights especially vulnerable.

Beyond, the legal rights offered through a land title, head of households/land title holders are usually the ones who participate in public meetings or trainings. As such, men are the main actors invited to environmental trainings, as normally only one person in each household is invited. This creates a scenario where having a land title or not, also ensures or precludes access to new knowledge and information. (This will be discussed further below).

In our opinion, if women are not recognised as rights holders and decision-makers in relation to natural resources, this precludes them from participating in access to knowledge and wider conversations about the environment and natural resources on which they depend. Not allocating land right certificates to women, casts them in a supporting, rather than central role, in terms of natural resource management. It also does not accurately reflect the role they play in day to day land management.

## Impact of The Community Forestry Instructions 2019

As a member of the IUCN, Myanmar is working to restore and rehabilitate its national forests. This includes the organisation of trainings<sup>29</sup> on reforestation and conservation for land users and the creation of community forestry groups, particularly in hilly regions.

Myanmar's Community Forestry's Instruction 2019 provides for gender equality in the formation of Management Committees of Forest User Groups.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in practice, the majority of positions in community forest institutions are delegated to men. Women's participation and representation is greater in the Community Forestry groups which are organised by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)/ International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), who actively try to achieve a gender balance when they create these groups<sup>31</sup> In government groups, the inclusion of women is notably less. In addition, fewer rural women are invited to forest-related trainings and high-level meetings hosted by government departments, but rural women can access workshops and trainings provided by NGOs.<sup>32</sup>

In several regions where we worked, women's groups said that they did not know any land use policies or forest-related information. This was because when the Forest Department came to the village, they communicated only with men, inviting men to meetings or trainings. Men were not able to share the information from these meetings with their wives as they had forgotten much of the information.<sup>33</sup> Including only men in such activities, would likely mean they do not include the information related to the tasks that women carry out in the household or village.

These patterns of participation are also influenced by the traditional roles that women and men in Myanmar play in households. This is also because ethnic minority women's traditional roles mean they have a heavy workload in the household doing housework and car-

ing for children and elders at home. At household level, women spend more of their time on domestic work than men. They are responsible for cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for elders and children, as well as managing the affairs of family members. Often their community roles are an extension of these reproductive roles, for example cooking for religious ceremonies or cleaning common areas. Women's contribution is not limited to care work and women also have to do productive work in many parts of the country.<sup>34</sup> Rural women participate in all sectors of agricultural work, such as home gardening, cultivating crops, transplanting the paddy, winning, rearing animals for their own consumption/ trade, forestry and aquaculture, often without recognition from wider society of the important contribution they make to their households.<sup>35</sup>

Gender Division of Household Labour – Example table from fieldwork		
Gender Division of Labour	Women	Men
<b>Productive Activities</b>		
– Migration to Thailand	✓✓	✓
– Farming (paddy, bean)	✓	✓
– Livestock breeding (pig, cow, chicken)	✓	✓
– Vending traditional snacks at pagoda festivals	✓	✓
– Furniture making	–	✓
<b>Reproductive Activities</b>		
– Cooking	✓	–
– Cleaning houses	✓	–
– Washing clothes	✓	–
– Caring for children	✓✓	✓
– Feeding animals	✓	✓
<b>Community Activities</b>		
– Attending Community meeting	✓✓	✓
– Attending Mya Sein Yaung meeting	✓✓	✓
– Networking and communication with governmental departments	–	✓
– Acting in management activities as chairman, patron, treasurer, focal –	–	✓

In recent years, the roles of women (except for domestic work) have changed. Low agricultural productivity, unstable markets, and men's out-migration have also led to women becoming more involved in casual day labour, while still being responsible for household activities for the family. As such, women often have no rest time, do household chores in the early morning and do agricultural work or paid jobs later in the day. After work, they still need to do the household tasks, including feeding animals. The unpaid work and paid work creates not only a double burden for women but also limits their time availability to participate actively in activities such as Forest User Groups and forestry affairs.

Yet, while women are increasingly willing to take on agricultural tasks of men - even though it is physically difficult for the women - men are reluctant to do tasks which are traditionally women's task. For example, research shows that women and men are both likely to take part in productive work and community activities; such as farming, attending meetings and migrating for work: whereas only women do reproductive work like cooking and washing clothes.<sup>36</sup>

In light of these factors, we consider that the Community Forestry processes are adapted to men's traditional roles, daily routines and knowledge. They do not consider or adapt to women's workload, nor do the implementing government organisations make efforts to ensure women are active participants in these activities.

## Impact of Government Trainings

In addition to developing Community Forestry User Groups, the Myanmar Government has organised farming equipment and agricultural extension services. These also are often orientated towards men, as the government also invites head of households to attend these meetings.<sup>37</sup> So, beyond the legal rights offered through a land title, head of households/land title holders are usually the ones who participate in public meetings. As such, men are the main actors invited to environmental trainings (normally only one person per household is invited).

Government extension workers are usually men, which we have noticed, creates training environments shaped by male styles of communication and men's traditional roles in agriculture. These types of training are often not attended by women and the

practices have the effect of excluding women from accessing information and skill trainings on technology advances in agriculture.<sup>38</sup>

This can occur even when women are directly affected by the topic of the training. For example, in Kayah, women from traditional communities, who live in hilly areas of Northern Hpruso, rely on shifting cultivation (which is now become less practised). They usually cut trees and move area every three years (to allow the land to restore). In this region, men were invited for trainings on reforestation and climate change. Yet, women - who were carrying out most of the daily work in the forest - did not have access to this information about environmental conservation of the forest and so could learn to adapt their processes while working in the forest.

In another instance, we observed government extension workers did not invite women to attend training about pesticides, as they thought only men do the work of spraying pesticides in the fields. Whereas, in reality, women work in fields at the same time that the spraying takes place. As a result, women are also exposed to the pesticides and would benefit from understanding properly about the impacts, especially for their health.<sup>39</sup>

Even in instances when trainings do involve women, their physical presence does not guarantee substantive participation or influence. Due to language barriers, rural - urban divide, knowledge and information gap and traditional beliefs, rural and Indigenous women in our experience, are less likely to express their opinion in group settings. Women who attend village meetings and other forest-related meetings often join as passive participants. Their attendance does not guarantee their meaningful participation or that their suggestions will be listened to and acted upon. We have noticed women rarely speak in these types of meetings, even if they know a lot about environmental issue. This is because they are afraid they are wrong or that other people will laugh at them.

For example, one woman mentioned to us: 'In the meetings, only the leader of the committee discussed the issues. No women provided a suggestion or raised any questions. Since all the leaders have more knowledge and experience than us, we feel we are doing something wrong if we raise question in the meetings.'<sup>40</sup>

In our opinion, if women are not included in trainings, they cannot learn about environmental sustainabili-



ty. Women would learn from being exposed to wider conversations on climate justice and they also have a lot to give to these processes. As Indigenous women are the closest to the forests in their daily lives, they are the ones who ought to be the key targets for environmental protection trainings and also research, or learning.

## Women's Daily Roles and Conservation

The relationship between women and natural resources is governed not only by the state legal framework but also by customary land tenure arrangements.<sup>41</sup> These are traditional systems which include practices around inheritance of assets to children or division of assets upon divorce or death. They also prescribe social roles and activities to men and women. These practices evolve over time, according to social norms and changes. In addition, they often vary within ethnic groups and can be specific only to one village area. While there has been no comprehensive study of ethnic traditions in Myanmar, it is possible to notice patterns across regions.<sup>42</sup> For example, studies show

that in many areas, traditions favour inheritance of land and productive resources to male children, reasoning that women will marry in order to obtain these resources. These systems often also require women to inherit family homes and care for elderly parents.<sup>43</sup>

As part of these traditional practices, men and women play particular roles in obtaining their main livelihoods. They tend to do these activities for their own consumption or as small-scale trade.<sup>44</sup> These include activities, such as hunting, animal husbandry, traditional weaving, shifting cultivation, upland agriculture, collecting Non-timber Forest Products (NTFP) and collecting wood for fuel and house construction. The roles are often gender divided. For example, men collect fuelwood, bamboo and poles for household use, by using a bullock cart or trolley.<sup>45</sup> Women collect NTFP such as bamboo shoots, mushroom, Eugenia plants, vegetables and some medicinal plants for their own consumption and occasionally for selling or to trade. Women carry fuelwood on their heads. The roles and responsibilities of women within many ethnic traditions show again the way that women maintain a daily relationship with local natural resources and are involved in natural resource management.



Shan village house. Credit: Signe Leth

Within these systems, women are often the main household actors in Myanmar who, through their daily actions, are leading local environmental management. It is possible to observe that women's daily role in cooking and collecting foods from the forest, provides them with a particular knowledge and skill set which is important for natural resource conservation. For example, women know what type of trees to grow within their compound, as well as the types of trees they can harvest at different times of year. As they rely on the forest for their livelihood needs, they also know how to maintain the trees, so they can continue to use these resources annually. While many traditional practices have positive impacts for the environment, others do not. For example, many women still cut down trees around their houses for firewood, even although these trees provide shade in the hot season. As they are largely excluded from government conservation trainings, and have very few sources of information outside their local communities, women can risk harming the forest in their daily actions.

Another important influence in many ethnic communities is superstition. In some cases, it can influence women's connection to their surrounding environment. For example, in Kayah State, ceremonial roles such as fortune tellers are taken on by men. These individuals can make decisions which have big impacts on women's lives, such as deciding her marriage partner. Other traditions control women's behaviour, stipulating that they cannot go into the forest while they are menstruating, as this is considered bad luck. It is understood that this action will anger the forest goddess and destroy the village. Similarly, women are required to not touch any fruits during their period, or if they are pregnant, as it is believed this will cause the tree to die.

One Kayah ethnic group has an annual ceremony called 'Kay Hto Boh'. During this time, the men identify the largest tree in the forest to bring to their ritual place for the following year. No women are allowed to interfere in this process and women are not allowed to enter the forest at this time (for nearly a month). Women's role in this celebration is the preparation of traditional wine and meals. No women are represented in the committee and their voices are not heard within these types of customary practices. Again, in these ceremonies, higher status positions are allocated to men.

With urbanisation and migration changing Kayah State, some of these practices are slowly disappearing. There are also less raw materials to make traditional wine and limited areas to grow crops. Revivals of traditional knowledge in Kayah State encourage young men to partake in learning traditions, but not young women. This means that the underlying dynamics continue to place women in a lower status position within these communities.

These examples show that ethnic tradition can contribute to an environment in which the knowledge of women is devalued and it also can exclude rural women from both national discussions and community decision-making. For example, in some communities such as Kayah, Rakhine, Chin, Lisu and Shan, land management systems and forest protection mechanisms are governed by customary and traditional practices, which are upheld by village elders, who are predominately men. Men are perceived as the protectors of the forest and women are discouraged from participating in the forest management. Despite being the group most connected to the forest on a daily basis, women are not perceived as knowledgeable on this topic.

At present, Indigenous women's first-hand knowledge of the forest does not feed into broader conversations. This is an important issue, which needs to be addressed in Myanmar's national processes. As we see from the new laws, gender is not expressly included, nor do the existing gender provisions translate into good practice on the ground. As a result, important knowledge and potential progress for climate change prevention in Myanmar is being lost. Women can learn from being exposed to wider conversations on climate justice and they also have a lot to give to these processes. This is knowledge which is currently being lost and not included in Myanmar national dialogue on environment protection.

As Indigenous women are the closest to the forests in their daily lives, they are the ones who ought to be the key targets for environmental protection trainings and also research, or learning. If we bring their voices, experiences and priorities to the national and local dialogue, we believe we can create opportunities for them to improve livelihoods and mitigate climate change.

## Conclusion

In our opinion, it is time to listen to voices of Indigenous women. When governments and NGOs talk about environmental issues they have to give spaces for Indigenous women to be a part of this conversation, in policy making, developing projects and strategies and in environmental management. We need to listen to their voices, learn more about their daily activities at ground level and use this experience to maintain our forest. We need to know why they use the practices they use and learn from this experience and ancient knowledge. If we bring their voices, experiences and priorities forward, we can better develop inclusive

strategies to combat climate change. We need to stop climate change but also assure climate justice, through the inclusion of this diverse and excluded group. This is an important element not only in the Myanmar national process but also in international learning for climate change mitigation.

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*Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun are gender experts and founders of the Gender Academy Myanmar, a think tank which promotes gender equality through provision of training and developing national discussions around gender. Their aim is to advocate for public policies which benefit women, based on academic research and fact-based arguments.*

## Chapter 3 Endnotes

1. This research interviewed 222 respondents including 86 females and 136 males in Sagaing region. It was organised by IUCN as part of their 10 years forest conservation and rehabilitation strategic plan. The 160 reserved forests cover 5,033,440 acres and 89 public protected forests cover 1,386,968 acres.
2. IWGIA, (2019), Indigenous World.
3. Community Forestry Instruction 2019, Chapter 5 s7(v)
4. The NLUP was developed through public consultation, led by civil society which integrated some consultations with women farmers. See: Forbes (2017): Civil Society Participation in Land Policy Making: The Innovative Experience of Myanmar's Pre-Consultation on the National Land Use Policy. Conceptualization Note. In: *MRLG Capitalization Note Series* (2).
5. There have been very few measures to implement the NLUP in Myanmar, so the gender protections it offers have not been directly translated into practice. For that reason, we will not explore this policy further in this paper.
6. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2019) Women in national parliaments, IPU, updated 1 February 2019. Available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.
7. Hook et al, (2015) Conceptualizing Public Sector Reform in Myanmar, MDRI and The Asia Foundation
8. See: Chapter 2, Ei Ei Min, Developing Indigenous women's leadership in the fight against climate change.
9. Civil society organisations facilitated consultation processes to seek out views of rural and Indigenous women as well as Indigenous groups more widely during the NLUP process. See: Forbes, (2017). Civil Society Participation in Land Policy Making: the innovative experience of Myanmar's pre-consultation on the National Land Use Policy. MRLG Capitalization Note Series #2. Vientiane & Yangon: Mekong Region Land Governance, Land Core Group and Loka Ahlinn.
10. These groups are created in coordination with the government's General Administrative Department which instructs the ward/ village tract administrator to form certain committees.
11. From the authors' experience in Sagaing (2016).
12. Minoletti, (2014) Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar, Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Centre for Economic and Social Development (MDRI CESD) and The Asia Foundation, Yangon and Namati (2016) Gendered Aspects of Land Rights in Myanmar: Evidence from Paralegal Casework, Yangon.
13. UNWomen (2016), Voice from the Intersection: Women's access to justice in the plural legal system in Myanmar
14. This observation is based on general field experience of the authors in different regions of Myanmar.
15. The Myanmar Government classifies land according to a Central Cadastral Map, of which Farmland is only one classification. Farmers must have land which the government has classified as Farmland in order to apply for a Land Use Certificate.
16. Namati, (2016) (supra)
17. Faxon and Knapman, (2020) *From the ground up: Land governance through the eyes of women farmers in Myanmar*, Yangon, Land Core Group (LCG)



18. CARE, ActionAid, Trocaire and Oxfam (2013) Women Leadership In Myanmar.
19. Pansy Tun Thein (2015) Gender Equality and Cultural Norms in Myanmar. International Conference Paper.
20. Agatha Ma and Kusakabe, (2015), Gender analysis of fear and mobility in the context of ethnic conflict in Kayah State, Myanmar, Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography
21. Based on observations from field experience of the authors. Also see: Knapman. (2018). Developing a community of practice to address women's land rights: Civil society discussion on gender equal land governance in Burma, USAID Tenure and Global Climate Change Program, Washington DC.
22. Based on authors' observations working in a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts in Myanmar.
23. Faxon and Knapman, (2020) (supra)
24. Examples from authors' experiences in Mon State and Sagaing State.
25. Oxfam, (2014) Delivering Prosperity in Myanmar's Dryzone: Lessons from Mandalay and Magwe on realizing the economic potential of small scale farmers.
26. Chandra, (2017) Investing in Women Myanmar Country Context Paper
27. Knapman, (2018) (supra).
28. From authors' experience in Pinwe village, Sagaing (2016).
29. These trainings tend to be top down in nature and not integrate knowledge of women or traditional practices.
30. Community Forestry Instruction, Chapter 5 s7(v)
31. See: Chapter 2, Ei Ei Min (supra)
32. Based on authors' observations from field work in different regions of Myanmar.
33. Based on authors' experience in East Katha, Sagaing (2016)
34. ADB et al., (2016) A situation analysis of Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar.
35. FAO, (2016) The State of Food and Agriculture: Climate change, agriculture and food security. The statement can be also studied detail in the policy brief of UNDP, titled of Gender and Climate Change: gender, climate change and food security.
36. The authors' experience for Mya Sein Yaung Project (2019)
37. As noted in the Farmland Law section, in Myanmar the head of household is traditionally a man.
38. See sample photos from the official page of the Forest Department as an illustration of these male-dominated spaces: <https://www.forestdepartment.gov.mm/CFDTC/cfdtc>
39. Nilar Tun, (2006) Master's Thesis, Gender perception on pesticide and health, Taung inn village, Magway division, Asian Institute of Technology, School of Environment, Resources and Development.
40. Based on authors' field experience for Mya Sein Yaung Project (2019)
41. Louis et al., (2018) Land Tenure Regimes and Women's Land Rights in Two Regions of Myanmar, Conference Paper.
42. Faxon and Knapman, (2020) (supra)
43. A research study exploring Chin practices, states that if a wife initiates divorce, her parents have to return the bride price they received at her marriage. In addition, she will lose all the property and custody of their children. However, if a man does the same he retains the custody of his children. See: NINU (2017) Women as the others, Chin Customary laws & Practices from a Feminist Perspective.
44. POINT, (2015) Shifting cultivation in Myanmar: case studies from Southern Chin State and Bago Division.
45. A trolley is motorised vehicle like a tuk-tuk.

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Hakha, Chin State, Myanmar. CREDIT: IWGIA

# Chapter 4

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights In REDD+: Placing the Cancun Safeguards at the Centre

by Stefan Thorsell and Lærke Marie Lund Petersen



## Introduction

In Myanmar, and around the world, Indigenous Peoples' rights are increasingly under threat from international commitments made by governments to reducing deforestation and forest degradation. This chapter provides a brief overview of the UN mechanism: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, commonly known as REDD+, and critically analyses the challenges posed by this mechanism for Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous women.<sup>1</sup> The analysis also explores some opportunities the mechanism might offer these groups.<sup>2</sup> The chapter concludes that unless effective safeguards are in place, REDD+ risks violating Indigenous Peoples' rights and excluding them from decision-making processes that affect their lives and livelihoods.

## Tropical Forests and Climate Change

There is strong scientific basis for protecting the world's tropical forests, as they act as sinks, storing carbon which otherwise would be emitted into the atmosphere. Tropical forests also remove greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere through carbon sequestration. In light of this, deforestation and forest degradation are understood as major contributors to manmade, or anthropogenic, climate change. Indeed, an estimated 15-20% of global greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the destruction and degradation of forests, especially tropical forests.<sup>3</sup> In addition to their important role as carbon sinks, forests are vital for ecosystems and biodiversity. They provide key ecosystem services to human beings and animals alike, including clean water and air, food and forest products and habitat for wildlife and plants. Forests are also an important basis for the livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent populations.

Nearly 15 % of the world's tropical forests are found in Southeast Asia and they constitute important global biodiversity hotspots.<sup>4</sup> However, the region has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world and one which is particularly severe in terms of biodiversity loss.<sup>5</sup> Research shows that Myanmar follows this trend. In 1925 forest cover in the country was an estimated 66 %, however by 2016 it had reduced to an estimated 43 % of the total land area. This means that during the past 90 years Myanmar has lost nearly 23 % of its forests.<sup>6</sup>

## The REDD+ Mechanism

The REDD+ mechanism has been under negotiation in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since 2007. Amongst governments and intergovernmental institutions today, REDD+ is widely regarded as an important part of a global political process to counter climate change.<sup>7</sup> The mechanism operates by providing funding to developing countries to facilitate the implementation of policies and initiatives to protect forests, notably through sustainable management.<sup>8</sup> In the early days of the REDD+ negotiations, there was a strong push for letting rich industrialised countries offset their emissions through payments for tropical forest conservation in the Global South.<sup>9</sup> This met wide resistance from environmentalists and the scientific community, who argued that this approach would not incentivise the industrialised world to cut its own emissions at a pace sufficient to prevent irreversible climate change. While offsetting is still on the negotiation table (and remains highly controversial) the focus of REDD+ has since turned towards results-based payments through international funding mechanisms, which will be described below.

REDD+ is implemented in three phases, which do not necessarily run in a chronological order. During the 'readiness phase', a country develops a national REDD+ strategy and government policies that address land tenure and forest governance issues, drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, as well as gender considerations and safeguards. A national emission reference level is set as a baseline. During the 'implementation phase', the country implements the strategy and policies, including concrete pilot projects in selected forest areas. The amount of greenhouse gas emission prevented, and carbon sequestered, from these activities, is quantified. Finally, during the 'payment-for-results phase', the country receives retrospective payments for emission reductions achieved through the implementation of REDD+ activities.

In 2015, UN member states, including Myanmar, adopted the Paris Agreement, a politically binding agreement to combat climate change under the UNFCCC.<sup>10</sup> Under the Paris Agreement, each country pledges nationally determined contributions (NDCs) which detail how they plan to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. 56 countries have suggested in their NDCs that they

aim to implement REDD+ as part of their contribution to address climate change.<sup>11</sup> Myanmar's NDC, which was submitted in 2015 and will be updated in 2020, includes forest conservation through REDD+ as one of the main measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>12</sup> Myanmar is currently progressing towards fulfilling the UNFCCC requirements for result-based payments. In 2019, a final draft of the Myanmar REDD+ Strategy was released, and the national safeguards information system is under development.

Seen as a historic turning point for REDD+ in February 2019, the Green Climate Fund approved its first results-based payment to Brazil for REDD+ results in 2014 and 2015.<sup>13</sup> Within a couple of months, however, other REDD+ funding to Brazil was withheld by donors

due to growing concerns over a suspected surge in deforestation under the new government of President Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>14</sup> This demonstrates that the mechanism is still far from being a universally accepted solution to halting global deforestation and forest degradation and remains subject to debate and controversy.

## Indigenous Peoples and REDD+

Insecure land tenure and lack of recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights to their land and territories are at the core of the challenges facing REDD+. From the outset, experiences with REDD+ have proven challenging with regards to respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights. REDD+ is aimed

at protecting tropical forests in many countries which have weak governance systems and histories of land tenure conflicts, structural discrimination and persecution against Indigenous Peoples.<sup>15</sup> Most of the forests in which REDD+ has been piloted are Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories. When Indigenous Peoples' rights to their lands, territories and resources are not recognised and protected, REDD+ can have serious negative consequences for these groups. The challenge of safeguarding Indigenous Peoples' rights in REDD+ is not only a matter of political will. Given that REDD+ is highly technical, assuring Indigenous Peoples' active participation is a key challenge throughout the three phases described above.<sup>16</sup>

A study undertaken by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in 2018 found that in Myanmar, under the current system of forest governance, none of the main stakeholders (neither Indigenous or other forest-dependent communities, nor the Government) have been able to address the drivers of de-



Myanmar rainforest. CREDIT: Stefan Thorsell

forestation so as to preserve forest areas. Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar have realised that they need recognition of their rights to land and forests, and the support of the authorities in enforcing local conservation rules against illegal logging. The Government of Myanmar appears to have realised that collaboration with these communities is essential for successful forest conservation and has followed the example of other countries in the region by including the concept of community forestry as part of its forest governance system. However, with an overall target of merely 3.5% of the country's total forest area, Myanmar's community forestry programme cannot be considered to be having any real impact, beyond testing this new approach. While studies have reported some improvement in the livelihoods of participating communities, and in the quality of the forest in community forestry areas, they have also found that community forestry provides weak tenure security and that stronger legal provisions are necessary to give Indigenous Peoples much-needed recognition and protection of their customary rights to land, forest and resources. Indeed, strong legal protections are important because, if implemented, they can support the long-term wellbeing and self-determined development of Indigenous Peoples. Bringing about the legal and policy changes that support Indigenous and other communities in the sustainable management of natural resources would help the Government of Myanmar fulfil its international pledge to address deforestation and forest degradation under its NDC. It is evident from the IW-GIA study that successful implementation of REDD+ in Myanmar will depend on this type of much-needed paradigm change in forest conservation.<sup>17</sup>

## Indigenous Women and REDD+<sup>18</sup>

Indigenous women around the world, like Indigenous men, suffer from loss of land and resources due to dispossession and encroachment, from racial discrimination, cultural alienation and pressure to assimilate, and from violations of their human rights, often exacerbated by the violent conflicts engulfing their communities. However, Indigenous women are often more affected than men by these dynamics and violations. For example, women tend to be more severely affected by the loss of land and resources since, in accordance with culturally-defined gender roles, they are often the ones responsible for collecting firewood, fetching water, tending the fields and feeding the family. Among many forest-dependent Indigenous Peoples, women play a central role in forest conserva-

tion and management. They are a repository of Indigenous knowledge on non-timber forest products and herbal medicine, and are often the keepers of seeds and thus in charge of preserving domesticated plant varieties. These invaluable roles and contributions of women for the wellbeing of their families and communities are not adequately acknowledged or recognised by community leadership or government actors. Indeed, Indigenous women are often excluded from participating in decision-making processes, they do not have control over the cash income with which they sustain themselves and their families, they have less access to health services and education, and in some instances, they also face domestic violence. Integration into, and the adoption of values of, mainstream society can lead to a further weakening of the status of women in Indigenous societies and increase their vulnerability to domestic and external violence.

Working with Indigenous women in REDD+ to ensure their active participation, and that their concerns, needs and rights are properly addressed, requires that other participating actors are aware of the specific circumstances of Indigenous women. These actors also need to adopt attitudes which are sincere, flexible and able to take the situation of Indigenous women into account. This means departing from assumptions or certainties that may be appropriate when working with women from other communities. Indigenous women share many of the same basic concerns and needs with their non-Indigenous sisters. But their situation, as women in Indigenous societies, sets them apart from those who are part of the mainstream society. Their concerns may not be fully addressed, either by Indigenous rights advocacy or by women's rights and gender advocacy. This is also the case with regards to REDD+. While Indigenous women have engaged in advocacy, lobbying and negotiations in UNFCCC at the global level, gender issues in REDD+ are still only marginally addressed at national level by government agencies and Indigenous organisations alike. Indigenous women are generally less informed about REDD+ and have been much less involved than Indigenous men in REDD+ related activities, including advocacy work. While their participation in REDD+ project activities is usually better at the local level, Indigenous women remain underrepresented in national bodies.

Negotiations on the implementation of REDD+ are taking place at international level within the UNFCCC while executed at country-level, based on national reference scenarios, guided and regulated by national plans, policies and laws. However, actual forest conservation takes place on the ground, at local level. The



engagement of Indigenous Peoples, and thus also of Indigenous women, is necessary at all levels: from international discussions to daily actions at forest level. In order for Indigenous women to meaningfully participate in these discussions requires better understanding of their daily responsibilities. As a result of traditional division of labour, women are often responsible at family and community level for taking care of children, animals and farming. It is easier for women to join meetings organised in their own (or maybe) a neighbouring village than to travel further, to the provincial or national capitals which requires overnight stays, sometimes of several days. In some Indigenous societies, men are often reluctant, or not willing, to let their wives, sisters or daughters travel without the company of their husbands or close male kin. This is a predominant custom in rural Myanmar, especially in areas with a recent history of armed conflict.

The situation is different for Indigenous women with formal education, who live in cities and work as professionals. They are better able to engage in REDD+ processes at national or international levels. As more Indigenous women complete higher education, ensuring their active participation in REDD+ related processes and institutions at national and international levels will be possible. But this will require a conscious effort and active lobbying with the relevant agencies. Indigenous Peoples themselves need to push for the inclusion of Indigenous women, not least by appointing more women to lead their own organisations and represent them in relevant bodies and processes. Equally important, if Indigenous women from

the grassroots are to be kept informed and involved, extra efforts are required to reach out to those at the community level. This may involve physical travel to villages to share information and consult in order to be able to bring local Indigenous women's views and voices back to conference rooms in the cities.

Taking into account cultural variations in securing Indigenous women's rights through REDD+ becomes particularly relevant with respect to key demands such as equal rights to land, forest and other natural resources. In Indigenous societies, rules that are regulating access to land and resources are often complex and multi-layered, comprising a combination of individual and collective ownership and use rights. There is also wide variation of inheritance rules within Indigenous societies, which is partly related to ecological and economic conditions and these are often tied to rules about kin or lineage identity and residence after marriage. Land rights issues can thus not be addressed without taking these aspects of customary law into consideration, along with the needs and perspectives of Indigenous women. Currently, integration into mainstream society and the market economy is leading to rapid transformation of Indigenous societies. The shift toward market-oriented production results in individualisation of land rights. Men, more so than women, are leaving their villages in search of work, which has led to a 'feminisation of agriculture',<sup>19</sup> since mostly women are looking after the land. This applies to the management of forests, too. In such a situation, it is even more important that women are given equal rights over land and forests.



Indigenous Women's Exchange 2018. CREDIT: AIPP

In order to do justice to the specific customary laws and traditions related to ownership of land and forest rights among Indigenous Peoples, while at the same time ensuring the equal rights of women, it is first of all indispensable to recognise the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples to their land, territories and resources. This will allow Indigenous communities to regulate individual or collective ownership and to have secure user rights to land within their territories. Since customary law often does not recognise equal rights over land and forests for women, it is necessary that certain aspects are revised accordingly. Aside from individual rights over certain types of land, most Indigenous communities continue to use and manage parts of their territories, such as forests, pastures or shifting cultivation land, communally. Therefore, it is important that women are part of the decision-making institutions and processes related to the use and management of common properties, such as village councils, which in many cases remain an exclusive domain for men. All over Asia, Indigenous women are increasingly raising demands for a revision of customary land rights and other aspects of customary law. It is important to support these demands and facilitate constructive discussion and decision-making processes, which allow communities themselves to address conflicts and difference in perspectives.

## Cancun Safeguards

Despite the challenges, some Indigenous Peoples, including Indigenous women, feel that there are conditions under which REDD+ could potentially assist them in securing the rights to their lands and resources, protecting their livelihoods and providing financial and other forms of benefits to their communities. For example, REDD+ can serve to strengthen the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in conservation efforts.<sup>20</sup> In some countries, REDD+ has created space for Indigenous Peoples to demand rights in otherwise sensitive political contexts. This has allowed an unprecedented space in which progressive land and forest reforms are advocated for openly. This is the case in Myanmar, one of several countries in which the governments do not even recognise the term 'Indigenous Peoples'. Indeed, Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar have in recent years, through persistent advocacy and lobbying, managed to influence key policies on REDD+ and have their voice represented at various REDD+ boards, task forces and technical working groups.

At national and international level, Indigenous Peoples and civil society have demanded that the recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and forest dependent communities be a precondition for designing and implementing REDD+. They have pointed at the potential multiple negative externalities of REDD+, if their rights are not taken into account. These include increase in land grabbing, displacement, conflict, corruption, impoverishment and cultural degradation. They also ask that REDD+ policies be in line with the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and respect the principle of free, prior and informed consent.

In 2010 the Cancun Safeguards were adopted, which contain a set of safeguards which should be promoted and supported when implementing REDD+ activities. This was a landmark victory for Indigenous Peoples' advocacy at the UNFCCC. The Cancun Safeguards include, amongst other provisions, the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, and respect for the knowledge and rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities with reference to the UNDRIP.<sup>21</sup> While specific safeguards on women's rights are not included, gender is reflected elsewhere in the agreement text.<sup>22</sup> Although the safeguards are not legally binding, and only deliver minimum standards for the countries participating in REDD+, they provide an important opportunity for Indigenous Peoples to advocate for their rights to be respected and protected in the development and implementation of REDD+.

Based on the Cancun Safeguards, each country must develop their own set of clearly defined safeguards and benefit-sharing schemes. Today, there is still a lack of clear, standardised and consistent safeguard guidelines for key issues such as ensuring free, prior and informed consent. Often where such guidelines do exist, they are not being fully and consistently implemented by governments, nor enforced by bilateral or multilateral donors.<sup>23</sup>

In 2018, Indigenous Peoples achieved another landmark victory when the Green Climate Fund (GCF) adopted an Indigenous Peoples' Policy. The policy applies to

*...GCF-financed activities supporting the REDD-plus actions, including the readiness phase, results-based payments, and any access and financing modalities, guidance, terms of reference, and assessment tools developed by GCF with respect to REDD-plus actions.*<sup>24</sup>

This policy is a key tool for Indigenous Peoples to assert their rights in climate action funded by the Green Climate Fund at international and national level, including in REDD+ implementation.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, in order to receive results-based payments from REDD+ activities, the policy obliges a recipient country to have in place a number of preconditions, including safeguards for Indigenous Peoples.

In spite of these encouraging and progressive policy developments, a recent study from the Green Climate Fund found that the least advanced element of REDD+ is the safeguards information system and the associated preparation of ‘summaries of information’ on how Cancun Safeguards are addressed and respected.<sup>26</sup> This clearly shows the urgent need to support countries to establish their safeguards information systems, in order to ensure that Indigenous Peoples’ rights, including those of Indigenous women, are not overlooked and violated in the implementation of REDD+.

In Myanmar, the Government is still working to develop a national safeguard system, based on the Cancun safeguards. Collaborating with the UN-REDD Programme, in consultation with civil society and other stakeholders, this is still a work in progress. It remains to be seen how Myanmar will shape safeguards and the consequent impacts this will have for Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous women.

# Conclusions

More than a decade after its birth, REDD+ remains flawed and controversial, and consequently, far from achieving its objective of becoming part of the solution to climate change. It is evident that key contested elements, such as the market-based approaches, need to be resolved for REDD+ to have a chance at becoming universally accepted. A vital precondition for REDD+ to function is that Indigenous

Peoples’ rights, including those of Indigenous women, are respected. This is in line with the findings of a recent ground-breaking report of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an intergovernmental body of the UN, which highlighted the critical role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in stewarding and safeguarding the world’s lands and forests.<sup>27</sup>

The implementation and monitoring of the Cancun Safeguards are crucial to prevent violations of Indigenous Peoples’ rights. Appropriate and equitable participation and representation of Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous women, in the decision-making bodies and processes around REDD+ must be ensured. As Indigenous women play a key role in ensuring the sustainable management of forests, they are also key to ensuring sustainable outcomes of REDD+.

As the example from Myanmar demonstrates, a paradigm shift in forest conservation and management at country level is needed. The most indispensable precondition is a supportive legal and policy framework, particularly to ensure tenure security. An important step moving forward is to ensure that national REDD+ safeguards in countries such as Myanmar are in compliance with the Cancun Safeguards, and in place before the countries move towards full implementation of REDD+.

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## Chapter 4 Endnotes

1. The full name of the mechanism is “Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries”, hence the ‘plus’.
2. It is beyond the scope of the chapter to assess if REDD+ is an effective and ethically correct approach to tackle the global problem of deforestation and forest degradation.
3. Studies have come up with a range of estimates. The IPCC (2019) estimates that agriculture, forestry and other land use (AFOLU) represents 23 % of global greenhouse gas emissions of which a major contributor to this is deforestation.
4. Sodhi et al., (2010). The state and conservation of Southeast Asian biodiversity. *Biodivers. Conserv.* 19, 317–328
5. Estoque et al., (2019). The future of Southeast Asia’s forests *Nature Communications*. Volume 10, Article number: 1829
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7. Following publications provide good insight into REDD+ as well as how indigenous peoples engage with, and are affected by, the REDD+ mechanism: Martone, (2019). An Indigenous Peoples’ Guide to REDD+ Results-Based Payments: Opportunities and Challenges. Available from: <http://www.tebtebba.org/index.php/content/465-an-indigenous-peoples-guide-to-redd-results-based-payments-opportunities-and-challenges> (accessed on 6 September 2019)
8. REDD + promotes five specific activities. These are: i) reducing emissions from deforestation, ii) reducing emissions from forest degradation, iii) conservation of forest carbon stocks, iv) sustainable management of forests, and v) enhancement of forest carbon stocks.
9. Only countries eligible of receiving official development assistance (ODA), commonly known as ‘developing countries’ are eligible for receiving payments.
10. The Paris Agreement recognises the central role of forests in achieving the goal of ‘[h]olding the increase in the global average temperature from pre-industrial levels to well below 2°C...’ (Art. 2.a) through mitigation options that aim to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (Art. 5.2) (UNFCCC 2015). In 2018, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) highlighted the importance of limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C and showed that reducing deforestation and forest degradation is crucial to achieve this (IPCC 2018). The United States have since delivered an official notice of their intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement.
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16. Ibid.
17. Erni, (2018) (supra)
18. This section is builds on AIPP and IWGIA (2014). Indigenous Women in REDD+. Making their voice heard. Available from: [https://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0697\\_Indigenous\\_omen\\_and\\_REDD\\_EB.pdf](https://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0697_Indigenous_omen_and_REDD_EB.pdf) (accessed on 6 September 2019)
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Indigenous women collecting forest products. CREDIT: POINT

# Chapter 5

The Impact of School Education on  
Biodiversity: A Dilemma Linking Ancient  
Practices to the Capitalist System

by Nu Ra Maru



## Introduction

Within Myanmar today there exist long-standing disputes between the central Burmese government and minority ethnic groups. Over the past 70 years, these disputes have been the basis for civil war between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups. Since 2010, as Burma has begun its transition to democracy, there have been significant moves towards building peace.<sup>1</sup>

systems has an impact on women. It will also share details of some ethnic traditional practices and the ways they are passed down through matrilineal lines, as well as their importance for biodiversity. It will focus on exploring the central role of women in this dilemma. It will consider, in particular, experiences of Sagaw Karen, Danu, Pa-O and Asho Chin Indigenous communities, based on a field research study carried out by POINT NGO in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Overview of Field Study Sites**

Village	Region	Ethnic Group	Geographic Features
Shwetaung Ngwetaung	Bago	Sawgaw Karen	Remote
Kyaukthaw	Ywangan township/Southern Shan State	Danu	Remote
Kyaukkacha	Hopong township/Southern Shan State	Pa-O	Not very far from Taunggyi
Bone Baw	Magway	Asho Chin	Remote

During the years of conflict and dictatorship, the Government of Myanmar implemented policies which affected all areas of daily life, including formal schooling and government administration. These policies discriminated against ethnic groups, as all education in schools took place in Burmese and ethnic minority groups did not learn about their own ethnic language, traditions and history in school.<sup>2</sup> Across the whole country, classes were taught by Burmese teachers, following a Burmese curriculum. As such education about ethnic cultures, language and tradition could only be obtained in informal spaces. This has meant that spaces to value, preserve and pass on traditional, ancestral knowledge became limited. This was further exacerbated by recent political changes, which open up the country to global culture, through mobile technology and migration.

While the state education system did not allow for teaching about ethnic traditions; Indigenous customs have been passed down within families and in community spaces. Many of these Indigenous practices were preserved through matrilineal lines, passing from woman to woman. These include important environmental practices, such as use of forest products and seeds for food and medicine, as well as practices related to forest- and seed-management.

This paper discusses the complex relationship between government and community education, notably considering how the history of these education

## An Example of Women's Traditional Role

In the Sawgaw Karen village of Shwetaung Ngwetaung in Bago, women play an important role in growing subsistence and cash crops. In this area, women are responsible for maintaining and conserving local seeds. These varieties of seeds have often been passed down from generation to generation. Sagaw Karen women also uphold Indigenous rules about agriculture. These are rules which have a matrilineal inheritance and a man must change from his mother's practices to his wife's practices when he marries. This shows the influence that women have on community behaviour and choices in forest management and cultivation practices.

Shwetaung Ngwetaung's inhabitants still rely on Indigenous medicines. Although they have a clinic established by government, many local people still rely on the traditional midwife when having babies, as many women want to deliver their child using Indigenous practices. Indigenous herbal medicines are taught to young women by their mothers. Some young women learn traditional midwifery practices by assisting at births with a traditional midwife. They learn how to cut the umbilical cord, how to deliver a child or how to test blood temperature using fingers to determine if a child can be delivered. Some women become highly skilled and sensitive in these techniques. For example, in this village there used to be a midwife who knew when to deliver a child by touching

a pregnant woman's womb. She was also able to determine whether the child is a boy or a girl by looking at the hips of the pregnant woman. Midwives are also able to check whether a birth requires surgery or not.

The continuation of these practices means that many people in the village can access health care even if they do not have enough money to pay for state medical services. In order to make treatments, women rely on herbs which they collect in the forest. As such, this Indigenous medicine practice relies on a diverse range of local plants. If the biodiversity in the local area is harmed, they no longer have access to these herbs and plants. The forest provides what they are not able to buy.

## From Old Practice to the Cash Economy

Like the Sagaw Karen ethnic group, other communities in the study also plant a range of crops for food and medicinal uses, following Indigenous shifting cultivation practices. For example, in Kyaukthaw village, a Danu community, they grow a diverse range of plants such as: groundnut, ginger, turmeric, green tea, avocado, coffee, mango, djenkol bean and cabbage. In Pa-O areas of Taunggyi, they earn their main livelihood from cigar leaf plantations, but they also grow a range of shifting cultivation crops including corn, avocado, coffee, tomato, strawberry, flower, allium hookeri, green tea, rice and garlic for food and income.

Shifting cultivation was a traditional subsistence method of agriculture, however in recent years, these practices are changing, driven by a range of external and internal factors. Contributing to changes in these practices are: government policy (to replace shifting cultivation by monocrops and other agricultural practices), pressure from climate change (which reduces the amount of land and shifts weather patterns) and the draw of the cash economy. Land acquisition by business investors in Indigenous areas also means that the land available for shifting cultivation has been reduced. This range of factors puts pressure on sustaining this traditional type of agriculture and contributes to overuse of available land. The location of villages can influence the way that Indigenous practices are changing. Remoter areas tend to be less influenced by outside pressures and have more land available to continue Indigenous practices. In ar-

reas nearer towns or cities, communities have tended to shift their crop and livelihood choices more quickly.

For example, the Asho Chin Indigenous people in the western part of Magwe practise shifting cultivation. They grow rice, corn, banana, elephant foot, lime, coffee and grapefruit for consumption and income. However, they reported that recently their practices have changed. As banana is a crop which is available for the whole year, the community have started to focus more on growing bananas, as this assures a year-round cash income. This means they plant less of their other traditional crops which has a knock-on effect on their nutrition levels and also on biodiversity.

In the Danu Kyaukthaw village in Shan state, communities now primarily cultivate green tea, both for household use and to sell as a cash crop. Traditionally, they practised shifting cultivation, growing a range of plants (like groundnut, ginger, turmeric, green tea, avocado, coffee, mango, djenkol bean and cabbage). However, in recent years, they only harvest and grow green tea. This means that their agricultural practices have shifted from a biodiverse range of crops to a monocrop.

The Danu village example has slightly more positive implications for local culture than in some other cases. This is because green tea is traditionally an important product, not only for Danu Indigenous Peoples, but also for peoples across Myanmar. In Indigenous practice, it is used in households, served to guests and harvested by women. In this respect, it is somewhat of a better choice than some other monocrop cultures because it has a value for the people and their culture. As such, replacing shifting cultivation crops with green tea has also allowed certain traditional roles and cultural practices to be preserved, which are lost when other outside, non-traditional, monocrops replace traditional agriculture.

Indigenous methods of shifting cultivation contribute to the biodiversity of the local area and play a role in mitigating climate change. The diversity of crops planted contributes to maintaining local biodiversity. These crops also play other important roles in the ecosystem, for example, storing water that is for livestock and animals. When growing shifting cultivation crops, communities have access to a wide range of food products, as such shifting cultivation practices also mean that communities are self-sufficient. It also assures the resilience of the communities, as the interconnected dynamics of this practice as-

sured the quality and quantity of available food and water. When communities become reliant on cash crops and cash incomes, they need to buy food. This is the case in Kyaukkachar village in Eastern Taunggyi, as the village is close to a city, many people buy food instead of maintaining traditional foods and cultivation practices.

This is an important factor to consider as climate change risks to create more extreme weather. When

communities change from shifting cultivation to modern agriculture, there tends to be a decrease in local biodiversity and community resilience. As such, this creates conditions which make these communities more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Indigenous practices would allow communities to survive on their shifting cultivation crops, even if roads are cut off and they cannot access shops. In this sense, shifting cultivation also plays an important role in local food security, nutrition and resilience.



Indigenous community sowing seeds in their field. CREDIT: POINT

## The Link Between Education and the Cash Economy

The shift from Indigenous agricultural practices to monocrop plantations also has links to the formal education system. As families need money to send their children to study beyond primary school age in the formal education system, this leads to communities choosing to plant monocrop cultures in order to access cash incomes. Over time, this has a knock-on effect for culture as well as for biodiversity. Once children go to cities or towns for their schooling, they become out of touch with their Indigenous ways of life. They also become used to the cash economy and ways of life outside their Indigenous culture. Conse-

quently, they often seek jobs outside the agricultural sector and do not continue to learn Indigenous practices. In these circumstances, access to formal education has direct impacts on the climate.

In traditional culture, the connection between mother and daughter was an important part of passing on Indigenous practices. Young women would stay at home with their mothers in order to learn household work, shifting cultivation, seed banking and weaving processes. They also learned which land types suit which crops and they obtained knowledge for gathering and using forest products. In addition, they learned which plants to grow together, in order to avoid the need to use pesticides and when



to harvest forest products, such as bamboo shoots, mushrooms, herbal medicines and vegetables. This knowledge is important in order to prevent soil degradation, to protect the fertility of the soil and to use natural resources sustainably. And all these practices have important benefits for biodiversity and the forest preservation.

In Sagaw Karen culture, women learned to weave Indigenous designs from their mothers, making clothes, bags and blankets, using colours and cottons grown and gathered from their shifting cultivation crops. This practice is rooted in a subsistence way of life, in which access to money was limited and most people could not afford to buy clothes and blankets. During those times, women had the role of producing blankets and clothes for household use. Now communities have access to money, interest and need for this type of knowledge has subsided and so it is no longer possible for women to fulfil their traditional roles in this way.

Despite the practical necessity of these practices decreasing, they are still considered an integral part of Karen culture. For Karen people, clothes patterns have a meaning and without traditional weaving, many people believe their culture would be gone. As only elders know how to weave well, there is a threat of knowledge loss.

Some groups are working to protect and pass on this knowledge in new ways.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the Asho Chin village of Yoma in Magwe, weaving is also one of the income sources for women. Again, women inherit the knowledge about traditional weaving from their mothers and the practice uses natural colours extracted from natural plants from the forest and cottons from shifting cultivation. Wearing Indigenous costume is less common for young people because wearing Indigenous clothes outside village areas can be seen as strange and can result in bullying or discrimination. However, it is being promoted among the youth with the help of Indigenous dancing and singing competitions. In addition, women are now passing down their knowledge to the younger generation, for instance, carrying out weaving trainings or developing new styles and patterns to modernise Indigenous clothes. In this way, local women are working on innovative methods to ensure that Indigenous costumes and the associated biodiversity benefits do not disappear.

As these examples show, practices which have their roots in Indigenous knowledge are passed from wom-

an to woman in villages and households. As many of these practices are passed along matrilineal lines, women often face pressure to uphold these Indigenous cultures. This means women feel increased pressure to conform to Indigenous ways of life and uphold Indigenous practice, even when it may not be in their personal interest.<sup>5</sup> There are instances in which women are blamed by their communities when they make choices which do not uphold culture or where they seek information from outside sources.<sup>6</sup> This can limit women's own self-development and often means that women are obliged to take on traditional roles in the home, attending to household chores, looking after children and not participating in other political or social matters.

Indeed, while women play an important role in Indigenous culture, many Indigenous customs have the effect of marginalising Indigenous women.<sup>7</sup> For example, tradition deters women from taking part in traditional decision-making bodies and leadership roles. They also do not favour female inheritance of productive assets such as land and property.<sup>8</sup>

## Access to Schooling

The relationship between ethnic communities and formal education systems has had an important impact on how Indigenous cultures treat women and also how women from Indigenous families access education. Older generations of women did not have the possibility to go to school, or to attend school past primary age. This was often because women were regarded as belonging to their husband's family. There was a belief that paying for girls to attend higher education was a waste of money. As such, many women did not learn to read and write, which created an obstacle for women to access formal information about topics such as climate change, politics or law.

However, in the present day, most women in ethnic communities are encouraged by their parents to continue their education. This is because of interest in the advantages of education, in particular for the opportunities that education offers young people to gain a higher salary through finding employment outside the agricultural sector. Nowadays, girls' net enrolment is higher than boys, however, girls' net enrolment slightly decreases when they reach higher education.<sup>9</sup>

As there are no secondary schools in most Indigenous areas and poor road infrastructure and trans-

port make it difficult to reach towns, young women often move to nearby cities or towns to continue their education, staying in boarding houses or with relatives. While this enables young women to access formal education, assuring increased literacy and work opportunities, this also has the effect of decreasing their opportunity to learn Indigenous knowledge and skills from their mothers, including skills and knowledge related to forest conservation and environmental protection.

In fact, maintaining biodiversity and Indigenous culture is seen as competing with education and in particular in educating girls.<sup>10</sup> For ethnic groups in Myanmar, formal education can be considered a threat, not only to their culture, but in preserving forest and plant life and in preventing climate change.

One male community leader from a village in Bago region shares his perspective on the changes in the village environment:

*"We have lost around five species in our village. Now I am aware that we have to restore these five species again from our neighbour villages if they have the species. Besides, the species lost we do not have traditional rice wine makers and we import modern alcohol from city. The knowledge about maintaining biodiversity and Indigenous practices have deteriorated as there is less interest in Indigenous knowledge. Instead the young generation go to school and so they do not have a chance to study Indigenous knowledge like seed-keeping process from shifting cultivation. Girls learn her mother's process of seed keeping through helping at shifting cultivation (if she goes to school she misses out on this opportunity). After marriage, she become in charge of keeping seed from shifting cultivation... We have some Indigenous knowledge as we do not let all children go to study. If we have five children, we are satisfied with two educated children. The rest learn to keep our traditional way of living."*

This quote shows the conflicted feelings around formal education in some ethnic communities. It shows that parents may choose to educate some of their children in traditional practices and others through the formal system. This has impacts over generations, as some children move away from Indigenous culture to live in the city. It also shows that parents

feel they have to make a choice between traditional and formal education. It suggests they do not see it possible to learn both, to preserve their Indigenous culture and educate children to read and write.

As women access higher levels of education, this provides them with opportunities to enter different forms of work outside agriculture and to understand more about the wider world. However, for many young women this is coming at the price of losing contact and knowledge of their traditional culture. This highlights an important tension in the way that different knowledge sources can be accessed by young women. It also influences how Indigenous women learn about climate change.

## Other Education Sources

As Myanmar's political culture changes, access to information from outside sources increases. Even though transportation, modern medicine and communication have improved in Indigenous communities, many Indigenous cultures feel further threatened by the impact of outside information on their Indigenous practices and ways of life. This is also the case with greater access to technology, as well as easier access to cities. As with many of these changes, they bring a dilemma between the advantages of having improved access to technology and the impact that this technology has on Indigenous culture.

In the present day, there is also the possibility of accessing information from CSO and government training, through the internet, radio and TV. Indigenous women still do not have the same access to this sort of information as men in their communities. As many Indigenous women are responsible for household tasks and childcare, these responsibilities limit their opportunities to access trainings, where they could have access to wider knowledge and information. Similarly, many rural parts of Myanmar do not consider it is acceptable or safe for a woman to travel alone. Access to mobile phone technology is also uneven and men are more likely to have access to mobile phone technology.<sup>11</sup> As such, women are less likely to be able to access information on the internet and do not have the same opportunities to attend trainings.

These trends were clear in our research interviews in Indigenous areas. In some research interviews, although women stated that they were aware of changes in their local forests, they said they did not know

about climate change. They assumed climatic shifts were local changes and were not aware that they could be related to global trends. Others stated that, although they had heard of climate change, they saw it as something happening far away from their village, which did not concern them.<sup>12</sup> This is also echoed in other research and reporting from Indigenous regions of Myanmar. For example, in rural Karen State, one report states that communities do not refer to climate change by name. Often communities attribute climate-related changes to local actions, such as trees and bamboo being cut down. They do not know the direct causes of climatic shifts or that they connect to global patterns.<sup>13</sup>

As so much information about traditional practice is held by Indigenous women in Myanmar, ensuring that they have the opportunity to learn and take part in global conversations and knowledge about these topics seems self-evident. This would also allow the global community the opportunity to learn from Myanmar Indigenous practice.

Government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) communicating information about climate change and environmental conservation can have an important role to play in the way they provide this knowledge to target groups. CSOs in particular can act as links to support connections between Indigenous and local knowledge. Where women have not had access to formal education, trainings can provide a space where they can make connections between Indigenous conservation practices and wider global thinking about environmental protection.

they continue to have implications today. In addition, the growth of the capitalist model as a means to meet needs; be it access to schooling, food, clothing, medicine and other daily necessities, presents a challenge to Indigenous practices. This is concerning because it poses a threat to the Indigenous culture. It also threatens the loss of important knowledge and practices which preserve biodiversity. These practices also ensure climate change mitigation and that communities are more resilient to climate change.

As a result of the tensions explored in this paper, many Indigenous rural women do not fully understand the concept of climate change and how it is affecting their communities. Indigenous culture contains many historic inherited practices and wisdom, which can support forest conservation and sustainability. The lack of connection between these Indigenous practices in Myanmar and modern understandings of climate change limits Indigenous women's ability to be empowered change agents in this process. Furthermore, access to formal education limits young women's access to Indigenous knowledge and practices. This also presents an obstacle to developing a holistic solution which embraces modern scientific knowledge as well as Indigenous knowledge and culture.

## Conclusions

This paper shows many of the complicated tensions between formal and Indigenous systems. While these are rooted in historic events,

*Nu Ra is a young Kachin woman working as program officer and gender focal person at POINT. Nu Ra has been conducting training and facilitation activities to empower Indigenous communities in decision making at local and national level. Through her continuous support, local women leaders have shared their experiences on various national platforms.*

## Chapter 5 Endnotes

1. In 2015 a peace agreement was signed between the Myanmar Government and 16 armed groups. In 2016 the parties met for the 21st century Panglong peace conference. There has been no disarmament at present and after 25 years of peace, the conflict in the Kachin area of Northern Myanmar restarted in 2011.
2. Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, Zabra Yu Siwa (2019) Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and Burma Link (2014) Burmanisation and Discrimination
3. The research included Focal Group Discussions (FGDs), informal interviews and mapping exercises. FGDs and stakeholder mapping was carried out in field sites during August 2018. Some findings also come from 3 workshops held on: 15-16 March 2018 (first workshop), 11 May 2018 (second workshop), 23-24 November 2018 (final workshop).



4. Our study showed that many communities have sought to seek ways to preserve traditional ways at life through ceremonies and other events.
5. Based on POINT fieldwork in Indigenous communities during 2018 (supra).
6. Ibid.
7. In POINT's field experience, we have observed when women propose an idea during the meeting or discussion, the ideas are not accepted. Most men believe that they are able to act on behalf of women without their input. In POINT's work, we often have to do home visits in order to consult women, or carry out specific women assessment activities, as women do not join meetings or FGDs.
8. NINU (2017). Women as the others: Chin Customary laws & Practices from a Feminist Perspective. This is also discussed further in other papers included in this book.
9. World Bank Education Statistics (Myanmar) <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/education/country/myanmar> and Myanmar National Education Profile (2018) EPDC: <https://www.epdc.org/tags/national-education-profiles>
10. Based on the author's experience. Also see: Zon Pann Pwint, (2010) Kayan no longer ringed by tradition, Myanmar Times, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/lifestyle/4708-kayan-no-longer-ringed-by-tradition.html> and Cameron (2017), Rethinking ethnicity in the classroom. Frontier Myanmar, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/rethinking-ethnicity-in-the-classroom>
11. Around 33 million people in Myanmar now own a mobile phone. See: <https://digitalinasia.com/2017/01/09/myanmar-33-million-mobile-users-smartphone-usage-80>. Yet, women are 28% less likely to have access to digital technology, see: Scott, Balasubramanian and Ehrke (2017) Ending the Gender Digital Divide in Myanmar, A Problem-Driven Political Economy Assessment, Center for Applied Learning and Impact, IREX.
12. From conversations with women as part of POINT field work in Shwe Taung Ngwe Taung village (2018).
13. Saw Blacktown, (2019), Burma's Indigenous Karen Communities Move to Protect Rivers, Forests, Karen News.







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***“Women** have different roles compared to men in their communities, and as such, have different knowledge about forest products and forest management. Traditionally, Indigenous women engage in activities like establishing nurseries for plantations; selecting seedlings and tree species; replanting timber trees; practising controlled burning for assisting regeneration; protecting germinating seedlings and new saplings. As such, they often play roles which prevent forest degradation. There is an important link between the prevention of forest degradation and the prevention of climate change. Not only do forests play a key role in carbon capture but they prevent adverse impacts in cases of extreme weather brought about by changing climates.*

*Women’s role in preservation of local biodiversity means they have knowledge that is important to capture, to pass on to future generations and understand to prevent extinction of certain species. If they are part of the solution – it seems logical that it will be a more effective solution.” - NAW EI EI MIN*

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***“Indigenous Peoples** conserve the forest because they depend upon it for food, water and medicine. The forest also protects them from natural disasters, illness and hardships. Indigenous communities protect the forest in return for protecting them.*

*The umbilical cord forest is a ceremony, which attaches the soul of the newborn baby to the soul of a tree, by placing the umbilical cord into a piece of bamboo and tying it to a tree. This is a Karen indigenous culture. The ritual is for the baby’s spiritual protection and it entwines the life of the baby and tree. It is believed that if the tree is harmed something could happen to that person. Because of these practices, people protect and do not cut down these trees.” - EEH HTAA WHA*

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***“Through our work and personal experiences,** we have witnessed that Indigenous women are important actors, with knowledge of the environment obtained through their daily lives and traditions and their lifelong relationships with forests. They have a very particular knowledge, which is often context specific, and which includes very detailed practices for forest protection. We believe that Indigenous women’s daily activities have the potential to be at the forefront of fighting climate change in Myanmar.” - AGATHA MA AND NILAR TUN*

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