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Jenny Hedström (she/her/hers) & Elisabeth Olivius (she/her/hers)

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The politics of sexual violence in the Kachin conflict in Myanmar

Jenny Hedström (she/her/hers) ^a and Elisabeth Olivius (she/her/hers) ^b

^aDepartment of War Studies, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Political Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden



ABSTRACT

Conflict-related sexual violence has been the focus of significant international activism and policy attention. International legal norms and frameworks have evolved to recognize it as a war crime, and a representation of sexual violence as a “weapon of war” is now widely endorsed. This article examines how international norms about conflict-related sexual violence are adopted and utilized in multiple ways in the armed conflict in Kachin state in northern Myanmar. Throughout decades of civil war, international norms on sexual violence have constituted key resources for international advocacy and awareness raising by local women’s rights activists. Further, activists have drawn on international norms to effect changes in gendered relations of power within their own communities. However, international norms on sexual violence in conflict have also been effectively used as tools for ethnonationalist identity politics, rallying support behind the armed insurgency and mobilizing women’s unpaid labor in the service of war. Thus, international norms on conflict-related sexual violence have simultaneously opened up space for women’s empowerment and political agency *and* reproduced gendered forms of insecurity and marginalization. Exploring these contradictions and complexities, this analysis generates novel insights into the politics of international norms in contexts of armed conflict.

KEYWORDS Conflict-related sexual violence; international norms; norm translation; Myanmar; Kachin

Introduction

Sexual violence in armed conflict has in recent decades been the focus of significant activism and policy attention. International legal norms and frameworks have evolved to recognize sexual violence as a war crime, and its representation as a “weapon of war” is now widely endorsed. However, as international norms on conflict-related sexual violence are adopted and

CONTACT Elisabeth Olivius  elisabeth.olivius@umu.se  Department of Political Science, Umeå University, 90187 Umeå, Sweden

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applied in local conflict settings, their meaning is renegotiated and reshaped. Consequently, they may be made useful for a variety of political projects and agendas. This article examines the political use of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict in Kachin state in northern Myanmar, and analyzes its local effects on gendered relations of power as well as on the dynamics of the armed conflict.

The conflict between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), with its armed wing the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Myanmar state military (the Tatmadaw) first erupted in the early 1960s. A military coup in 1962 was the catalyst for an armed ethno-nationalist Kachin movement, demanding ethnic self-determination and control over natural resources found in Kachin areas (Sadan 2013). The conflict centered on Bamar domination of ethnic minority areas and lack of access to rights, representation, and resources among people living in Kachin state. A ceasefire came into effect in 1994, but the vague agreement did not resolve underlying political issues, instead resulting in what historian Mandy Sadan refers to as an “armed peace” (Sadan 2016). In 2010, Myanmar began transitioning toward a more democratic political system, with national elections held and respected for the first time since the military coup. At this time, there was a resurgence of conflict in Kachin state after the KIO/KIA refused demands to surrender their weapons and transform themselves into dependent military units under the command of Tatmadaw officers. At the time of writing, the conflict shows no signs of abating: over 100,000 people are currently displaced, and the national peace talks with the Kachin army have been postponed (UNOCHA 2018).

During periods of both active conflict and armed peace, local women’s groups have documented the Tatmadaw’s extensive use of sexual violence targeting ethnic Kachin women. The prominent role of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence as tools for advocacy and activism in the Kachin conflict over time makes it a useful case for exploring how international norms are appropriated, interpreted, and applied in specific local contexts, and what the effects are. Advocating against the sexual violence of the Tatmadaw within the framework of international norms on sexual violence has provided women’s rights activists with both a platform and a language to draw international attention to the situation in Kachin state, as well as to promote change within their own communities through local activism. This demonstrates the power of international norms as tools for both local and international activism and potential change. However, this case also illustrates the complexity of the local use of international norms. Far from a straightforward process of norm diffusion or implementation, this is a messy, political process where norms are reshaped and used in a variety of ways – not all of them necessarily consistent with the intentions of international policymakers or the goals of feminist activists who originally

advocated for the recognition of sexual violence in armed conflicts. This research generates insights into the complex local politics of norm translation that have broader relevance in other contexts and in relation to a wider range of international norms.

Our analysis suggests that women's organizations, as well as other Kachin organizations and armed groups, have made use of norms on conflict-related sexual violence in three main ways. First, as noted above, international norms constitute an important platform for international advocacy and awareness raising by Kachin women's rights activists. Second, using the leverage gained through international attention and networking, activists draw on international norms to effect changes in gendered relations of power within their own communities. Third, international norms on conflict-related sexual violence are also effectively used as tools for ethno-nationalist identity politics, rallying support behind the armed insurgency, not least through mobilizing women's unpaid labor in the service of war (Hedström 2020).

Thus, this analysis suggests that international norms on conflict-related sexual violence can be used as tools to liberate as well as dominate. These norms are translated and used as tools for a variety of political projects, some of which may not strengthen women's rights or challenge their subordination, but instead reinforce gendered forms of insecurity, exploitation, and marginalization. Our findings show that while international norms may be effective tools to mobilize women and draw attention to previously neglected issues, it is far more difficult to achieve broader changes in local gendered relations of power. While Kachin women's norm-translation activism is animated and enhanced by the Kachin armed struggle, it is at the same time constrained by this militarized, patriarchal political context. Exploring how these contradictions and complexities play out in the context of the Kachin conflict, this analysis contributes to a better understanding of the local use of international norms, in particular in contexts of armed conflict. Further, in addition to advancing theoretical debates about the relationship between international norms and local women's activism, we provide new insights into the gendered dynamics of the Kachin conflict – a conflict that is ongoing and has a long history, but that rarely makes the news outside of Myanmar.

The article is structured as follows. We first outline the conceptual framework for our analysis, describing our approach to international norms as political tools with multiple potential uses. Thereafter we present the materials and methods that form the basis for the analysis. The analysis then follows, exploring how norms on conflict-related sexual violence are adopted and made useful by various actors and in various ways in the context of the Kachin conflict. In conclusion, we discuss the significance and implications of the findings.

International norms on sexual violence as political tools

The Kachin case demonstrates that when international norms on conflict-related sexual violence are translated into conflict zones, they can become key resources for women's empowerment and activism *and* for ethnonationalist identity politics and mobilization for armed struggles. To make sense of these complexities, we draw on literature on feminist norm translation (Zwingel 2016) as well as critical debates on the political use and commodification of sexual violence in armed conflict (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Meger 2016). We argue that bringing these literatures together facilitates an analysis that captures local women's agency in making use of international norms and sheds light on the ways in which these norms can at the same time be deployed in service of political projects and agendas that reinforce women's exploitation and marginalization.

Concepts and strategies originating in women's movements and feminist theorizing have increasingly become part of processes and institutions of global governance (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013). Research on transnational women's networks shows that feminists have been quite successful in shaping policy agendas and opening new discursive spaces in global forums such as United Nations (UN) conferences (Antrobus 2004; Moghadam 2005). Such networks constitute powerful tools for transnational normative change (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The recognition of conflict-related sexual violence as a war crime is in no small part the result of local women's activism, demonstrating how women's local agency and the evolution of international norms are intertwined (Zwingel 2012). However, as feminist ideas and agendas are institutionalized in global governance mechanisms and processes, they take on a life of their own. The now-mainstream adoption of a narrative representing sexual violence as a weapon of war, deployed to destroy enemy communities through women's bodies, is a prime example of how feminist analysis has merged with mainstream rationalities of governance and created new international norms and forms of knowledge (Prügl 2011; Reeves 2012). In this analysis, we therefore approach international norms not as "things" with an intrinsic meaning or as normative ideals, but as political tools that can be mobilized for a variety of different purposes and agendas. What we find analytically interesting is how these norms are ascribed meaning and made useful in specific local contexts (Olivius 2014, 43).

As emphasized in feminist work on norm translation and transnationalism, norms originating in feminist theorizing and movements can be powerful resources for local women's activism, but constitute instruments whose impact depends on local interpretations and contextualized agency (Kardam 2004; Krook and True 2012; Merry 2006; Zwingel 2012). International women's rights norms are appropriated and made useful for local women's

struggles in a variety of ways, modifying and reshaping their meaning in the process. Global norms codified in international conventions and agreements undergo processes of localization and contextualization in order to have real effects in women's lives. Women's norm-translation activism is making global norms – such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) – relevant and useful as instruments of social transformation in a variety of contexts (Zwingel 2016). This perspective is key to understanding how Kachin women's rights activists have actively worked to translate and make use of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence, and to examining the forms of change they have been able to achieve as a result.¹

However, while the literature on norm translation emphasizes local women's agency and the positive, transformative potential of international norms, it is critical to recognize that the integration of feminist ideas and concepts in global governance “may also have a dark side” (Prügl and Tickner 2018, 80). As norms on sexual violence travel across institutional and geographic contexts, they become politically useful for a variety of agendas – not all of which contribute to women's empowerment or equality. Feminist scholars demonstrate how the growing salience of conflict-related sexual violence as a global security issue risks turning it into a key commodity in gaining access to resources and recognition for a variety of actors in armed conflicts (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Meger 2016). For example, growing attention to sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has led to a concentration of aid resources on medical services for female victims of sexual violence at the expense of other health services and responses to other forms of violence (Autesserre 2014; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). Further, international attention to sexual violence has made it an “effective bargaining tool for combatants” – possibly exacerbating its use in conflict zones (Autesserre 2012, 205). Moreover, as Harriet Gray points out, while the weapon-of-war narrative represents wartime rape as an act of exceptional violence occurring in the public sphere, domestic violence – while also perpetrated during war – is situated as ontologically different (Gray 2018). This “singular focus” on sexual violence as a crime of war therefore risks separating it from, and obscuring, other forms of gender-based violence (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2018, 297; Grey and Shepherd 2013; Meger 2016, 3).

This analysis contributes to a better understanding of the unintended uses and effects of international norms as they play out in local political economies of conflict. In Myanmar, women's ethno-political organization and activism is closely linked to ethno-nationalist armed struggles, and the language of norms is also deployed by armed actors to legitimize, and generate mobilization for, insurgent violence (Hedström 2020). In this case, the reception and

use of norms on conflict-related sexual violence merge with women's rights activism as well as mobilization for armed resistance, illustrating how narratives about sexual violence as a weapon of war become useful not only for women's rights activists but also for military leaders. As we will show, norms on sexual violence in war have emerged as a key resource enabling ethno-nationalist mobilization for the Kachin armed struggle. The visibility of raped women has become a rallying point for support for the armed insurgency, and the representation of this violence as a weapon used to annihilate a minority ethnic community from within merges with ethno-nationalist narratives. In line with the arguments by Meger (2016), the use of norms in narratives on the Kachin conflict suggests that the local reception of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence influences the behavior of conflict actors, and the dynamics of conflict, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Bridging literatures on norm-translation activism and literature on the political use and commodification of conflict-related sexual violence enables us to move beyond simplistic dichotomies of cooptation versus empowerment (Prügl and Tickner 2018), and identify and analyze the ambiguities and tensions that are generated when norms about sexual violence are translated into conflict zones. These analytical perspectives help us to explore how international norms provide opportunities for challenging women's inequality and insecurity *and* constitute key resources for political projects with very different goals and effects.

Methods and material

This article draws on several periods of fieldwork carried out in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand (2015–2017), and in Kachin state, Myanmar (2012–2018), conducted separately by both authors. Three interviews were conducted in Kachin state in 2019 by a local research assistant fluent in Jingphaw and with close connections to the KIO/KIA, using a questionnaire developed by one of the authors to structure the interviews. Some interviews were done as part of a research project with a broader focus on women's movements and activism in relation to armed conflict and peace building in and from Myanmar (Olivius 2019; Olivius and Hedström 2019; Olivius and Hedström 2020). Some interviews formed the basis of one of the authors' doctoral research focusing on gender relations within the Kachin civil war (Hedström 2018). Sexual violence against ethnic minority women in conflict areas, and the impact and importance of advocacy on this issue, stands out as a prominent theme in our interactions with women's organizations and armed actors throughout this disparate fieldwork. In this article, we explore this theme specifically in the context of the Kachin conflict, while recognizing that similar experiences of violence and dynamics of norm translation and

activism can be observed in other ethnic minority areas of Myanmar as well. In total, we draw on about 130 interviews with Kachin women's rights activists, civilians, male leaders of the KIO/KIA, and community-based organizations. As part of our feminist methodology, we seek to be attentive to previous silences and erasures of knowledge by situating minority women's actions, activisms, and narratives as critical sources of knowledge. The majority of these interviews are therefore conducted with women.

For the analysis in this article, we pay particular attention to interviews with Kachin women's rights activists in both Kachin state and in Thailand, with a focus on the Kachin Women's Association (KWA) and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT). Both organizations work throughout Kachin state, but only the KWA is integrated into the Kachin armed structure as a formal women's wing, with a head office in Laiza, the "capital" of "liberated" Kachin state. This means that they have obligations to the KIO's Central Committee and regularly contribute to administrative and operational matters, such as through their seat at the coordination meeting for internally displaced persons. The KWAT was established independently of the armed group and is headquartered in Thailand, and does not sit in on any coordination meetings. Yet significant cross-organizational relationships exist, with members moving between the two women's organizations, and even between the armed group and the women's organizations (Hedström 2016).

The majority of the interviews were conducted in English, and three were conducted in Jingphaw. The interviews in Jingphaw were transcribed and translated into English by a Jingphaw translator with extensive knowledge about issues related to gender, women's rights, and international norms on sexual violence. This knowledge was critical for ensuring that the translations were attentive to the relationship between Kachin gender relations, power, and rights. As interviews emerging from within politically sensitive contexts (Fujii 2010) carry with them particular limitations related to the political position of the people interviewed, we do not interpret the narratives shared with us as facts, but look for ambiguities and contradictions in how our respondents' make use and sense of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence.

Before each interview, research participants were informed of the focus and aims of the research, the voluntary basis of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and their opportunity to access the results of the research if they would like to. Interviews ranged from 30 min to two hours in length. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the names of the research participants have been kept anonymous. Broadly defined, the interviews focused on the roles and objectives of women's rights activism, and the relationship between women's groups and other actors and stakeholders, including armed groups. While activism and advocacy around conflict-related sexual violence was not the exclusive focus of,

or point of entry in, these interviews, the topic was consistently raised as an important aspect of the work of Kachin women's rights activists and other stakeholders.

In addition to conducting formal interviews, one of the authors (Hedström) has worked as a teacher for Kachin women's groups. This prior knowledge of, and relationships with, the Kachin context and Kachin actors facilitated access to the research site as well as identification and analysis of nuances and contradictions not immediately or easily visible to someone unfamiliar with the context. In fact, this positionality constituted the very source from which the research design and the questions of this study emerged (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Observing how the Kachin call for an armed revolution seemed to facilitate women's claim for political rights – and simultaneously constrain their political agency – prompted us to explore this paradox further (see Scott 1997). Analysis of reports on conflict-related sexual violence produced by the UN and by Kachin women's rights organizations between 1994 and 2017 complemented the interviews.

These materials allow for a close examination of the multiple ways in which norms on conflict-related sexual violence have been utilized as political tools in the Kachin conflict. Drawing on the conceptual framework outlined above, our analysis focused on identifying how sexual violence is represented and referred to by women's organizations and other actors, tracing how they connect it to and attempt to make it useful for wider political goals and agendas in the context of the Kachin conflict.

Conflict-related sexual violence as a political tool in the Kachin conflict

The international salience of norms and narratives on conflict-related sexual violence, combined with its prevalence on the ground, has made such violence a key focus in the work of the two Kachin women's organizations included in this article. However, sexual violence is also a prominent topic and a useful political tool for actors other than women's groups. Below, we demonstrate how norms on sexual violence are employed as political tools in three main ways: to capture the attention of the international community, to push for change in gendered relations of power within Kachin communities, and to rally support for continued ethno-nationalist armed insurgency.

Capturing the attention of the international community

International norms on human rights took on prominence as a means for advocacy and awareness raising in Myanmar after the student uprising in 1988. Fleeing the crackdown and intense violence that followed the demonstrations, activists now in exile began to draw on international human rights

frameworks to highlight abuses in the country, giving rise to a transnational movement (Buzzi 2016; Chua and Gilbert 2015). From engaging in advocacy to establishing organizations dedicated to monitoring abuses, the movement successfully attracted international attention to events in Myanmar. In 1991, the UN expressed “its concern at the grave human rights situation” reported, and urged the government to improve the human rights conditions (UN General Assembly 1991). The same year, the movement’s *de facto* leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The following year, the UN installed a special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, mandated to monitor and report on the situation (Buzzi 2016). In the late 1990s, international sanctions were imposed on Myanmar due to, among other things, the country’s poor human rights record (Ewing-Chow 2007).

Within this international human rights framework, a focus on human rights abuses committed against women living in conflict areas or women active in the struggle for democracy soon gained prominence. Myanmar women’s groups began attending human rights conferences, exposing themselves to international discussions about women’s equality, including the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

In 1998, the Rome Statute became the first international legal instrument to explicitly define sexual violence as a crime against humanity. Following this, the focus on sexual violence in the international WPS agenda became a powerful resource for Myanmar women defending human rights, with women’s groups in and from Myanmar increasingly focusing their activism on sexual violence committed against ethnic minority women by members of the Tatmadaw. As noted by Anne-Kathrin Kreft (2018), skyrocketing international engagement around conflict-related sexual violence provides both critical resources *and* receptive audiences for local women’s political mobilization during armed conflict. In this way, a narrative about rape against ethnic minority women being used by the Myanmar state as a “weapon” or “tool” of military warfare gained momentum, capturing the attention of the international community (Horton 2005, 377, 382, 398; SHRF/SWAN 2002, 7; Women’s League of Burma 2014, 1).

Drawing on this framework, Kachin women’s rights activists began publishing reports representing sexual and gender-based violence and insecurities experienced by Kachin women and girls as violations taking place within the context of “armed peace” in northern Myanmar (Sadan 2016). Between 2005 and 2008, the KWAT released two reports, detailing 133 cases of women and girls being trafficked to China for sexual exploitation or surrogacy (KWAT 2005, 2008). The reports posit that trafficking “cannot be addressed without challenging the state policies of militarization” (KWAT 2005, 7). Upon the resumption of the Kachin conflict in 2011, members of the KWAT began documenting cases of rape and other forms of sexual harm perpetrated against minority women and girls, again explicitly drawing on the

international WPS agenda. As a result of the work undertaken by Kachin women's rights defenders in Myanmar, awareness of both the conflict and sexual violence perpetrated by the Myanmar military within the context of the conflict has increased. As an illustration, all seven reports on conflict-related sexual violence released by the UN include specific references to the Kachin experience (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict n.d.). International norms on sexual violence in conflict have in this way constituted an important platform for international advocacy and awareness raising for Kachin women's rights activists. Additionally, Kachin women's successful international advocacy has boosted their status in relation to Kachin armed groups and male elites. Kachin women have leveraged the attention and resources generated through international advocacy on conflict-related sexual violence to push for change in gendered relations within their own communities. We turn to this below.

Pushing for change within Kachin communities

In Kachin "liberated areas," the overarching governance system structuring everyday life is administrated by the KIO, the political wing of the Kachin armed struggle (Hedström 2018; Sadan 2013). This means that the local setting in which Kachin women's rights activists are translating and making use of international norms is a highly militarized, male-dominated context of rebel governance (also see Mampilly 2012). This includes systems for justice and dispute resolution that have developed at the nexus of Kachin customary law, colonial penal law, and international norms. While these particularities present significant obstacles to women's rights, activists nonetheless work with and through customary and military institutions and governance mechanisms, seeking to gradually reshape them from within. This suggests that women can and do seek to utilize militarized structures, despite their drawbacks, as platforms for feminist mobilization and change (Olivius and Hedström 2019).

Notably, in efforts to effect change within this context, Kachin women's rights activists draw on the status and recognition they have achieved through their successful international advocacy on conflict-related sexual violence. This has helped strengthen their status within the Kachin armed struggle, suggesting that the "securitized discourse of wartime sexual violence" (Meger 2016) has imbued them with authority, making them, if not accepted, then at least useful to local military elites. A 2018 interview with the head of the Kachin army's political wing illustrates this:

From my assessment, women can do more work than men who are not members of the KIO/KIA because they are doing relationship building and

getting out to the international community, sharing about our struggle, telling people, exposing what we've been going through. It's really the women highlighting our circumstances and the struggle we go through – not only the armed struggle, but also the future planning of the Kachin people as a whole. Women play such a significant, even more important role than the men, despite the gender imbalance in the KIA/KIO.²

In short, as this quote suggests, women's rights activists are recognized by their communities as important spokespersons because of the attention and international support they have garnered through their advocacy, in which sexual violence in armed conflict is a key issue. This has enabled them to draw on the authority of international norms to also contest gender discrimination and inequality within their own communities. In this way, Kachin women's rights activists have taken on critical roles as spokespersons and as mediators both between the international and the local community, and between the military and the civilian community.

While competing conceptions of and institutions for justice and authority coexist in governing people's lives (Engel and Engel 2010; McConnachie 2014), in Kachin state it is precisely this nexus that both provides women's groups with an entry point for advocating for greater gender equality and constrains their work. Attempting to effect change within their communities requires women to contextualize the use of norms in the military setting in which they operate. Thus, women's rights activists use military and customary justice mechanisms as points of entry for challenging and reinterpreting prevailing understandings of women's rights. As Kachin women's rights activists apply international norms on conflict-related sexual violence to effect change within their own communities, these norms have to be interpreted by and through local institutional settings and power brokers. For example, when seeking to change the norms operating in KIO courts, power differentials between the military and the women's groups make it difficult to advocate for women's rights. Successful outcomes are not guaranteed:

Women's groups can participate in the court ... but justice depends on the judge and the members of the court, how much they are aware [about women's rights] and how much they care about women's rights issues, like a rape or domestic violence. If the women's groups can push them, then the judge is fair and we get justice.³

The expectation that women's rights advocates have to constantly push judges and military leaders to make them open to and aware of women's rights demonstrates the obstacles that these militarized institutions pose for women.

In interviews with us, women's rights activists are conscious of these limitations, and frequently refer to the constraints imposed on them by armed conflict and a militarized, male-dominated society. Some of the obstacles

women's groups face in applying international norms to their own situation are neatly captured in this quote from a high-ranking KWA member working in Laiza, the capital of "liberated" areas:

There is still a lot to be done to fully understand those international documents and relate them to our situation. People tend to say that we are still at war and that international documents like CEDAW are not applicable to our situation because we are still unable to reach to that standard yet.⁴

Thus, according to male leaders, the Kachin are "still at war," and women's rights do not yet apply. The documents are "international," and therefore not locally applicable. Yet this also demonstrates how local women's rights groups do work with and through these local settings, rather than opposing them as such. Importantly, small changes in the governance structures of the KIO are seen as interlinked with broader global normative changes, and as resulting from the local application of international norms. To dismiss these systems out of hand as fixed, discriminatory sites would then be wrong. As one woman commented in relation to customary justice systems, seeking to change rather than replace them is a pragmatic and strategic choice, simply because "this is what people are using."⁵

Here, international women's rights norms are made useful through their incorporation into a local normative setting, which, for better or for worse, is primarily governed by military objectives. Seeking to apply international norms in their context, women's rights activists utilize a multitude of strategies and avenues to engender change. They train women to serve in the KIO court by sending them to local military-organized law schools and to actively participate in military hearings. They undertake training to raise awareness of women's rights with both members of dispute settlement mechanisms and leaders of the army. They urge women across the communities to come to them first if they experience gender-based violations, so that they can make sure that women know their rights. They advocate for gender-equal representation across decision-making levels in the KIO/KIA and for the formulation of gender-responsive legislation in "liberated" areas.

The incremental changes that have been achieved, despite the constraints, demonstrate that militarized governance structures and hybridized, customary justice systems are in fact malleable for recognizing women's rights, even if this recognition is limited. However, operating within the constraints of ethno-nationalist, male-dominated militarized structures has also pushed women's rights activists toward a "cherry-picking" approach to international norms. For example, while Kachin activists openly oppose sexual violence by Tatmadaw troops, placing these violations within the weapon-of-war narrative, similar violations by KIA soldiers are treated as more "sensitive" issues, and may be raised only in closed meetings with KIO/KIA leaders (Hedström 2018). This reflects how the weapon-of-war narrative draws focus toward

rape as perpetrated by “enemy men,” thereby disconnecting it from other forms of gender-based violence as well as from broader experiences of gendered inequality (Davies and True 2015; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2018; Gray 2018; True 2010).

As Zwingel (2012) reminds us, norms on women’s rights evolve at the nexus between local and international use, and hence attention to the local context is crucial for understanding how and why international mechanisms work. In Kachin state, the authority and recognition that women’s rights activists have gained through successfully exploiting the international salience of conflict-related sexual violence in their international advocacy has given them a platform for engaging with and reshaping local Kachin governance structures from within. Seeking to increase recognition of women’s rights as well as to create space for women’s participation and leadership, these efforts have, despite significant constraints, also generated changes. This testifies to how international norms can be translated into powerful tools for local change. However, ongoing armed conflict and militarized structures have also constrained how these norms can be applied by women’s rights activists. In addition, this context has allowed international norms on conflict-related sexual violence to be appropriated and employed for purposes of military mobilization and legitimation of violence. This is further analyzed in the next section.

Rallying support for ethno-nationalist armed struggle

In the context of the Kachin conflict, the political salience and utility of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence has been exploited by a broader range of actors than women’s organizations alone. Sexual violence against ethnic minority women has achieved attention and visibility not only out of a concern for women’s security and rights, but also because of its political utility for ethno-nationalist military projects. International norms on sexual violence, in particular in the form of the ubiquitous narrative of rape as a weapon of war, have contributed to building popular support for the Kachin armed uprising. Drawing on this narrative has allowed Kachin armed actors to represent their insurgency as a righteous struggle against oppression and abuse of the Kachin community in general, and of Kachin women in particular. This is vividly illustrated by the case of the “two Kachin teacher killings,” as the murder and rape of two women in January 2015 is widely referred to. The women, Maran Lu Ra and Nan Tsin, were missionaries volunteering as teachers for the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) when they were attacked. Although no one has been found guilty of the crime, it is widely believed soldiers serving in a Tatmadaw battalion, temporarily based in the village where the crime took place, were the perpetrators. The murder and rape of these women has been represented as symptomatic

of how ethnic Bamar people treat the Kachin community, leading to widespread outrage. Close to 10,000 people attended the women's funeral, many clad in the green-and-red colors of the Kachin revolution.

A year later, in 2016, the KWAT and a local human rights organization published a report investigating the murders (Legal Aid Network and Kachin Women's Association Thailand 2016). The report was launched in five cities simultaneously on the anniversary of the murders. The major part of the report is devoted to the teacher killings, but it also includes details of the rape and murder of two other Kachin women, creating a narrative of a pattern of abuses, where sexual violence perpetrated against ethnic minority women can only be understood by relating it to the conflict. The report posits these incidences of sexual violence and murder as exceptional events and, above all, acts of war. The report explicitly draws on international law to condemn the Burmese government for failing both to protect its citizens from abuses such as rape and murder, and to situate these crimes as acts of war (Legal Aid Network and Kachin Women's Association Thailand 2016, 45).

On the 2016, 2017, and 2018 anniversaries of Maran Lu Ra and Nan Tsin's deaths, gatherings were held all over the country. Protesting the rapes became synonymous with protesting the Tatmadaw's aggression, and enabled a representation of the Kachin armed struggle as a righteous campaign to protect the Kachin people, and Kachin women in particular, from the violence of the enemy. As succinctly argued by Srila Roy, "the gendered politics of resistant violence points to the manner in which women are also foregrounded, made visible, and useful in the legitimation of violence" (Roy 2009, 146). In this case, repeated commemoration of the rape and murder of the two women has arguably contributed to an affective environment legitimizing the Kachin armed struggle.

Thus, in a very tangible way, the attack on these women's bodies is read as an attack on the Kachin nation. This reflects gendered dynamics through which women are situated as the (symbolic and literal) reproducers of the nation, and women's bodies and behaviors come to symbolize ethnic or national identity and its boundaries (Banerjee 2006; Narayan 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997, 2009). These dynamics are especially salient in contexts of militarized nationalism, such as Kachin state. As demonstrated by feminist scholarship, these constructions contribute to giving sexual violence its meaning as a weapon of war, used to symbolically and literally destroy the enemy group (Korac 1998; Sjoberg 2014). However, the construction of women as symbols and reproducers of the nation *also* creates an uncanny affinity between international narratives of sexual violence as a weapon of war and ethno-nationalist and patriarchal military projects. Rather than challenging ethno-nationalist imaginaries, the weapon-of-war narrative feeds into ethno-nationalist legitimations of the Kachin armed struggle and provides

key discursive resources for demonizing the enemy. These notions are exemplified in a quote by a retired Kachin military leader:

This is the Burmese way: every Kachin is their enemy, even the children, because when they grow up they will become KIA. So they kill everyone. And the women, they kill the women because women give birth to the younger generation because they come from women's wombs.⁶

For this military man, an attack on women is perceived as an attack on the nation and its future existence. The importance ascribed to women's bodies and labor in (re)producing the Kachin nation, and the Kachin armed group, through the birth of new citizens and soldiers risks conflating the violence endured by the individual woman with the threats faced by the wider community. The construction of woman-as-nation (Yuval-Davis 1997) makes sexual violence against Kachin women politically useful and morally enraging at a symbolic level, but obscures the extensive harm done to individual women.

This is illustrated by the fact that sexual violence is seen as targeting the very reproduction and continued existence of the nation – but only when this violence is perpetrated by enemy soldiers. As the case of Maran Lu Ra and Nan Tsin demonstrates, this violence elicits a performance of collective grieving in which the public mobilizes to protest sexual violence as an expression and symbol of the aggression of the enemy. Reports and advocacy by women's organizations support a construction of the "raped woman as a metonym of state terror" (Roy 2012, 170) that can be invoked in the construction and reconstruction of the ethnic imagined community, and in framings of its military campaigns as acts of rightful self-defense against state repression. In this context, ending sexual violence against Kachin women is represented as intimately linked to the political and military objectives of Kachin self-determination and the withdrawal of Tatmadaw armed forces. This dynamic is enhanced by the increased international salience of conflict-related sexual violence.

By contrast, incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by KIA soldiers against Kachin women are rarely publicly denounced. Reflecting this, the vast majority (86 percent) of the reported incidents in reports released by the KWAT were perpetrated by members of the Tatmadaw. None were perpetrated by members of the KIO/KIA (Hedström 2018, 169). Of course, the absence of data does not mean that no offenses have been committed by the KIA/KIO. While these offenses are less frequent than the violence perpetrated by Tatmadaw soldiers, research undertaken by one of the authors has uncovered incidents of gender-based abuses perpetrated by members of the Kachin armed forces (Hedström 2018). Consequently, the absence of data instead suggests an erasure of sexual violence perpetrated by Kachin soldiers. Thus, a narrative of rape as perpetrated by "enemy men," while lauded by feminist scholars for politicizing and elevating gender-based violence to "high politics" (Kirby 2012, 798), simultaneously

constructs it as exceptional and obscures its connection to broader experiences of gendered inequality and oppression (Davies and True 2017; True 2010). Linking sexual violence to a dehumanizing and demonizing representation of the military enemy constructs it as exceptional and as always perpetrated by the “other,” an enemy external to the ethnic community. This not only contributes to legitimizing and sustaining armed struggle, but also risks masking other forms of violence to which Kachin women are subjected, such as domestic violence and rape committed by men living in their communities. Individual women’s suffering of domestic violence or more “private” forms of violence are abstracted from these very public performances of grief and protest.

Further, the appropriation of international norms about sexual violence to legitimize and sustain armed struggle also sustains gendered forms of insecurity and exploitation. The Kachin military project relies heavily on women’s unpaid and underpaid reproductive labor to finance militarization and sustain soldiers as well as their families, as this quote from a group interview with Kachin women’s rights activists illustrates:

Everything has to be done by women. They have to look after the children, they organize [prayer] groups for the soldiers at the frontline, and they fast. They have to make the uniforms and also in some areas do the cooking for the frontlines. Women also mostly work in the IDP [internally displaced person] camps and do all the social work. Women provide the love and the care and the passion and the moral support for men. This is the responsibility of women and very important right now.⁷

These overwhelming responsibilities shouldered by women lead to depletion and exhaustion, as the resources available to women for fulfilling these tasks in a context of war and displacement are far from sufficient (Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014). Nevertheless, these notions of gendered reproductive responsibility are reinforced and legitimated when a narrative of sexual violence as a weapon of war heightens the urgency of and support for armed insurgency. As a result, the political utility of the weapon-of-war narrative for military objectives simultaneously provides a platform for Kachin women’s agency and makes it difficult to link attention to these gendered violations to a broader analysis of gendered inequality in Kachin state. As norm-translation activism is undertaken within the constraints of military objectives, women’s everyday experiences of violence, inequality, and depletion within families and communities are obscured. This highlights the tension between how, in the Kachin conflict, these norms are used as tools to liberate and at the same time to dominate.

Conclusion: international norms as tools to liberate and to dominate

For Kachin women’s rights activist groups as well as armed actors, international human rights frameworks and international networks have

constituted key resources for opposing the oppression and violence of the Myanmar state and its armed forces, the Tatmadaw, for decades. International norms condemning and criminalizing conflict-related sexual violence as a weapon of war have been particularly effective as an advocacy tool. The prominent role of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence in advocacy and activism in the Kachin conflict makes this a useful case for exploring how international norms are appropriated, interpreted, and applied in specific local contexts, and what the effects are.

Our analysis has demonstrated that in the Kachin conflict, women's organizations, as well as other Kachin organizations and armed groups, have used norms on conflict-related sexual violence in three critical ways. First, international norms have constituted an important platform for international advocacy and awareness raising by Kachin women's rights activists. Second, using the leverage gained through international attention and networking, women's rights activists have drawn on the authority of international norms to challenge gender inequality within their own communities. Third, international norms on conflict-related sexual violence have also been used effectively as tools for ethno-nationalist identity politics, rallying support behind the armed insurgency.

This reveals a key tension: international norms on conflict-related sexual violence have simultaneously opened up space for women's empowerment and political agency *and* reproduced gendered forms of insecurity and marginalization. Women's norm-translation activism has made them useful to the Kachin struggle and generated respect and recognition, giving women's rights activists a platform and a voice in shaping local governance structures. At the same time, as women's vulnerability to the sexual violence of the enemy is exploited to legitimize the Kachin insurgency, a gendered division of labor – where women's unpaid reproductive labor and support in the service of war – is entrenched, contributing to insecurity, exploitation, and depletion for women. In addition, by decoupling sexual violence committed by the Tatmadaw from a broader political discussion of women's rights within both Kachin communities and the Myanmar state, everyday forms of violence against women within Kachin communities are obscured and made more difficult for women's rights activists to oppose publicly.

While some of these contradictory dynamics and effects are linked to ongoing armed conflict and a highly militarized, male-dominated context of rebel governance, our analysis provides key insights into the complex local politics of norm translation that have broader relevance in other contexts and in relation to a wider range of international norms. In particular, our findings reveal that there is a gap between the potential of international norms to draw attention to previously neglected issues, generate international attention and support, and give a voice and a platform to people who were previously marginalized or silenced, and their potential

to contribute to broader changes in local relations of power. In this case, militarized, patriarchal structures have made it challenging for women's rights activists to build broader gender equality beyond a singular focus on sexual violence, although the political utility of sexual violence for military projects has given activists a significant position of authority in their communities. In further research on the politics of norm translation, it is essential to explore how this gap is manifested in other contexts and in relation to other norms, and to explore how local activists seek to move from attention and agenda setting to broader social and political change in various local contexts.

Notes

1. Our usage of the term "conflict-related sexual violence," rather than "sexual and gender-based violence," reflects the dominant focus in Kachin women's activism as well as in international discourses on sexual violence, particularly as it is understood through the weapon-of-war narrative. However, we do not exclude other gender-based violations in armed conflict, and examples of how women have made use of international norms to draw attention to violations experienced in the Kachin conflict also include trafficking of women, for example.
2. Interview with armed actor, Kachin state, January 17, 2018.
3. Interview with women's rights activist, Kachin state, October 22, 2012.
4. Interview with women's rights activist, Kachin state, January 12, 2019.
5. Women's rights activist, quoted in UN Women and Justice Base (2016, 44).
6. Retired Kachin military leader, quoted in Hedström (2018).
7. Kachin students, quoted in Hedström (2018).

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Notes on contributors

Jenny Hedström is an Assistant Professor in War Studies at the Swedish Defence University, Sweden, and holds a PhD in International Relations from the Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre, Australia. Her research concerns the relationship between households, gender, and warfare; gender, transitions, and peacebuilding; and women's activism and resistance, with a focus on non-state armed conflict in Myanmar. She has also published on methods in feminist research on conflict and peace. She holds two research grants from the Swedish Research Council. One project explores the politics and effects of gender expertise in peacebuilding in

Myanmar. The other examines the role of women's social reproductive labor in relation to civil war.

Elisabeth Olivius is an Associate Professor in Political Science at Umeå University, Sweden. She has published in international journals on topics such as the gender politics of humanitarian aid; men and masculinities in refugee governance; political space, activism, and resistance in settings such as refugee camps and forced displacement; women's diasporic activism and leadership; and the gendered dynamics of post-war development and peacebuilding efforts. Presently, she leads two research projects. The first examines the role of diasporic Burmese women's organizations in shaping peacebuilding and social change in their home country. The second explores the politics and effects of international gender experts and gender expertise in peacebuilding in Myanmar. In addition, she coordinates the Varieties of Peace research network, and is co-editor of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics'* Book Reviews section.

ORCID

Jenny Hedström  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9535-3276>
 Elisabeth Olivius  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2400-9144>

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