

The Karen Women's Organisation's approach to Karen Literacy

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Karen identity

The Karen are a minority ethnic group who throughout history have been oppressed in Burma. There are now more than 100,000 Karen refugees living in 7 refugee camps along the Thai- Burma border. In addition to the Karen refugees in Thailand, thousands more Karen have been internally displaced within Burma. Lacking even the relative security of the camps, internally displaced people are under constant threat of attack. Communities move often, and schools, as well as the rest of community life, are extremely vulnerable and unstable.

Because of the persecution experienced by ethnic minorities, many Karen parents who raise their children in cities and towns throughout Burma are afraid to teach their children the Karen language. They call their children by Burmese names and are not able to pass on Karen traditions for fear their children will be targeted in school. As anyone of Karen descent is easily labelled a "rebel insurgent", many Karen in cities fear a perceived alliance with the refugee camps in Thailand. For this reason, and because government schools do not allow Karen to be taught, the Karen living in Karen state and the refugee camps in Thailand are adamant that Karen is the official language of instruction in schools and meetings

Women's initiative

The KWO was formed in 1949 with the aim of supporting and organizing Karen women to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality in Burma, in order to be free from all forms of oppression. Illiteracy interferes with women's participation in the community, and when the KWO realized that many illiterate women do want to learn, but they didn't get a chance as young students because of the history of war, displacement and poverty in the Karen community, the KWO decided to prioritize literacy in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. In most Karen homes or meeting spaces, there are bamboo mats placed in the centre of the room when people sit together and discussions take place. Often during meetings in the camp, many women, particularly women with little or no education, sit and remain close to the door, far away from the mat and the meeting space. When the KWO asked women why they sit at the door and not on the mat, several illiterate women said that they didn't think they deserved the important place on the mat. In their minds, only people with education had the right to occupy the mat, which would indicate their position as people eligible to offer opinions, suggestions and comments.

Everyone's language counts

The KWO conducted a needs assessment in four of the camps to evaluate literacy among women. The KWO was concerned about the high rates of illiteracy found in adults (women and girls over 13), which was as high as 32% in one of the camps. Between 20% and 50% of the non-literate women surveyed in each camp expressed a keen interest in gaining literacy skills. Most women who expressed an interest in learning to read and write speak S'kaw Karen as their first language, and thus it was decided to start the literacy classes in S'kaw Karen. Because significant numbers of women listed either P'wo Karen or Burmese as their first language, the KWO plans to expand the literacy classes to include these languages as well in the near future.

S'kaw Karen is the most widely spoken language in the Karen refugee camps on the border, and it is the language of instruction in the schools and most camp meetings. Most Karen publications are written in S'kaw Karen, including several newspapers and magazines distributed in the camps, and health education materials posted around the communities and clinics.

Organising literacy

The KWO started the literacy project by coordinating a Training of Trainers (TOT), facilitated by an international education NGO working in the refugee camps, on literacy education. The TOT is a common approach on the border, capitalizing on and strengthening local expertise, as communities are very isolated and travel is extremely difficult. The TOT brought together two women representatives from each camp who were trained on how to teach others about teaching literacy. They returned to their camps and in turn, led trainings for the literacy teachers in each location. Following these trainings, which focused on participatory methodology, theories of adult education, effective use of teaching aids and student-centred teaching methods, each of the 16 new literacy teachers, all of whom are women, were given a teaching guide that had been translated and adapted for Karen culture, a book of teaching games (also translated), Karen alphabet posters, pictures to use to prompt discussions and simple reading books.

Initially, 502 women students in total took part in the classes in the four camps. Class sizes averaged twenty students, and each student was given 2 notebooks and 2 pens. Class venues were arranged by the participants, and included the women's office in some camps and private homes in others. Class participants also chose what time of day the classes met, as women in each camp have different schedules and responsibilities, dependent on the terrain and security around the camp. The pilot project was planned for 3 months, beginning in May 2001, but it was extended for another 3 months by popular demand. At the end of the course, KWO organised an informal writing competition among participants. All the TOT trainers are also publishing their own Karen language teaching guide, appropriate to women in the camps. They are using their experiences as trainers from the past year to write up teaching suggestions and activities. There were several unexpected results from the literacy project. The participants expressed from very early on that they would like to continue the learning process beyond basic literacy. In addition KWO learned that the literacy classes motivated men within the community to pursue literacy. The KWO has responded to these outcomes by continuing and expanding the literacy programs to reach participants in all the camps.

Learning the lessons

In order to continually improve the project, KWO will try to address some of the concerns that arose during the first classes. Additional training for the existing literacy teachers will help teachers feel more confident in their new teaching styles and roles. There was some resistance to new teaching methods, as the Burmese system of rote learning is engrained, and some of the adult students felt the games and activities were not "learning" and wanted to memorize lessons. KWO wants to emphasize participatory styled learning to promote the ideas of working as a team and learning from one another as benefits of literacy education. Additional training will also serve to encourage and motivate the teachers to continue teaching the literacy classes by developing their own teaching skills. The KWO plans to visit each of the programs in the coming year to offer more training and encouragement in the value of the

interactive, participatory methods. KWO has a dream of a “one-to-one” literacy program in all of the camps. That is, each high school student would be paired with an adult wanting to become literate, and they would work together throughout a year. Once literacy is achieved, both of these people would work with other non-literate people until everyone in the camps are literate. With visions of one day returning to a free Karen state, the model would be replicated until all Karen people can read and write their own language.

Adapted from ASPBAE Case Study on the Karen Women Organisation’s approach to Karen Literacy by Ginger Norwood