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To cite this article: Linnéa Blomqvist, Elisabeth Olivius & Jenny Hedström (2021) Care and silence in women's everyday peacebuilding in Myanmar, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21:3, 223-244, DOI: [10.1080/14678802.2021.1933031](https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1933031)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1933031>



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Published online: 02 Jun 2021.



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Care and silence in women's everyday peacebuilding in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on feminist perspectives on the everyday to explore women's everyday experiences of peace in Kayah state in Myanmar. We locate the daily practices women engage in to maintain life and minimise violence, making visible women's contributions to everyday peace. In addition, we examine the ways in which women are disproportionately affected by war and prevented from benefitting from post-war changes. Our findings demonstrate that practices of care and silence are key avenues for women's everyday peacebuilding, through which women sustain peace, ensure survival, and minimise violence in their families and wider communities. At the same time, however, these practices are conditioned by and may contribute to gendered insecurity and marginalisation for women. Through this focus, our analysis shows how women's positioning in gendered relations of power may both enable their agency in peacebuilding and reinforce their gendered inequality and marginalisation in the post-war period. We conclude that while everyday peace practices may hold the potential for positive change, these can also contribute to the reproduction of inequality, oppression and structural violence.

KEYWORDS

Everyday peace; women; gendered peace gaps; peacebuilding; care; silence; Myanmar

Introduction

The 'local turn' in peace studies, and the more recent interest in 'everyday peace', has paved the way for an increased focus on exploring how peace and peacebuilding is manifested and practiced through mundane interactions in local, conflict-affected settings.¹ While the local turn for long remained preoccupied with contrasting 'the local' with international peacebuilding practices and criticising the liberal peace project, more recent literature on everyday peace have sought to redirect analytical attention away from international institutions, policies, and programmes. Instead, people's everyday experiences, practices and strategies are placed at the centre of efforts to understand how peace is manifested and sustained.²

However, this relatively recent interest in the everyday in critical peace studies has tended to neglect that the everyday is a space permeated by gendered relations of power, where people's everyday practices and experiences are shaped by gendered norms and hierarchies. In addition, feminist scholars have noted how the everyday peace literature

have largely ignored a much longer feminist research tradition that takes an interest in everyday experiences of war and peace, and theorises the everyday as a site of violence and oppression as well as resistance, love and care.³ Thus, to understand everyday peace, it is essential to understand how experiences and practices of peace are conditioned by the ways in which gender structures everyday life, and to learn from the narratives of those whose perspectives are less frequently reflected in gender-blind accounts of the local or in top-down accounts of peacebuilding.⁴

Against this backdrop, this article explores women's everyday experiences of peace in Kayah state in Myanmar. Kayah state is a rural, ethnic minority-dominated region of the country bordering Thailand. It has been affected by armed conflict of varying intensity since the end of the 1940s, until a number of ceasefires and the initiation of a political transition in Myanmar brought relative stability in the first decade of the new millennium. However, while there has been little outright fighting for the past 15 years, widespread poverty and the presence of a number of armed actors in the state makes the post-war order precarious and fragile.⁵ The military coup on 1 February 2021 has heightened insecurities about the future, compounding people's fear of a return to war.⁶ In our analysis, we draw on feminist perspectives on the everyday to explore women's experiences of peace in Kayah state through two analytical themes. First, we locate women's everyday peacebuilding – which we define as the practices women engage in to sustain peace and minimise violence. This theme captures women's agency and resilience in navigating ongoing war as well as a precarious post-war context. Second, we identify gendered peace gaps – understood as the ways in which women are less able to benefit from peace due to the broader dynamics of gendered power informing women's everyday lives.⁷

Our findings demonstrate that practices and patterns of care and silence feature prominently in women's experiences of everyday peace both during and after the war. Our data shows that women's extensive care practices are crucial to sustain families and communities, during periods of active conflict as well as in the current post-war context. However, women's care practices are not only central to the survival of individuals, but have functioned as a form of conflict management, minimising violence and building trust between communities and in relation to conflict actors such as state and non-state armed groups. But while women's care practices help individuals, families and communities cope and facilitate non-violent functioning social relations, this labour comes at a high cost for women as it may restrict their mobility, prevent them from taking advantage of post-war job opportunities, and limit their political participation and influence.

Further, women's everyday care practices as means to sustain life and build everyday peace often co-exist with practices of silence. Women's silence should not necessarily be read as an absence of choice, but as an active and strategic response to insecure circumstances. Through silence, women enable functioning social relationships, protect themselves and others, and ensure survival. However, silence may also give rise to gendered peace gaps that prevent women from benefitting from opportunities present at the end of war, and that reinforce their subordinated position. For example, silences around wartime sexual violence and other forms of gendered insecurity may render women isolated and fearful as they silently carry their traumatic experiences within them, inadvertently perpetuating impunity for abuses during and after war.

By showing how practices of care and silence enable women's agency and facilitate everyday peace, but simultaneously contribute to entrench gendered insecurity, inequality and marginalisation in the transition from war to peace, our analysis speaks to several strands of research. It adds to feminist advances in theorising the relationship between care and social reproduction and peace,⁸ as well as to feminist scholarship on gendered silences in war and post-war contexts.⁹ Our findings illustrate how women's extensive care work is more than just a burden and source of depletion, and that silence surrounding injustice and abuse does not necessarily signify powerlessness or lack of choice. These practices also need to be recognised as central to how everyday peace and the survival of families and communities during and after war is achieved and sustained. However, in relation to the broader literature on everyday peace, which often tends towards hopeful or optimistic claims about the transformative potential of everyday peace practices,¹⁰ our analysis provides a sobering account of how everyday peace constitutes a gendered site where coping with or navigating insecurity may amplify already existing gender discriminatory practices. This may not be as visible in gender-blind analyses that do not pay analytical attention to women's experiences of peace. Indeed, everyday peacebuilding is not necessarily transformative or progressive – it is simply what people do to make life work in the shadow of war and insecurity. These practices may hold the potential for change, but also for the reproduction of inequality, oppression and structural violence.

Next, we elaborate on our analytical approach to peace as practiced and experienced in the gendered everyday. This is followed by a background to the empirical context of Kayah state, Myanmar, and a description of the materials and methods on which we base our analysis. The analysis then follows, examining practices of care and silence as both key avenues for women's everyday peacebuilding and as practices that are conditioned by and contribute to gendered peace gaps. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of these findings for theorising and studying everyday peace.

Locating peace in the gendered everyday

Critical peacebuilding scholars have recognised that a better understanding of the character and emergence of peace in the aftermath of war requires a focus on people's everyday experiences and practices. This means paying attention to how people create and practice peace in their daily lives.¹¹ The everyday peace literature emerged from a critique against liberal approaches to peacebuilding for limiting their attention to top-down approaches such as institution- and state-building,¹² while 'sacrificing concern for community, local needs and everyday experience'.¹³ Related to the broader 'local turn', the everyday peace literature fosters understandings of how 'simple everyday activities present the realm of the possible' in building peace, and explores how individuals make use of 'whatever tools and tactics are at their disposal' to navigate 'the surrounding natural, social, economic and political structures, local and global, that empower or constrain their lives'.¹⁴

Outlining a research agenda for everyday peace, Roger Mac Ginty emphasises how this focus redirects the gaze of peacebuilding research away from macro-processes, such as official peace negotiations and agreements, and the international actors and interventions associated with these.¹⁵ Mac Ginty argues that to capture how peace actually takes shape in conflict-affected contexts, analysis needs to instead focus on people's everyday peace

activities. These are context-dependent practices that are used by people and groups in their everyday interactions to survive, navigate tensions relating to the dynamics of the conflict, minimise risk, and ensure functioning social relations. He suggests that these practices can be characterised as forms of avoidance, ambiguity, ritualised politeness, telling and blame deferring. As a form of peacebuilding, these practices are limited in that they may not necessarily challenge or upset dominant power relations and structures that sustain conflict, but they may nevertheless help people to cope with these, enabling a degree of security, order and predictability in everyday lives and social relations. In addition, by locating agency not in escaping the ordinary but in the mundanity of everyday practices and relationships, an analysis of everyday peace can be sensitive to the complexities and tensions of how these practices may simultaneously reinforce conflict and enable a relative degree of peace.¹⁶

Thus, the everyday peace literature foregrounds everyday experiences and practices, and points to how everyday peacebuilding foments agency, but is also shaped by, and may reproduce, destructive conflict dynamics and unequal relations of power. These insights are highly pertinent to our analysis, but needs to be combined with a feminist analysis of the everyday as a site that is fundamentally gendered.¹⁷ Engaging in everyday peace practices, or peacebuilding, means (for women in particular) navigating a status quo of gendered inequality, marginalisation and insecurity.¹⁸ As Jenny Hedström argues, 'to understand the everyday as embodied and ordinary, as a space of drudgery, negotiation, love, intimacy, and insecurity requires a recognition of the gendered relations of power that structures and constrains everyday life', shaping access to power, authority, and decision-making.¹⁹ This assertion aligns with a tradition of feminist peace research that has long demonstrated how, in the shadow of the masculinised spaces of conventional politics, peace is practiced and lived in the mundane spaces of homes, families and communities.²⁰ Drawing on feminist peace research as well as feminist political economy, and using women's everyday experiences as analytical entry point and source of knowledge, we approach everyday peace in the aftermath of violence as a site framed by unequal power relations. This approach conceptualises 'peace as a site of ongoing struggles for survival despite, and amidst, violence and insecurity, locating agency not only in overt resistance but in resilience' in the daily struggles to sustain lives, families, and communities.²¹ This understanding of the everyday offers a critical framework for locating women's experiences and practices of peace in Kayah state and relate them to broader dynamics of the post-war transition as well as persistent legacies of war.

Feminist approaches to the everyday reinforces the recognition of everyday peace as a site of local agency, but also a site for the reproduction of inequality and injustice.²² Thus, while everyday peace presents a valuable analytical focus on how peace actually manifests itself in people's lives, our approach does not assume that everyday peace practices are necessarily transformative of the structures that cause conflict, insecurity and inequality. This analytical perspective makes visible women's often unrecognised contributions to minimise violence, ensure smooth social relations, sustain the survival of families and communities, and the functioning of societies during and after war.²³ It illustrates how women's care work not only has value but indeed matters far beyond the individual family: this is critical labour which sustains communities and undergirds social life.²⁴ Women's care practices include a wide range of activities involved in the production of life; biological reproduction and the services required for maintaining

intimate relationships and family (sexual and emotional); social provisioning and voluntary work aimed at meeting needs of the broader community; unpaid production in the home of services and goods, and the reproduction of culture and ideology.²⁵ In highly militarised context, Jenny Hedström has theorised women's care work as 'militarised social reproduction': in such contexts, care work includes the reproduction of both immediate families, communities, as well as armed forces through caretaking and subsistence labour, whether voluntary or not.²⁶

Feminist perspectives on the everyday also puts the spotlight on the gendered dynamics of peace. Because of their gendered positioning, women are often less able to benefit from post-war transformations like economic development and political reforms.²⁷ To capture the specific ways in which women are disadvantaged by emerging post-war orders, and the ways in which their possibilities to benefit from existing forms of peace are circumscribed, we use the concept of gendered peace gaps. As described by Annika Björkdahl, gendered peace gaps are products of gendered power hierarchies inherent in and amplified by conflict dynamics and post-war transformations.²⁸ As an analytical tool, the concept of gendered peace gaps directs attention to how the form of peace that characterises a certain context at a certain time is not experienced in the same way by all people. An analysis of gendered peace gaps thus alerts us to how long-time patterns of gendered power and norms, and gendered dynamics of war, spill over into the post-war. Identifying the specific ways in which the power relations of the gendered everyday shape post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction is essential both to better theorise peace, and for better responding to gender-specific needs.

In our analysis, we draw on the feminist perspectives on peace and the everyday outlined above, and explore women's experiences of everyday peace through two analytical themes. First, we seek to locate women's everyday peacebuilding – which we define as the practices women in Kayah state engage in which contributes to build and sustain peace as well as minimise violence. This theme captures women's agency and resilience in navigating an everyday precarious post-war context. Second, we identify gendered peace gaps – understood as the ways in which women are less able to benefit from peace due to the broader dynamics of gendered power that are reproduced in their everyday.

This two-pronged approach to women's experiences of peace allows us to interrogate how women's positioning in gendered relations of power and divisions of labour both enables their agency in peacebuilding *and* reinforce gendered inequality and marginalisation in the post-war. Through this approach, we also illustrate how seemingly mundane everyday practices and spaces, such as the home, are not outside of or peripheral to broader dynamics of peacebuilding and post-war transitional initiatives in Myanmar, but constitutive of them.

Exploring women's experiences of peace in Kayah state

Kayah state is the smallest of Myanmar's ethnic minority states, located along Myanmar's Southeastern border with Thailand. Like many of the country's ethnic minority populated border areas, it has been the scene of armed conflict of varying intensity since shortly after Myanmar's independence in 1947.²⁹ The inauguration of a semi-civilian government led by General Thein Sein in 2011 came to mark the start of an ambitious reform agenda that has unleashed far-reaching processes of change in the country,

including Kayah state. Beginning in 2011, economic and political liberalisation and a renewed peace process fundamentally reshaped the political landscape in Myanmar as well as its international relations. Peace efforts brought the government and ten Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) together as signatories of a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).³⁰ While these were promising developments, the military takeover on 1 February 2021 effectively put a stop to these reforms. Allegedly motivated by concerns about election fraud, the military coup has been followed by widespread public protests and violent regime crackdowns. To many outside commentators, the coup signalled a 'return' to the pre-2011 era of military rule, threatening a descent into civil war.³¹ However, during the decade of political transition, discrimination and armed violence in ethnic minority areas did not cease; indeed, conflict in Northern Myanmar intensified in recent years and persecution of ethnic Rohingyas in Western Myanmar escalated to the point of alleged genocide.³² This shows how, in conflict-affected, ethnic minority populated areas of the country, significant changes since 2011 co-existed with persistent continuities and legacies of war. These have now been compounded by new insecurities and threats caused by the recent coup.

In Kayah state, the main ethnic insurgent group is the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), formed in 1957. Over time, splits and breakaway factions led to the establishment of numerous smaller armed groups, creating a complex conflict landscape. Several of these smaller groups agreed ceasefires with the government in the 1990s, but KNPP did not conclude a ceasefire deal until 2012, and, although a participant in the peace talks, has still not signed the NCA.³³ Armed conflict was most intense during periods in the 1970s and 1990s, during which civilians across the state was targeted by large-scale human rights abuses and forced displacement.³⁴ For example, state-led campaigns to quell local resistance in the late 1990s included the forced relocation of around 30,000 civilians to army-led displacement camps, accompanied by an increase in *Tatmadaw* [Myanmar Armed Forces] presence across contested areas in the state.³⁵ Since the start of the transitional period, armed violence has decreased, but the situation is fragile, poverty is widespread, and tensions around state-led initiatives for economic development and reconstruction of the state have been prominent.³⁶ As women's organisations report, military sexual violence against minority women continues to occur.³⁷ After the coup, armed conflict has not resurged (as it has in neighbouring Kayin state, for example) but anti-coup protests have been met with military violence and arrests of protesters. Thus, people in Kayah state navigate a complex landscape of multiple threats and insecurities in their everyday lives.

This article draws on data collected by one of the authors (Hedström) in Kayah state, Myanmar, and in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in November 2018.³⁸ The material primarily consists of semi-structured interviews with women and men active in civil society organisations and armed groups, as well as focus group interviews and participant observation with female poppy farmers, women working in mining, and female farmers. The interviews in Kayah state were conducted with the invaluable help of a local research assistant, Zin Mar Phyto. In total, we interviewed forty-one people: 32 women, and 9 men. The women included in the study were between 20 and 80 years of age. Several of the women interviewed had had no schooling and were illiterate, but most had attended at least a few years of school. Married or widowed women had between two and ten children each. Participants primarily originated from remote rural villages in Kayah

state, with a couple of interviews undertaken with Kayan women across the border with southern Shan state.

During the height of the civil war, several of these areas were identified as ‘free fire zones’, with villagers assumed to be rebel-sympathisers, subject to attack by the state military. Some women we spoke to had had to leave their homes in a relocation programme designed as part of the regime’s counterinsurgency efforts in 1996, in which over 30,000 civilians were forcibly removed from their homes to live in sites under the control of military authorities.³⁹ Women from other areas had instead attempted to stay near their villages, opting to hide in the jungle to avoid the fighting.⁴⁰

To triangulate the findings from these interviews, the article also draws on a wide range of materials published by civil society and research institutes focusing on the situation of women in Kayah state in particular and in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar in general.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the material.⁴¹ As noted above, the analysis aimed to, firstly, identify categories of women’s everyday peacebuilding practices – what women do to minimise violence, facilitate smooth social relations, and ensure the survival and functioning of families and communities. Secondly, the analysis aimed to identify gendered peace gaps – discrepancies in how people are able to benefit from the emerging post-war order in Kayah state that disadvantages, marginalises and harms women as a result of their gendered positioning. Below, we turn to the results of this analysis.

Women’s experiences of everyday peace in Kayah state

In the following sections, we examine women’s experiences and practices of care and silence, demonstrating how these are key avenues for women’s everyday peacebuilding, but at the same time, conditioned by and contribute to reinforce gendered insecurity and marginalisation for women. This contributes to reproducing gendered peace gaps that sustain gendered inequality.

Care as everyday peacebuilding

The gendered household is increasingly recognised as a critical site from where women engage in and support intergenerational and community reproduction and resilience.⁴² This labour takes on a particular urgency in fragile, conflict-affected contexts – when an absence of state provisioning and welfare, combined with the rupture to everyday life and livelihoods caused by conflict – means that the socio-economic and physical insecurities of war are in effect ‘downloaded’ on the bodies of women and girls who are expected to ensure the survival of their immediate communities.⁴³ As Fatma Osman Ibanouf shows with regards to Darfur, the time women spend on unpaid care work increases exponentially with the onset of conflict, a pattern that remains in the fragile post-war.⁴⁴ This is the case in Kayah state, where decades of war and a lack of state welfare provisioning especially in minority areas have left the state with serious shortages of key services such as health care.⁴⁵ Our data shows that women’s extensive care practices sustain families and communities, during periods of active conflict as well as in the current post-war context. Care practices include the unpaid or underpaid reproduction of family,

community and armed groups through household and subsistence work, undertaken in response to both force and need.⁴⁶ In this way, women's care practices are not only central to the survival of individuals but have also functioned as a form of conflict management, minimising violence and building trust between communities, and importantly, in relation to conflict-actors such as state and non-state armed groups. The centrality of this labour during periods of active conflict is evidenced in the following narrative by an elderly woman, recounting wartime experiences:

When the Burmese soldiers came to our village, all men ran away. There were only women left here. When the soldiers came here, all women villagers depended on me. They said, "you are our village head" and they were afraid to face the soldiers without me [...] When the soldiers came here, whatever they asked, we had to give. For example, if they were hungry, we cooked, we cooked really good food . . . and also if we had rice wine, we opened it for them [...] Most people depended on me since I was braver and dared to speak out more than them. However, since I was also really frightened, I just gave them whatever the soldiers asked. I gave whatever they asked with the wish that they would go faster after they got what they wanted.⁴⁷

This narrative suggests that women deployed gendered care duties as a form of everyday peacebuilding. In extending care to enemy soldiers moving through their villages and homes, women diffused tensions, avoiding outbreaks of direct violence. The home, often seen as a non-political space, were in fact a key site through which communities embroiled in conflict interacted with armed groups. This was not an innocuous practice. Women often had to navigate caring both for state as well as rebel soldiers, with effects on both the larger conflict context and on the women themselves. Indeed, our interviews indicates that women's care practices were important for ensuring non-violent everyday interactions and functioning social relations in a fragile, insecure context of armed conflict.

This narrative also exemplifies how women during periods of active conflict have taken up roles traditionally held by men, including village head positions. This pattern has been well documented, for example in Karen areas adjacent to Kayah state. Women's rise to wartime leadership was often motivated by the vacancies left by men who had fled or died, but also by ideas about women being less likely to be treated as rebels, and therefore able to defuse enemy aggression through their feminine roles. As noted by the Karen Women's Organisation, the increase in women village heads have not been sustained, post-war.⁴⁸ This suggests that gendered roles and responsibilities, and the meaning and value assigned to women's unpaid labour, are not given but fluctuates in relation to a changing context of armed conflict and unequal gendered power.

In the past decade, Kayah state has been in a state of fragile peace, characterised by state efforts towards post-war reconstruction and reform, a multitude of still active armed groups, and widespread poverty. Women's extensive responsibilities for ensuring the survival and wellbeing of families and communities have largely been carried over to this period without much relief. Post-war development efforts have primarily focused on large-scale infrastructure and energy projects, while state investment in social provisioning lags far behind.⁴⁹ As remarked by one young respondent when describing the centrality of women for a functioning everyday life, 'women are very important because my mum has to take care of everything, [...] our studies, food, travel, and other things, [...] outside people does not recognise this, but for us, we know how it is . . .'.⁵⁰

Current government-led development strategies have in turn produced new forms of threats, such as land-grabbing for development purposes, and caused new gendered patterns of migration where men leave to take advantage of new job opportunities, or to simply find any work. Women are affected by these new insecurities in specifically gendered ways, for example by being less able to capitalise on new opportunities:

If there is a problem with land grabbing because of a development project, in that case, women are suffering more than men. For example, if their lands are grabbed, then men can move to other places for their livelihood or their income . . . but for women, they cannot move freely like men, because they have their children and their families and other things. That is why, because of land grabbing, women suffer more than men from livelihood problems.⁵¹

As women still bear the burden of keeping families afloat and communities functioning through their everyday care practices, key gendered peace gaps are amplified through post-war transformations where women's mobility and labour market opportunities are circumscribed – despite the end of armed violence and an overall upwards economic trend.⁵²

As women's extensive reproductive labour limit their prospects from taking advantage of formal job opportunities, they instead have to engage in informal, often precarious, forms of labour to sustain their livelihoods. This is illustrated by the gendered division of labour at the Maw Chi mines. Here, only men are employed to work inside the mines. This work is highly dangerous, but better paid than the informal forms of work around the mines that women do. This is partly due to the fact that women's childcare responsibilities prevent them from working in the mines:

The women have to look after their children, so they cannot go far away or for a long period of time. If they worked inside the mine, no one could take care of their children. So, after sending their children to school, women work and collect stones at the slag heap in that mining area.⁵³

Consequently, women mainly work with mine waste cleaning, a job they can do above ground. While this is in some ways less dangerous than actually going underground, the toxins leaking out of the slag heaps results in serious health problems.⁵⁴ The lack of economic opportunities means that women sell the small lead ores on the black market, supposedly captured by armed groups, as it pays better. This illustrates the gendered and precarious nature of informal labour, as well as its entanglement in extractive, predatory forms of war- and ceasefire economies.⁵⁵

However, in response to the detrimental local effects of government-led development and reform efforts, such as constructions of dams and factories, women have also deployed care as a means of peacebuilding stretching beyond their immediate families and households, showing how care undergirds social life more widely.⁵⁶ For example, through civil society organisations women raise awareness about the effects of these types of development projects, arrange dialogue between different local communities, and bring the needs of local communities to the attention of local armed organisations as well as local government officials.⁵⁷ In the area of the Maw Chi mines, women have reached out to government representatives to try to get the mining company to improve security from landslides, which is needed to protect their men working in the mines and their communities living around the mines.⁵⁸ In a context where activists widely report of

increasing government surveillance of civil society and intolerance towards local protests,⁵⁹ drawing on their maternal identity and their caring responsibilities to make demands allow women to engage in political advocacy in less threatening ways.

While women do extend their care practices into political activism within the realm of civil society, their extensive care responsibilities and norms about the domesticity of women prevent them from more formal political positions and influence. For example, in the 2010, and again in the 2015 elections, not a single woman was elected to the state parliament in Kayah state.⁶⁰ Women activists who move beyond small-scale, local activism also report being constrained by, and penalised because of, widespread norms about a woman's place being in the home:

In Karenni state, the customary culture and traditional stereotype are really sensitive, still sensitive. For female human rights defenders, because we have to travel a lot [...] we lack the time to stay at home. But in the culture, the women have to stay inside the home . . . Because they [the women's rights defenders] cannot, the community say that they are bad women or sex workers or something like that.⁶¹

Women activists who leave the site of the home are seen as transgressing boundaries of acceptable femininity, generating stigmatisation and social ostracism. These norms, in combination with the time required by women's extensive care work, contribute to another gendered peace gap, excluding women from formal political influence and producing boundaries of acceptable public behaviour that limit their civil society activism. This limits women's opportunities to have a voice in decision-making fora where the direction of post-war change, and thus the nature of peace in Kayah state, are decided.

Our analysis demonstrates that dynamics around care work and caring responsibilities fundamentally shape women's experiences of everyday peace in Kayah state. This resonates with Tiina Vaittinen et al, who argues that

When care is not explicitly addressed in analyses of peace, it follows that various mundane practices of caring that are crucial in creating trust and peaceful conflict transformation are either taken for granted, or remain invisible. Consequently, the intricate processes of everyday peacebuilding are not fully understood.⁶²

Indeed, without attention to care, as reflected in women's experiences, the nuances of how a functioning everyday life has been sustained through war and in the post-war period in Kayah state would remain invisible. However, while women's care practices have been central to everyday peacebuilding and may contribute to create 'non-linear cycles of care, trust, and transformation',⁶³ it is equally important to recognise how women's extensive caring responsibilities amplify gendered peace gaps. Bearing the burden of sustaining families and communities, in a fragile security environment with little state social provisioning or support, constrain women's opportunities to have a say in relation to post-war transformations or take advantage of economic opportunities generated by the end of war. Identifying gendered peace gaps related to women's care practices underline how gendered legacies of war shape the emergence and experience of peace. As pointedly stated by Jacqui True, 'postconflict societies depend on large and under-recognized care economies that, because they are not adequately recognized or supported by societies, states, and international actors, deplete women's lives'.⁶⁴

Thus, while women's care practices help individuals, families and communities cope and facilitate non-violent, functioning social relations, hence sustaining everyday peace,

this labour comes at a high cost for women, and entrenches gendered insecurity, inequality and marginalisation in the transition from war to peace.

Silence as everyday peacebuilding

Women's everyday care practices as means to sustain life and build everyday peace may be coupled with practices of silence. Our data demonstrates that the ways in which women have coped with war and post-war insecurities and managed to keep families and communities alive have often entailed a combination of taking on extensive caring responsibilities and choices to stay silent about the forms of abuse and trauma they have endured. To an extent, silence is a product of the isolation and limited mobility that has shaped the lives of many women living through war. As a female opium poppy farmer told us, 'my whole life I lived here, I never went to school, and don't even understand Burmese, don't know how to read and write. My mother asked me to take care of the cows and buffalos, so I did that.'⁶⁵

Assuming a heavy caretaking load from a young age, unable to converse in Burmese – or indeed reading or writing in any language – pushed this woman into informal, illegal labour. This, in itself, conditions the ways in which it is possible for her to deal with wartime experiences of abuse, including forced labour for the various armed groups active in her community, as both legal recourse and political involvement as ways of speaking up is made very difficult by her location, occupation, and lack of education. However, her silence around what happened during the war is also a result of a strategic choice not to upset the fragile security that has been enabled by ceasefires between the various armed groups in her area: 'there is no more armed conflict and we do not need to run anymore [. . .] we hope it [the ceasefire] will not be broken, because in this situation, life is much easier and better'.⁶⁶

This narrative illustrates how 'speaking out' is not always a preferred, or indeed feasible, strategy for dealing with legacies of war, or coping with a precarious post-war existence.⁶⁷ As recognised in feminist scholarship, silence is not merely the absence of voice or a sign of passivity or powerlessness; silence can be a strategic choice, and a form of agency and even resistance.⁶⁸ Silence, as Johanna Mannergren Selimovic puts it, 'is never "nothing"'.⁶⁹ To live, or simply survive, in a precarious post-war context might require silence as a means for not only smoothing out social relations, but for avoiding tensions and violence.⁷⁰ Silence, as a way to minimise threats, can in this way be an effective practice of everyday peacebuilding.⁷¹ While this silence can be oppressive, it may also inhere a form of resistance, by allowing survival and enable claims-making through which everyday social relations and meaningful life can be facilitated and protected.⁷² This productive aspect of silence is also recognised in the everyday peace literature, positioning it as a form of peacebuilding. Indeed, as argued by Roger Mac Ginty social relations nurtured and maintained in the face of dominant conflict divides can create so-called 'micro-solidarities' whose very existence and presence subvert ideologies legitimising war.⁷³ Silence – as avoidance and ambiguity – then creates the possibility for coexistence despite divisions caused through 'the overwhelming power held by states, militias and other institutions'.⁷⁴ This is illustrated by the above examples of how women's extension of care to government and rebel soldiers were crucial to the wartime survival of civilian communities. In these instances, silence – about relationships to other

armed groups, and about their membership or whereabouts – was essential to prevent violence and create a temporary space for co-existence across conflict lines. Drawing on Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, this exemplifies forms of enabling silence, which allows individuals and communities to cope and to protect themselves and others. As Mannergren Selimovic points out, silence as coping strategy ‘may not hold a lot of promise of transformation’, but may nevertheless be highly significant for people in precarious war and post-war situations and facilitate the rebuilding, or sustaining, of functioning social relations and everyday lives.⁷⁵

Silence as a coping strategy is also prominent in the narrative of how Agnes, a young woman who escaped sexual violence and forced labour during the war, struggled to rebuild her life and move forward after the war.⁷⁶ In her interview, Agnes recounts her experiences of being sold into forced labour, raped by a commander from an armed group, and of finally managing to flee. Upon her return home, Agnes finds her three younger siblings abandoned by their parents, and immediately assumes responsibility for caring for them. In addition, Agnes gives birth to a baby as a result of the sexual assault she has experienced. Rather than to speaking up about crimes committed against her, seeking to hold perpetrators accountable, or challenging the wartime economy of violence, drugs and human trafficking, Agnes focuses on the present and does the best she can to raise her siblings and her baby. In order to do so, she re-joins the armed group that her parents belonged to at the time when they sold her into slavery. The armed group provides protection and some support for her son, and Agnes feels she can try to raise awareness about sexual violence from within the group, thus potentially sparing other girls her own fate. At the same time, joining this group, rumoured to be running a series of brothels, Agnes is also implicated in the same gendered structures of violence that has shaped her life.⁷⁷

However, Agnes’ actions and her choices in how to navigate the fragile post-war is not indicative of passivity, but of her agency in overcoming trauma and taking on extensive responsibilities for the lives of others. Her silence enables her to do this the best way that she can: it facilitates her membership in the armed group and her ability to access crucial support. Moreover, her silence also creates space for love and connection to her son, despite a history of pain:

When I gave birth to the baby, I did not want him and wanted to give away. But, my aunty told me that my biological mother abandoned me. And if I abandoned my baby, I would carry this kind of legacy [...] when I looked at my baby, I felt so pity on him and did not dare to give him away. So, I decided to raise him [along with my siblings].⁷⁸

Similar to the fictive story of a Bosnian mother and her daughter born out of rape in the film *Grbavica*,⁷⁹ Agnes’ choice to love and care for her baby seems to have been enabled by her decision to separate her relationship to her son from her memories of his conception. This separation, as Mannergren Selimovic writes, was enabled by ‘a silence in which love grew’.⁸⁰

However, while silence can be enabling and facilitate protection, relationships and meaningful everyday life, the gendered post-war context in Kayah state is also rife with disabling, oppressive forms of silence that erase and deny women’s experiences and lives.⁸¹ This is captured in an article on fear and mobility in Kayah state, by Agatha Ma and Kyoko Kusakabe.⁸² Agatha Ma and Kusakabe’s analysis point to the narrow

difference between silence as coping strategy, enabling women to protect themselves and their loved ones, and silence as an effect of wartime trauma that reinforce women's subordination, denying their experiences of violence, perhaps even depleting their bodies as women isolate themselves at home. Feeling like there is no other option to escape insecurity, silence sometimes shifts into a mentality of 'trying to be and to feel nonexistent'.⁸³ This illustrates how disabling, destructive effects on women's post-war well-being result from how women silently carry their pain and trauma. In interviews, this pain was described as physical, as heart pain or headaches. For example, an elderly woman described her feelings of fear and her memories of war in the following way:

I have no medicine to cure my feelings. I want medicine for my feelings. [But] even when I drink medicine, it cannot cure my fear, that disease. That hurt that comes from my past, I cannot cure that, I need medicine for that.⁸⁴

In her interview, this woman recounts stories of fearing wartime rape – going back as far as the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and throughout the civil war that followed and lasted for many decades. She tells us about the stress generated by living through a lifetime of war, wherein she had to hide guns for rebels, feed rebel *and* government soldiers on her meagre provisions as well as surreptitiously ferrying food to the men of the village hiding in the jungle whenever soldiers came through, all the while attempting to keep her children fed, safe and alive. However, in her daily life, these traumas are silenced and instead take expression through fear and pain that has a severely disabling effect. Clearly, there is a fine line between silence as a strategic choice and a form of avoidance that allows people, like Agnes, to live in the present and make life work; and disabling, destructive silence that continues to destroy lives and does not contribute towards everyday peace.

As the example above indicates, although silence can be a feasible and strategic way to survive and to build an everyday peace, silence can also reproduce gendered peace gaps that prevent women from benefitting from the end of war, and that reinforce their subordinated position. Disabling silences, where women remain isolated and fearful as they silently carry their traumatic experiences within them is one expression of this. One specific prominent example is silences around wartime sexual violence. This was a recurring theme in many of our interviews with women in Kayah state, as illustrated in the two narratives above. Many of women we spoke to had been victims of or witnessed sexual violence at the hands of armed men, but very few considered it an option to seek justice or to speak up about this. This had to do with the sensitive nature of the issues, and with the enduring power of armed groups, which made silence a rational course of action. Activist from local women's organisations confirm this, testifying about frequent threats, sexual harassment and stigmatisation when they break the silence around violence against women in general and abuses by armed actors in particular.⁸⁵ As one activist tells us, as a women's rights activist there is no security, as she faces threats both from individual male perpetrators and the border guard force in the area; to her, it is clear that breaking silence around sexual violence 'is a political issue' that threatens the fragile stability of the post-war political order in Kayah state.⁸⁶ For many women, silence about sexual violence and other wartime experiences therefore helps to protect themselves and make life possible, given a context of widespread impunity and a precarious security situation, as documented by women's organisations.⁸⁷ While this contributes to

reproduce a culture of silence and impunity around these abuses, and prevents women from accessing the little support that might be available, for example through local women's organisations, it is unrealistic to hold women survivors and activists responsible for speaking out in order to change these long-standing patterns of inequality.

Thus, as emphasised by feminist scholars, silence exists within and is produced from an everyday structured by gendered relations of power.⁸⁸ Within this context of unequal power and a fragile post-war order, silence can be employed to create space for everyday peace and meaningful life, but can at the same time reproduce gendered peace gaps where women's subordination is reinforced, their experiences denied, and their bodies – sometimes literally – erased.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we have explored women's experiences of peace in Kayah state. Our findings demonstrate that practices of care and silence are key avenues for women's everyday peacebuilding, through which women sustain peace, ensure survival, and minimise violence in their families and wider communities. At the same time, however, these practices are conditioned by and contribute to gendered insecurity and marginalisation for women. Our analysis suggest that women's gendered positioning may simultaneously enable their agency in peacebuilding and reinforce gendered inequality and marginalisation in the post-war. Thus, recognising the everyday as a gendered space is necessary for rendering visible these nuances and ambiguities of everyday peace, and for gaining a better understanding of how peace is manifested, experienced and sustained in the everyday.

In particular, our findings caution against an overly optimistic view of everyday peacebuilding. As illustrated by women's practices of care and silence, everyday peace practices are often simply what people do to make life work in the shadow of violence and insecurity. Ensuring survival and facilitating functioning everyday interactions is, of course, in itself highly significant for people in conflict-affected contexts, but may not necessarily be conducive to broader or more long-term change towards secure and just societies. While everyday peace practices may hold the potential for more substantial transformation, our analysis demonstrate that they can also reproduce inequality, oppression and structural violence as people do what they can to avoid risk and navigate existing political orders and relations of power. Careful, contextual analysis is therefore needed to tease out when, and in what ways, everyday peacebuilding can go beyond coping to challenge the status quo, and how this potential might be enhanced in a particular conflict context.

Notes

1. Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building'; Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding'; Mac Ginty and Firchow, 'Top-down and bottom-up narratives'; Leonardsson and Rudd, 'The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding'. Randazzo, 'The Paradoxes of the 'Everyday'.'
2. Mac Ginty, 'Everyday peace'; Firchow and Mac Ginty, 'Measuring Peace'; Roberts, 'Post-conflict Peacebuilding, Liberal Irrelevance'; Noma, Aker and Freeman, 'Heeding Women's Voices.'
3. Lyytikäinen et al, 'Unruly wives in the household'; Boulding, 'Cultures of Peace'; Reardon, 'Women and Peace'; Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking'; Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*;

- Enloe, 'Maneuvers'; Das, *Life and Words*; Sylvester, 'Experiencing War'; McLeod, 'A feminist approach to hybridity'; McLeod and O'Reilly, 'Critical peace and conflict studies: Feminist interventions'; Martin de Almagro, 'Hybrid Clubs: A Feminist Approach'; Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace'.
4. Zanoni and Gross, 'Kenyan Girls as Agents of Peace'; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendering Agency'.
 5. Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion'; Agatha Ma and Kusakabe, 'Gender Analysis of Fear and Mobility'; Kramer et al., *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State*.
 6. Olivius and Hedström, 'Spatial Struggles and the Politics of Peace.'
 7. Björkdahl, 'A Gender-Just Peace?'
 8. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*; Vaittinen et al, 'Care as Everyday Peacebuilding'; Lyytikäinen et al, 'Unruly wives in the household'; Rai, True, and Tanyag, 'From depletion to regeneration'; Hedström, 'On Violence, the Everyday, and Social Reproduction'.
 9. Nordstrom, 'Wars and Invisible Girls'; Parpart and Parashar, *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency*; Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies'; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 'Feeling silences in a place of pain.'
 10. Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace'; Ibnouf, *War-Time Care Work and Peacebuilding in Africa*.
 11. Roberts, 'Post-conflict Peacebuilding, Liberal Irrelevance and the Locus of Legitimacy'; Firchow and Mac Ginty, 'Measuring Peace'; Väyrynen, 'Mundane peace and the politics of vulnerability.'
 12. Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace*, 2.
 13. Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace,' 191.
 14. Roberts, 'Post-conflict Peacebuilding, Liberal Irrelevance,' 412–413.
 15. Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace.'
 16. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Das, *Life and Words*.
 17. Richter-Devroe, 'Palestinian Women's Everyday Resistance'; Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 'Theorising youth and everyday peace(building)'; Elias and Roberts, 'Feminist Global Political Economies of the Everyday'; Väyrynen, 'Mundane Peace and the Politics of Vulnerability.'
 18. Partis-Jennings, 'The 'Third Gender' in Afghanistan'; Kappler and Lemay-Hébert, 'From Power-blind Binaries'; Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace.'
 19. Hedström, 'On Violence, the Everyday, and Social Reproduction'. See also True, *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women*.
 20. Boulding, 'Cultures of Peace'; Reardon, *Women and Peace*; Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*.
 21. Hedström, 'On Violence, the Everyday, and Social Reproduction.'
 22. Elias and Rai, 'Feminist Everyday Political Economy.'
 23. Ibnouf, *War-Time Care Work and Peacebuilding in Africa*; Faxon, 'Securing meaningful life'; Hedström, ' Militarized social reproduction.'
 24. Rai, S. Hoskyns, and Thomas. *Depletion and Social Reproduction*, p. 3; Vaittinen et al., 'Care as Everyday Peacebuilding; Luxton, 'The Production of Life Itself.'
 25. Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas, *Depletion and Social Reproduction*; Vaittinen et al., 'Care as Everyday Peacebuilding.'
 26. Hedström, ' Militarized social reproduction.'
 27. Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion.'
 28. Björkdahl, 'A Gender-just Peace?' 286; See also Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendering Agency.'
 29. Kramer, Russell and Smith, *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State*; Agatha Ma and Kusakabe, 'Gender Analysis of Fear and Mobility'; Karenni National Women's Organization The Report on the Process.
 30. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, 'Signs of Life in Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement?'; Simpson and Farelly, *Myanmar: Politics, Economy and Society*.
 31. See for example Kurlantzick, 'Post-Coup Myanmar Could Become a Failed State'; Myers, 'Myanmar Is on the Precipice of Civil War'; Schlein, 'UN Rights Chief Warns Myanmar Heading Toward Syria-like Civil War.'

32. Women's League of Burma. Long Way to Go. On the allegations of genocide in Rakhine state, see ICJ's website: <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/178>.
33. KNPP did agree a brief ceasefire with the government in 1995, which broke down after three months and was followed by one of the most intense periods of violence. See Hedström and Olivius. *Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion*.
34. Kramer et. al. *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State*.
35. Amnesty International. *Aftermath: Three Years of Dislocation*.
36. Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion.'
37. Women's League of Burma, *If They Had Hope*.
38. The interviews, and the methodology used, is also discussed in Hedström and Olivius, *Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion*.
39. Amnesty International. *Aftermath: Three Years of Dislocation*.
40. Because of the cumulative traumatic experiences of the majority of our respondents, we carefully developed a research protocol informed by feminist ethics and designed to minimise possible negative consequences for the research participants. We asked for informed consent ahead of, during, as well as after the interview, emphasising to our respondents that they were ultimately in control of the interview, meaning that they could choose to terminate the interview altogether at any moment in time, and only answer questions if they felt comfortable doing so. We purposefully did not ask for information about traumatic events but kept the questions broad. We also worked in close collaborations with a women's organisation that is well grounded in the communities we visited, which also helped identify voluntary study participants. Zin Mar Phyto helped design the research protocol to ensure the ethical standards we strived for were applicable locally, and helped organise the interviews. In addition, when necessary, she provided translation from local languages to English. If and when respondents showed signs of trauma (such as crying) we explained that while we are here to listen to anything they want to tell us, we can take a break at any moment of their choosing, or come back to the interview at another time.
41. Braun and Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis'; Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, and Barnard, 'Analysis: Principles and Processes.'
42. Ibanouf, 'War-Time Care Work and Peacebuilding in Africa'; Hedström, 'Reproducing Revolution'; Mama and Okazawa-Rey, 'Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism.'
43. True, 'Introduction'; Rai, True and Tanyag, 'From depletion to regeneration.'
44. Ibanouf, 'War-Time Care Work and Peacebuilding in Africa.'
45. Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion.'
46. Hedström, 'Militarized Social Reproduction.'
47. Interview, female farmer, 25 November 2018.
48. Karen Women Organization, 'Walking amongst sharp knives.'
49. Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion.'
50. Interview, female CSO activist, 12 November 2018.
51. Interview, male CSO activists, 23 November 2018
52. World Bank. *Myanmar: Ending poverty and boosting shared prosperity in a time of transition*.
53. Interview, female mining workers, 27 November 2018.
54. Molo Women Mining Watch Network. *Lost Paradise*.
55. Woods, 'Ceasefire capitalism'; Brenner, 'The Development-Insecurity Nexus'; Meehan, 'Ploughing the land five times.'
56. Faxon, 'Securing Meaningful Life.'
57. Interviews, female CSO activists, 22 and 23 November 2018.
58. Interview, female CSO activists, 22 November 2018.
59. Forum Syd. *Do We Still Exist? 23*; Civicus. *Myanmar: Continued crackdown on civil society*; Interviews, female CSO activists, 22 and 23 November 2018.
60. Shwe Shwe Sein Latt et al. *Women's Political Participation in Myanmar*.
61. Interview, female CSO activist, 23 November 2018.
62. Vaittinen et al., *Care as Everyday Peacebuilding*, p. 196.

63. Vaittinen et al., *Care as Everyday Peacebuilding*, p. 196.
64. True, Introduction, p. 535.
65. Interview, female poppy farmers, 26 November 2018.
66. Interview, female poppy farmers, 26 November 2018.
67. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies.'
68. Parpart and Parashar, *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency*.
69. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies,' 2.
70. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies.'
71. Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace.'
72. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies,' 7; Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic, 'Silence as Possibility.'
73. Mac Ginty, 'Everyday Peace,' 555.
74. Ibid.
75. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies,' 10.
76. For an extended analysis of Agnes' story, see Hedström, On violence, the everyday, and social reproduction. Agnes is a pseudonym.
77. For more information see Hedström and Zin Mar Phyto, Friendship, intimacy, and power in research on conflict.
78. Cited in Hedström, On violence, the everyday, and social reproduction.
79. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies,' 10.
80. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies,' 10.
81. Ibid., 6.
82. Agatha Ma and Kusakabe, *Gender Analysis of Fear and Mobility*.
83. Ibid., 352.
84. Female farmer, cited in Hedström and Olivius, 'Insecurity, Dispossession, Depletion,' 391.
85. Interview, female CSO activists, 23 November 2018; Karenni National Women's Organization, The report on the process; UNFPA, *Powerful Myths, Hidden Secrets*.
86. Karenni National Women's Organization, The report on the process.
87. Karenni National Women's Organization, The report on the process; Women's League of Burma, *Long Way to Go*.
88. Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendered Silences in Post-conflict Societies'; Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic, 'Silence as Possibility'; Parpart and Parashar, *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency*.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Zin Mar Phyto for excellent research assistance during data collection. This research was supported by funding from the Swedish research council (grant number 2015-01756) and the Swedish Foundation for the Social Sciences and Humanities (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, grant numbers M16-0297:1 and P19-1494:1).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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