



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

25th November 2022

Today, November 25th, we call attention to the urgent need to fight against all acts of psychological, physical, and sexual harm committed against women and girls. Women in Southeast Burma are the subject of a vast array of human rights abuses and acts of gender-based violence. KHRG stands firm in the struggle to eliminate all types of violence against women in Southeast Burma, and joins the #16Days campaign to advocate for gender equity and to guarantee human rights for all women - including the right to live free from violence and discrimination, the right to physical and mental health, and the right to justice. We reinforce our calls for perpetrators of violence against women to be held accountable, as well as for shared responsibility to accomplish equality.

Since the 2021 coup, the military junta has perpetrated a variety of war crimes and crimes against humanity – including indiscriminate killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, forced displacement, burning and looting of villages, using villagers as forced labour and human shields, as well as denying access to basic services and humanitarian assistance – that have targeted women in a variety of ways and have had devastating impacts on their health and safety.

Over 300,000 people have been displaced in Karen State since the 2021 military coup. Women often have to flee with young children and care for them on their own with limited external support. While displaced, women in Karen State have to live in poor conditions, often with little to no access to clean water, sanitary facilities and health services, including maternal and pediatric health care, adding to their overall vulnerability. Women that remain in their villages face air strikes and other attacks perpetrated by the junta, and are also being deprived of essential items, including food and medicine.

As documented in KHRG's past reports, sexual violence has also been systematically perpetrated by the Burma Army against women, linked with forced portering.¹ There is a connection between these gendered crimes of war and conceptualizations of masculinity: widespread crimes of sexual violence have been committed by Burma Army soldiers to support structures of military power, subjugate dissidents, and inflict terror and repression. As such, since the 2021 military coup, the very presence of Burma Army soldiers in and near villages generates insecurity for female villagers. One of the biggest challenges in combatting conflict-related gender-based violence, including sexual abuse, is the impunity that armed actors receive due to a lack of jurisdiction over Burma Army personnel by the civilian justice system. Military leaders and soldiers have enjoyed total impunity for their crimes.

¹ KHRG, *Suffering in Silence? Sexual violence against women in Southeast Myanmar*, December 2018; KHRG, *Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar*, August 2016.

Over the past few years, reports of non-conflict related sexual violence committed by civilians have also increased, especially against girls and women with mental disabilities. Community attitudes that condone or tolerate violence against women play a central role in shaping the way the citizens respond to violence. In addition to facing stigmatisation and secondary victimisation by their community, many survivors also continue to struggle with the trauma of sexual violence. In rural Southeast Burma, there is also a tendency to resort to informal dispute settlement mechanisms in cases of sexual violence. In many cases documented by KHRG, authorities encouraged the victim to marry the perpetrator. This constitutes forced marriage, and perpetuates systematic gender-based violence against women. Norms of propriety lead to the silencing of survivors, which often results in additional forms of violence, as well as self-harm. Marital rape and intimate partner violence are also present in Burma.

KHRG also recognises other types of violence against women in Karen State that might be present in subtle and complex ways. Women's autonomy regarding land and livelihood is limited due to the non-recognition of local customary land tenure within Burma's national land policies. Girls are also less likely to complete their education as they are often required to help with domestic tasks and caring of siblings. Differences in gender roles and an unequal distribution of power between men and women have also been heavily fuelled by the oppressive policies and actions of Burma's military regimes. Believing the soldiers will be less violent against women, villagers themselves exploit traditional gender roles in an attempt to lessen the overall abuse that the community will face at the hands of the Burma Army, but in doing so women's lives, health and well-being are placed at high risk. In order to guarantee equity and rights for Karen women, all factors leading to discrimination and violence have to be addressed.

Therefore, in observing this year's International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, KHRG focuses on all types of violence against women (VAW) in Southeast Burma and the common responsibility that we all share to eliminate them. We must hold ourselves and others accountable to stand against rape culture; to believe and defend survivors of violence; to end patriarchal, oppressive, and toxic behaviours and structures; to educate the next generations about equality and respect; to demand responsive services from local and regional authorities; to ensure women participation in decision-making, as well as power-sharing within the community and household. We end violence against women and girls united.

Acknowledging the situation of insecurity that women face in Southeast Burma, on this 25th of November we also celebrate all women human rights defenders that fight everyday against inequality, oppression and dictatorial rule. Likewise, we recognise ethnic community-based organisations, civil society organisations, local non-governmental organisations, and other community protection initiatives for their extraordinary work throughout the years to guarantee justice for all women victims and survivors of gender-based violence in Karen State. These efforts continuously seem to be dismissed by international actors operating in Burma.

Finally, we must call once again on the international community to place action into words, support civil society actions and work in the country, and develop a strong, concrete response to address all atrocities committed by the Burma Army, in the past and present, including sexual and gender-based violence. Neither equality nor peace can be accomplished in the country while impunity prevails.