

# Sex-based violence in Myanmar

Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls – February 2025

## Introduction

Human Rights Myanmar is a civil society organisation dedicated to promoting civil and political rights in Myanmar. This submission highlights the sex-based violence faced by women and girls, particularly in the context of the 2021 military coup, in response to the UN Special Rapporteur's call for input. Drawing from HRM's report [The Gendered Impact of the Myanmar Coup on Free Expression](#) and other reports such as: [Daring to Defy: Myanmar's Patriarchy](#), this document details how sex-based violence has been systematically employed as a tool of repression.

## Sex-based violence against women and girls

In Myanmar, violence against women and girls is deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms and has been exacerbated by the military coup. Since 2021, women and girls have faced extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, and torture. These acts are not incidental but represent a deliberate strategy to reinforce male dominance, silence dissent, and instil fear.

### Targeted killings of women

In addition to the hundreds of women killed by indiscriminate artillery and airstrikes against civilian areas, at least 380 women and girls have been specifically targeted and unlawfully killed by the military.<sup>1</sup> Of these, at least 216 were shot, including 50 who were summarily executed. The targeting of women for execution constitutes a grave violation of Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which enshrines the right to life.

At least 119 of the 380 women specifically killed were held in custody by the military at the time of their deaths, including 28 who were shot. The deprivation of liberty without due process, combined with summary executions of detainees, amounts to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. These acts violate the prohibition against arbitrary deprivation of life under international law and reflect a broader pattern of targeted violence against women as a means of punishment and control. The military's systematic impunity for these killings further entrenches structural discrimination against women and girls.

---

<sup>1</sup> At the time of submission, 216 women and girls had been shot, 74 killed in detention using unknown means, 71 burned to death, two tortured to death, and one beheaded. The [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) maintains a daily count of individuals detained or killed by the military.

## Sex-based factors in killings

Among the most egregious acts of violence, at least 71 women and girls were killed by being set on fire. This method of execution is particularly significant in the context of sex-based violence. Burning is not merely a form of execution; it is an act that seeks to dehumanise and obliterate women's identity and is often used to conceal evidence of sexual violence. The mutilation and destruction of women's bodies serve to erase evidence of sexual crimes and further terrorise affected communities.

Similarly, at least one woman has been killed by the military through beheading, a method of execution that carries profound symbolic significance. Historically, beheading has been associated with the suppression of female agency and the enforcement of patriarchal control. It represents an attempt to silence women physically and symbolically, reinforcing the idea that those who challenge traditional power structures or assume leadership roles must be eliminated in a demonstrative manner.

## Sexual violence and rape

Beyond the methods of killing, some of the 380 women and girls were subjected to sexual violence, including rape, before their deaths. Sexual violence is one of the most direct and severe forms of sex-based violence, as it specifically targets women and girls based on their sex, reducing them to instruments of subjugation and humiliation. Rape has been systematically used in Myanmar as a weapon of war, an assertion of dominance, and a means of political and ethnic persecution. Sexual violence is often used not only as an attack on individual women but as a strategic tool to break communities and enforce patriarchal hierarchies.

While the full scale of sexual violence remains difficult to determine due to the lack of independent monitoring and the military's deliberate obstruction of accountability mechanisms, credible information indicates that at least 500 women have been subjected to sexual violence and rape.<sup>2</sup> At least 16 women and girls were raped while in custody before being killed.<sup>3</sup> The true number is likely far higher. The military's use of detention as a space for sexual violence before execution is a pattern documented in other conflicts and constitutes torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. The systematic nature of these violations, combined with their targeting of women and girls based on sex, could amount to crimes against humanity.

## Structural aggravating factors

Certain factors exacerbate the nature, likelihood, and impact of sex-based violence against women and girls. Each factor is also increased by intersectional oppression, such as based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and disability, shaping vulnerabilities to sex-based violence. In Myanmar, three major aggravating factors have intensified since the military takeover in February 2021.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Women's League of Burma has tracked and verified over 500 cases since the coup: RFA (2024), "[Nearly 500 cases of sexual assault against women in Myanmar's conflict](#)".

<sup>3</sup> The [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) tracks some cases of sexual violence.

## **Patriarchy**

Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and values permeate Myanmar's social, political, economic, educational, cultural, and legal structures, reinforcing gender-based discrimination and worsening sex-based violence against women and girls. Women and girls experience additional layers of exclusion due to their lack of access to power and privilege, rigid sex roles, and systemic discriminatory policies and practices. Ethno-nationalists claim that women are “naturally” weaker. Their autonomy is restricted under the pretence of “protection” by families, communities, and the State. Those who challenge these limitations—through their thoughts, speech, or actions—are accused of threatening Myanmar's “traditional values,” endorsing “Westernisation,” harbouring hostility toward men, or even suffering from mental instability. The military coup has further entrenched patriarchal control, particularly because the military itself remains an institution dominated by men, with very few women in leadership positions.

## **Militarisation**

Myanmar's long-standing militarisation has embedded military values, structures, and behaviour across society, governance, the economy, education, and the legal system. This has reinforced patriarchal dominance, prioritised State security over human rights, and normalised the use of force as a means of control. Militarisation increases the risks for women and girls who assert their rights. Any deviation from traditional sex-based roles or any form of expression that challenges male dominance is labelled as “undisciplined” or subversive. In extreme cases, women and girls who assert themselves are depicted as threats to public order, as agents of foreign influence, or as “traitors” to the state. Under this militarised framework, any perceived challenge to the status quo—regardless of its severity—is met with force, whether from State authorities, community actors, or even family members.

## **Extremism**

Religious and ethno-nationalist extremism further exacerbates discrimination against women and girls by justifying their oppression under moral and ideological pretexts. Extreme elements exist within Myanmar's religious communities, with some groups actively encouraged by the military since the 2021 coup as part of a divide-and-rule strategy aimed at fuelling communal tensions. Extremism serves as an aggravating factor because it provides an ethical and religious rationale for suppressing women's rights. Women and girls who defy traditional sex-based roles are cast as being “against” religious values. They are portrayed as “bad” wives and mothers, “immoral” daughters and sisters, and as bringing “shame” upon their communities. By disguising sex-based oppression as religious doctrine, extremism legitimises the control, subjugation, and punishment of women and girls, further entrenching patriarchal dominance in Myanmar.

## Consequences of sex-based violence on women and girls

Sex-based violence in Myanmar has profound consequences for women and girls, affecting their psychological well-being, physical health, economic stability, and human rights. The military's use of such violence not only harms victims but also entrenches systemic oppression, silencing women and erasing them from public and political life.

### Trauma

The military deliberately cultivates sex-based psychological terror through rape, executions, and arbitrary detention, forcing women and girls to live in fear. This climate of fear has led to a mass withdrawal of women from civic and political spaces, undermining their ability to participate in protests, advocacy, and leadership. The psychological toll is devastating, impairing their ability to exercise freedoms of expression and association.

### Harm to sexual and reproductive health

Sex-based violence often results in severe physical harm, including internal injuries, chronic pain, and reproductive health complications, including forced pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. The lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services further exacerbates these harms, particularly for displaced women and girls, who are among the most vulnerable. Many displaced women lack access to maternal healthcare, leading to an increase in life-threatening conditions such as haemorrhages, miscarriages, and pregnancy-induced hypertension. The military's deliberate targeting of healthcare facilities and workers has further restricted access to medical treatment, violating women's right to health.

### Social and economic consequences

Women and girls face heightened risks of exploitation when facing sex-based violence, including being forced into survival-driven coping mechanisms, including early or forced marriages, transactional sex, and exploitative labour arrangements. Many sacrifice their nutrition for their families, leading to malnutrition and related health complications. Survivors also experience stigma, particularly in cases of sexual violence, where patriarchal norms blame victims rather than perpetrators. Women who become pregnant from sexual violence often face social exclusion, compounding their trauma. The lack of legal protection and accountability mechanisms further exacerbates these harms, as survivors are often left without access to justice or remedies for the crimes committed against them.

The economic impact extends beyond individual survivors, as women who experience violence lose access to employment and education, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Girls subjected to sex-based violence often drop out of school, limiting future opportunities. The economic marginalisation of women reinforces their dependence on male-dominated structures, violating their rights to education and work.

## Wider impact

The intergenerational consequences of sex-based violence are also severe. Children born from rape face lifelong stigma, often growing up without legal recognition or social acceptance. Mothers who have endured sex-based violence struggle with severe trauma, affecting their ability to care for their children. Children witnessing violence toward women and girls internalise these abuses, perpetuating cycles of oppression.

The military's use of sex-based violence has broader implications for Myanmar's struggle for democracy and justice. By systematically targeting women and girls, the military not only inflicts individual harm but also weakens broader resistance movements. The erasure of women and girls from public and political life diminishes the diversity of voices advocating for change, weakening democratic struggles and reinforcing authoritarian rule.

## Emerging forms of sex-based violence

---

Since the military coup, sex-based violence in Myanmar has intensified and taken on new forms. The militarisation of public life and erosion of legal protections have made women increasingly vulnerable. One emerging trend is the use of digital tools to facilitate sex-based violence. Women activists, journalists, and women's rights defenders face online threats, trolling, doxxing, and sexual violence threats, often escalating to real-world harassment, attacks, and detention.

Forced displacement and deprivation have also become systematic methods of sex-based violence. Women in Myanmar are often deliberately denied adequate food, healthcare, employment, and security, forcing many into exploitative survival strategies, including forced marriages and transactional sex. The military's targeting of pregnant women and attacks on healthcare facilities further highlight the use of reproductive control as a weapon.

Sexual violence has worsened nationwide, particularly against politically active women or women who confront military men's sense of dominance. Women detainees face rape, sexual torture, and other forms of abuse as punishment for dissent. Free women face sexual violence and harassment daily, and their situation is worsened due to the lack of the rule of law. This pattern underscores the intersection of political persecution and sex-based oppression.

## Underreported forms of sex-based violence

---

Most sex-based human rights violations likely remain undocumented due to stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of access to support, and systemic impunity. Rape and sexual violence in detention are among the least reported crimes, as survivors remain under the total control of the perpetrator and face threats or further abuse if they speak out. The extent of the use of sexual violence to extract confessions or punish political activism remains comparatively uncovered in discussions on State violence.

Documentation of sex-based violations is likely to be even weaker for women and girls facing intersectional factors, including discrimination based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability.

Another under-recognised form is the forced erasure of women from public life, which is a form of violence. Women’s rights defenders, journalists, and politicians face threats of arrest, execution, and sexual violence, forcing many into hiding or exile. Their displacement disrupts democratic movements and silences women’s voices.

The economic impact of sex-based violence is also overlooked. Survivors often lose jobs, homes, and financial independence, making them more vulnerable to further abuse. This economic marginalisation is not just a consequence of violence but a deliberate tactic to disempower women politically and socially.

## **Role of language in addressing sex-based violence**

The debate between “sex-based violence” (SBV) and “gender-based violence” (GBV) has profound implications in Myanmar, shaped by entrenched patriarchy, the military’s use of sexual violence, and the intersection of political repression with women’s rights. Understanding this distinction is critical for addressing both immediate harm and long-term accountability.

### **The case for “sex-based violence” (SBV)**

Sex-based violence in Myanmar is deeply rooted in military strategy and structural oppression. The military has long used sexual violence, including rape, forced pregnancy, and sexual slavery, as a weapon of war against women and girls. These violations are committed specifically against women because of their biological sex, making SBV a precise term for such atrocities.

Ethnic minority women—particularly Rohingya, Kachin, Karen, and Shan—have been systematically targeted, with rape used as a tool of terror and demographic alteration. The targeting of women’s reproductive capacities highlights the sex-specific nature of these crimes, reinforcing the need for SBV as a framework in legal and advocacy efforts to ensure that crimes specifically inflicted upon women are not diluted in broader gender discussions.

### **The case for “gender-based violence” (GBV)**

While SBV highlights the biological dimension of violence, GBV offers a broader perspective that includes violence against gender-nonconforming individuals. The military targets not only women but also LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender women, who face sexual violence, torture, and arbitrary detention.

Myanmar’s rigid gender roles exacerbate this violence. Patriarchal norms demand that men be dominant and women be submissive. Those who defy these roles—whether women asserting their rights or LGBTQ+ individuals—become targets of State repression and social exclusion. GBV allows for a comprehensive analysis of how enforced gender expectations fuel systemic violence.

## A Balanced Approach

A nuanced approach is necessary that prioritises the individual's rights above intellectual discourse. While GBV encompasses the full spectrum of gendered violence, SBV remains crucial for recognising sex-specific harms inflicted upon women, particularly in military tactics. Future legal and policy frameworks must account for both perspectives, ensuring that Myanmar's deeply patriarchal structures and sex-specific violence are not erased while acknowledging broader gendered oppression.

## Conclusion

The military's systemic use of sex-based violence in Myanmar constitutes a deliberate strategy to silence, subjugate, and erase women and girls from public and political life. From targeted killings and sexual violence to structural discrimination, these violations not only harm individual victims but also reinforce patriarchal and militarised oppression. The international community must take urgent action to hold perpetrators accountable, protect survivors, and address the deep-rooted inequalities that enable such atrocities. Legal frameworks, advocacy, and humanitarian efforts must recognise both sex-based and gender-based violence to ensure no victim is overlooked. Myanmar's women's rights movement requires sustained international support to combat impunity, amplify survivor voices, and promote systemic change.

## Recommendations

- Demand independent investigations and accountability – Urge the UN and international bodies to strengthen independent mechanisms to document, investigate, and prosecute sex-based violence as crimes against humanity.
- Ensure survivor protection and support – Advocate for safe reporting mechanisms, legal aid, trauma-informed care, and emergency relocation for survivors of sexual violence.
- Apply sanctions targeting perpetrators – Press for targeted sanctions on military officials and institutions responsible for sex-based violence, restricting their access to international finance and travel.
- Support women's rights defenders – Strengthen protections and funding for women activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and their associations facing repression, displacement, and violence.