



Karen Human Rights Group
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Statement: International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women
November 25th, 2018

As the world observes the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, KHRG calls on the government of Myanmar to take urgent action to protect the rights of survivors of sexual violence and to bring perpetrators to justice. Widespread sexual violence continues to be an issue in Southeast Myanmar, fuelled by a climate of impunity.

From January 2012 to November 2018, KHRG received 52 reports covering 27 instances of sexual violence against women in Southeast Myanmar. However, these cases tell only a small part of the story. Social and cultural stigma often discourages survivors of sexual violence from reporting this type of crime. Survivors also face many barriers in accessing justice, including a lack of legal counsel, threats by the perpetrator, fear of reprisals and pressure to settle the case informally, including by marrying the perpetrator. The reliance on traditional, male-led, justice mechanisms further denies the survivors their rights, as they have to face delays and bias. Out of the 27 cases documented by KHRG, only one was handled in a court.

Impunity also remains the rule for past sexual violence committed by Tatmadaw soldiers against Karen women in Southeast Myanmar. For decades, widespread sexual assault and rape were part of a systemic pattern of civilian abuse. The use of sexual violence as a way to punish, traumatise and terrorise local communities has been well documented by KHRG and other human rights organisations. Despite this evidence, no action has been taken to bring the perpetrators to justice, and survivors continue to grapple with trauma and to face stigma within their communities. Even though the human rights situation has improved since the signature of the 2012 Preliminary Ceasefire Agreement, local women continue to report security concerns whenever the Tatmadaw operates near their village. In Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, the military continues to use sexual violence as a 'weapon of war' against civilian populations.

The National League for Democracy promised to strengthen legal protections for women by adopting a comprehensive Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women Bill, which has been in development since 2013. However, progress on this issue has stalled. KHRG urges the government of Myanmar to prioritise the adoption of this Bill because the current legislation on sexual violence fails to provide adequate protection for women and girls. Marital rape is not yet a crime under Myanmar law, and women are unable to secure restraining orders against perpetrators of sexual violence.

Taking measures to tackle impunity and strengthening legal protections for victims of sexual violence are a necessity, but so is addressing the root causes of this phenomenon. Gender stereotypes remain pervasive in the country, and they perpetuate harmful practices such as discrimination, violence and coercion. Therefore, KHRG calls on the government to design and implement awareness-raising strategies aiming at promoting gender equality and changing traditional gender norms.

According to KHRG Programme Director Naw Htoo Htoo, “For decades, female survivors of sexual violence have suffered in silence. We owe them justice and protection. The time has come to put an end to the reign of impunity and to create the necessary conditions for women to live a life free of sexual violence.”