



International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

25 November 2020

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) would like to unite their voices in support of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The observation of November 25 as a day to call attention to acts of sexual, physical, or psychological harm committed against women and girls has been occurring since 1980. However, over these last 40 years, far too little has been done. Violence continues to be one of the defining characteristics of life for women all around the world. On this day, and every day, we reinforce our calls for perpetrators of violence against women to be held accountable.

In August 2019, the UN Independent International Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar released its [report](#) on sexual and gender based violence in Burma, detailing how rape and sexual violence had been perpetrated by the Burma Army in northern Burma and in Rakhine State "with the intent to intimidate, terrorise and punish the civilian population and as a tactic of war" -- the same tactic used against our Karen people for decades. The Mission determined that these violations amounted to war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of genocide, necessitating urgent referral to the International Criminal Court. We strongly support this call, as Burma/Myanmar's domestic legal system is currently incapable of holding the military institution to account.

Sexual and gender-based violence is not always committed during conflict; it can include marital rape, harassment, stalking, cultural or traditional practices, or the violation of reproductive rights. Survivors of sexual violence are often blamed for the crimes that are committed against them. Neighbours and even family members may shame them for being attacked because of how they dressed or acted. But being raped or attacked is never a women's fault.

When women do seek justice, they find legal institutions that are inconsistent, unaccountable, exclusive, and dominated by men. Male dominated justice systems risk further perpetuating dangerous cultural beliefs. The Government of Burma/Myanmar must act to protect women from all forms of violence, including state sponsored violence in many forms. And the state must take progressive action to ensure that the human rights of all girls and women are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

The recurrence of sexual and gender-based violence speaks to the urgency required in reforming and strengthening legal mechanisms that hold all perpetrators accountable for their crimes. The crime of violence against women is made more heinous by the culture of impunity that surrounds it. KHRG and KWO therefore reaffirm our calls for accountability. The state must end the impunity of crimes committed by the Burma Army/Tatmadaw and must hold all perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence accountable in civic courts.

The Burmese/Myanmar government must work towards establishing legal mechanisms that serve the needs of survivors and do more to prevent violence against women from happening. If everyone is to truly be equal under the law, the government has to uphold their moral and legal obligations to ensure survivors have access to reliable justice referral pathways. All members of society, both men and women, must commit themselves to this cause. When we witness the emotional, economic, physical and mental abuse of women, we must call it out. Those that speak up must also be protected.

Overall, Burma ranked a disturbing 148 out of 189 countries in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index. Policies must be implemented to ensure women's increased participation as decision makers, and the government must immediately adopt the Prevention of Violence against Women Law that has been stalled in parliament for over seven years. The Government of Burma/Myanmar, as a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, must meet its international human rights obligations towards the women of the country.

We have witnessed too many cases of violence against women. We must do more to prevent the numbers of those abused from rising. It needs to end now. We must eliminate sexual and gender-based violence in our lifetime. Let us leave a world for our daughters where they do not have to be afraid of violence defining their lives and their possibilities.

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