



## **Girl's rights and protection challenges in Southeast Burma**

11<sup>th</sup> October 2022

On this International Day of the Girl Child, we bring your attention to the difficulties faced by girls in Kawthoolei (Karen State, Southeast Burma). Obstacles to growing up in peace, to securing food, to obtaining education, to accessing healthcare, and to attaining justice. The challenge for girls in Burma to remain children; sheltered in a safe environment where they can develop in a wholesome manner. On this 11<sup>th</sup> October, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) call the international community to take concrete action to end violence in Burma, which is harming all girl children in the country.

### **Violations of girls' rights**

Since the 2021 military coup, over 350,000 people have been displaced by the violence and military attacks committed by the State Administrative Council (SAC; or Burma Army) in Kawthoolei. Displacement disproportionately impacts women and children: almost half of all displaced people are children and half of those are girls. Both KHRG and KWO have received numerous reports of women fleeing while pregnant, or right after giving birth. While displaced, people must live in very poor conditions, moving suddenly and often, escaping SAC soldiers and their weapons, constantly at risk of injury or death from landmines, air strikes, and artillery shelling. There is little access to clean water and food, to education, sanitary facilities, and health services, including maternal and paediatric health care.<sup>1</sup>

Women and girls who remain in their villages are also particularly vulnerable to threats and attacks from Burma Army soldiers since many local men are forced to flee to escape systematic arrest and torture by the junta. In one case reported to KHRG, SAC soldiers tortured the wife and child of a villager in order to obtain information about his whereabouts following a nearby bomb explosion.<sup>2</sup> Gross human rights violations are being committed by the military junta against girls in Burma, including forced labour, use of human shields, air strikes and shelling, trafficking in human beings, and sexual violence. Girls' basic rights are being violated in Karen State every minute of every day, including today.

### **Protection challenges and justice**

Under previous military regimes, violence against women and girls (VAWG), including sexual violence and gang rape, committed by Burma Army soldiers was taking place on a wide scale, particularly in

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG, Denied and Deprived: Local communities confronting the humanitarian crisis and protection challenges in Southeast Burma, June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> KHRG, Field Report: Intensification of armed conflict, air and ground attacks, and widespread human rights violations, July-Dec 2021, March 2022.

conjunction with forced portering.<sup>3</sup> These military leaders and soldiers enjoyed total impunity for their crimes, and still do to this day. Lack of jurisdiction over Burma Army personnel by the civilian justice systems remains one of the biggest challenges in combatting sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the country. Since the 2021 military coup, villagers in Karen State have reported sending young women and girls to hiding sites to protect them whenever the Burma military enters their village or sets up nearby camps.<sup>4</sup>

Crimes of sexual nature committed by the Burma Army soldiers do not get reported, as impunity prevails. Since the coup, SGBV crimes reported in Karen areas are those perpetrated by community and family members, which are prosecuted through local community procedures which are still functioning, albeit with even fewer resources and less security. The current situation of conflict hinders the legislation and justice mechanisms in place, that already fell short of ensuring adequate protection for survivors. Stigma placed by the community on survivors of SGBV diminish reporting, justice-seeking processes, and the welfare of women and girls. Girl victims of sexual violence do not expect to get justice; it is not something we can celebrate today.

### **Call to action**

In the current situation in the country, girls in Southeast Burma are increasingly exposed to violence and insecurity. KWO and KHRG urge the international community to:

- Put pressure on the military junta and its army to stop killing and injuring children, and eradicate all violence against girl children.
- Stop selling weapons, ammunition, aircrafts, and jet fuel to the military junta, and sanction those companies and individuals responsible for arms deals.
- Make violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, a stand-alone designation criterion for sanctions where possible, and include it as a criterion in more sanction regimes.
- Direct funding earmarked for protection services for victims of SGBV and other forms of violence to local existing CSO/CBOs (in Burma and neighbouring countries) already operating on the ground so that they can expand and develop support programmes and services, including child protection services.
- Prioritise and strengthen methods of humanitarian aid delivery that are cross border and organised by local CSO/CBOs and ethnic service providers that have the networks for local implementation of support programmes.
- Do not act in any way to legitimise the SAC. Do not collaborate with the SAC to implement any development or humanitarian programs.
- Take immediate action to bring military leaders in Burma who permitted and perpetuated systematic and widespread child abuse, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) to justice in international courts and tribunals.

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<sup>3</sup> KHRG, Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers' voices from southeast Myanmar, October 2017.

<sup>4</sup> KHRG, Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update, August 2021.