



STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN BURMA

*Challenges facing women amid escalating
conflict in Kawthoolei (aka Karen State)*

This briefing paper was produced by the
Karen Women's Organization (KWO)



INTRODUCTION

Since the attempted coup in Burma in February 2021, the State Administration Council (SAC) junta and its military forces have tried to take control of the country, using brutal and extreme violence against the civilian population and creating a humanitarian crisis. We see their violence everywhere. Violence and conflict destroy lives, livelihoods, the economy, and families but women are disproportionately affected. Existing inequalities and inequities get magnified and even decades after a conflict, women continue to bear the brunt. Conflicts make women more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation as social networks break down along with institutions that prevent gender-based violence. Thousands of people in Burma have been killed, injured, arrested and tortured. More than one million people are now displaced from their homes, fleeing the attacks and threats of the SAC soldiers and their militias. The economy is disintegrating and millions of people are now facing extreme food insecurity. Women are suffering from this large-scale violence every day.

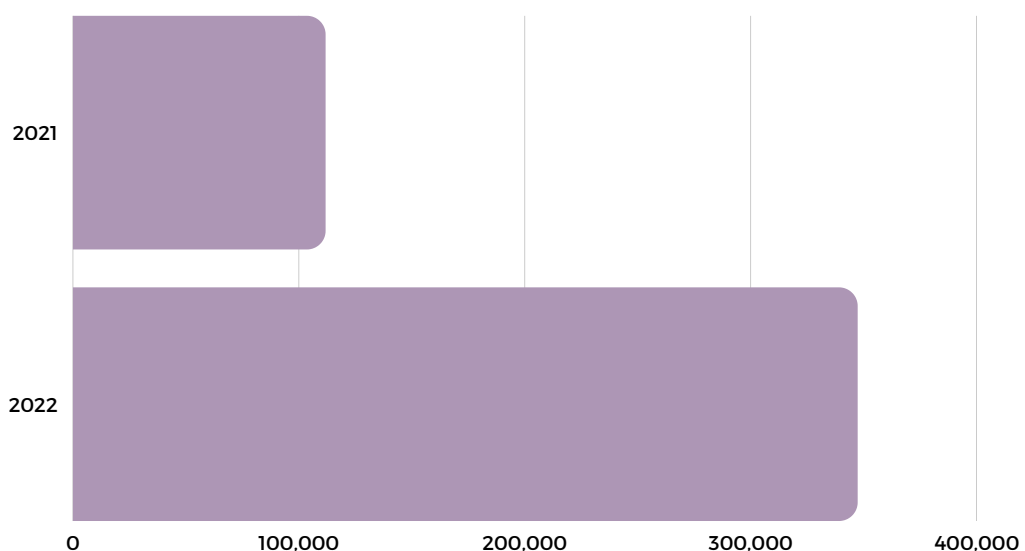
The junta has scaled up attacks in ethnic administration areas, targeting civilians, including in Kawthoolei. There is frequent indiscriminate firing against civilians, including aerial and ground strikes by the military junta, which has resulted in the forced displacement of at least 347,000 people in Kawthoolei. People have had to flee, while their villages are burned to the ground, shelled or bombed by Burma Army soldiers and their aircraft.

Approximately 55% of the IDPs are adults, and 45% are children under 18. So this means approximately 254,000 women and children are displaced, in Kawthoolei alone. They have fled their homes and are hiding in temporary shelters in forests, makeshift bunkers, or are hiding in caves, to protect themselves.

Clashes between the armed wing of the Karen National Union, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and the military junta have increased, as people all over Burma resist the junta's attempts to take control. All local communities are in danger daily. In Kawthoolei the Burma Army attacks have concentrated on six of the seven districts: Doo Tha Htu, Kler Lwee Htu, Bli D'weh, Mutraw, Taw Oo, and Dooplaya. As junta soldiers move into new areas and attempt to squash all opposition, women must make difficult decisions. They must decide whether it is safer to flee as the SAC soldiers approach, or to risk staying. Fleeing and being displaced is full of difficulty, but staying in your village with SAC soldiers nearby and conflict taking place, makes women and children especially vulnerable. There is a higher risk of physical and sexual violence, and infant and maternal mortality increase.

The offensives by the Burma Army against the Karen people have continued for decades. Like many ethnic people, the Karen have felt the worsening impacts on daily life since the attempted coup. This short briefing paper by the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) will look at the challenges women face in conflict and highlight their resilience and how community-based organizations are supporting displaced communities.

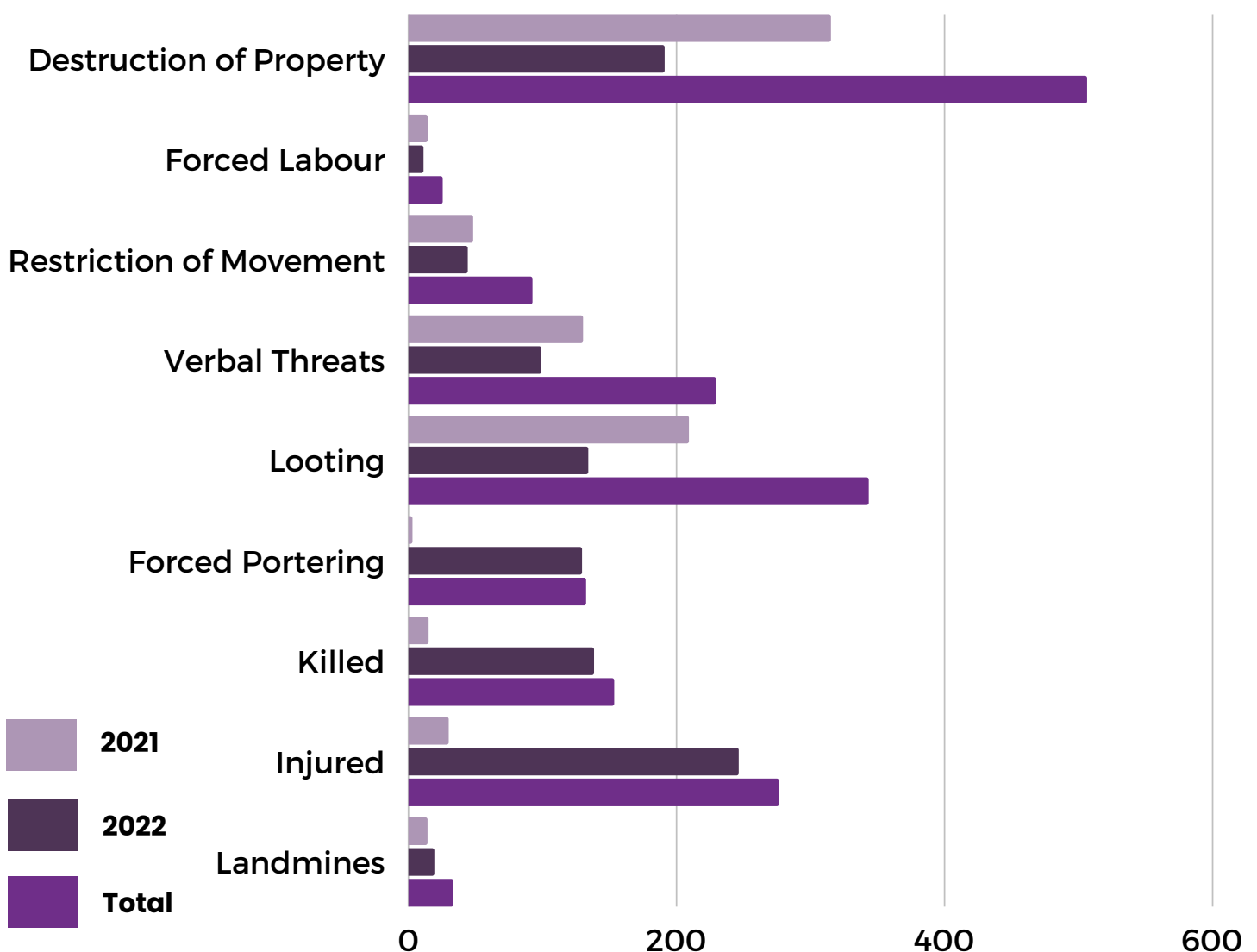
Increase in IDPs in Karen State Between 2021 and 2022



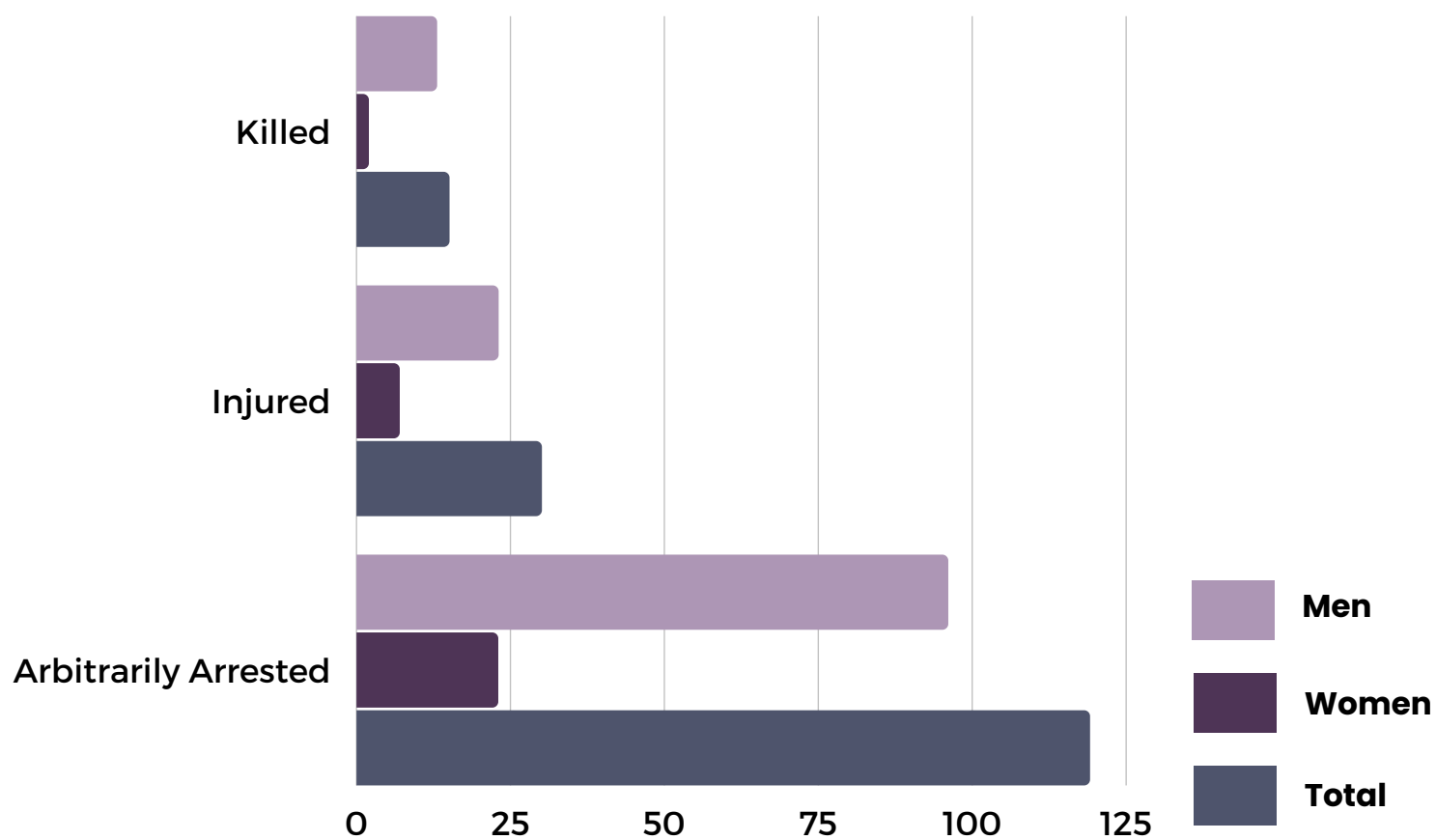
KWO'S DOCUMENTED HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The violence that has overwhelmed the country since the attempted coup has violated the basic human rights of the Karen people and put thousands of lives in jeopardy. Between 2021 and 2022, KWO documented 2,999 cases of human rights violations perpetrated by the Burma Army against civilians in Karen State. These include forced labor, arbitrary arrest, unlawful detainment, destruction of property, threats, torture, and attacks causing death or serious injuries. KWO has documented reports of 153 people killed including 30 women. And of the 276 civilians reported wounded, 117 were women. There are 447 cases of looting and at least 171 burned homes, by the military since 1 February 2021. The actual numbers are certainly much higher as many human rights violations have not been able to be reported or documented.

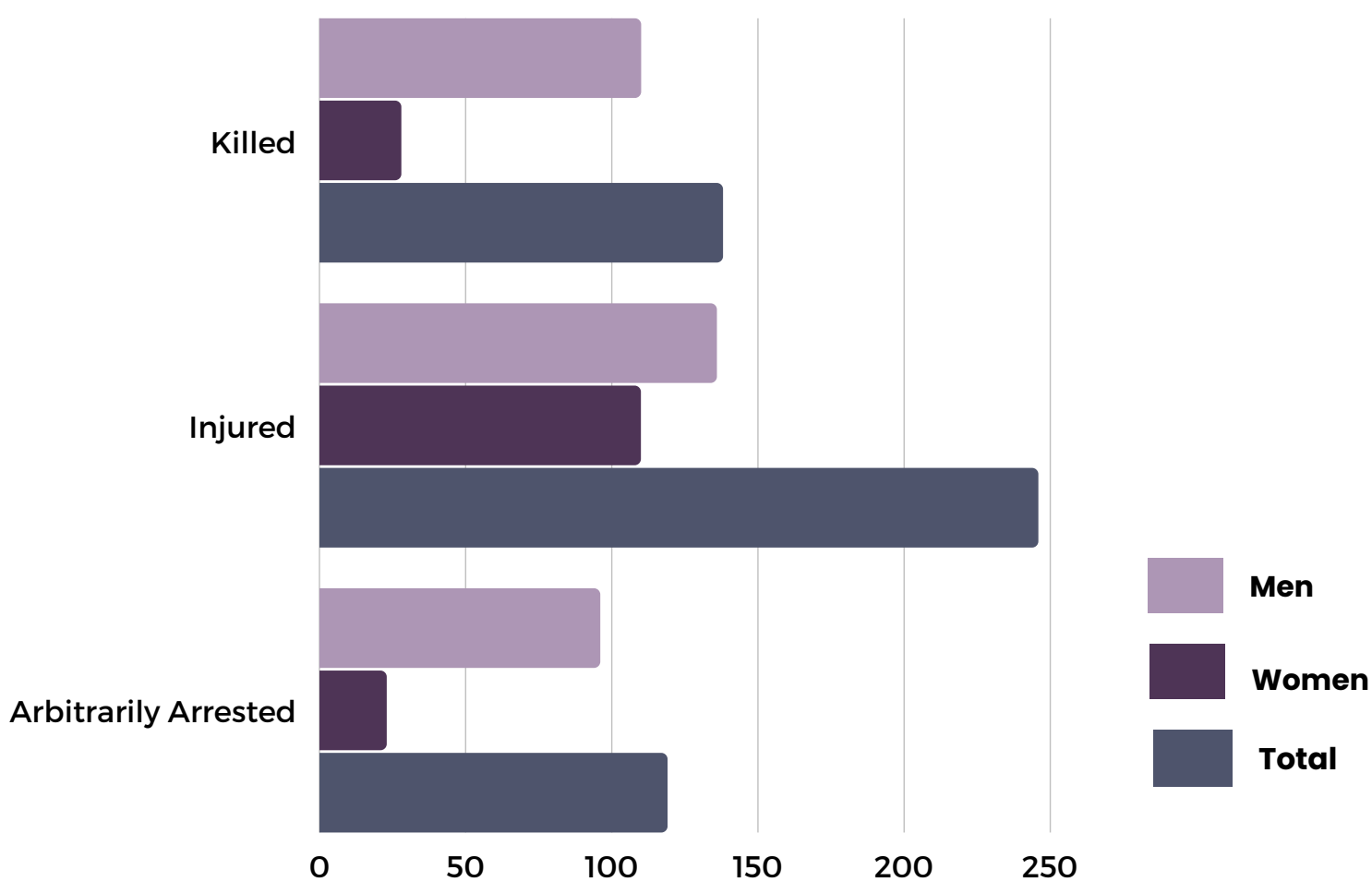
Below is a breakdown of the reported human rights violations in Kawthoolei perpetrated by the Burma Army in 2021-22. Women were affected by the unlawful conduct of the military junta. Please see a breakdown of the crimes committed specifically against women throughout 2021 and 2022.



Civilians Killed, Injured and Arrested in Kawthoolei (2021)



Civilians Killed, Injured and Arrested in Kawthoolei (2022)



SAC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN KAWTHOOLEI

The violence of the SAC Burma Army has caused direct and indirect harm to Karen women and children. There are many types of challenges women are facing to their safety, livelihoods, health and education. Karen women are a strong and resilient force in the community and they need more support and recognition.

SAFETY

Karen women now cannot safely travel to work to earn income or grow or gather food. Children cannot walk safely to school. When the Burma Army attacks or approaches, women will decide to flee, but if there are small children or elderly parents sometimes they must stay and face the soldiers. No place is really safe. In most villages, before the Burma Army enters, everyone will flee. Women and girls caught by the junta face torture, sexual violence, abuse and risk to their lives. Those who manage to escape are less likely to be subjected to this violence.

The current violence in Burma has decreased the safety and security of women and children and also weakened the capacity of communities to enforce laws. This has allowed more crimes against women to take place with impunity. The daily stresses of the current situation are also causing breakdowns in the safety of family households as we see higher rates of substance abuse and we see that women living in situations of domestic violence are reporting increases in the abusive patterns of behavior by husbands.



CARING FOR THE FAMILY

Women as the primary caregiver in Karen culture, provide safety and care for children, the elderly and other vulnerable family members. Under current violent conditions, local resources and systems have deteriorated so that women are struggling to find enough food, water and funds. Family members who depend on women for their daily survival are at higher risk of harm. Women are providing care also to those in the family who are injured. And if a woman is injured or killed, all the children and vulnerable individuals she is caring for are suddenly without protection and care.

Thousands of women and their families have been forced to flee the conflict and violence and now live/ hide in temporary shelters in the forest instead of in their homes. There are less of essential resources available to care for the family. With the associated breakdown in health services, food security, water supply and shelter, there are significant increases in death and disease rates among women, children and the most vulnerable. These are the indirect harms of violence.

HEALTH

Women living near high-intensity conflicts have three times higher mortality than women in peaceful settings. Conflict and violence directly affect the survival chances of women and children by increasing malnutrition, physical injuries, infectious diseases, poor mental health, and poor sexual and reproductive health. Local groups are trying hard to keep their locally-run health systems going but face huge obstacles.

Girls and women are facing challenges, especially in reproductive health, personal hygiene and sanitary needs. Women continue to menstruate, require contraception, fall pregnant, and give birth, even when there are bombs dropping around us or we are running to safety. Often there is limited access to clean water, or it is too far away. We cannot carry enough materials and soaps to keep ourselves as clean as we want to, so our personal hygiene and dignity are suffering. The current violence has greatly decreased access to essential maternal and reproductive health services, contraceptives, and supplies. Women who are

pregnant, giving birth, or caring for an infant, do not have secure access to medical support if needed and their lives are put at risk. Women who fall pregnant and women with small children are especially suffering increased anxiety about how to provide for themselves and their families. When women are displaced, they are also much more susceptible to water-borne and mosquito-borne diseases such as cholera, dengue fever and malaria. A lack of clean drinking water and nutritious foods weakens the immune system.

Armed conflict is also creating a threat of infectious diseases by eroding surveillance and disease control systems. Fundamental disease control measures such as vaccinations, sanitation, and safe drinking water all come under threat in conflict settings. The Burma Army has specifically targeted health workers and attacked health clinics so there are fewer trained staff and equipment available to provide basic healthcare.

Food security is under great threat now as Karen farmers cannot safely plant or care for crops. We will soon face big increases in the number of children affected by chronic malnutrition and hunger. Mothers will often forgo food so their children can eat thus causing high rates of malnutrition among women as well.

Walking into the forest or farm to look for food is a life-or-death decision. More than 33 landmine incidents wounding civilians were documented by KWO in the 2021-22 period. We know there are many, many more not able to be reported. Landmine injuries and injuries from Burma Army artillery and bombs have become more common, with women and children as victims. Explosive devices can cause injury either at the time of intended detonation or as unexploded remnants. The long-term safety of the land is being destroyed. Many injuries will continue to be endured in the future when remnants of the war are exploded by predominantly non-combatant civilians, in the course of daily food gathering and household work, including women and children.



SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Women living in conflict areas are subject to the ongoing threat of sexual violence. The Burma Army has long used rape as a weapon of war to terrorize and intimidate ethnic women. Prolonged militarization in Karen State has had disastrous impacts on local communities. Under the military junta, soldiers and officers of the Burma Army are never held accountable for their crimes. There is no trust in the junta's justice system so many victims of sexual violence perpetrated by the military do not report their cases. Even for civil society groups, documenting cases of gender-based violence perpetrated by soldiers is difficult, as survivors feel disempowered and unsafe and are wary of the social stigma. Women who are fleeing for their lives set other priorities which include their own physical safety, their children's safety, and access to safe sites far from the conflict zones. As a result, many victims of sexual violence are forced to endure the pain and trauma with less support from community services.

Conflict and displacement have also weakened local justice mechanisms and capacities. Women who are victims of sexual violence from intimate partners receive inadequate protection and response. Sexual and gender-based violence has major effects on the physical and mental health of women and girls, including injuries from rape, and HIV.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOODS

EDUCATION

Limited access to education due to the junta's violence has left children and adults with fewer learning options. Young boys and girls have had their education forcibly put on hold as the Burma Army bombs villages and schools. Local people are trying very hard to keep their locally-run education systems in place despite the active conflict. In remote areas, even in communities which are displaced, they still encourage children to review their school work daily.

The Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) operates 1,233 schools in Kawthoolei. There are 7,946 teachers and 78% of them are women. Burma Army attacks and threats have closed 20% of the schools, with teachers and children hiding in bunkers to study, returning to classrooms when possible. 60% of other schools are on high alert all the time. It is mostly women who are teaching and caring for these children each day. They shoulder enormous responsibilities each day, to prepare for the security and protection of the children under their care. When whole communities are displaced, the teachers and other volunteers run small group learning activities often in dangerous conditions. The lack of daily security and comfort provided to children and teachers in schools has caused great distress and anxiety for all.



School buildings have been bombed by the SAC army planes and soldiers, and the remaining schools are at high risk of being destroyed. Some parents have sent their children to stay in “student dormitories” far away so they can continue going to school in a different place where it is safer. This means that their children have to stay far away from the support and protection of their family. Due to the many dangers, while travelling, a lot of parents choose not to send their daughters, so we are seeing fewer girls in school. There has been a big increase in the number of students in what are considered comparatively safer areas. KWO has received many more requests from communities needing more support for the student dormitories. The number of dormitories we support has doubled in 12 months.

LIVELIHOODS

With huge inflation, and disrupted business routes, the cost of essential goods, including the Karen people’s staple food of rice, has increased beyond the means of a typical household's income. Many people are facing extreme poverty. Women are being denied the right to work safely. Violence is preventing women from earning income. For most Karen people, their most reliable source of income comes from farming and small businesses. Since clashes between the Burma Army and Karen opposition groups have increased, the Burma Army has deliberately planted landmines in civilian areas, around farms and markets, and there is frequent indiscriminate shelling of farms, orchards and around villages. Women are afraid to go out and work or look for food. When women cannot access their farms for food, it puts them and their families at greater risk of malnutrition and food insecurity. This danger discourages women from traveling to their crops or military-occupied villages. The lack of income for women who have to manage the finances in the family has led to extreme stress.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

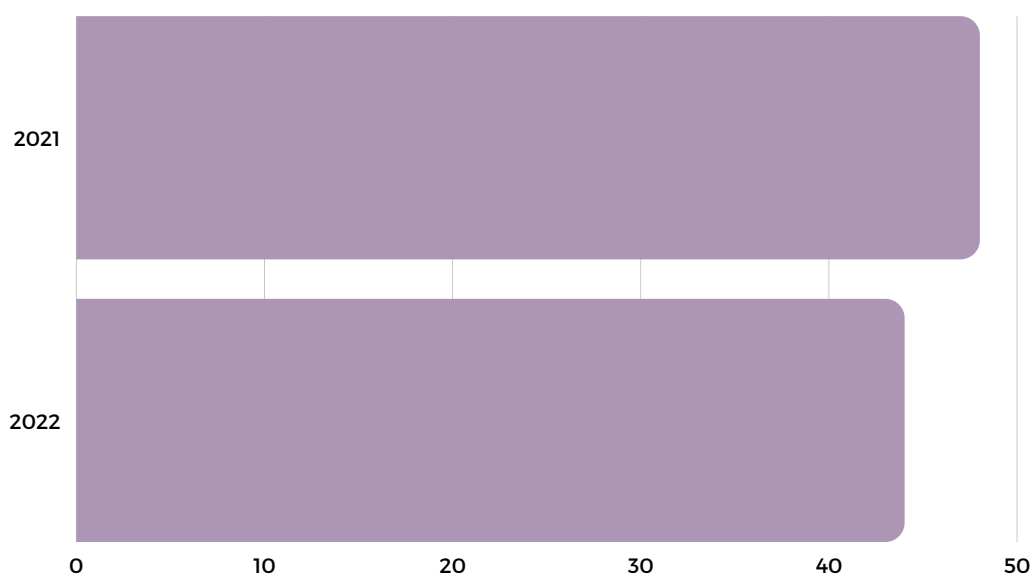
In Kawthoolei, the Burma Army is constantly reinforcing its troops, strengthening its military camps, and sending food supplies and equipment for its many soldiers. As they approach any town or village, they arrest and detain local people as they try to conduct small businesses to earn some income or to quietly move away to safer areas.

Military checkpoints have been established along crucial transportation routes where civilians are stopped and extorted for their possessions. Those who resist are subjected to arbitrary arrest, which in many cases has resulted in death in military custody. Women and girls are especially at risk at these checkpoints. Women, especially expectant mothers and those who have just given birth, often require care from a health worker and access to medical facilities in case of complications. Under the stressful circumstances of displacement and restricted travel, they and their babies are not safe.

KWO documented more than 100 cases of serious travel restrictions in the 2021-22 period. The travel restrictions are announced by Burma Army personnel through the many “orders” sent into villages. The villagers are told they can no longer move around freely. This means they can no longer go to another town or market to buy food and other essentials.

If caught by the Burma Army while hiding or while travelling, everyone is at risk of being detained and forced to porter, or be used as guides, or human shields. It is especially high risk for women and children. The people are made to carry the heavy equipment of soldiers and forfeit any food, water, or materials they may have. Conditions during these periods of detention are harsh with little rest, or food. Men, women, girls and boys are often the victims of abuse and violence at these times. Many have not returned to their families.

Restrictions on Freedom of Movement in Kaawthoolei Between 2021 and 2022





KWO'S EMERGENCY HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

KWO is coordinating closely with community groups and structures and providing direct support to communities who are conflict-affected and/or displaced. We apply our own experience and knowledge to ensure the unique needs of women, children, and the most vulnerable people are not overlooked. In the first 6 months of 2022, KWO provided emergency assistance to 121,444 individuals (male and female) in Kawthoolei.

"We were in hiding in the forest for many days. Then some local leaders found us and gave us some food and a tarpaulin. That helped saved our lives. It made us feel so good that we were not forgotten, that we were not alone in our troubles. I don't know how long we will have to stay here," said a Karen IDP woman.

KWO provides food packs, baby kits for new mothers, hygiene items, sanitary pads, tarpaulins, equipment for drinking water, and clothes. We also provide child protection kits and women's protection kits. We support the care needs of patients injured or in critical condition. We also provide cash support to individuals and families who are in high-risk places, with Burma Army

soldiers nearby, so it is too dangerous to send materials to them. We provide cash support also to people who have a family member who has been killed or injured by Burma Army air attacks and mortar shelling.

While continuing to run our regular programs, KWO has had to give a lot of time and effort to the more recent emergency humanitarian aid and try to ensure they receive life-saving support. Despite the challenges faced by our communities, we are resilient and continue to help and care for each other. We continue to operate our services and projects in all areas whenever possible.

Local groups, including KWO, lead humanitarian aid delivery along the Thai-Burma border. Karen community and governance groups based along the border, with offices, staff, and access to resources, have been working together to respond to needs as they arise. We coordinate closely with each other, so we do not duplicate each other's efforts or waste resources. We share duties and responsibilities based on what resources and capacity we each have so that the needs of the people in trouble are addressed as fully and quickly as possible. We know the people and geography, and we know each other. We speak the same language, and we can communicate quickly and easily.



KWO working area in Refugee camps and Kaw Thoo Lei



Images:

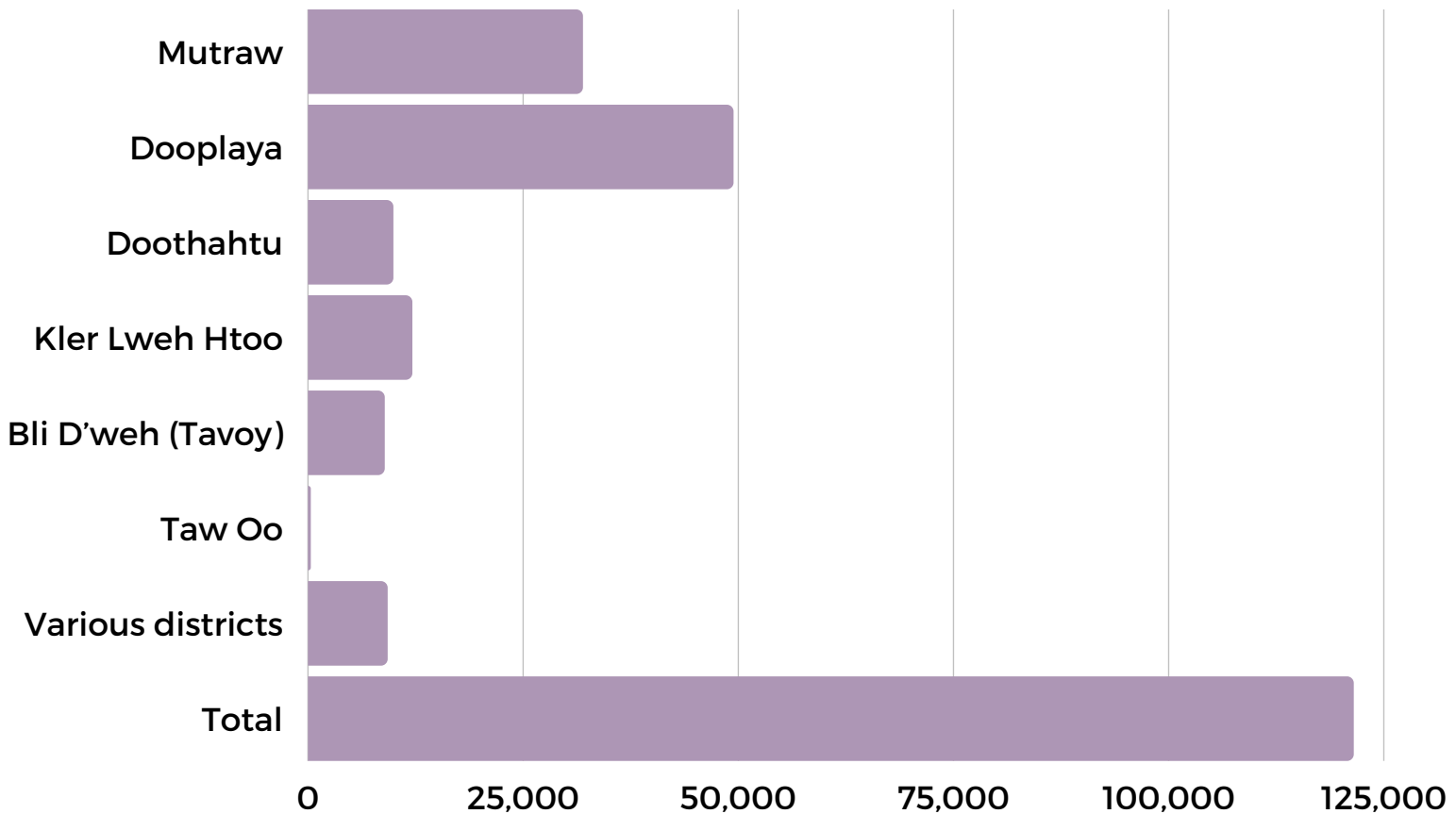
Left: KWO lives and works in the seven districts of Karen State, Burma, and in seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border.

The seven Districts where KWO works in Karen State are:

1. Doo Tha Htu
2. Taw Oo
3. Kler Lwee Htu
4. Bli/Dweh
5. Mutraw
6. Doo Pla Ya
7. Pa An

Below: A chart detailing the beneficiaries who received assistance from KWO in six districts of Kawthoolei.

Number of Beneficiaries from KWO IDP assistance in the Six Districts of Kawthoolei.



CONCLUSION

While committing blatant human rights violations on a mass scale, the Burma Army is desperately seeking to gain control of the country and achieve some legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. There is a huge level of violence initiated by the SAC junta and they are targeting civilians. Women are not safe. Children are not safe. No one is safe.

In the face of many challenges, women demonstrate their courage and resilience but are struggling to cope with the effects of relentless violence.

Women and children who are exposed to direct violence, and to the constant threat of violence, suffer from increased levels of trauma and stress and see family and social structures break down.

The junta's military forces are guilty of perpetrating acts of violence against women on a daily basis and are directly and indirectly causing extreme harm and death.

KWO calls on the international community to take more effective actions, and impose more sanctions and boycotts on the SAC junta so that they will be disabled, disarmed and disbanded. We want to see the extreme violence perpetrated against us come to an immediate end. Many years of impunity have emboldened the junta and they continue to commit atrocities without fear of consequences. Strong messages must be sent that make clear no one is above the law. Refer the junta to the International Criminal Court, among other punitive actions. The global community must not fail us.



KWO ADVOCACY CALLS

- Increase cross-border support and aid through community-based organizations and existing structures, for IDPs and conflict-affected populations most in need. Make sure funds are easy to access, with only minimal administrative requirements, so that local CBOs and women's groups can be supported.
- Earmark funds for women's and girls' specific needs, including hygiene packs, and nutritious food for pregnant women and new mothers; support local services to respond to gender-based violence.
- Apply military pressure: do not sell weapons or fuel for planes to the Burma Army.
- Apply diplomatic pressure: do not recognize the State Administration Council (SAC) in any way.
- Apply economic pressure: don't do business with the Burma Army; instead, apply targeted sanctions against them. There must be no investment or business dealings with the military junta.
- Seek accountability and justice for victims: this includes, but is not limited to, supporting the Gambia case against Burma at the International Court of Justice and the referral of the Burma Military to the International Criminal Court.
- Advocate for improved conditions for refugees living in camps in Thailand: increase aid, and provide legal documents so refugees can travel and work.





The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) is a community organization of indigenous Karen women working in protection and our programs directly serve women, girls, children, and the most vulnerable people in our community.

KWO Vision: In a federal Burma, all communities have gender equality, the protection and promotion of indigenous people's rights, human rights, and justice.

KWO Mission: KWO is an ethnic women's community-based organization that empowers women so they have the capacity and power to solve their own problems and participate in decision-making that will affect their lives.

KWO participates in the struggle to stop all kinds of oppression of women and of children and provides support for communities on the Thai-Burma border and in Karen State, Burma.



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