



# **Sexual Violence Against Women under the Political Instability**



Analysis Paper

June 2023



## Situations of sexual violence during the attempted military coup

Myanmar has been under the military rule for over 70 years and the military government has systematically committed sexual violence against women. Women have experienced the worst sexual violence where ongoing conflict occurs, especially in ethnic areas.

The Women's League of Burma has consistently documented sexual violence against women in conflict zones and the system of impunity that exists in Myanmar and has released several reports on these issues. The latest report, published in January 2014, described military-perpetrated sexual violence in ethnic communities as the "Same Impunity, Same Patterns" and included 104 cases<sup>1</sup> of sexual violence against women and girls from the 2010 elections to January 2014.

Since the attempted military coup in 2021 until now in 2023, sexual violence continues to be committed as a method of interrogation and a weapon of war in conflict zones.

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<sup>1</sup> Women's League of Burma, 2014 January [https://www.womenofburma.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/2014\\_Jan\\_SameImpunitySamePattern\\_Burmese-final.pdf](https://www.womenofburma.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/2014_Jan_SameImpunitySamePattern_Burmese-final.pdf)

Women of all ages and from various backgrounds were among the street protesters who came out against the attempted military coup and the junta. Besides joining the protest, many women from various social backgrounds and ages have participated in this struggle in multiple ways; female civil servants joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, young women joined the strikes, housewives participated in pot-banging and joined the strike from home, they have provided food and drinks to the young peaceful protesters, and many women have helped in hiding young activists and protesters during the crackdown.

The military junta brutally shot and killed many of those who opposed them. Others have been arrested and tortured. There have also been cases of sexual violence during interrogations of all genders.

The terrorist army intentionally uses the above methods to weaken women's political participation. Such sexual violence is dominated by patriarchal practices, which are a part of Myanmar's culture, and because of the lack of rules of law and legal regulations it is difficult for women survivors to speak out about their experiences regarding sexual violence.

According to the information from credible news media sources collected by the Burmese Women's Union, among the sexual harassment and abuses during interrogations, there was a woman whom the members of the terrorist army sexually abused in front of her father during the interrogation. In addition, members of the terrorist army inappropriately touched the breast of Ma Win Win Ko and attempted to rape her during the interrogation.<sup>2</sup>

According to Ko Ye Mon, a Frontier Myanmar journalist who was arrested at Yangon International Airport in December 2021, he was raped in the interrogation center by the terrorist army soldiers, and these terrorist soldiers committed sexual violence against people regardless of their gender.<sup>3</sup> The fact that these terrorist soldiers dared to commit sexual violence against this well-known national journalist, is a very worrisome indication of the condition of the women who were arrested and interrogated by the terrorist army.

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<sup>2</sup> Myanmar Now, Jan 17, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/mm/news/10110>

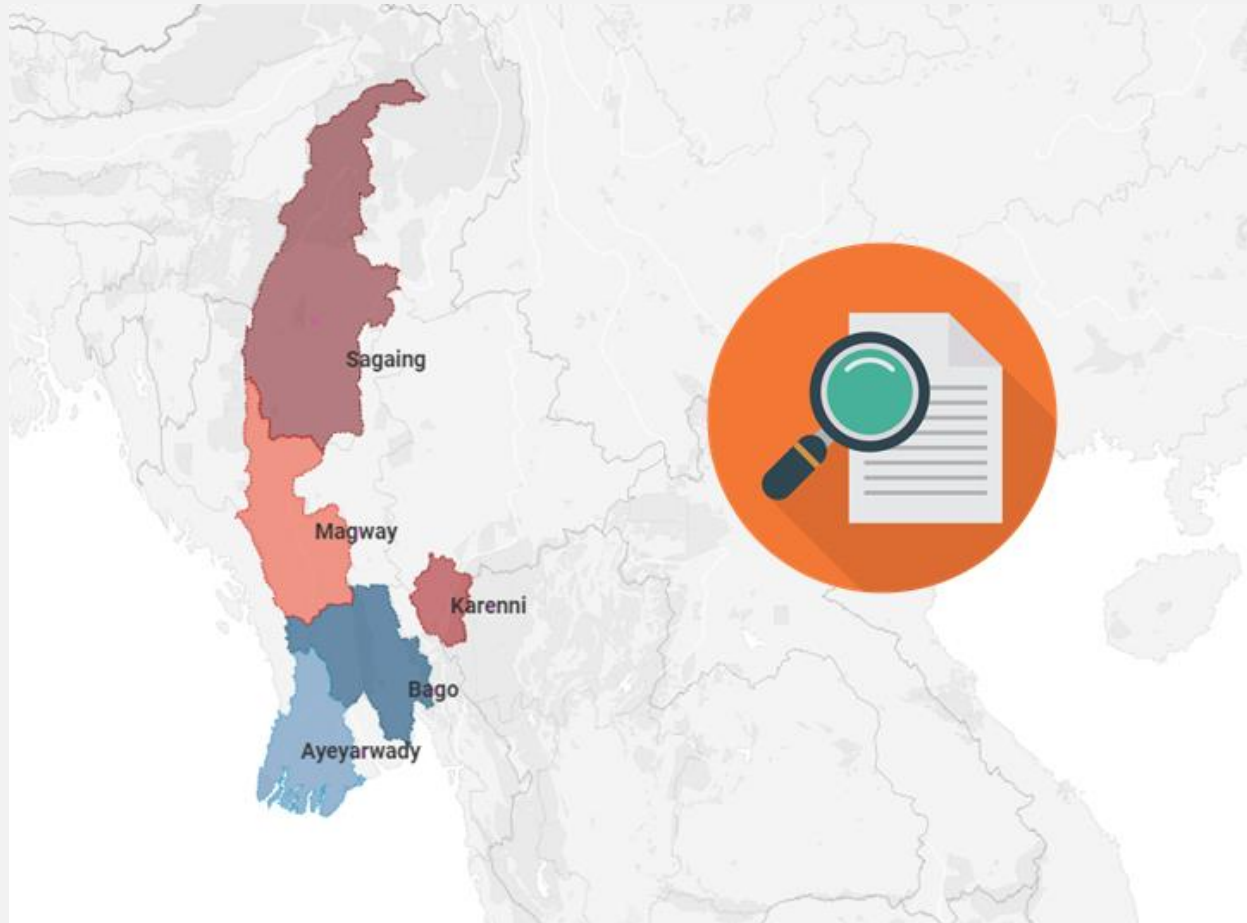
<sup>3</sup> Frontier Myanmar, Sep 16, <https://bit.ly/42TkePI>

As the attempted coup d'état continues, armed rebellions against the terrorist army continued to gradually expand, and the repression and torture by the terrorist army became more and more brutal. In order to control the people through fear, the terrorist army burned villages, torturing and killing those captured and using local people as human shields. The cruelest act of military junta was that the bodies of captured and killed women showed signs of sexual abuse.

Therefore, BWU has observed that the terrorist army has used rape as a weapon of war for many years during their offensive attacks in ethnic areas, and now, they intentionally and systematically continue to use this tactic during the current attempted coup.

Political instability and conflict affecting the entire country have exacerbated the situation of sexual violence against women. Not only have military soldiers under the military junta committed sexual harassment and violence but other armed groups have too. The sexual violence committed by civilians against civilians is also a challenge to achieving justice in this situation of political instability and dysfunctional government mechanisms.

In the current situation, victims of sexual violence have not only lost their way to get justice for the sexual violence that they have experienced, but they have also gradually lost a safe and peaceful community.



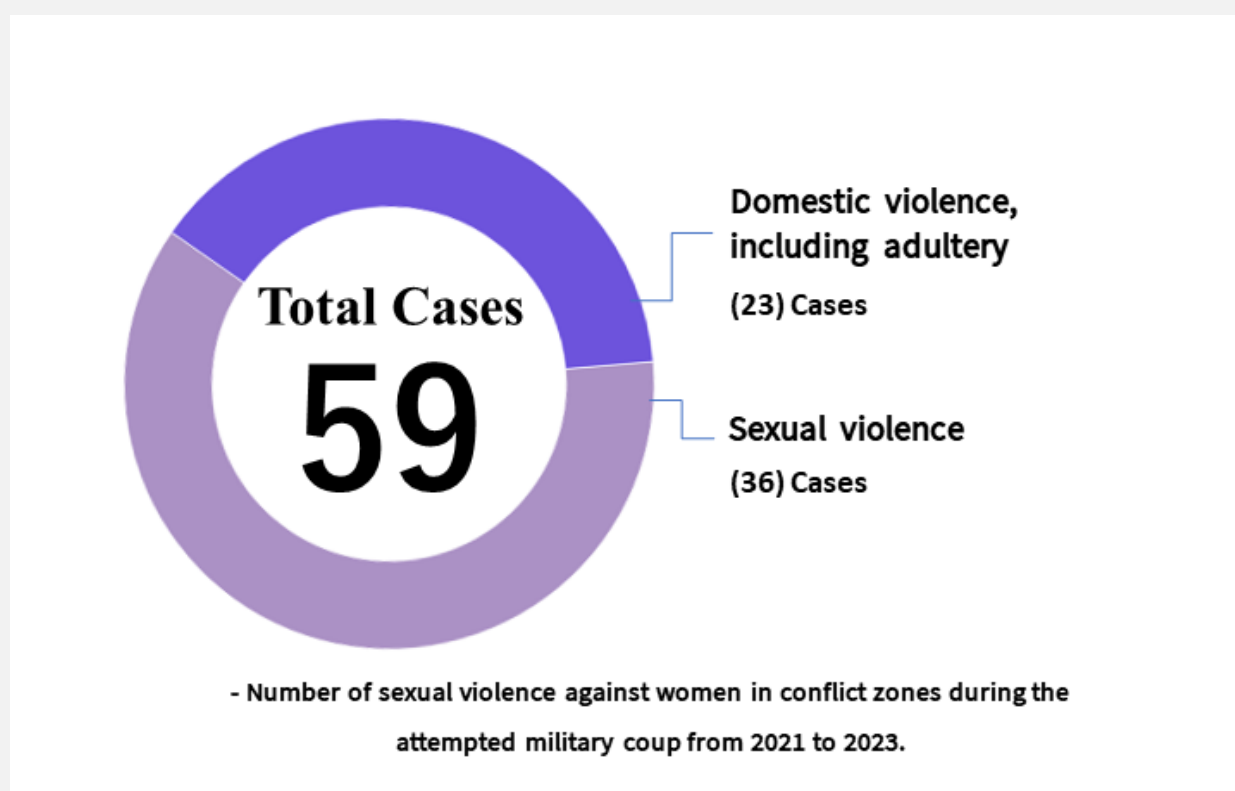
## Methodology

This analysis paper is based on the information and data collected by the Burmese Women's Union from 2022 to 2023 about incidents that took place since the beginning of the attempted coup in 2021. BWU has targeted and collected sexual violence-related data from Ayeyarwaddy Region, Sagaing Region, Magway Region, Bago Region, and Karenni State between May 2022 to April 2023. Before data was collected from the field through interviews, the working team first verified the incidents and assessed the category of incident.

After that, in order to gather detailed information, data was collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews. In addition to collecting field data from targeted areas, we also collected sexual violence-related news and data from reliable media groups. Due to our agreement with the interview participants, the details of the interviews we collected will not be included in this paper.

## The status of the cases:

The Burmese Women's Union has collected and documented sexual violence-related incidents in BWU's five target areas: Karenni State and Sagaing, Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions, which occurred during the attempted military coup from 2021 to 2023. In the data we collected, there were a total of 36 cases of sexual violence and 23 cases of domestic violence, including adultery, documented in the field and 54 cases of sexual violence collected from reliable news media.



Burmese Women's Union has divided the collected data into three sections as follows:

- **Cases committed by the military**
- **Cases committed by other armed groups**
- **Cases committed by civilians against other civilians**

## Cases committed by the Myanmar military:

In one year, BWU collected nine cases of sexual violence and sexual harassment committed by military soldiers through interviews, and some of the cases were suspected of having been committed by the army as a body was found near their army base.

Moreover, BWU found that most of the news reports of sexual violence against women collected from reliable news media were reports of incidents committed by the military. For example, according to the news, on the night of November 11, 2021, members of the terrorist Myanmar army forces repeatedly gang-raped a pregnant woman and a postpartum mother in the village of Ap Lwal, Tedim Township, Chin State.<sup>4</sup>

Married women, including a 14-year-old girl, were among those raped and killed by the terrorist army. In addition, it was found that the men, including the two-year-old child who was with the woman, were also killed. We found six cases of sexual violence committed against women by the terrorist army in Magway Region. Then, there was one case from Bago Region, one from Sagaing Region, and one from Ayeyarwaddy Region. The terrorist army has often entered and burned down entire villages in that area.

Furthermore, the terrorist army not only tortures and kills those captured in the villages they attack but also rapes and kills women. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, in Gangaw Township, Magway Region, the terrorist army soldiers arrested a father and a son, raped the 14-year-old daughter, and burned them all to death.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a woman was raped and killed after the terrorist army offensive attacked Gangaw Township, Magway Region, six men were also killed in this incident.<sup>6</sup>

In Sagaing Region the junta could not operate its military dictatorship. This is also a region where the Myanmar army has been hurt militarily due to the resilience of the armed resistance forces. Therefore, the terrorist army brutally committed human rights violation such as

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<sup>4</sup> Irrawaddy, 19 Nov 2021.

[https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/interview/2021/11/19/247573.html?fbclid=IwAR3pgkfUKG4Gckj\\_osLjJsMkUbO4yd\\_iLMrb1gw8Xh7dWXbldGnH23EUgRU](https://burma.irrawaddy.com/opinion/interview/2021/11/19/247573.html?fbclid=IwAR3pgkfUKG4Gckj_osLjJsMkUbO4yd_iLMrb1gw8Xh7dWXbldGnH23EUgRU)

<sup>5</sup> Burmese Women's Union's documentation (Magway Region)

<sup>6</sup> Khit Thit Media, September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3M2vBOP> )

burning and destroying villages, torturing and killing civilians, and raping women in that Region.

According to the data collected through news agencies, the terrorist army raped one mentally disabled woman and seven other local women from two villages in Kani Township, Sagaing Region, on September 6, 2022.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, on July 11, 2022, the terrorist army raided the village of Taung Ywar Thit in Palae Township, Sagaing Region. During this incident, two young girls were raped and killed, and two other locals were also killed.<sup>8</sup>



**Photo - A military shirt and a piece of paper found in the vicinity of the village where Kani residents who were fleeing the war were raped on September 4th. (Yangon Khitthit Media)**

<sup>7</sup> Khit Thit Media, September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3M2vBOP> )

<sup>8</sup> Khit Thit Media, September 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3LzKDLm>)



## Findings:

According to the data we gathered, the terrorist army frequently cuts off access to the internet in areas where there is active armed conflict and continuously committed sexual violence against women. It was discovered that their crimes involved children of all ages, and the elderly.

On the other hand, it has been challenging to build strong evidence of cases committed by the terrorist army, especially when connecting with eyewitnesses. It was a massive challenge for us as the eyewitnesses continued to displace and flee from one place to another due to the terrorist army's burning of the entire village and their offensive attack. Likewise, some eyewitnesses refuse to be interviewed because of concerns for their safety.

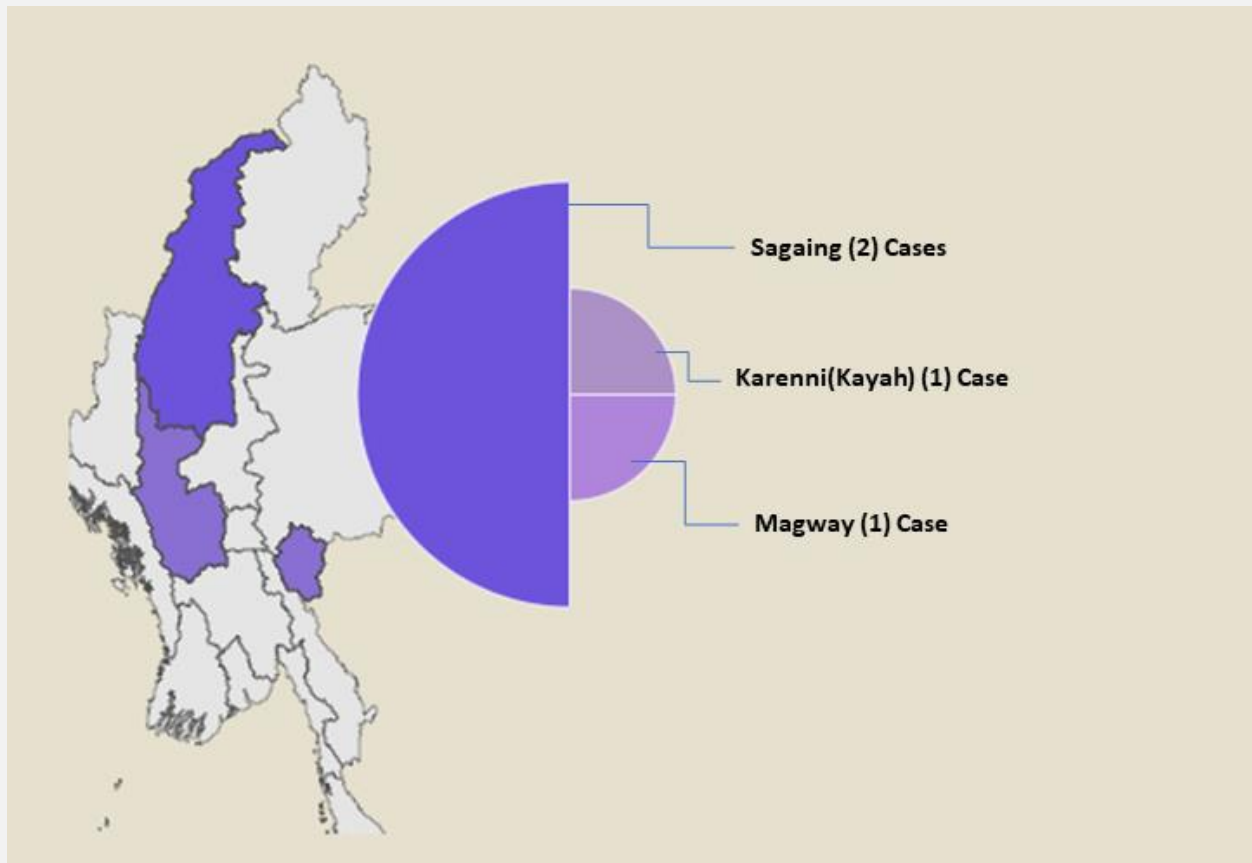
In connecting with eyewitnesses, there have been some requests from witness to do face-to-face interviews in places to which they had fled instead of phone interviews due to the high-security concerns. In order to reach to eyewitnesses, we had to pass through an area of active armed conflict as well as military junta checkpoints.

Moreover, the victim's family members could not take photographs of the crimes committed by the terrorist army or what had happened because of concerns for their safety. In some cases, although there were some photos taken to document the scene, the photos were deleted to avoid the risk of being arrested because the terrorist army entered the village and checked devices for such photos whenever they wanted.

BWU discovered that most women whom terrorist army soldiers have sexually assaulted are also in situations where they are not emotionally ready to disclose their experiences. In some cases of sexual violence, the victim has been killed therefore, it was huge challenges to confirm sexual violence assault. In some cases, based on the discovery of the bodies of the murdered women, there are reports of sexual violence. However, when contacting the family members, we encountered a situation where the family members denied sexual violence. In some cases, the family members were not the first to find the body, so they have difficulty confirming it.

## Cases committed by other armed groups:

In one year, we documented four cases of sexual violence and harassment committed by other armed groups besides the terrorist army. We were unable to interview the armed resistance groups in cases where there were news reports of sexual crimes committed by them outside of our target areas.



The cases collected by the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) are two rape cases involving individual victims: one in the Sagaing Region and another one in Karenni State. BWU also collected data regarding one sexual harassment case committed by a member of PDF in the Magway Region. The remaining case was a gang-rape and murder of three women by the resistance forces in Sagaing Region while they were being interrogated on suspicion of being military informants (dalan).

Of the above cases, two were crimes committed by members of armed resistance groups against other members, and the remaining two were crimes against civilians. These cases

highlight the fact that women are subjected to sexual violence and harassment under conditions of armed resistance against the military.

In the case of sexual assault in Magway, the victim filed a complaint to take action against the perpetrator, but the officer replied as they were in the process of developing and organizing the force and did not have proper and completed rules and regulations yet. As a result, there has been no punishment or accountability measures taken against the perpetrator besides the officer asking the perpetrator to apologize to the victim verbally.<sup>9</sup>

In the individual rape case in Sagaing Region, the victim complained to the seniors and the village security team. Apart from confiscating the perpetrator's weapons, no other effective punishments were taken against him. Therefore, the victim filed a complaint with the Public Administration and is still trying to get justice.<sup>10</sup>

## Findings:

Data collection on sexual violence and assault by other armed groups is just as challenging as data collection on sexual violence by the terrorist army.

BWU discovered that the survivors of sexual violence by other armed groups did not receive justice and fair punishment too. Women also experienced not only sexual violence but also sexual harassment and assaults. Respective armed groups authorities gave reason of active armed conflict and did not consider sexual abuse against women as a priority issue. They thus failed to take effective action against the perpetrators.

BWU is aware that the National Unity Government (NUG) is currently taking action to ensure justice for the victims of the gang rape and murder that occurred in the Sagaing Region.

Some sexual violence and harassment cases were resolved by the relevant elders only with verbal apologies and no effective punishments against the perpetrator. According to our source, there are also warnings to the survivors not to disclose such abuses to the outside

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<sup>9</sup> Burmese Women's Union, documentation (Magway Region)

<sup>10</sup> Burmese Women's Union, documentation (Ayeyawaddy Region)

world. Because of this warning, some victims have abandoned their troops and are seeking mental health treatment.

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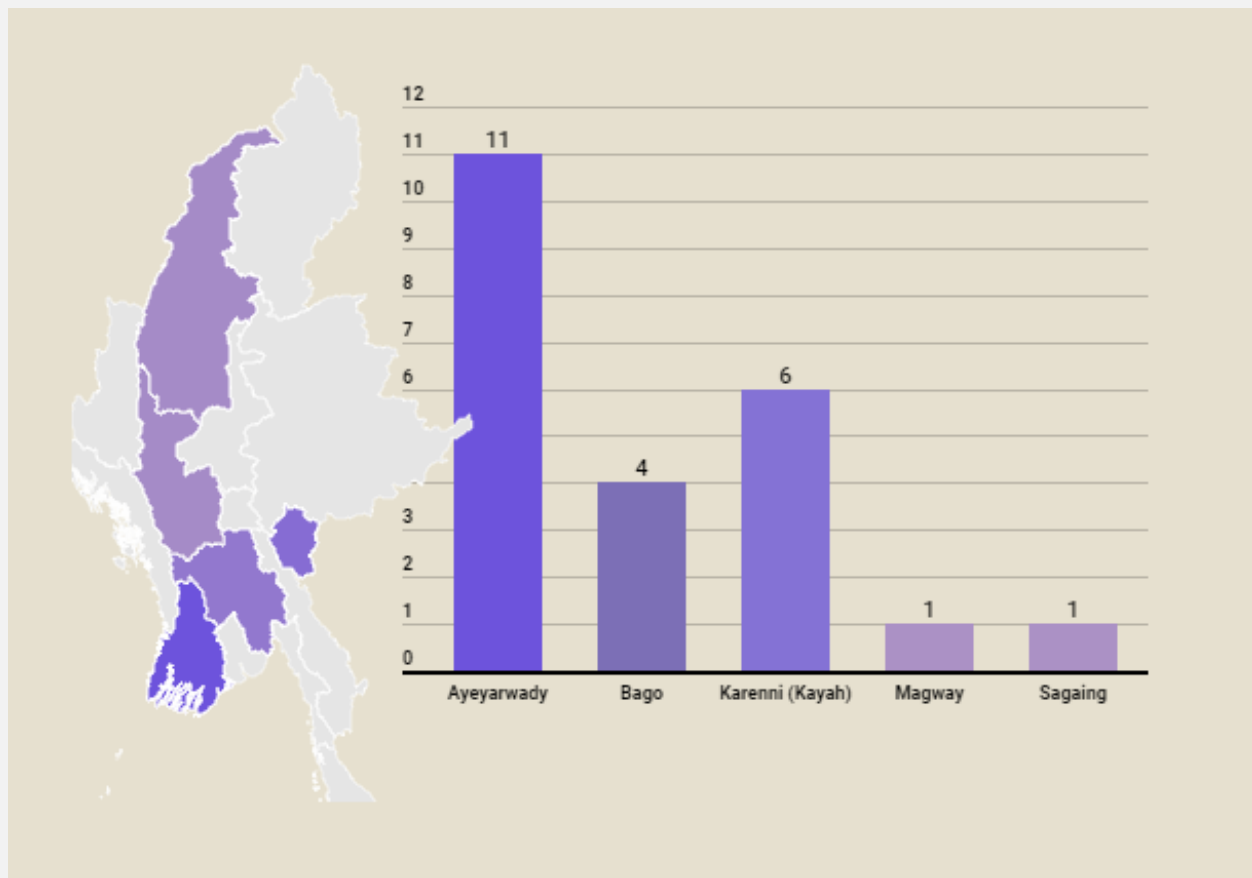
On the other hand, when conducting interviews and documenting the experience of the survivors of sexual violence in the armed resistance forces, we also encountered the suspicion of being spies (informants) of the terrorist army from the eyewitnesses. In addition, when asking the members of the armed resistance forces who first discovered the bodies of the victims who died, they also suspected us of being informants.

### **Cases committed by civilians against other civilians:**

According to our documentation collected from the field, there were 23 cases of sexual violence, and 23 cases of domestic violence and adultery committed by civilians in the last year, meaning a total of 46 cases. We have documented one case of sexual violence in Sagaing, one case in Magway, four cases in Bago, eleven cases in Ayeyarwaddy Region, and

six cases in Karenni State. Among these cases, there were four cases in which minors were raped. A 3-year-old girl was included among the child survivors.

While a woman was sleeping alone in Pantanaw in Ayeyarwaddy Region, an unknown man entered inside her mosquito net, pulled his pants off, and attempted to rape her. The attempt was unsuccessful because the woman screamed for help despite being gagged by the perpetrator to prevent her from screaming. At the same time, an unknown man entered the house over a fence of a woman who lives in the same block with the survivors of the above case and had given us witness statement of the case. Therefore, she had to scream for help.<sup>11</sup>



In Ayeyarwaddy Region, a 14-year-old student was raped when the perpetrator told her that her friend had called her home for a snack. Although the girl’s father witnessed the crime, the

<sup>11</sup> Burmese Women’s Union, documentation (Ayeyarwaddy Region)

accused has not been arrested and punished. In addition, because the perpetrator belonged to another religious group Mabatha's Buddhist group intervened in the case.<sup>12</sup>

In Karenni State, a mentally disabled young woman was raped by a man who fled the war from another region while her mother was going to their hillside farm. The man took the woman with his motorbike and committed the rape. The young woman received bruises around her face due to the use of force to prevent her from screaming and struggling. Because the perpetrator is not a resident and provided false information about himself, there is no information about his true identity and there is nothing people can do for her to get justice.<sup>13</sup>

## Findings:

According to our findings, most of the cases of sexual violence committed by civilians that we have collected were from communities where the perpetrators were close to the survivors. Survivors are subjected to sexual violence at home and on their regular routes.

Nevertheless, we found that there is no valid legal mechanism for women who have been violated to get justice. We also found violence committed between people of different religions, and

we also have seen that religious extremists are involved and try to influence such violence. In some cases, the police sometimes detained and arrested the offenders, but there was no legal repercussion. It was also revealed that criminals who could afford the money bribed officials and evaded the law; as a result, the police failed to arrest those perpetrators.

We also found that the women victims are financially poor, and

<sup>12</sup> Burmese Women's Union, documentation (Ayeyarwaddy Region)

<sup>13</sup> Burmese Women's Union, documentation (Karenni State)

struggle to fight for justice. Due to criticism from the community, families expelled their daughters from school and restricted their outdoor activities.

After the attempted military coup, services and support mechanisms for violence against women ceased. Therefore, victims who lack money face financial difficulties to be able to attend court appointments regularly to get justice. There is no rehabilitative support, including emotional support and counseling.

In some case committed by civilians, the relevant local ethnic armed groups and community elders have intervened and resolved the case using traditional practices. They have also warned the victim's family members not to disclose cases that have already been resolved. Therefore, some survivors' family members refused to disclose the information and refused to let us collect their data.

## **Analysis of sexual violence in conflict zones:**

In every conflict in Myanmar, women become a target to win the conflict. In addition, sexual violence against women is a sign of the decline of human ethics and dignity.

The information in this analysis paper is based on the incidents documented in our five targeted areas. Due to the armed conflict, and because transportation and the internet were cut off, it has been impossible to collect all the incidents happening on the ground.

Therefore, according to our observation and analysis, the terrorist army committed brutal rapes, sexual violence, and other dehumanizing attacks against women wherever they are based and where they organized military offensives with the intention of instilling great fear in the public.

Terrorist army forces commit not only sexual violence but also burning and murder. It is also possible that victims of sexual violence were murdered so that there would be no evidence of the crimes the army had committed. Similarly, the terrorist army made threats and pressured the family members of women survivors of sexual violence not to disclose and talk about their experiences.

According to the findings, survivors do not want to describe and share the situations and events they have encountered. They are reluctant to speak out because of the stigma and victim blaming, and also because of the traditional practices rooted in a patriarchal society.

At the same time, among the armed resistance forces, we have seen a diminishing of respect and acknowledgment for women and a normalization of violence against women. Because of this the armed resistance forces fail to take concrete action to address sexual violence, assault, and harassment against women and women are not able to get justice. Such crimes and acts are contrary to the expectations of the people as revolutionary soldiers with strong ethics and morals.

Therefore, the image and reputation of the revolutionary soldiers may decline over time if effective measures are not taken against the violations related to the sexual violence that was committed disrespectfully. Hence, it is necessary that the armed resistance forces strictly avoid committing such sexual violence against women in the same way as the terrorist army, which has a bad and brutal image.

**“ From the findings, we have also seen that the survivors were threatened with their lives, their families, and their shame and dignity. ”**

There should be practical and strong rules and regulations regarding sexual violence, and if there are violations, the perpetrators must be punished effectively and appropriately according to those regulations. That way, it can set an example so that other soldiers don't commit the same crimes. If the relevant forces are not able to take effective measures, the sexual violence committed against women may become worse, and the people's respect for the revolutionary soldiers may decrease.

From the findings, we have also seen that the survivors were threatened with their lives, their families, and their shame and dignity.



In instances of sexual violence committed by civilians against other civilians, survivors are threatened in the same way, and the victims receive criticism from their neighbors and community, so they stop going out and socializing as before and choose to stay indoors.

The reason women face such consequences after they experience sexual and genders-based violence in Myanmar is because the culture and traditions are rooted in the patriarchy, in which women are portrayed as a class that always needs to be protected and possessed by men. In Myanmar society, women's dignity and value are heavily based on their virginity, and premarital sex and rape are considered major social sins for women. Therefore, women often face severe criticism in these situations.

BWU believes that it will only be possible to eliminate the situation by fighting against the military dictatorship along with other forms of dictatorship and patriarchal practices.

## Recommendations to NUG and NUCC

- To develop and implement practical resolution mechanisms, and to organize reporting and accountability mechanisms to reduce and prevent sexual violence and other forms of violence against women during the conflict.
- To ensure immediate and effective punishment for sexual violence committed by the armed resistance forces under the NUG and armed resistance forces operating independently.
- To establish a policy and systematic mechanism for the victims of sexual violence committed by the terrorist army to seek justice.
- To work with domestic and international organizations to develop mechanisms for victims of sexual violence for rehabilitation, reparation, and transitional justice.
- To cooperate with women's organizations and civil society organizations in order to prosecute and punish the terrorist army that has systematically perpetrated sexual violence against women with impunity.

## Recommendations to ethnic armed organizations and other armed resistance forces

- To take effective punishment and action against the perpetrators of sexual violence that occur within areas under their control.
- To establish specific policies and guidelines regarding violence against women, including sexual violence, as part of their force's rules and regulations and to enforce those rules.

- To use an open and transparent judicial system for sexual violence committed by members of the armed resistance forces, in which the violence will be adjudicated regardless of the victim's gender.
- To cooperate with local administration and civil society organizations to address the sexual violence that occurred in the areas under their control.
- To cooperate and enable pathways and activities led by civil society organizations aimed at reducing violence against women, including sexual violence.

## Recommendations to the international community

- The international community, including the UN and ASEAN, must prevent and take effective measures against the targeting of civilians with sexual violence, directed airstrikes, firing artillery, and shooting small and heavy weapons targeting public places, including other human rights violations committed by the terrorist army
- International organizations, including the UN and ASEAN, should not turn a blind eye to the human rights violations, including the sexual violence documented by BWU, occurring throughout the country and must take effective action against the terrorist army as they are the main perpetrators.
- International governments must immediately cease trading weapons and cooperating with a terrorist army that targets the civilian population, including by using sexual violence as a weapon of war, as if it were an enemy.
- The international community should take steps to prosecute the terrorist army as they have committed grave human rights violations, including sexual violence, in accordance with the international criminal justice system.

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