

Sexual and Gender-based violence

Since the Myanmar military launched a coup on 1 February 2021, it has continued to commit widespread and severe human rights violations against the population, and to deliberately use sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) as a weapon of intimidation and humiliation. According to Women's Peace Network, at least 3,771 women are detained in prisons and other facilities, some of whom have been targeted with SGBV and other forms of torture.¹ Over 1500 civilians have been killed, which WPN says include "young people, women human rights defenders, and pro-democracy activists".²

The use of SGBV by the Tatmadaw is systemic and longstanding, often used against women from ethnic and religious minorities, or those speaking out against the military. In fact, women continue to play a prominent role in human rights activism, with the "unwavering participation and leadership of women who have defied patriarchal systems, including gender stereotypes, and set an unquestionable new standard of what is possible for women and girls in Myanmar."³ Those who are taking action include women of different ages and ethnic backgrounds, and from both urban and rural areas; many workers in female dominated jobs have been part of the Civil Disobedience Movement, refusing to work for the junta.⁴

Women human rights defenders (WHRD) play a significant role in advocacy and peacebuilding around the world. Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders told the General Assembly in October 2023 that "Women human rights defenders provide support to civilian populations, document human rights violations, gather evidence to secure future accountability and work to maintain or create space for the active participation of women in public life. In doing so they bring peace and justice closer."⁵ According to the Special Rapporteur, the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting at least two years increases by 20% if women are involved. WHRD face not only the threat of violence and intimidation, but also gendered perceptions that can diminish the role they play and their right to participate in peacemaking and related efforts.

In Papua New Guinea, WHRD have been active in calling for peace and stability, and for the government to address underlying causes and triggers of the social unrest that erupted in largescale violence in January 2024. Magna Carta, a human rights organisation, called for "effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding" based on Melanesian values. WHRD in PNG are contributing to efforts to reduce the shocking levels of GBV in the country, including domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sorcery accusation related violence, and tribal violence that has seen massacres of women and children.

A recent study of 152 cases from 2020 in PNG found 60 victims experienced physical abuse, while 46 experienced psychological abuse, and 45 experienced both. Justice and accountability remain elusive, with only 20 victims able to get court orders served to the perpetrators. In 50 cases, the perpetrators were not punished, with complainants withdrawing their case due to threats from partners and families, or financial reliance on the offender.⁶ In addition, while polygamy was previously concentrated in the highlands, it is now increasing across the country, leading to a host of social problems. 65% of female prisoners are convicted of crime related to a polygamous relationship, often the murder of a fellow wife.⁷

In Fiji, the Online Safety Commission is taking a lead role in tackling online GBV, by empowering young people in digital literacy and providing education programs to counter online violence against women.⁸

Recommendations

The UN and ASEAN should:

1. Take urgent and serious action on the situation in Myanmar to protect women from the high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, and hold perpetrators accountable;
2. Continue to platform Burmese human rights defenders in UN forums and fund and support the work of civil society organisations in Myanmar, including by ensuring the safety of members and staff.

Pacific regional organisations should:

1. Update the Pacific National Action Plan on WPS and continue to support programs that aim towards gender equality and reduced violence against women.

The Australian Government should:

1. Continue to support GBV reduction policy and programs in the Pacific, with specific focus on SGBV, tribal violence, and sorcery accusation related violence in PNG;
2. Implement diplomatic tools to encourage the Myanmar military to cease its targeting of civilians and its systematic use of SGBV.

¹ Women's Peace Network Myanmar,

https://mcusercontent.com/6819ae24e30bd9a9db0322d69/files/bfdfac32-839e-ee4c-e52b-f2e293329a6d/ENGLISH_Factsheet_February_2024.pdf

² Ibid

³ Naw Hser Hser and Maggi Quadrini, Three Years After the Myanmar Coup, Women Human Rights Defenders Remain at the Forefront, The Diplomat, 31 January 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/three-years-after-the-myanmar-coup-women-human-rights-defenders-remain-at-the-forefront/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ States must protect women human rights defenders working in conflict and crisis-affected settings: UN expert, 13 October 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/states-must-protect-women-human-rights-defenders-working-conflict-and-crisis>

⁶ Minetta Daniella Kakarere, Intimate partner violence in Port Moresby: drivers and outcomes, DevPolicyBlog, 18 January 2024, <https://devpolicy.org/intimate-partner-violence-in-port-moresby-drivers-and-outcomes-20240118/>

⁷ Kingtau Mambon and Stephen Howes, Polygamy Spreading in PNG, DevPolicyBlog / The National, 7 February 2024, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/polygamy-spreading-in-png/>

⁸ Litia Cava, Fiji takes lead in fight against online gender-based violence, FBC News, 8 February 2024, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/fiji-takes-lead-in-fight-against-online-gender-based-violence/>