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JUSTICE FOR WOMEN IN CONFLICT AFFECTED AREAS IN MYANMAR

ANALYSIS

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1. Executive Summary

According to the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security (2023), Myanmar (Burma) ranks 165 out of 177 countries for women peace and security issues. This report displayed Myanmar as the worst country in East Asia and the Pacific region regarding the proximity to conflict. The military coup in 2021 was a devastating setback for gender equality in Myanmar, leaving women and girls acutely vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and exploitation.

As the conflict between the State Administration Council (SAC) of Myanmar, People's Defense Forces (PDF), and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) intensifies, an increasing number of people are being forced to flee their homes. As of February 2025, more than 3.5 million people in Myanmar are internally displaced (OCHA Myanmar, 2025). The widespread gender-based violence, already prevalent before the coup, has been significantly exacerbated by the ongoing political and armed conflict. This escalation is driven by the absence of the rule of law and the prevailing economic hardships resulting from widespread loss of income and livelihoods.

This paper aims to explore the various forms of violence experienced by women and girls in conflict-affected areas, as well as the justice mechanisms available in those regions. The violence against women is perpetrated by the Burmese Military (Tatmadaw), Resistance Forces (including both PDFs and EAOs), as well as general civilians, including their husbands, boyfriends, and relatives. Crimes committed by the Burmese Military during their attempts to take control of territories include airstrikes, land-mining, and horrific acts such as burning women alive. SAC soldiers have been reported to commit rape, including gang rape, against women and girls while marching through villages. Women are also subjected to torture during detention, and sexual harassment and assault are common forms of violence inflicted by the Burmese Military. Persons with disabilities (PWD) and underage girls are among the victims targeted by SAC forces. More recently, forced conscription and abduction have emerged as additional forms of violence faced by women in areas controlled by the SAC. Women in conflict-driven communities have also experienced violence at the hands of resistance organizations, including groups affiliated with the National Unity Government (NUG) and EAOs. These groups have been reported to commit rape, including gang rape, as well as sexual assault and harassment. These groups have also targeted girls under the age of 18 as victims of rape. Like the Tatmadaw, they engage in the forced conscription of women and girls.

Survivors of violence experience severe physical and emotional consequences. Some sustain permanent disabilities due to the violence, while others suffer deep psychological trauma. Many women and girls withdraw from their communities, isolating themselves out of shame, believing they are no longer "clean." Cultural norms often reinforce this guilt, leading them to become increasingly silent and disengaged from community activities. In conservative communities, survivors

and their families may also face social ostracisation. As a result, some are forced to relocate to escape their distressing circumstances.

The accessibility of justice mechanisms for women in the community varies by location. However, for cases of gender-based violence and war crimes committed by SAC soldiers and their allies, justice is almost nonexistent due to the entrenched culture of impunity within the Burmese Military.

This study recommends providing institutional support to Alternative Governance Institutions to ensure they are accountable to their citizens through effective laws, policies, and guidelines for handling GBV cases. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the role of women leaders and women's rights organizations in promoting women's access to justice in conflict-affected areas. In areas with limited resources for formal justice mechanisms, efforts should strengthen community dispute resolution systems to adopt a gender-sensitive and survivor-centered approach. Additionally, clear dissemination of information on reporting procedures is essential. Programs and projects should be introduced to improve women's access to justice-related information and resources, ensuring they understand their rights and the available mechanisms for seeking justice.

2. Background and Introduction

The civil war in Myanmar (Burma), which has lasted for over seven and a half decades, is currently the longest ongoing civil war in the world. The country is home to approximately 135 recognized ethnic groups. The conflict primarily stems from ethnic groups fighting for self-determination against the Burmese Military known as the Tatmadaw.

In 2011, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was signed between the military and various ethnic armed organizations following the transfer of power to Myanmar's first civilian government led by U Thein Sein. However, on February 1, 2021, Myanmar's transition to democracy was abruptly reversed when General Min Aung Hlaing seized power, citing alleged election fraud. In the initial response, mass demonstrations, work stoppages, and a widespread civil disobedience erupted. The military responded with violence, using live ammunition to disperse protesters and arresting thousands, including opposition leaders and journalists.

The protests evolved into a "Spring Revolution", marked by large-scale demonstrations and civil disobedience against the military coup. Eventually, the military's violent repression led to the protests escalating into an armed uprising. As anti-coup forces made advances, taking control of military outposts and towns, the generals faced their most significant challenge since overthrowing the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

In the three years since the coup, the Spring Revolution has transformed into the People's Defense Force (PDF) and the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar. The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was effectively invalidated by the Ethnic Armed Organizations (PDF), leading to the resumption of full-scale civil war. The PDF is now engaged in intense fighting against the Tatmadaw.

The country is facing a multi-layered protracted crisis. As of February 2025, the overall number of internally displaced people is more than 3.5 million; and 19.9 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance. Data provided by UN Women in 2022 revealed that one in three women felt unsafe even in their own home at night. (OCHA, 2025)

During the NLD government, promotion of the rule of law was prioritized as a key political agenda. In this regard, several initiatives were undertaken, including the establishment of four Rule of Law Centers across Myanmar with support from development partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the European Union (EU). The Supreme Court of the Union issued the Judiciary Strategic Plan (2015–2017) to develop a national strategy for court modernization and judicial reform (UN General Assembly, 2016). The enactment of the Legal Aid Law (2016) and the expansion of legal aid services by civil society organizations were significant milestones in the reform process. The postponement rate for criminal cases decreased from 42% in 2018 to 31% in

2019, while for civil cases, it declined from 35% to 27% over the same period. Additionally, court user satisfaction increased from 56% in 2018 to 76.5% in 2019 (The Supreme Court of Myanmar, 2019).

Since Myanmar's military illegally took full control of Myanmar, judicial independence and the legal defense of human rights have collapsed in the country (ICJ, 2022). The judiciary is overwhelmingly subservient to the military and has lost even the modest gains it had made in independence and effectiveness over the last decade. Domestic violence has risen dramatically since the coup and is now one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based violence impacting women and girls in Myanmar (Human Rights Council, 2024). Other forms of sexual and gender-based violence such as sexual exploitation, assaults, abuse, and harassment have also dramatically increased, as the conflict erodes the rule of law in Myanmar (OHCHR, 2024).

This study examines violence against women and access to justice in four areas in Myanmar that have experienced active conflict since the coup and are currently controlled by various armed groups. These areas are Kachin (Northern part of the country), Kayah or Karenni State (Eastern Myanmar), Northern Shan State and Sagaing Region (Middle of the country) (Please see Annex I for demographic information of states and these regions). Each state and region has a unique culture that shapes the status of women and the justice mechanisms available.

Besides the introductory sections, the policy paper includes three main parts. The first part (chapter 4) explains the types of violence experienced by women and girls in conflict-affected areas, perpetrated by both SAC forces and resistance forces, as well as violence within the homes and community. The State Administration Council (SAC) is a governing entity established on 2 February 2021, following the military coup in Myanmar/Burma on 1 February 2021. Both State and non-State armed groups have targeted civilians with rape, gang rape, and abductions, amid record levels of internal and cross-border displacement. Women and girls are the primary targets, though men and boys are also reported as victims.

The second part (chapter 5) explores the justice mechanisms available for women and girls during the conflict. Although sexual and gender-based violence remains a major issue hindering the development of women and girls, achieving justice for survivors has long been an uphill battle in Myanmar. Existing barriers and challenges, compounded by the current conflict, make accountability nearly impossible. The issue of impunity, of knowing that a Burmese Army soldier can commit rape and other acts of sexual violence, and not be punished, feeds the pathology that keeps this problem terrible and growing. On the other hand, sexual and gender-based violence committed by other armed factions also presents immense challenges, depending on the location and the actors involved.

The paper concludes (in chapter 6) that the escalation of conflict between SAC forces and resistance forces has led to conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by both parties. Domestic violence has risen dramatically since the coup and is now one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based vio-

lence affecting women and girls in Myanmar (Human Rights Council, 2024). Despite significant challenges, women's rights organizations and civil society organizations are working tirelessly to achieve justice for survivors and provide services within their limited capacities and resources.

3. Methodology

To understand violence against women and girls in the study areas, publicly available reports, media articles, and the websites of development organizations were reviewed. This review seeks to understand the current situation and the types of justice accessible to women and girls in various regions.

The study team also analyzed the experiences of two countries (Afghanistan and Liberia) with situations like that of Myanmar — characterized by authoritarian rule, diverse ethnic groups, powerful ethnic armed organizations, and prolonged civil wars. This comparative analysis identifies the practices employed in these countries and evaluates the benefits and drawbacks of each justice mechanism. Moreover, the role of various actors, including ethnic armed organizations, in seeking justice is examined through different scenarios.

Additionally, local women leaders from each study area were interviewed to complement and to fill the gap of the findings from the literature review. Based on the literature and desk review, questionnaires were developed for different target groups. The following respondents are included in the study:

1. Representative of women's rights organizations
2. Women's network representatives
3. Community leader
4. Women from the IDP camps
5. Women from the resistance force
6. Women from the ethnic armed organizations

The findings from the interviews are cross-referenced with the desk review to identify which mechanisms and policies most effectively serve the interests of women in conflict-affected areas. Twenty women from different states and regions were interviewed to gather information that fills the gaps not addressed in the literature review and publicly available reports. Contacting these women for interviews was highly challenging due to limited communication access in conflict areas, security concerns, and a lack of trust toward the interviewer. However, these challenges were tackled through nighttime interviews, trusted networks and contacts, and persistent efforts to reach these women during difficult times.

4. Types of violence experienced by women and girls

The continued presence of and offensive actions of the Burmese/Myanmar Army have severely endangered civilians, particularly women and children. The resulting displacement has stripped many women of their dignity and integrity, leaving them to struggle with profound hardships and insecurity.

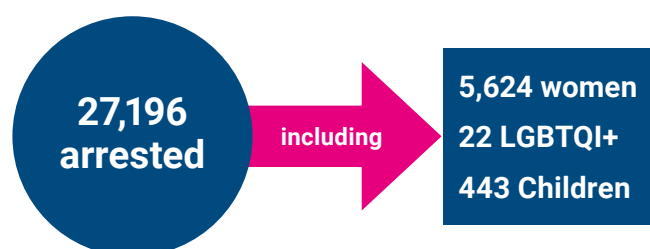


Figure 1: Number of people arrested from February 2021 to August 12, 2024. As indicated above, the number of women arrested is much higher than the other two groups listed (Humanitarian Aid Crisis Report 2021-2024, Women League of Burma, 2024).



Figure 2: Number of people killed from February 2021 to August 12, 2024. Of the women who were killed:

- 290 died due to airstrikes,
 - 415 from artillery shelling,
 - 118 in detention centers,
 - 13 were raped and then murdered,
 - 46 were burned alive,
 - 26 were killed during demonstrations, and
 - 17 died under unknown circumstances.
- (Humanitarian Aid Crisis Report 2021-2024, Women League of Burma, 2024)

Regarding the types of violence, although there are limited data disaggregated by geographic locations, the table below shows the level and types of violence in four regions from January to June 2024, ("Situation Update", Women League of Burma, 2024):

Violence	Kachin	Kayah	Shan	Sagaing
Fatality Killed	42	26	66	397
Still Detained	99	20	163	602
Sentenced	22	13	65	257
Arrested	197	44	248	695
Death Penalty				1

These figures show how severely women are affected in these four regions as the conflict further escalated.

Women have also been systematically subjected to sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) by the Burmese/Myanmar Military. Reports indicate that women are being threatened with rape and assault if they do not comply with junta orders, such as being forced to act as porters through treacherous jungle terrain. For instance, the Burmese/Myanmar Military killed six internally displaced women and children in Karenni State after using the victims as human shields and subjecting them to torture (WLB, 2024).

Desk studies revealed that women and girls, regardless of where they live, are vulnerable to violence from both state and non-state actors. Both sides committed rape including gang rape to women and girls including women with disabilities whereas SAC soldiers also committed raped by objects. Reports of rape and gang rapes, including of pregnant women and adolescent girls, are common in the conflict-affected areas. SAC Soldiers have reportedly raped women in front of their fathers, husbands, and other family members. The "Ogre Column," a military unit operating in southern Sagaing Region, has become known for its brutal crimes and violence, which has included beheading, maiming, mutilation, and rape of women.

Armed groups have perpetrated violence against women and underage girls. For instance, on 30 August 2022, four resistance soldiers under the command of a National Unity Government-linked local defense team in Chaung-U Township, Sagaing Region allegedly carried out an extrajudicial execution of seven civilians accused of being junta informants. The victims included five minors under the age of 18. The armed groups raped three of the four female victims before being killed. Two of the victims were 15 years old (Human Rights Council, 2024). One interviewee from Sagaing Region also shared the case where one local PDF member killed a girl

when she refused to date him. He was sentenced to 10 years after NUG's judicial system investigated the case. Recently, a media outlet called *Voice of Myaylatt* stated an incident where a man affiliated with local administration staff and local defense forces assaulted a female journalist and her transgender friend while they were working at an internet shop. The case has sparked public outcry, as it became known that local PDF members, despite witnessing the incident, failed to intervene. Interviewees from the Sagaing Region also recounted the case and confirmed that the People's Security Team, known as Pa.La.Pha, under the National Unity Government, addressed it.

Women have also faced severe torture during detention, including acts leading to mutilation and maiming. Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) AAPP reports 20,000 unjustly detained individuals, including over 5000 women. Women and girls in junta custody face severe gender-based violence, including invasive strip searches and physical abuse by prison guards, as highlighted by the Political Prisoners Network-Myanmar. At checkpoints, women and LGBTQ+ individuals have been subjected to sexual harassment, such as groping, invasive body searches, sexually explicit intimidation, and verbal abuse. During detention and interrogation, women were deliberately beaten on their breasts and hips, further compounding the physical and psychological trauma they endured. In the most horrific cases, women have been killed through acts such as beheading and being burned alive. They also demand sexual favors in exchange for the release of male relatives (Human Rights Council, 2024).

Moreover, thousands of women in Myanmar have also put themselves on the front line of resisting the military aftermath of the 2021 coup. Nonetheless, female soldiers, like other women and girls in the community, are still running the risk of sexual harassment, sexual assault and exploitation. Women who have received military training with people's defense forces have told the Special Rapporteur of a pervasive culture of sexual harassment, including by commanding officers (Human Rights Council, 2024). Interview with a female PDF member from Karenni also confirmed these findings: sexual harassment within resistance groups has become normalized, and she wants to put an end to this culture. Another interviewee from the Karenni National Defence Force (KNDF) shared similar incidents, stating that sexual harassment is widespread within their ranks: *"Sexual harassment cases occurred both inside and outside the battalion. Some perpetrators held high ranks, and cases were resolved quietly, often leaving survivors dissatisfied with the outcomes."* These cases are often dismissed as unimportant, as the revolution is considered the top priority, with other issues being set aside.

On the other hand, women living in SAC-controlled areas face the risk of forced conscription by the military. The regime activated the conscription law in February 2024, targeting men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27. Although the regime officially exempts women from the conscription law, there have been numerous reports of women being forcibly conscripted in areas under its control (Irrawaddy, 2024). The law also exempts married women, which raises concerns about

the potential for forced and early marriages and an increase in domestic violence (BWU, 2024). The forced conscription of both women and men also occurs in ethnic areas, particularly during periods of intense fighting and an urgent need for soldiers on the battlefield. One interviewee from **Kachin State** shared information about the conscription of women in their community but refrained from naming the armed group due to concerns for her safety and fear of retaliation: *"Women in our community reported that many women were conscripted by the armed forces and experienced sexual violence. However, for security reasons, I cannot disclose who was responsible."*

Social protection, safety nets, and redress mechanisms remain insufficient, leaving women and girls in the community vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse, and gender-based violence. Though perpetrators are primarily members of the Myanmar armed forces, other armed actors, friends, and relatives are to blame. Stressors such as food insecurity, overcrowding, and economic uncertainty further intensify gender-based violence. Domestic violence is also more prevalent in these situations, as the extreme pressure of displacement magnifies tensions within families. These cases included hitting, punching, slapping, threatening, kicking, hitting with objects, and verbal abuse. The Women's League of Burma (WLB) has documented increased rates of domestic violence in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, compounding the trauma that women and girls endure in their fight to survive (Women's League of Burma, 2024, p.6). Interviews with women from Karenni, Sagaing, Kachin, and Northern Shan states revealed an increase in domestic violence rates in IDP camps. The findings of this study show a rise in cases of rape involving young girls, including children and women with mental disabilities and/or physical disabilities. Some survivors became pregnant, facing severe social, psychological, and physical consequences because of these traumatic events. Moreover, within the structure of a family, husbands often commit both physical and emotional violence against women and children after excessive alcohol consumption. While alcohol consumption among men is common across all four study areas, drug use and abuse of women and children are more prevalent in Kachin State. Representatives from civil society organizations in Kachin State shared the information that both men and women use drugs as a negative coping mechanism to escape their suffering, *"Domestic violence cases are prevalent in the village, as both women and men use drugs in Kachin."* However, this often leads to women being abused by their husbands, sons, and other relatives.

5. Access to Justice: Available mechanisms and the prevailing challenges

Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have always struggled to access justice in Myanmar, but the post-coup conditions have rendered accountability nearly impossible.

Interviews with various key stakeholders revealed that most GBV survivors faced significant barriers and challenges in accessing justice.

In Myanmar, there has been a long-standing lack of significant action against military soldiers who have committed rape and other forms of sexual violence. Even when legal proceedings are initiated, it remains difficult to determine if soldiers are held accountable under proper laws and procedures, as cases are often wrapped in the secrecy of military courts. For example, in numerous cases of sexual violence, such as in the Kachin and Rakhine States, perpetrators either have gone unpunished or were provided with small financial settlements, effectively avoiding accountability (Women League of Burma, 2024, p. 6).

When resistance fighters are the alleged perpetrators, judicial processes set up by resistance forces themselves often handle cases. Civil society organizations have reported a lack of proper procedures and weak legal protection of survivors and victims in these proceedings. Where there is redress, it is often in the form of monetary compensation to survivors for the harm committed rather than punitive justice, contributing to the survivors' increased reluctance to report the cases. For instance, in Monywa, Sagaing Region, about one-third of reported cases are allegedly addressed through monetary compensation (Human Rights Council, 2024). This is also similar to the situation in Karenni/Kayah, Kachin, and Northern Shan State. When the perpetrators are members of an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO), they are often granted amnesty, under the justification of preserving unity within the resistance, with the belief that any disagreements can be addressed once the revolution succeeds. Interview participants also shared the unfortunate truth that victims often remain silent out of fear of retaliation and concern for their safety:

If you asked me whether women report these cases to the authorities, I would say that most go unreported. Survivors are often threatened by the perpetrators and their allies, who have the money and power to intimidate them.

Women who participated in the study openly stated that not only do members of EAOs receive impunity, but individuals affiliated with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) also evade accountability for committing violence against women. There are also many cases in which perpetrators have been required to pay compensation to the survivor's family, perform symbolic cleaning services, or sign a pledge committing to refrain from further violence. Interview respondents also acknowledged that survivors are dissatisfied with the compensation, as

they would prefer the perpetrators to be punished. One case in Northern Shan State illustrates that the perpetrator deliberately chose to join an ethnic armed organization to avoid punishment. One respondent from the Karenni State shared that cases of violence within the Karenni army are handled under the laws adopted by the defense force, holding perpetrators accountable and enforcing penalties accordingly. However, she noted that punishments are sometimes less severe than expected due to the high demand for resistance fighters on the battlefield.

If the perpetrators are civilians, the handling of cases varies depending on where the incident occurred and which armed actors are operating in the area. In regions under SAC control, such as parts of Kachin and Sagaing, survivors can access justice with support from legal aid and women's rights organizations working in those areas. However, high transportation costs, complex reporting procedures, and prolonged litigation processes still discourage women and girls from reporting their cases. In most instances, although they were dissatisfied with this option, survivors opted to accept compensation and relocate to other areas.

If the incident occurs in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations, women and girls can report the cases to them. For example, in Kachin, survivors can report to KIA/KIO. Although these organizations lack formal written laws or policies to address gender-based violence, they assist survivors within their limited capacities. However, a women leader from Kachin State noted that men who often lack gender sensitivity predominantly lead these institutions. As a result, they do not approach the issue from a gender perspective, which often leads to outcomes that are not favorable for survivors.

In Northern Shan State, the presence of multiple ethnic armed organizations makes the reporting process more complex. Women's organizations often need to advocate with different groups to secure their support. One interview participant shared that she chose to report life-threatening cases to the United Wa State Army (UWSA) because of their faster response. While the UWSA lacks interest and capacity in effectively addressing GBV cases, they do ask survivors what outcome they want. They are quick to arrest perpetrators and often punish them severely through physical violence, such as beating and kicking. In some cases, they force perpetrators to join their army. However, they refuse to handle divorce cases, instead delegating such issues to women leaders to resolve on their own. Locals from Northern Shan State have expressed concerns about sex trafficking and sexual exploitation by ethnic armed groups, such as the MNDAA (Kokang Army), as their region is known for large casino resorts and gambling houses. They have also observed an increase in unwanted pregnancies among women and girls, although it is unclear whether these pregnancies result from consensual sex. Local

women's rights leaders believe that MNDAA soldiers exploit their power and resources to take advantage of girls in the community:

There has been a rise in unwanted pregnancies in the villages, though it is unclear whether they resulted from consensual sex or not. I suspect that sexual exploitation is occurring through the use of money and power.

Although cultural barriers to reporting GBV cases exist in all four locations, the issue appears more pronounced among Karenni women. They often believe that maintaining the dignity of their tribe requires remaining silent. Additionally, their religious beliefs discourage divorce, leaving women with no perceived option to separate from abusive husbands. The emergence of the Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC) and the establishment of various departments have created a significant opportunity to address GBV in Karenni State. However, limited capacity, human resources, and funding have hindered the accessibility of services, particularly in remote areas such as IDP camps in forests and villages in the hills.

In Sagaing Region, the presence of diverse armed actors, even under the National Unity Government (NUG), creates additional challenges compared to other areas. Various forces such as the Local People's Defence Forces (LPDF), People's Administration Bodies (PAB), and People's Security Teams (PST) operate at the township level and are collectively known as the 'P-three' groups. While GBV survivors can report their cases to these groups, their roles, responsibilities, and autonomy remain unclear. Moreover, the NUG has not provided clear guidelines or procedures for handling GBV cases. Women leaders from Sagaing Region acknowledged the support these groups offer in GBV cases but highlighted the limitations of the justice system at the township level. With no prisons to detain perpetrators and prolonged case resolution processes, many survivors opt for compensation as an alternative.

Myanmar's formal justice system is based on English common law, influenced by customary law and recent legislation. It comprises the Supreme Court, High Court, and lower courts. However, corruption and inefficiency have led to widespread mistrust in the system (My Justice, 2016). Many people avoid filing complaints altogether due to concerns about shame and loss of dignity or instead seek assistance from local authorities, religious leaders, or ethnic organizations (DIIS, 2015). Trust and access to the formal justice system have further deteriorated, reaching near zero in areas affected by mass displacement caused by conflicts between resistance forces and the Burmese military. Since the 2021 military coup, the formal justice system has undergone significant changes, marked by increased military control and the erosion of judicial independence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

With the absence of formal legal mechanisms, traditional and informal justice mechanisms are applied to sexual and gender-based violence cases across the country, including in ethnic areas. These processes rarely provide an adequate outcome for the survivor. Informal justice mechanisms often involve mediation by a third party, such as village leaders, community elders, or religious and cultural affairs leaders, who are usually men. Oftentimes those involved in the resolution of cases have little awareness or sensitivity to issues relating to gender and sexual orientation. The remedies provided by traditional mechanisms are often grossly inadequate. In some cases, local leaders have reportedly taken a portion of the survivor's compensation through these practices. Customary practices sometimes involve brokering or forcing marriage between the survivor and perpetrator. The findings by the Human Rights Council on informal justice mechanisms are supported by responses from participants in Kachin, Karenni, and Northern Shan states. All respondents agreed that decisions in the current informal justice system appeared arbitrary, as there were no clear rules or guidelines in place.

However, all the women leaders who participated in the study said that resistance organizations and state consultative councils are developing justice mechanisms that can more formally address sexual and gender-based violence cases. They also believe that developing and effectively implementing a robust justice mechanism at the local level, in collaboration with relevant key stakeholders, would help address GBV issues in the community more effectively in the future.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As the conflict between Myanmar's armed forces and resistance groups escalates, the number of IDPs across the country is expected to rise even more. Many IDPs are unable to remain in one place due to military airstrikes targeting civilian areas. The regime has attacked schools, hospitals, and even refugee camps, resulting in the deaths of many women and children. On a bigger picture, these atrocities by the Myanmar military are unlikely to stop as long as certain countries, such as Russia and China, continue to support and legitimize the SAC government.

Embodied by a decade of impunity, Myanmar's military has committed numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity since the 2021 coup. However, the international response to the Myanmar crisis has been fragmented and halting. The UN Security Council, the body with the authority to respond with binding resolutions on states, has remained paralyzed. The unwillingness of the UK, the US, and France to press for a resolution in fear of vetoes by China and Russia has ultimately betrayed the Council's mandate to ensure international peace and security as well as the millions of people risking their lives in Myanmar by opposing the coup. Attempts to stop Myanmar's military from committing inhumane treatments may fail due to ongoing support from powerful allies and the preference of some diplomats for quiet diplomacy and dialogue over strong measures to ensure accountability.

In November 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor requested a warrant of arrest for Myanmar military commander-in-chief, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, which is a major step towards justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The ICC can only exercise its jurisdiction over crimes committed by nationals of, or on the territory of a member country unless the UN Security Council refers the situation to the court, or if the nonmember country in question accepts the court's jurisdiction.

Three years after the military coup, the territories controlled by resistance forces under the NUG, as well as those controlled by ethnic armed organizations, continue to expand. The governance structures of these non-state actors must be effective in providing public services to the population and ensuring the protection of civilians under their administration. Formal laws and policies must be established to protect women and girls from all forms of violence, and service provision should be accessible to marginalized groups. As more states and regions are likely to come under non-regime control, it is essential to build the capacity of these actors on issues of democracy and governance. Considering the discussion above, this paper suggests the following recommendations:

- i. Engage with Alternative Governance Institutions (AGIs) to strengthen governance structures and raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This effort should include institutional capacity building, such as supporting the development of laws, policies, and standard operating procedures for addressing SGBV. Additionally, advocate for these institutions to take accountability for violence committed by their members or allies, ensuring a commitment to justice and transparency within their organizations
- ii. Support local civil society organizations, particularly women's rights organizations, women-led organizations, and organizations for persons with disabilities, operating in non-SAC or SAC-controlled areas through flexible funding mechanisms. These organizations possess local expertise to adapt to the constantly changing environment and have strong networks with community leaders, religious leaders, ethnic leaders, and resistance forces. Additionally, GBV survivors often feel more comfortable seeking justice through women's organizations, as they tend to trust these organizations more than other institutions, which are often male-dominated and may display judgmental attitudes toward their cases. Women's rights organizations are well positioned to engage with CDM staff from Justice Centers in non-SAC-controlled areas and to implement GBV prevention and response mechanisms to protect and support communities effectively.
- iii. Support informal justice systems as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms in areas with limited capacity to implement formal justice systems. Provide training to local and religious leaders to ensure gender sensitivity and aim for at least 40% women's participation within these systems. Where possible, establish women-only committees for GBV cases to address barriers posed by male-dominated dispute resolution processes.
- iv. Explore opportunities to establish mobile legal clinics for remote townships and villages with the support of justice actors, such as CDM police, judges, and lawyers. Mobile legal clinics have proven effective in the Sagaing Region and can be replicated in other areas with limited access to formal justice institutions and procedures.
- v. Develop programs to disseminate information about available justice resources within communities through various media channels. Given the limited digital literacy and internet access among women in rural and ethnic areas, these programs should account for these challenges and incorporate innovative communication strategies to effectively reach these women. Es-

establishing community women's groups or supporting women-owned and women-led community media organizations can be effective options for disseminating information. These initiatives can help inform women about whom to contact and how to report incidents of violence.

- vi.** The international community's support for the NUG and other ethnic institutions should be contingent upon demonstrated progress in implementing gender equity reforms and accountability measures. Conditioning support in this way would incentivize meaningful action and ensure that their policies go beyond rhetoric.
- vii.** Create programs and projects that promote women's participation in alternative governance institutions. The activities should focus on strengthening the women's wings/departments of these institutions both technically and financially. Projects should focus on changing the power dynamic of women in those organizations and make sure women are given full authority to solve the cases with the support of leadership at the local level as well as the national level.

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8. Annex I.

Kachin State

Located in the northern part of Myanmar, Kachin State is home to 18 townships with a population of approximately 1.689 million. The armed group leading the fight in this state is the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA. The Kachin conflict is a decades-long armed conflict between the KIA and the Myanmar military. In 2016, the KIA formed the Northern Alliance with three other Ethnic Armed Organizations (EOs – the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The KIA provided extensive training for the soldiers of its allied EOs and received significant military assistance from the People's Republic of China (CSIS, 2024). As of February 2025, there are 252,300 IDPs in Kachin State alone (UNHCR, 2025).

Northern Shan State

Northern Shan State, located in the northeast of Myanmar, has a population of approximately 1.82 million people spread across 20 townships. The region includes self-administered zones such as Wa, Pa Laung, and Kokang. Northern Shan State is experiencing ongoing conflict involving several armed groups, including the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). These groups have been focused on issues such as eradicating the online scam „Kyar Phyant,” with some speculations about external involvement, including possible links to China. The United State Wa Army plays a significant role in the region. As of February 2025, the conflict has led to the displacement of approximately 37,900 people (UNHCR, 2025).

Sagaing Region

Sagaing Region, located in the northwestern part of Myanmar, has a population of approximately 5.13 million people in 37 townships. Sagaing Region has experienced active and widespread conflict, with a population that was supportive of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The region has the largest internally displaced person (IDP) population in Myanmar, with over 1.23 million displaced individuals. Sagaing also hosts more People's Defense Forces (PDFs) than any other region in the country. Additionally, new revolutionary governance structures aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG) have emerged in the region (CAR Area Assessment Sagaing Region, 2023).

Kayah or Karenni State

Karenni State, located in eastern Myanmar, is the second smallest state with an estimated population of 0.28 million across seven townships (2011 HMIS data). As of February 2025, more than 133,900 residents are classified as internally displaced. Thousands of Karenni people are also living in refugee camps in Thailand. The Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) and the Karenni Army, the armed wing of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), have claimed control over 90 percent of Karenni State.

