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The Situation of Women's Peace and Security in the Context of Myanmar's Conflict from July to September 2024

October 2024



Photo : UNOCHA



Introduction

September is the month of International Peace Day, established in 1981 by the United Nations General Assembly. This day is observed on 21 September worldwide including Myanmar. While September marks the International Day of Peace in Myanmar the current conflict poses a significant risk to women's peace and security. The theme for the 2024 Peace Day is "Cultivating a Culture of Peace." It is important for everyone to be involved in achieving lasting peace.¹ However, the condition of women's peace and security is under threat in the context of Myanmar due to the military's attempted coup. Since 2021, the people of Myanmar have been struggling with severe human rights violations at the hands of the military. The people of Myanmar are vehemently opposing the military's attempted coup through various non-violent means and taking up arms. However, during more than three years of resistance against the attempted military coup, the situation concerning women's peace and security in Myanmar has deteriorated. Women are being killed as a result of the military's airstrikes, artillery shelling, massacres, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, and rape, including gang-rape, of women and girls. During these three months, the armed conflict between the military junta and ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) and People's Defense Forces (PDFs) has escalated across the country, especially during the second episode of the 1027 Operation in Northern Shan state. The military junta has lost strategic bases, posts, and cities, including Lashio, the capital city of Northern Shan State, where the military's Northeastern Command is based. At the same time, the military junta continues to target civilians and blatantly commit grave human rights violations such as artillery shelling and aerial bombardment, arbitrary arrest, killing, and sexual violence. The military junta continues its forced recruitment under the illegal conscription law, including of women and girls. The security of Women Human Rights Defenders, including women political prisoners, is getting worse. Moreover, the economic crisis negatively impacted women's lives, particularly in grassroots communities. Women and girls are under the threat of sexual violence, such as rape, gang rape, sexual harassment, and abuse. However, there are no existing protection and accountable mechanisms for the survivors, therefore allowing perpetrators to enjoy complete impunity.

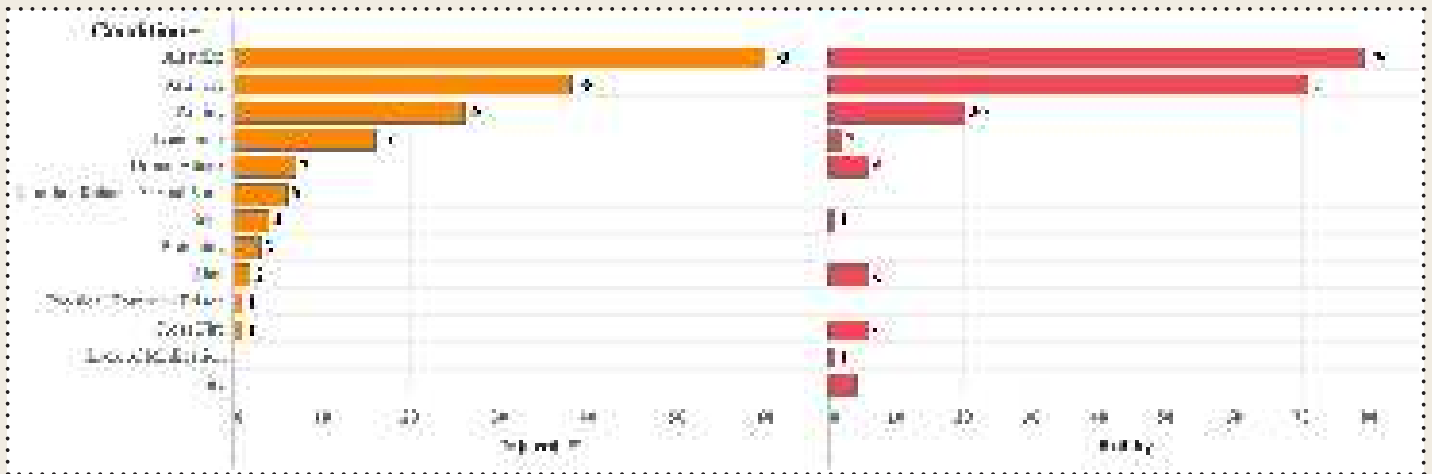
1 UNDP (20 September 2024).
<https://www.undp.org/blog/cultivating-culture-peace>



This report will cover the status of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), the illegal conscription law, women and the economic situation, their protection, and access to justice for survivors/victims of sexual violence against women and girls, the situation of women internally displaced persons (IDPs), and their security situation in the period from July to September 2024. This report is written based on secondary sources such as news articles, organizational reports, research. BWU believes that this report helps to understand the struggles and challenges faced by women's and girls, as well as their resilience. Furthermore, this analysis paper can be used as advocacy material for different stakeholders at national and regional levels, and it can also help in accessing justice for survivors and their families. However, due to limited access to information and restricted flow of information on the ground, BWU faces numerous obstacles and challenges in accessing data and forming informed opinions across the country. Thus, the information written in this report will reflect only the tip of the iceberg of the actual situation that is happening on the ground.

1. The Situation of Women's Peace and Security

Despite September 21, 2024, being the International Day of Peace, the situation of women's peace and security are in jeopardy situation in Myanmar because of the atrocities committed by the military junta and the ongoing intensified armed conflict. However, women play a critical role in protecting their families and revolution; therefore, they are targeted by military junta. According to the BWU's data collection, 196 women were killed, and 164 were wounded between July and September 2024.



Picture: Number of Women Fatality and Injured (July to September, 2024)

Based on AAPP's data, 1180 women have been murdered by the military junta since 2021². In conflict areas, women and girls are being used as human shields and are being taken into custody by the military. For example, on July 5, 2024, in Gonenya village, Kanbalu township, Sagaing region, Pyu Saw Htee arrested ten women and three men who were working on a farm. The men were released after being beaten, while the women were traded for supplies and rations.³ Additionally, women from Mon State are being compelled to cook for the military junta troops and are facing verbal harassment. This is the reason they are being subjected to security checks in public areas and even in their homes, including during nighttime⁴.

The risks for pregnant women have increased amidst the armed conflict. Following the attempted military coup, most health workers joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), while non-CDMers fled to other areas because of the conflict. Therefore, on August 3, 2024, a pregnant woman and her baby died at Bhamo Hospital because she could not receive an emergency section in time due to a lack of doctors⁵. Additionally, due to the fighting between the KIA and the military junta in Indaw town, thousands of civilians have been trapped at the

2 Assistance Association for Political Prisoner Burma (30th September 2024).
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=925454402944988&set=pcb.925454642944964>

3 Myaelatt Athan (06 July 2024).
<http://surl.li/ljhava>

4 Connect Burma (5th July 2024).
<https://web.facebook.com/share/p/hY1PixJPLP9Xc1jN/w>

5 Kachin News Group (3rd September 2024).
<http://surl.li/mdiobx>

monastery for a month. Some civilians were injured during the fighting, and the military junta restricted freedom of movement and access to emergency healthcare. As a result, some injured civilians, including women, lost their lives due to the lack of medical care⁶. Women are also facing high risks to their security due to the danger of landmines, putting their lives and the lives of children at risk. According to BWU monitoring from the media in these three months, more than four women have lost their lives, fourteen have been wounded and some lost their legs or hands.

1.1. Conscription Laws and Women

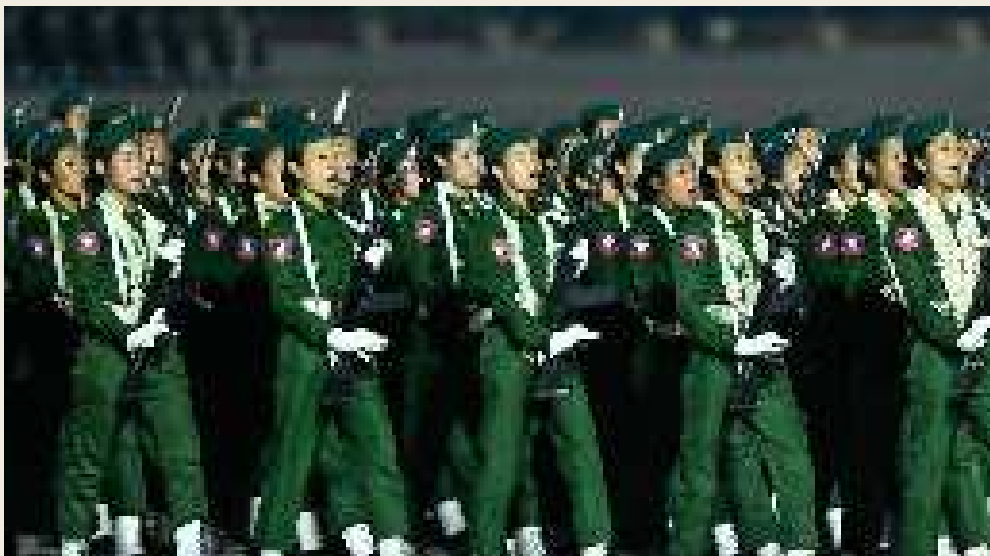


Photo : AFP

It has been almost seven months since the military junta reinstated an illegal conscription law to strengthen its troops while EROs continue launching offensive attacks. Civilians who live under the strong control areas of the military junta are forcibly recruited by the recruitment team under orders. Three rounds of military training have been completed, and the fourth batch is currently undergoing training during this reporting period. After the training, the trainees are sent to the front line on the battlefield. However, since July 2024, there have been reports of military personnel unlawfully raiding people's homes and forcibly arresting young people at midnight in Monywa town. Specifically, four to five women and girls aged between 18 and 20 have been arrested. Their parents tried to pay for their release, but they are still being detained⁷. Women and girls are living under significant risk and threat in the con-

6 RFA Burmese (04 September 2024).

https://www.facebook.com/rfaburmese/posts/934725672022169?ref=embed_post

7 VOA Burmese (09 July 2024).

<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/conscription-law-myanmar-women/7690697.html>

text of resistance to the military attempted coup. However, the military unlawful conscription law has added another layer of risk and security for women and girls. According to the RFA's interview with the director of Mon Human Rights Foundation, in ten townships from Mon state, the military junta has recruited eligible women and girls for the batch of August 2024. As the military junta intensifies its recruitment process, women and girls are fleeing their homes and villages to escape the illegal conscription law⁸. Meanwhile, lack of job opportunities and financial difficulties are the main sources of mental distress among parents who have daughters.

On September 5, 2024, it was reported that Thai authorities transferred a total of 960 Myanmar citizens to respective border gates. This group included 752 men and 208 women who had entered Thailand illegally. More young people from Myanmar are fleeing to neighboring countries, particularly Thailand, through various means following the announcement of illegal conscription laws⁹. Additionally, concerns and anxieties have arisen among young women, girls, and their parents due to forced recruitment and arrests¹⁰. On the other hand, the military junta has increased restrictions for youths falling within the age range of conscription law at airport immigration since the last week of August 2024. This has led to an increased risk of human trafficking through illegal border crossings.

1.2. The Situation for Women's Human Rights Defenders

Throughout Myanmar's history, women have been actively involved in leading and participating in political movements alongside men. Despite men's dominant political ideology and societal norms, women have played crucial roles in resisting dictatorship. However, women continue to face exclusion from decision-making positions. Regardless of this, women have been actively involved in opposing the military coup in various ways. Unfortunately, this has resulted in increased threats to the safety of WHRDs, including arbitrary arrest, torture, killing, and surveillance by the military junta.



8 RFA Burmese (20 August 2024).

<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/junta-women-military-service-08202024130215.html>

9 RFA Burmese (06 September 2024).

https://www.facebook.com/rfaburmese/posts/936174905210579?ref=embed_post

10 Shan News Burmese (23 August 2024).

<https://burmese.shannews.org/archives/43776>



The situation of WHRDs and women political prisoners has deteriorated in recent months. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoner Burma (AAPP) has reported that 5,690 women have been arrested by military junta since the military attempted the coup in 2021¹¹. According to International Court of Justice, Myanmar women political prisoners have been experiencing severe human rights violations including denied access to health care, torture, (especially during interrogation), sexual violence and forced abortions¹². On 19 August 2024, the prison authorities at Daik-U prison in Bago brutally beat and tortured women political prisoners, causing serious injuries to seven of them. They were denied access to medical care. Additionally, on August 18, 2024, a female lawyer providing free legal aid to individuals charged with political offenses following the attempted coup was arrested in Kyaikto, Mon State¹³.

Thousands of women from different departments joined the Spring Revolution as CDMers and strongly condemned the attempted military coup. Therefore, the military junta keeps targeting them, and their security is a serious concern. It was reported that a four-month pregnant CDM teacher was shot and killed by the military junta troops in Chaung-U township, Sagaing region. The victim was tortured before killing, and her hands were mutilated with knives.¹⁴ Additionally, the military not only targets the WHRDs but also seizes and destroys their property due to their political participation. For example, the house of a leader of an LGBT strike in Dawei was raided and set on fire on July 22, 2024, by military junta¹⁵. Over the past three years of resisting the attempted coup, the security situation for WHRDs has continued to deteriorate.

11 Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma (30th September 2024).
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=925454402944988&set=pcb.925454642944964>

12 Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (31 July 2024).
<https://fb.watch/ux1QbV7XNh/>

13 Independent Mon News Agency (22 August 2024).
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=903900348432193&set=a.640474221441475&type=3>

14 RFA Burmese (24 August 2024).
<http://surl.li/hxqnpj>

15 Honest Information (17 September 2024).
https://www.facebook.com/honestinfo/posts/497191872950421?ref=embed_post

1.3. Deteriorating Economy and its' Impact on Women

The military junta has not only led to increased armed conflicts but has also plunged Myanmar's economy into chaos, resulting in higher inflation rates, food insecurity, a lack of job opportunities, and a significant outflow of labor to neighboring countries. The high inflation rate is making it even harder for people, especially women, to make ends meet. Despite the rising cost of living, wages and salaries remain the same. As a result, more people are resorting to borrowing money from illegal lenders, who charge exorbitant interest rates. Additionally, there are reports of women in IDP camps struggling to survive due to the conflict and soaring prices of basic goods throughout the country. Due to the increase in commodity prices, some women sell their property to feed their families while others cannot even afford cooking oil due to their low income.



Photo: Aung Kyaw Htet/Sopa/Zuma

On August 9, 2024, the military junta announced an increase in daily wage from 5800 to 6800 kyat, which is equivalent to 1 USD. Nevertheless, the increased rate does not cover the living cost for the workers due to the continuous depreciation of the Myanmar kyat and a surge in community prices. Business owners, specifically garment factories, also encounter a shortage of skilled workers because employers cannot increase sufficient salaries and wages. Those who are unable to find a job abroad are struggling with the current situation¹⁶. World Bank also predicts approximately one-third of the population of Myanmar lives in poverty¹⁷. According to a survey by Myaelatt Athan, the price of basic foods tripled after the military

16 RFA Burmese (15 August 2024).

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1192968181926506&ref=sharing>

17 VOA English (12 June 2024).

<https://www.voanews.com/a/world-bank-inflation-poverty-keep-climbing-in-war-torn-myanmar/7653449.html>

attempted a coup in the Bago region, where the military fully controls the area. It cost 5,000 kyats per day for the whole family in 2021, but it cost 15,000 kyats in 2024¹⁸. In some parts of the country, people have to skip meals due to fierce inflation and rising community prices.

A large number of people are trying to escape from such an economic crisis and seeking jobs abroad. However, it is not easy for migrant workers to work without proper documents in foreign countries where they can be subjected to arrest, imprisonment, and deportation. On September 25, 2024, the Thai authorities arrested 264 Myanmar undocumented migrant workers from Myanmar, including 52 women. They will be charged and will spend one and a half months in prison and then deported back to Myanmar. Between June and September 2024, a total of 193,430 Myanmar migrant workers have been arrested in Thailand.¹⁹ After almost four years since the military terrorist attempted the coup, Myanmar's economy shows no signs of recovering, leading to collapse, and civilians are facing various challenges.

1.4. Protection and Access to Justice for Sexual Violence Survivors



Photo : ICRC

Throughout this prolonged armed conflict, the military junta has systematically used sexual violence against women and girls as weapons of war, with complete impunity for decades. However, cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have become even more widespread across the country after the attempted military coup in 2021. The military has committed CRSV not only in armed conflict, but also in non-conflict areas such as prisons, interrogation and detention centers, and military checkpoints.

18 Myaelatt Athan (25th September 2024).
<https://tinyurl.com/ft2jtnxb>

19 RFA Burmese (25 September 2024).
<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/myanmar-workers-arrested-09252024024430.html>



Consequently, people of all gender are at high risk of CRSV, particularly rape, including gang raped and murder. On August 30, 2024, a video emerged in which the military troops are seen inciting each other to rape and commit sexual violence against a local woman in Gangaw township, Magway region²⁰. This video is evidence that the military strategically and systematically targets women and girls as weapons of war. The military troops torture, murder, arrest, carry out arson in the villages, and commit sexual violence against women and girls while they enter the village.

On August 29, 2024, a woman was beaten and raped by the military troops in Letpadan township, Bago region, and a man also was killed who tried to save the woman²¹. Two days later, another woman was beaten with guns and gang raped by three military soldiers in Minhla township, Bago region. As a result, the victim is in critical condition as she was beaten unconsciously after being raped²². BWU continues to gather and record cases of CRSV in challenging and dangerous conditions in five specific areas: Sagaing, Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions, and Karenni State. Despite the difficult circumstances, BWU has documented over 45 cases of CRSV as September 2024, including instances of child rape, through interviews with survivors, families, and witnesses. The majority of these cases involved military soldiers and people associated with the military. Nevertheless, many cases of CRSV go unreported because survivors and their families are concerned about security and there are inadequate protection mechanisms in place. Despite widespread and systematic use of sexual violence against women and girls, seeking justice is difficult, and survivors often do not see the perpetrators held accountable. On the other hand, survivors face numerous challenges, including victim blaming, social stigma, discrimination, and oppression due to societal, cultural, and traditional norms. Therefore, the feminist movement aims to challenge dictatorial, patriarchal, social, and traditional norms that harm survivors of CRSV.

20 Myanmar Now (30th August 2024).

<http://surl.li/fnkarp>

21 DVB Burmese (01 September 2024).

https://www.dvb.no/post/667083#google_vignette

22 DVB Burmese (02 September 2024).

https://www.dvb.no/post/667211#google_vignette

1.5. The situation for women IDPs

During this reporting period, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of internally displaced persons across the country due to the ongoing armed conflict and natural disasters such as floods and landslides. The military junta has been continuously shelling, reinforcing, and launching airstrikes on the civilians' areas, leading to civilians seeking refuge. According to the data from the BNI-Myanmar Peace Monitor, as of August 31, 2024, there were 3,320,470 IDPs due to intense armed conflict and massive floods²³. There is extensive flooding damage to civilian's homes, public infrastructure, communication channels water sources, and public transportation.



Photo: The Diplomat



Photo : AFP

According to the UNOCHA report on September 21, 2024, around 887,000 people from 65 townships were affected by a crisis, resulting in over 300 deaths and approximately 100 injuries²⁴. The humanitarian aid, including emergency support and access to health care continues to face shortages. BWU also received information that IDPs, especially women, are facing multiple challenges such as increased community prices, sexual violence, and abuse in the camps. It is challenging to afford menstrual pads due to their high cost. Moreover, the military continued to reinforce villages, set homes on fire, and carry out arbitrary arrests and killings. In the early morning of August 5, 2024, the military junta launched an aerial bombardment on the IDP camp in Karenni state, resulting in the deaths of at least 8 IDPs, including 6 children and the destruction of more than

23 BNI-Myanmar Peace Monitor (31 August 2024).
<https://mmpeacemonitor.org/314126/internally-displaced-persons-situation-in-myanmar-jan-2021-aug-2022/>

24 United Nations OCHA Myanmar (21 September 2024).
https://www.facebook.com/OCHAMyanmar/posts/950437463795610?ref=embed_post



20 shelters²⁵. On the same day, many Rohingya, including women and children, were killed by the military's artillery shelling and drone attacks while attempting to cross the Naf River to seek refuge in Bangladesh²⁶. The IDPs are struggling with insufficient humanitarian assistance, the pervasive threats of sexual violence against women and girls, and the continuous airstrikes by the military junta.

Conclusion

It has been almost four years since the military junta attempted a coup in Myanmar. However, the people of Myanmar are still strongly resisting and fighting with different strategies against the military junta. The armed conflict is widespread across the country, and has resulted in the significant loss of territories, including strategic posts and border cities of the military junta. Ethnic resistance organizations have established and are running local administrations in their respective territories they have taken over despite the risk of airstrikes. The military is undeniably collapsing as a strong and concrete institution. All institutions, such as those related to the economy, education, health care, administration, and judiciary are already damaged, and there are no signs of recovery under the military regime. Civilians are living in poverty and facing various human rights violations committed by the military junta. Parents and women of Myanmar are living with worries and threats of being conscripted because the military junta sponsored illegal military conscription law. The military restricts freedom of movement for those trying to go abroad to seek a job or escape illegal conscription law. The fierce inflation forces women and girls into daily struggle and a vicious cycle of poverty.

On the other hand, WHRDs are at risk of arbitrary arrest, murder, destruction of property, and torture in prison. Women political prisoners are particularly targeted. As the armed conflict escalates, the threats of conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls increase. However, access to justice for survivors is still challenging due to a lack of systematic and accountable mechanisms. It is important to raise awareness about conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) to break the silence, support survivors, and advocate justice.

25 The Irrawaddy Burmese (06 August 2024).

https://www.facebook.com/theirrawaddyburmese/posts/931725962333925?ref=embed_post

26 HI-Honest Information (22 August 2024).

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1882757805526474&ref=sharing>



Social stigma, survivor blaming, and discrimination are widespread issues that need to be addressed. Holding perpetrators of these crimes accountable is crucial to prevent further violence. It is not just armed conflict that leads to increased IDPs, but also natural disasters like flooding, which can result in humanitarian crises and shortages across the country.

The number of women who have been killed or injured has increased due to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the military junta. Pregnant women, in particular, have lost their lives due to lack of access to healthcare during the conflict. Women's lives are at severe risk, but they continue to resist and fight back against the military junta alongside men using various strategies.

The resilience and determination of women and girls in Myanmar is truly remarkable, especially in the face of political changes. This revolution is not just against the military junta, but also against all forms of dictatorship, including patriarchal ideology, which is deeply ingrained in the society. This revolution aims to promote gender equality and create an inclusive community and society for the future. Women are continuously fighting for justice, equality and inclusive future through immense risks and challenges alongside.