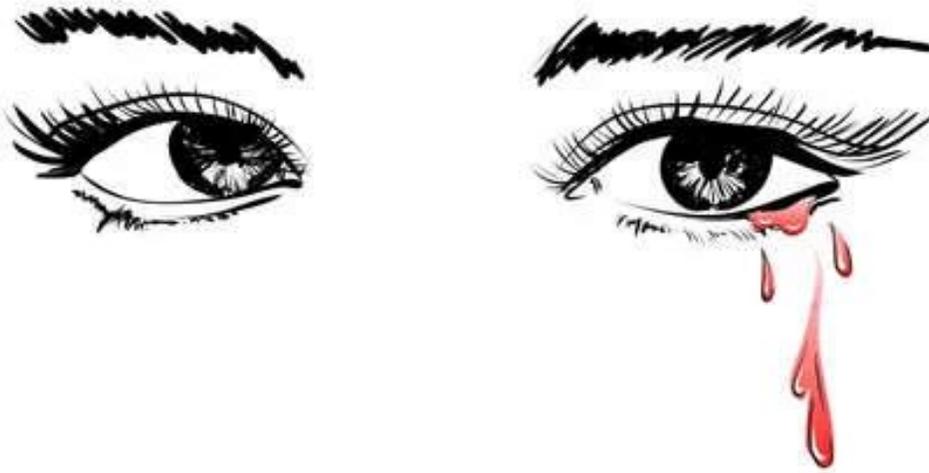


WIDOWS IN BURMA



2022 REPORT

Picture credit: [@doctorblack](#)



I. Introduction

On March 15, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 76/252 “Addressing the situation of widows.” This Resolution is significant as it comes after many years of raising awareness and advancing the rights of widows on an international level by women such as Margaret Owen, a Barrister in the United Kingdom and Founder of Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD).¹

In summary, the Resolution calls upon UN member states to:

- Focus on addressing and eliminating all forms of discrimination, violence, marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion against widows.
- Promote the inclusion of widows in decision making processes.
- Take measures to establish appropriate mechanisms to register and recognize marriages while eliminating child, early, and forced marriages, including ensuring widows have full access to inheritance and social protection and legal support.
- Develop and strengthen a social protection system for widows and their children.
- Implement policies that ensure and leverage women’s economic empowerment and promote equal pay, and other instruments which allow widows to become financially independent.
- Promote and ensure access to health care services.
- Collect and analyze data which accurately reports on widows.
- Incorporate widows into future UN agendas.

On March 18, 2022, the Congress of Nations and States (CNS) along with WPD co-hosted a session at the Commission on the Status of Women NGO event a session on widows in Burma. The theme of the CSW NGO 66 sessions centered on climate change and the environment. This report compliments the conversation which took place by looking at the challenges that widows and single women face within Burma in a broader context.

CNS is an international, independent, permanent forum created to bring about mutual cooperation and dialogue between Indigenous and Minority Peoples, their Nations, and State

¹ Global Fund for Widows (New York), [“UN General Assembly Adopts Seminal Legislation on Widow’s Rights”](#) All Africa, March 15, 2022.



governments.² CNS asked for organizations in Burma to contribute to this report. CNS is grateful to the contributions made by [Karen Human Rights Group](#), [Arakan Rohingya National Organisation](#), and [Human Rights Foundation Monland](#) to advance dialogue regarding the status and rights of widows in Burma. All other information provided in this report was obtained through open-source publications.

II. Background

On February 1, 2021, the military apparatus in Burma staged a coup against the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy party which had recently secured a majority of votes in the November 2020 national elections. The military (junta) appointed itself as the leaders of the country through the State Administrative Council. It then wasted no time in arresting different leaders of the National League for Democracy and charging them with crimes that appear to be unsubstantiated. Since February 2021, the junta has been attempting to take control over the entire country, but has been met with fierce resistance in different areas.³ Besides the Ethnic Armed Organizations which continue to resist the military, different People's Movements, such as the Civil Disobedience Movement, protest against the unjust actions of the military.

The junta has responded to the various civil society movements with brutal violence. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported on February 1, 2021, “arbitrary detentions, unnecessary and disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters, extrajudicial killings and ill-treatment and torture in custody have accompanied the Tatmadaw’s seizure of power.”⁴ Worse still is the continued aerial bombings of villages and those fleeing from the violence for safety. In addition, social media has been replete with images of civilian photos of villages and homes being burned to the ground. On March 27, 2022, it was reported that military appointed leader General Min Aung Hlaing would “annihilate” those who are part of resistance organizations.⁵ All of these severe human rights violations continue to date,

² For more information regarding CNS, you can visit our [website](#). The recording of the CSW session is also available on our website.

³ UN High Commissioner Report A/HRC/49/72 citing Lindsay Maizland, “[Myanmar’s Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict](#)” Council on Foreign Relations, January 31, 2022.

⁴ UN High Commissioner Report A/HRC/49/72 citing [A/HRC/48/67, paras. 21–41](#). See also the conference room paper containing supplementary information to the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Myanmar since 1 February 2021, available from [paras. 4–38](#).

⁵ Jerry Harmer, “[Myanmar leader vows to ‘annihilate’ opponents of army rule](#)” ABC News, March 27, 2022.



despite the languishing economy and COVID 19 which continues to impact all people throughout the country.

Throughout the country ethnic groups are impacted in different ways by the violence which continues under the leadership of the junta.

III. Widows in Burma

The following section will examine three different areas within Burma and three specific ethnic groups, the Karen, Mon, and Rohingya. For the purposes of this report, while the communities discussed here are facing similar challenges, CNS has highlighted different challenges within each section to give a glimpse of diverse factors which create more widows and/or create vulnerabilities that worsen conditions for widows to survive.



a. Karen

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) has provided the following information regarding the landscape for widows and single women in the Karen communities.

It is important to highlight from the outset that widowhood could, and perhaps should, be defined in broader terms than the typical “someone whose spouse is deceased”. In areas



affected by conflict and high insecurity, there are a variety of situations that can lead to the effective loss or temporary (yet extended) loss of a spouse aside from death. In Southeast Myanmar, it is common for men to go into hiding when there are threats of forced labor and other military abuse in their area. This can extend for long periods of time. Increased arrests and detention, mostly arbitrary, by soldiers and other security forces can also lead to extended absences. Landmine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) explosions, even when they do not result in death, can lead to the long-term or permanent inability of one spouse to work and earn money for the family. For that reason, KHRG has typically identified not only widows but single parents, those whose spouse is currently absent, and unmarried adults in general, as experiencing increased vulnerability, and on multiple fronts: livelihood, increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), health, etc.

KHRG has also previously reported that little formal support is available to widows. Most often, support comes from other community members, sometimes in the form of material support, but often in the form of limiting additional financial burdens that other individuals and families may be subjected to, like taxation and material contributions (typically, rice donations).

With the escalation in fighting and air and ground attacks, arbitrary killings, and the planting of new landmines since the February 1st 2021 coup, there will certainly be a rise in the incidence of widowhood. Hardship and vulnerability will also increase pushing many into more precarious situations of food insecurity and debt.

Increasing prevalence of widowhood, single parenthood and absent spouses since the 2021 coup

i. Planting of new landmines

Despite an increase in mine awareness training and education not just for villagers, but also for armed actors following the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, Myanmar is still not party to the Mine Ban Treaty, nor to the Convention on Cluster Munitions. It is listed as one of the 12 remaining landmine producers by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), and as the only state whose security forces still actively use landmines. Since the coup, there has been a rise in the planting of new landmines by multiple armed groups. This has led to a significant increase in landmine incidents, including those resulting in death. Aside from the financial burden created by medical expenses and/or funerary costs, the family often loses a primary breadwinner and must figure out a new means of earning an income. The latter is also the case even when the victim does not die. Many of the landmine accidents reported to KHRG resulted



in the amputation of a foot or leg, meaning that the most common occupations that villagers rely on, agriculture and casual labor, will be difficult for the victims in the future, thus limiting their wage-earning potential.

Most landmine victims and their family receive no support. In KHRG's operational area, DanChurchAid has often been able to provide a small sum to help cover medical costs when KHRG alerts them of an incident, but more long-term aid does not seem to be available.

Losing the primary breadwinner in the family can have a long-lasting impact on the family, affecting the future of the children. Often, one or more children are no longer able to attend school, either because the family does not have the financial means, or because one or more children are needed to help earn money or take care of the other children. On June 22nd 2020, Saw F---, a 48-year-old villager from Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District stepped on a landmine while he was on his way back to the village after he had gone fishing with his 14-year-old son. One of his feet was blown off in the explosion. The villagers took him to the clinic in Day Boo Noh village for treatment, but due to hemorrhaging, he passed away later that evening. Saw F--- is survived by a 30-year-old wife and eight children, including a new-born baby. The victim's wife had been facing health issues since her last delivery and needed to tend to her children. As she cannot work, her oldest child, the 14-year-old who was with his father when the incident happened, had to abandon his studies to provide for the family.⁶

ii. Forced labor and fears of military abuse

Since the 2021 coup, concerns about the renewal of forced labor and other forms of violence have led men in many villages to go into hiding, leaving women and children alone in the village. Although in some cases men are able to return during the day in order to help work the plantation or tend to livestock, in areas of higher insecurity, the men may be unable to return for extended periods of time. Women are thus left to take care of their children and their crops and livestock. It also leaves these women more vulnerable to a variety of abuses by soldiers. Since the coup, and under past military regimes, KHRG has found that when the men are not present in the village, the soldiers will take women instead as porters, navigators, or human shields.

KHRG recently received a report of forced labor in Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District. Close to 300 villagers in total (180 from Htee Hpa Doh Hta village and 100 from Yo Klah

⁶KHRG, "[An Ongoing Danger: Death and injury due to landmine and UXO explosions in Southeast Myanmar from January 2020 through January 2021](#)", December 2021.



village) were forced by Border Guard Force (BGF) soldiers to carry rations and ammunition for them. The majority of the villagers required to serve as porters were women because many of the local men had already fled the village. According to Ya Cher, who was herself forced into portering: *“I went because my husband is not home. When I returned home, my legs were in pain. It was so painful.”*⁷

KHRG previously reported that in some cases widows will be spared from engaging in forced portering. For instance, in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District in January 2013, villagers were ordered by local Buddhist leaders and village heads to work on the construction of a bridge. In this particular case widows were excused by the village leaders from participating in forced labor.⁸ Since the 2021 coup, KHRG has not yet received similar reports of widows being exempt from forced labor.

iii. Increase in conflict, attacks on civilian areas and arbitrary killings

Military activity, including fighting and air and ground attacks by the Myanmar military increased shortly after the coup, and has resulted in injury and loss of life. The exact numbers of civilians who have died is difficult to estimate. While KHRG recorded only seven deaths as a direct result of the airstrikes in March and April 2021, the high levels of displacement that have ensued are most certainly leading to an increase in deaths, given the conditions of displacement that villagers are facing. Most of these deaths will likely go unreported to relevant organizations, but will have tremendous impact on the families themselves.

There has also been an increase in what appears to be intentional shooting and killing of civilians by State Administration Council (SAC) forces, including instances of SAC soldiers shooting civilians on sight. Given the current security situation, including the ongoing displacements, there are even fewer possibilities for support or justice for the families of the deceased.

In Mu Traw District, on the evening of April 29th 2021, SAC soldiers shot dead a 38-year-old villager from Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District while villagers were trying to flee their village because of fighting between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and SAC forces. He suffered from two bullet wounds, one to his head, and the other to his abdomen. He is survived

⁷ KHRG, forthcoming raw data publication (21-290-D1).

⁸ KHRG, [“Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar”](#), August 2016.



by his wife and two daughters. Because villagers had to flee from their village, there has been no organizational or individual support for the family yet.⁹

In Dooplaya District, the ten-household head (also a local traditional healer) from Kyone Doe Township was shot at his home on April 23rd 2021, at about 8:30 pm. Responding to a knock at his door, six rounds of bullets were fired at him, and he died as a result of a bullet to the chest. The SAC police officers at Chaung Na Kwa Police Station claimed the bullets were not theirs, thus the case remains unresolved, and no further investigation has been made by either the Karen National Police Force (KNPF) or SAC police.¹⁰

Livelihood challenges and financial insecurity of widows

Livelihood challenges and financial insecurity are common among widows. Women who had lost their husbands have described having to work “hand-to-mouth”, struggling to feed their children, being unable to conduct their former livelihood activities or business, being unable to protect their paddy fields alone, and having to rely on family to support them.

i. Cycles of debt

Ma P---, a 42-year-old woman from Doo Tha Htoo District, described in June 2015 facing increasing livelihood difficulties after her husband was arrested and imprisoned at Insein Prison, Yangon: *“When he was here, he worked and it was not bad and now he is not [here] and I have to face problems with my children. I have to borrow money and my siblings also cannot provide me [with] food all the time [as they are also poor]. It is too hot [in Myanmar] and I have children and I also have to follow the case and I have to go for the court appointments as well. Sometimes when I come back, my children have to eat the rice that has started to go off [spoiled]. They [the court] set an appointment twice or four times a month. I always have to go and it costs money [to travel].”*¹¹

For all villagers, the cost of medical care can create added financial problems. Because of the already vulnerable livelihood situation of widows, medical care can often push them into an unending cycle of debt. According to a villager from Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District who was interviewed in November 2016: *“For some widows, they do not have money therefore they*

⁹ KHRG, [“Military Atrocities and Civilian Resilience: Testimonies of injustice, insecurity and violence in Southeast Myanmar during the 2021 coup”](#), November 2021.

¹⁰ KHRG, [“Dooplaya District Situation Update: SAC interrogation and arbitrary arrest, arbitrary killing, and displacement due to fighting in Mu Traw District, April to May 2021”](#), December 2021.

¹¹ KHRG, [“Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar”](#), August 2016.



sell their land or borrow money from others and they are in a situation of debt. They receive medical treatment and have to repay their debts as well, so they cannot be safe from debt.”¹²

ii. A situation of increased hardship as a result of COVID-19

Due to the lack of any form of systematic support from state actors or other organizations, if widows do not have other family members who can provide financial support or help with the caring of children, they are unlikely able to meet the needs of their family.

These kinds of problems increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. KHRG researchers reported that widows and their families have been at even heightened risk of food insecurity. Saw Ag---, an unemployed day laborer living with six of his children in Law Pa Hkee village, Noh T’Kaw Township, Dooplaya District recounted in 2020 the difficulties he was facing: *“Since the spread of COVID-19, there have been many problems for us. We cannot travel anywhere and we do not have enough food as well. [...] In this situation, we have to ask for food from our relatives. [...] If we are unfortunate, we might have to survive by eating porridge meal. We cannot even guarantee having porridge if the food shortage gets worse.”* He continued to explain that he occasionally received bowls of rice and meat from relatives but it was enough for just a couple of meals because he has six children to feed. They are surviving on vegetables from the forest and eat sparingly in order to have something for the days to come. Having also had to scale back their number of meals, it is likely that members of his household are now suffering from malnutrition. The situation of this family is likely even worse since the coup.¹³

A villager from Moo Township, Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District told KHRG back in 2020 that day labourer families in his community where the head of household was a widow were in dire need of humanitarian support. These households were already facing livelihood difficulties before the pandemic, and they have seen their economic situation worsen even further in 2020. In describing their situation, he states: *“They borrow money to buy food and pay it back after they [receive their wages]. Then, they have to borrow again and work to pay their debts. Sometimes, they cannot pay their debts so they stay indebted.”¹⁴*

In some areas, widows and others in critical livelihood situations were able to receive small amounts of support through local CSOs and CBOs, like [Karen Women’s Organisation](#) (KWO).

¹² KHRG, [“Foundation of fear: 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar”](#), October 2017.

¹³ KHRG, [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, killings and sexual violence, July to December 2020”](#), February 2021; KHRG, [“Left Behind: Ethnic Minorities and COVID-19 Response in Rural Southeast Myanmar”](#), May 2021.

¹⁴ KHRG, [“Left Behind: Ethnic Minorities and COVID-19 Response in Rural Southeast Myanmar”](#), May 2021.



Support has however not been systematic or widespread. In fact, the Myanmar government's COVID-19 response plan that claimed to provide economic relief to families in need did not reach most rural villagers.¹⁵

iii. Humanitarian crisis and displacement since the 2021 coup

The 2021 coup has led to an increase in human rights violations and a highly critical security situation for villagers in Mu Traw, Kler Lwee Htoo, Doo Tha Htoo, and more recently Dooplaya District. Tens of thousands of villagers in Southeast Myanmar have been displaced due to SAC offensives since the beginning of the coup, often fleeing with little food and supplies, and having poor access to shelter and potable water, yet also unable to access humanitarian support. Although information specifically on the challenges faced by widows has not yet been received, given the challenges already identified in reports on the COVID-19 pandemic and past periods of conflict, it is likely that widows, particularly those caring for multiple children, will be facing extreme vulnerability and increased hardship.

iv. Added stress and mental health issues

Women identified a variety of concerns, stresses, and struggles in widowhood, including the sadness of being dependent on elderly parents, the lack of satisfaction as they cannot earn income to provide for their children, difficulty entering into the workforce as they lacked experience, and having concerns for the future of their children.

A young widow from Meh Mgeh village tract in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District told KHRG in October 2011 about the difficulties she was facing since the death of her husband: *"I am 20 years old. I am Saw S---'s wife. My husband Saw S--- was taken by the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) and he stepped on a landmine over one year ago. After he stepped on the landmine, he died and left me. After he passed away, he left me his two children, so I have to take care of these two orphan children. I do not know how to work. When Saw S--- passed away, he didn't leave me any property and also I cannot work for myself. So now, I stay with my parents. It is right [fine] when I stay with my parents and they don't tell me anything. But my siblings told me that I could not work to help them so I felt very sad. Even though I can live and stay like a person [as normal], it is not like a person [as normal]. I have felt many differences other people say, and I feel so weak [disheartened] among the people. Because my oldest child can ask for bread, sometimes my child asks for bread. It happens sometimes that I do not want to buy for them or that I cannot, that makes me very sad and so weak and makes me miss my*

¹⁵ Ibid.



husband so much. I do not know what I need but I can tell [you] that the lack of a house [creates a] need after my husband passed away.”¹⁶

The overall mental health of widows is of concern, particularly given the variety of stressors and trauma that rural villagers have endured. KHRG received information in June 2012 about the situation of one widow in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, whose husband was shot dead by Tatmadaw soldiers while he and other villagers in the area were in the forest looking for truffles to sell in the market: *“He [the deceased] had six children, with him and his wife, altogether eight people. I would like to tell you about his wife’s very pitiful situation. When I went to see her, it was very pitiful. After his wife delivered her youngest baby, she did wrong with water [it is unclear what this refers to], so now her brain is not working so well. When they came to stay in T--- camp, it seemed like her situation had improved. Now, since her husband has died the disease has occurred again and she cries every day. Now, after a while, she called out her husband’s [name], then ran outside into the rain, and then she slipped and fell. So, her disease is happening again like before and we can’t cure her. It is a very pitiful situation for his wife and children.”¹⁷*

High vulnerability of widows to rape and other SGBV

Most reported incidents of SGBV have occurred when the perpetrator had some sort of favorable opportunity, for example when the victim was alone at home. Women who are widows or whose spouse is absent are thus particularly vulnerable to SGBV, both by soldiers and other civilians. KHRG previously reported about a 45-year-old woman, a former widow, and whose current husband had migrated for work, who was raped by a DKBA soldier in her house. Naw A--- from Kawkareik Township, Doolaya District reported that the soldier came to her house in the middle of the night and raped her. After confronting him later about the rape, he kicked her, shot at her and threatened her. When she mentioned the incident to a village elder, the village leaders, who had spoken with the soldier, said she was lying.¹⁸

Even elderly widows are at risk of SGBV. KHRG received information about a rape that occurred in August 2020 to a 75-year-old woman in Daw Hpa Hkoh (Thandaunggyi) Township, Taw Oo (Toungoo) District. A fellow villager snuck into her house during the night, covered her mouth to keep her from shouting and raped her. The case was investigated by the village authorities

¹⁶ KHRG, [“Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar \(Appendix\)”](#), August 2016.

¹⁷ KHRG, [“Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar”](#), August 2016.

¹⁸ Ibid.



and eventually referred to the Karen National Union (KNU). The local authorities arrested the perpetrator in November 2020, but he was released in December due to lack of evidence. The release of the perpetrator has left the survivor particularly vulnerable to retaliation and/or further abuse since he previously threatened to return to her house. The survivor has not benefitted from counselling services to overcome her trauma.¹⁹

Most perpetrators of SGBV in Southeast Myanmar go unpunished. In some cases, if the female survivor is unmarried, she will be forced or encouraged to marry the perpetrator in lieu of compensation.

Widows are particularly vulnerable as a result of land confiscation and development

After the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), development projects increased steadily but often negatively impacted local villagers due to land confiscation and damage to farms, forests, waterways and other natural resources. Although the Asia Highway was supposed to be beneficial for the public as well as for organizations and local citizens, it greatly impacted local people who live along or near the road construction. The road crossed through local people's lands/gardens and farmlands, but those involved in construction were not concerned with providing any compensation for the damage they inflicted upon gardens and farmlands. Those who had lots of land could endure this damage, but some people lost everything they had. KHRG reports indicated that widows were often the most seriously impacted. Already facing livelihood difficulties, the loss of land could leave them few or no other livelihood possibilities. As a result of construction of the Asia Highway, land confiscation left one widowed male villager, with nothing. At the time he was over 60 years old and a father of seven children. Although he previously owned land, he was forced to earn money by working daily irregular work. KHRG reported that he was tightly managing his family's health, education, and livelihood; although others were also facing difficulties, he was one of the worst victims of the development projects that the KHRG community member (researcher) had witnessed.²⁰

Widows are unable to access justice and unable to perform funeral rites

Access to justice is an ongoing problem in Southeast Myanmar, with the Myanmar military enjoying widespread impunity for the crimes and atrocities soldiers commit against civilians. In many cases, families are threatened by the soldiers or fear retaliation due to the presence of troops in their area, and thus are unable to report the incident, or are pressured to drop the

¹⁹ KHRG, "[Taw Oo District Incident Report: Rape case in Daw Hpa Hkoh Township, August 2020](#)", February 2021.

²⁰ KHRG, "[Doooplaya Situation Update: Win Yay Township, January to October 2016](#)", February 2018.



case, particularly in killing cases. Denial of wrongdoing is also extremely widespread. Even when the military admit to the wrongdoing and agree to compensation, there is often little recourse when the military fails to pay the compensation. Saw A---, a villager from Htee Tha Daw Hta village tract, Bu Tho Township, was shot and killed by a soldier from the BGF in March 2015. After his death, his family struggled with their livelihood and his widowed wife went to meet with the battalion commander in charge of the soldier who shot Saw A---. She demanded compensation for the killing of her husband, and although the commander agreed verbally to provide her with financial support for one month, no compensation had been given by the time KHRG received the report.²¹

Men, more so than women, seem to be the victims of targeted killings, which means that women are more often widows as a result of a crime and/or human rights violation, and in a situation of not receiving justice for the death of their spouse. In some cases, a widow will leave the village to be closer to other family members, but in other cases a widow may be forced to leave due to insecurity.

After her husband was murdered in what appeared to be a witchcraft-related killing in July 2020, Naw D--- was herself accused of witchcraft. Fearing for her own safety and that of her children, she fled to another village, but was eventually forced to seek refuge in a KWO safe house. Because of the ongoing witchcraft allegations, Naw D--- has fallen into depression and is now living in fear, so she cannot even think about accessing justice anymore. In her words: *“Currently, I cannot think about anything. Everything is complicated for me so I just depend on whatever will be done [...]. The leaders can do what they should do for me, I cannot think of anything now. [...]. I want you [leaders] to consider my security and rights, to help me think about whether I should [formally] report the case or not. [...] I just want peace and safety. I always have to live in fear so I desire security. [...] If possible, I want to go home.”*²²

In some cases of killings committed by the Myanmar military, the body of the victim is disappeared by the military. This can have a significant impact on the possibility of obtaining justice. The disappearance of the body can make it difficult to prove that a violation was committed. Saw Theh Mee, a community leader, who served as deputy chair of the Kaw Thay Ghu Judicial Committee and committee member for the Salween Peace Park, was shot on March 31st, 2020, when Tatmadaw soldiers transporting rations opened fire on villagers

²¹ KHRG, [“Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar”](#), August 2016.

²² KHRG, [“Hpa-an District Incident Report: Witchcraft-related killing in T’Nay Hsah Township, July 2020”](#), November 2020.



returning to their village. While the other villagers were able to escape, Saw Theh Mee was killed. Initially, KNLA soldiers and villagers were afraid to retrieve the body of Saw Theh Mee because Tatmadaw soldiers were still operating in the area and guarding the body. A few days later, the body had disappeared. None of the soldiers involved in this case, nor their superiors who were on duty, have met with punishment for this killing. Nor have any charges been brought up against the perpetrators. Without the body, it would be difficult for the family to prove that the killing had taken place, and that Tatmadaw soldiers were the perpetrators.²³

Widows may also face challenges regarding the performance of funeral rites for the deceased. In the case of Saw Oh Moo, a committed human rights defender, community leader, and peace advocate who was shot and killed on April 5th 2018 by the Tatmadaw while on his way home from a meeting to organize humanitarian assistance for villagers who have been displaced from ongoing clashes in Ler Mu Plaw, Mu Traw District, his widow was unable to recover the body of her deceased husband because Tatmadaw soldiers would shoot at anyone who approached the area. Saw Oh Moo's widow told KHRG, *"I am disheartened that I cannot see my husband's body because the P'Yaw [Tatmadaw] are hiding it. I want to hold his funeral according to our Karen traditions and as our animist beliefs teach us."*²⁴ Here was another case where no justice was possible, and the Tatmadaw soldiers have enjoyed total impunity for the human rights violations that they are committing.

More systematic support is clearly needed to address the challenges faced by widows, including families where one of the spouses is absent or no longer able to contribute to the family's survival. That support needs to consider the range of hardships these families face, and their increased vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, and mental health issues. There also needs to be increased support in accessing justice. With the tremendous burdens widows already face, the barriers to justice only further contribute to the traumas they are enduring.

²³ KHRG, "[Mu Traw District: Tatmadaw soldiers killed a Karen community leader and a KNU forest ranger in March 2020](#)", April 2020.

²⁴ KHRG, "[A Karen Community Leader, Saw O Moo, Was Murdered by Tatmadaw forces in Hpapun District, April 2018](#)", June 2018; KHRG, "[KHRG tribute to Saw Oh Moo](#)", May 2018.



b. Mon

Situated geographically close to the Karen Peoples is the Mon State where the Mon Peoples reside. The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) provided information regarding the state of affairs in their area and the disintegration of societal structures leading to complications for widows to survive.

In December 2021 HURFOM released a report titled *Trajectory of Terror* which gave an overview of the human rights violations which have been committed in the latter part of 2021. Some of the human rights violations which are documented by HURFOM are similar to those reported by the Karen and the Rohingya, discussed in the next section. Given HURFOM's documentation, CNS will focus on the impact COVID 19 has had on widows in Burma. WPD and many other organizations noted in a 2020 statement to the Commission on the Status of Women that "the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple protracted conflicts has exponentially increased the number of widows worldwide. Now more than ever we are obligated to closely examine how cultures treat surviving spouses and their families following both unexpected and expected deaths."²⁵ All around the world, widows who lost their loved ones to COVID 19 have been working together to sort out how to assist women who have lost access to resources as a result of their new status as a widow. India provides a glaring example of the necessity of the

²⁵ Commission on the Status of Women, "[Statement submitted by Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Widows Rights International, and Women for Human Rights, single women group, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council](#)", December 2020.



UNGA Resolution, as COVID 19 has ushered in a large number of widows, yet the data set remains incomplete which complicates rendering assistance.²⁶

HURFOM has been documenting the steady decline in human rights protections as COVID 19 continues to emerge in Burma. In the report, *Left Behind and Destitute*, under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, despite the economic assistance which was rolled out to the country to prevent economic devastation as a result of COVID 19, it did not have a positive impact in the Mon state. Generally, in Burma the restrictions on movement prevented farmers from accessing their plots, people to work as daily laborers, and prevented the inability to collect traditional forest product.²⁷ Compounding this problem was the lockdown taking place in different parts of Asia, which brought overseas workers back home to the Mon State. The largest impact this had was food shortage and inability to provide economically for their families.²⁸ HURFOM also documented the impact these types of restrictions had on small enterprises throughout the Mon State. Businesses which depended on workers were unable to obtain a labor pool.²⁹

In February 2021, as the military junta took control of the country, the response to COVID 19 fell into disarray. The junta has been using COVID 19 to punish civilians who do not align with the coup. The Mon State was hit hard by COVID 19 and in 2021, public education, prevention and control measures were “proven to be very weak” under the junta.³⁰ A local rescue member reported, “During the third wave (of COVID-19), the number of volunteer teams has been reduced. That’s because the military oppressed these teams after the coup. Most rescue and charity teams had to stop their activities. Now, just a few teams are left to provide COVID-19 related assistance.”³¹

A month later HURFOM reported a significant increase in the amount of COVID 19 cases and the death toll as a result.³² No government statistics indicate how many widows came about as a result of the heavy death toll. These figures prompted HURFOM to release *Running out of Air*,

²⁶ Agnee Gosh, “[He Left me All Alone in the World to Survive: India’s COVID Widows Struggle to Survive](#)” NPR, July 18, 2021.

²⁷ HURFOM, “[Left Behind and Destitute: How IDP communities in Southern Burma/Myanmar are struggling to Survive during COVID-19](#)” pg 13, July 2020.

²⁸ Ibid pg 14- 15.

²⁹ HURFOM, “[Deep economic impacts for workers and business due to COVID-19](#)” January 22, 2021.

³⁰ HURFOM, “[Military junta fails to deliver, leaving fewer rescue and volunteer teams able to provide COVID 19 assistance](#)” June 26, 2021.

³¹ Ibid

³² HURFOM, “[Covid 19 death toll reaches new record in Mon State](#)” July 7, 2021.



which documents the horrific acts perpetrated by the junta towards civilians in Myanmar. The report highlights the targeting of health care workers, further supported by United Nations reports that over 150 people have been killed in the medical field for not supporting the junta, while the pandemic rages on in the country.³³ Further, the blocking of medical aid, including denying oxygen for those who need assistance and exporting bribes for those who need a COVID 19 test.

HURFOM's follow up report *Trajectory of Terror* specifically found "the COVID-19 pandemic has been further weaponized by the military junta as key routes for travel and transportation, including the flow of aid, continue to be blocked. In February 2021, there were 178 incidents of reported attacks on health care workers in Burma."³⁴ The situation has not improved and as a result of COVID-19 the widow population within the Mon State continues to grow.



c. Rohingya

The Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) provided the following information on Rohingya widows.

The Rohingya community is divided across multiple strata. The Rohingya who still reside in the Arakan are often overshadowed by the communities that have sought refuge from repeated cycles of violence in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India. There is a myriad of issues that the

³³ HURFOM, "[Running out of Air](#)" July 2021.

³⁴ HURFOM, "[Trajectory of Terror](#)" December 2021.



Rohingya widows face. Their challenges often depend on where they are. As with other communities which are mentioned in this report, there has been no focused research that has been conducted on this particular demographic outside of the widow camp in Bangladesh.

Rohingya Widows in Burma

Like most of the other ethnic groups, there is a significant lack of data regarding the Rohingya widows who reside in Burma. The Rohingya's traditional homeland is the Arakan, referred to as the Rakhine state. The Arakan has been under intense violence for decades, as the junta has sought to control the area from groups such as the Arakan Army, who seeks an independent state. There are several notable challenges to widows and single women which impacts Rohingya women throughout Burma aside from violence, these include but are not limited to citizenship, land confiscation, human trafficking. This report will focus on land confiscation and human trafficking, as the issue relating to citizenship has been documented by various non-governmental organizations.

Land confiscation

Utilizing the most recent reports, since the August 2017 genocidal purge, the junta has embarked on an alleged project to “develop” the Rakhine. Many, including the Rohingya, believe that this is in fact a way of continuing the genocide and removing evidence of the existence of the Rohingya people in Burma and evidence of the crimes that have been committed. In 2018, Amnesty International released a report titled “Remaking Rakhine” which discussed the efforts by the junta to bulldoze entire Rohingya homes, villages, and tracts of land.³⁵ The new tenants of these areas are mainly Rakhine Buddhists. The former Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar put it succinctly, “Now they’ve got them out, they sure aren’t going to give it back to the Rohingya.”³⁶

The issue of land is important as it provides a root cause of instability that Rohingya widow populations in Burma will face. With a proper home, they can at least continue family ties, grow food sustenance, and have a life but that is not the case as without a home or peaceful place to reside, the day-to-day challenge centers on survival.

Rohingya Khobor reported a story which emphasizes this point:

³⁵ Amnesty International, “[Remaking Rakhine](#)” March 12, 2018.

³⁶ Reuters, “[Point of No Return](#)” December 18, 2018.



“On 3rd June a police officer from Ali par para (Kyaw Hla) village, Let Wea Det Pyin Shey village tract, Buthidaung, Arakan State (Rakhine), enters the house of a widow – Daw Lot Da Ni, 38 years old and takes her to the police station.

While in the police station, the officer demands 500,000 Kyats bribe to release her, while she was arrested without any crime. The widow was forced to pawn her house to make the payment and to free herself.”³⁷

Even if the Rohingya wanted to leave the villages they are in, to go from one village to another there are specific restrictions in place, therefore there is no freedom of movement between townships.³⁸ Like many other communities throughout Burma, the Rohingya also deal on a daily basis with food insecurity, landmines, and violence. The violence is spreading across the state. In 2019, 275 men were rounded up by the Tatmadaw on suspicion of belonging to a rebel armed group. A woman reported to the media that her husband was killed with five other men and died “for no reason.”³⁹ Many women throughout the Arakan are becoming impacted by the violence.

Human Trafficking

Rohingya women are generally targets of human trafficking given the high vulnerabilities of the population. One factor that contributes to this is the internal displacement of Rohingya women by Myanmar.⁴⁰ Another factor is the lack of job opportunities to alleviate poverty and destitution the Rohingya people face.

Despite the awareness around human trafficking that is generated by the Trafficking in Persons Report⁴¹ issued by the United States and the work of the United Nations, the crime remains prevalent throughout Asia, specifically within the country of Burma. Reports indicate that the trafficking of the Rohingya people in particular is estimated to generate \$50 to \$100 million USD a year.⁴² The 2021 US Trafficking in Persons report noted, “approximately one quarter of the population in Burma does not have access to citizenship or identification documents,

³⁷ Rohingya Khobor, “[Police extort money from a Rohingya widow in Buthidaung, Let Wea Det Pyin Shey](#)”

³⁸ Myanmar Now, “[Rohingya in Buthidaung hit with even tougher travel restrictions](#)”

³⁹ Borneo Bulletin, “[Rakhine widow says ‘husband was killed for no reason’](#)” May 4, 2019.

⁴⁰ See Niruka Sanjeevani, “[Trafficking in Rohingya women: The ASEAN perspective](#)” UNSW Sydney, August 20, 2020.

⁴¹ US State Department, [Trafficking in Persons Report 2021](#).

⁴² Tasneem Tayeb, “[Trafficking in Rohingya: Exploiting the desperate](#)” The Daily Star, December 7, 2019.



generating human trafficking risks that disproportionately affect ethnic minority groups – particularly in Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine States.”⁴³

Rohingya Women in Refugee Camps

The Director of the ARNO Women’s Division, Razia Sultana, conducted five interviews detailing the challenges that widows in the refugee camps are facing. All names and exact addresses have been redacted for security reasons. In this section ARNO invites the reader to see first-hand the types of concerns the widows have and how they are coping.

Interview 1

A: Assalamu Alikum

B: Walikum Assalam, Assalamu alikum

A: What is your name and tell me about yourself.

B: My name is S- K-. I was living in Burma. I was suffering with my daughters after my husband passed away.

A: How were you struggling in Burma?

B: Yes, I was struggling in Burma. However, I was surviving with some cow and goat.

A: When you were coming to Bangladesh with your daughters have you face any problems?

B: We came together with other families they help us to get here by the grace of almighty Allah. After we came here our sufferings worsened.

A: What kind of problems you are facing after you came to Bangladesh?

B: We suffered a lot after we get here, No shelter, no food, no treatment. Some people help us to make a hut and I and my daughters are still struggling to be alive.

Interview 2

A: Sister Assalamu alikum

B: Walikum Assalam

A: Can I ask a question? When and where did your husband die?

B: My husband died in Burma when I was 45.

A: After how many years of your marriage your husband died?

B: He died after 21 years of our marriage.

A: How many children you have:

B: We had 4 children and 2 of them died 2 are with me.

A: How was your life after your husband died?

⁴³ US State Department, “[2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma](#)”



B: We were suffering after my husband died later on thing got better after my daughter got married and living with me.

A: What kind of suffering you had after your husband died?

B: All my husband's property was taken by his brothers. Everyone around was trying to take his things whatever they can. I was helpless.

A: Your husband's property and belongings?

B: Yes. Some people asked about it, but I never complained.

A: Are you living with your daughter's family?

B: Yes. They take care of me. My son-in-law is good.

A: Have you had any problem when you were coming to Bangladesh?

B: Yes, I had to walk. I suffered walking through jungle, stoned path over the hills and mountains. One of my brothers-in-law (my husband's brother) helped me to walk. My daughter has 2 baby daughters, my daughter and her husband had to carry them. We couldn't bring much belongings. Most of it had leave on the way.

A: How was the situation when you reach here in Bangladesh? Especially, since you don't have your husband.

B: Yes, my sufferings may not be this much if my husband is with me. But what to do, I have to accept the reality.

A: How are you now?

B: Now is better than the time we just arrived. We have shelter. My son in law made this hut. We don't have restrooms, so we don't eat much to avoid toilet. We have to go to another hill if we need to use restroom. I barely can walk. I had to stop eating but now few families including my son in law arranged nearer and now is better.

A: Ok Sister Thanks

B: I remember this it seems a tale.

A: Ok Thanks Assalamu alikum

B: Walikum Assalam

Interview 3

A: Assalamu Alikum

B: Walikum Assalam

A: Sister, when you lost your husband?

B: 3 years before came here.

A: How old were you when he died?

B: I was around 45 and my husband was 50

A: how many children you have?



B: I have 7 children

A: were you suffering?

B: Yes, I suffered with small kids but by the grace of Allah time has passed

A: Can you tell me how you suffered that time?

B: living with 7 kids we couldn't have enough food, we have to collect rice from far east and struggled to collect bamboo, wood to cover my house, to make boundary.

A: With 7 kids how did you manage to come here?

B: we suffered, walked a day and a night. We were in rested a day and a night near the river. We couldn't cross with kids and didn't have money to pay the boatman. From Malaysia someone requested them than they let us passed with their boat. After that we found some relative. I had 2 sons the rest are daughters. 1 of the daughters were married and I was slow moving because of with kids.

A: How long it took to reach

B: a day and a night, 1 more day was at the jetty was waiting for boat.

A: How were you suffered after came in to Bangladesh?

B: we didn't have shelter, couldn't make hut, with small kids and didn't have any money. On the way some Bangladeshi people donated some money so I saved them and bought some bamboo and wood and made a little hut where we took shelter.

A: How were you after that?

B: After finally reach here, authority gave us a space and we prepared the ground together with kids but we couldn't make it level than neighbors and some young adult helped us to prepare. We are still surviving.

Interview 4

[No questions] We get some food. We get some from the government but still need to buy some of the food items. We need educate our kids. I am working in a USAID (not so clear) program. As a widow we have a lot of problem such as have to shop food items, to buy clothes for kids, study materials, need to pay teacher. Since kids has no father, we face terrible problems to spent for them. We are very thankful to USAID that we at least working in their program and going 1 house to another talk to them. My son, I manage to let him complete class 8 in Burmese and class 8 in English. After I work with USAID now, I can go block to block talk to them. Before I felt shy and couldn't talk in public but now, I can talk to other sisters and brother and they accept. Now we don't feel shy and can talk openly.

Interview 5

A: Assalamu alikum



B: Walikum assalam.

A: Who do you live with in your house?

B: I have 2 children with me and my mom. I have 3 daughter and 1 got married.

A: where is your husband?

B: my husband left us and live with another wife.

A: He left you in Burma or after you came here?

B: He left us when we were in Burma and 14 years ago.

A: You have lived and raised your kid without your husband. Have you ever thought that if you have husband your life would be much better?

B: If I have my husband with me, I could raise my kids much better way. I was dreaming to educate my kid but without their father I couldn't do that.

A: how have you suffered while coming here?

B: I came all alone with my kids and mom when I heard that border opened and I gathered my courage and started.

In 2020 a case was filed by a Rohingya widow whose husband was killed by junta soldiers during the 2017 genocidal purge at Inn Dinn village.⁴⁴ The widow is filed the complaint with the Myanmar Human Rights Commission. Unfortunately, given the coup that took place less than two months later, there is no further information on whether the Human Rights Commission is even active given the coup. It should be noted that in 2016, the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission submitted its report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and there was no mention of any issues relating to widows.⁴⁵

IV. Next Steps

It is important to emphasize that there are hundreds of other communities throughout Burma that are not mentioned in this report and that for all of them, they are likely to be suffering conditions that are similar to the Karen, Mon, and Rohingya and are not capturing the attention of the media or international community. For the ethnic communities featured in this brief report and for others not mentioned, the events of February 2021 have only exacerbated

⁴⁴ Reuters, "Rohingya widow seeks compensation from Myanmar government for death of her husband" December 11, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/rohingya-widow-seeks-compensation-myanmar-government-death-her-husband-n1250913>

⁴⁵ See MNHRC, "A Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women" June 2016, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/MMR/INT_CEDAW_IFN_MMR_24177_E.pdf



ongoing challenges that they were *already facing*. While this report specifically focused on Burma, it is important that nations and states around the world consider:

- Calling for an immediate end to hostilities and violence by the junta, including a global arms embargo to ensure that the targeting of innocent civilians stops.
- Creating economic pathways for widows and single women to be assisted during this tumultuous time in Burma's history – particularly with economic and food aid.
- Opening humanitarian aid corridors which work directly with ethnic communities and leaders on the ground as opposed to the junta, which has used all forms of aid as a tool to punish those who do not agree with their policies or politics.
- Requesting that appropriate data collection begins among local communities within Burma to allow for ethnic groups to properly assess how many widows and what is the true nature of the challenges they are facing.

Finally, CNS encourages the National Unity Government (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) should focus on the issues of widows as it continues to engage in dialogue with ethnic groups. While taking an approach that is inclusionary for all ethnic groups, among the most important tasks the NUG and NUCC should rectify are issues relating to citizenship issues which leave widows who may not have had access to documentation, extremely vulnerable. This should become a priority for the NUG and NUCC with a mind to dismantling all policies that would violate the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). As this report has highlighted, without the basic necessities to survive and proper data and research, the challenges widows face will become largely ignored or overshadowed by other issues and they will fall through the cracks as a result of silence.