



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

In Spite of Fear: Women in Southeast Burma are surviving protracted internal displacement amidst increasing human rights violations – new report

Karen Human Rights Group documents pervasive fear as the Burma military regime targets displacement sites, schools, and healthcare facilities, destroying livelihoods and causing mass humanitarian crisis across Southeast Burma five years after the coup

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93% of displaced women interviewed report feeling unsafe in Southeast Burma as the Burma military regime attacks displacement sites and restrictions on movement prevent seeking safety, said the Karen Human Rights Group today in a new report. Increasing criminality and lawlessness has further destabilized locally-defined Karen State, disrupting livelihoods, and contributing to the pervasive fear reported. Urgent action is needed from the international community to hold the military regime accountable and prevent further unnecessary suffering.

The 70-page report *In Spite of Fear: Women's experiences navigating the compounding challenges of displacement and insecurity in Southeast Burma* documents both the human rights violations that cause displacement and how displacement conditions themselves amplify the loss of rights for displaced people, especially women, by indefinitely exposing them to dangerous living conditions,

destroying their livelihoods, and preventing access to essential healthcare. Women often bear the brunt of these consequences due to employment-related gender discrimination and increased vulnerability to sexual & gender-based violence.

"Villagers in Karen State have been dealing with displacement and its challenges for many years, since even before the coup, but women are often disproportionately affected," said Saw Albert, Research and Advocacy Director at Karen Human Rights Group. *"Even when displaced, they're still expected to do all the housework and take a leadership role to protect their displaced community. They also face increased risk of sexual violence from Burma Army soldiers. Despite this, our research shows that women have shown remarkable strength and agency to survive these difficulties and have been integral to resisting the military."*

The number of people displaced has exponentially increased after the 2021 coup with over 1.2 million people now displaced across Southeast Burma according to the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People. The majority of people interviewed by Karen Human Rights Group reported that they face challenges accessing safe shelters, many living in the forest or caves where they must sleep on the ground without a roof. Often, villagers will try to return to their homes once the immediate violence ends but quickly learn that they cannot because the Burma Army has looted and burned down their village, leaving them in a state of indefinite displacement without access to their food, personal belongings, or livelihoods.

Between January 2024 and January 2026, Karen Human Rights group conducted 51 interviews (44 women and 7 men) with displaced people across all seven Karen National Union-administered districts. Three community-based organizations providing cross-border aid were also interviewed in May 2026. Additionally, the report draws on analysis from 37 field reports submitted in 2024 and 2025 to Karen Human Rights Group by community members living in Southeast Burma.

The new report documents the Burma Army's continued attacks on civilian areas where people frequently seek safety, such as schools, hospitals, and religious buildings, showing that displacement from one area under attack often results in villagers coming under attack again in the areas they displace themselves to. Nan B--, a teacher in Dooplaya district survived one of these attacks when the Burma Army fired mortar shells on her village, targeting the clinic and school where displaced villagers had been taking refuge.

"There were more than 30 people in the room, including teachers and students," Nan B-- explains. "They conducted shelling targeting us. When we were only 30 metres away from the school, the shell landed on the roof. We barely escaped. If we didn't make it, I dare not to think. That whole school would be covered by the blood of teachers and students."

Attacks on displacement sites and other civilian targets mean that villagers need to repeatedly move to new areas for safety. However, the new report reveals how tight movement restrictions prevent villagers from taking such measures to protect themselves. The Burma Army directly restricts movement by building checkpoints and requiring travel permission documents. Indirectly, movement itself has become dangerous due to contamination from landmines and explosive remnants of war as well as reported increases in criminality that puts travelers, especially women, at risk of robbery, abduction, and sexual violence. Beyond preventing movement for immediate survival when under attack, these restrictions also prevent access to livelihoods and healthcare with limited access to humanitarian aid, further complicating survival in protracted displacement.

Because villagers in Southeast Burma rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods, displacement is directly connected to economic disruption as it prevents both access to their fields and movement to towns to buy needed supplies or find other work. However, even those with income struggle to afford their basic needs amid increasing commodity and food scarcity caused by fighting that blocks major roads and disrupts harvest cycles.

“Right now, from the day fighting began, there is no work for us to do,” states Ma Ac--. “Thus, we face so many problems [...] [even if] you have money, you can’t buy anything. Right now, food is scarce.”

Women interviewed by Karen Human Rights Group described experiencing discrimination when seeking work, many employers preferring to hire men or paying women less when they are hired.

“For women, we get 170 Thai baht per day (5.31 USD),” explains Naw L--, a woman displaced to Doooplaya District. “For men, they get 200 Thai baht (6.25 USD) per day. They think that men are strong, so they can do more work. That is why they get paid more. In their perspectives, women are weak, and women cannot work as much as men work. So, women get paid less. [...] Sometimes I feel like it is not fair, because both men and women do the same work, but we, women, get paid less. [...] We started working at 7 am. And we took a break at 11 am. Then, we resumed the work at 1 pm again. It is finished at 4 or 5 pm. [...] But men get paid more, although we work the same hours.”



This report contributes to the growing body of evidence that the human rights violations committed by the Burma Army have caused mass displacement throughout Southeast Burma and manufactured a humanitarian crisis. The Burma Army has ensured that displaced people have limited access to food, clean water, and healthy living conditions by preventing access to livelihoods and blocking vital humanitarian aid from ethnic areas, including by attacking aid workers. Additionally, funding shortfalls for cross-border humanitarian aid organisations have further limited women’s access to humanitarian aid.

“Women must be treated as equals and without discrimination in Burma. There cannot be peace until they are, and the Burma military regime’s relentless campaign against civilians is a significant barrier to gender equality,” Saw Albert said. “The regime must be held accountable for their complete disregard for human rights and human life. The people of Burma are already working for accountability, justice, and humanitarian support, and we strongly urge the international community to support these efforts to end unnecessary suffering.”

Read the full report here: <https://khrq.org/2026/07/26-1-tmt/spite-fear-womens-experiences-navigating-compounding-challenges-displacement-and>

Media contact:

Saw Albert, KHRG Research and Advocacy Director: albert@khrq.org (Burmese, Karen and English)