A silent emergency: Violence against women and girls

Today on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the supporters of the Women and Girls First initiative and the prosecution said violence against women is a global problem, the situation in Myanmar is exacerbated by high levels of social acceptance and a weak legal system.

Violence against women and girls is a silent emergency in Myanmar. It ranges from groping on buses to human trafficking. It includes harassment, cyber exploitation, psychological and economic violence, date rape, marital rape, gang rape — the complete list could fill this entire column.

And then there is domestic violence. Many of us have experienced extreme forms, such as rape and murder by armed forces. But the problem is not isolated to conflict zones, and it is not unique to Myanmar. It is a global problem of epidemic proportions. Violence against women and girls is one of the world’s most pervasive human rights violations. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. Today, there is no country in the world where violence against women live free from violence — it is here on our streets, in our workplaces and in our homes. Globally, an estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.

Now, for the first time, the global community is united in its resolve to end violence against women. Last year, the elimination of gender-based violence was included as a target in the Sustainable Development Goals.

In Myanmar, one of the biggest challenges is social acceptance. In Yangon, as is the lack of response to assaults in our midst. Domestic violence in particular is largely regarded as a private matter. Earlier this year a journalist wrote a personal account of seeing a crowd simply watch a man beat a woman on the street in Yangon. Where she worked as a journalist tried to inter- vene, the man said: “It’s OK. She is my wife.”

Marital rape is not a crime in Myanmar. This testifies to our high level of acceptance in the country of violence against women not only in society but also in the law. It illustrates how the legal system is not set up to protect women against violence. A National Prevention of Violence against Women Law has been in the works for years, but there is no indication of when it will be passed.

In the meantime, few women report assaults. They suffer in silence. Many are caught in a vicious circle of abuse because they do not have the financial means or the social support structures needed to leave their husbands. Too often, settlement is made with a woman or girl without her having a say. Impunity has to stop, and the court must be the place for judgement.

Myanmar is one of the few countries in the region where there is no national data on violence against women. But even if official figures were available, recorded cases only tell a very small part of the story. In the face of a weak legal system, and the stigma of community disapproval, even women who are repeatedly and seriously injured often choose not to report the crime or take legal action.

One of the few figures available on domestic violence comes from information that UNFPA has collected from its Women and Girls Centres around the country. It shows that 70 per cent of women who visit the centres have experienced domestic violence. The centres have been set up to help women and girls cope with life in camps for displaced people in conflict-affected areas. But there is no indication that levels of domestic violence are lower in those situations. In fact, an Oxfam-supported report from Kachin shows that displaced people who live in camps are far less likely to think that domestic violence is justified than people who live in villages and towns.

Daw Khaung Nan helps abused women at the Women and Girls Centre in Wainmaw, Kachin. For her, strengthening the legal system must be the place for a say. Impunity has to stop, and the court must be the place for judgement. This is the only way to prevent more and more violence.

Because domestic violence is taboo, we tend to speak about it in general terms. But domestic violence is not something that just happens. It is one person, usually a man, intentionally causing physical and/or psychological harm to another person, usually a woman. Violence deprives women and girls of their human rights to health, education and participation in the affairs of their communities and countries. It is time to end the gender inequality and the impunity that allow this violence and to take meaningful action on such a widespread scale.

Violence against women is a global problem. In Myanmar, the situation is exacerbated by high levels of social acceptance and a weak legal system. Myanmar needs a law that criminalises all forms of violence against women, and a strong justice system to underpin it. This is the Government’s responsibility. But we also have a personal responsibility. As we commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, let us all take a stand against gender-based violence in our communities, in Myanmar and in all countries. Prevention worker Daw Khaung Nan’s words capture the core of what it’s all about:

“We should not have to live in fear of violence, just because we are women. We have the right to live in peace in our homes and in our country.”

Janet E. Jackson, UNFPA Representative for Myanmar
Jarmo Kuutila, Chargé d’Affaires, Diplomatic Mission of Finland
Ann Söödberg, Head of Development Cooperation, Embassy of Sweden Section Office
Peter Schumi, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland in Myanmar
Gavin McGillivray, Head of Office, UK Department for International Development
Peter Batchelor, Country Director, UNDP Myanmar
Troyel Vester, Country Manager, UN Women Myanmar
Jean D’Cunha, Head UN Women, Myanmar

South Korean investigators raid Lotte and SK offices amid political scandal

SEOUL — South Korean investigators raided the offices of Lotte Group, SK Group and government agencies on Thursday, officials said, as part of a widening probe into alleged influence-peddling that has engulfed President Park Geun-hye.

The businesses are suspected of providing money to two foundations controlled by Choi Soon-sil, a close friend of Park who is at the centre of a growing scandal, to win government favours in related sectors. Choi came under mysterious circumstances Wednesday.

The raids came just days after a special prosecutor in the widening investigation into the corruption scandal, which has left a worrying cloud over Park’s presidency.

Spokesmen at Lotte Group and SK Group confirmed the raid took place, but said they were not aware of the suspicion. Lotte and SK are two of South Korea’s largest conglomerates, which have deep political ties and are expected to play a key role in the country’s economic and political future.

Last year, South Korea’s National Pension Service (NPS), the world’s third-largest pension fund, voted in favour of the merger despite criticism that the deal helped the Samsung Group family to cement control at the expense of other shareholders. Its backing was seen as crucial to the success of the merger and some South Korean media reports said its approval came under mysterious circumstances.

Prosecutors and investigators, who are also raiding the offices of Samsung Group, South Korea’s largest family-run conglomerate and the parent of global smartphone leader Samsung Electronics Co Ltd, are believed to be investigating whether money from NPS was laundered at the Bank of Korea.

Samsung is alleged to have provided 2.8 million euros ($3.1 million) to a company co-owned by Choi and her daughter to use her influence to gain backing from a state pension fund for the $8 billion merger of two Samsung group affiliates, Samsung C&T Corp and Cheil Industries, last year. South Korea’s National Pension Service (NPS), the world’s third-largest pension fund, voted in favour of the merger despite criticism that the deal helped the Samsung Group family to cement control at the expense of other shareholders. Its backing was seen as crucial to the success of the merger and some South Korean media reports said its approval came under mysterious circumstances.

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Indian police arrest 11 people for trafficking babies in cardboard boxes

KOLKATA. (India) — Eleven people have been arrested in India on suspicion of duping single women into selling their newborn babies and trafficking the infants into export centers to be sold as childless couples, police said on Wednesday.

A senior official from Crime Investigation Department (CID) in West Bengal said the arrests began on Monday after police raided a private nursing home and found two babies hidden in cardboard boxes in a locked medical store-room.

Those arrested included the owner, midwives and other staff at the nursing home in Baduria, 80 km (50 miles) from Kolkata.

Police have also arrested court clerks suspected of making fake documentation for the children and the head of a charity which ran the adoption centre.

“The inquiry is underway and more information will be revealed only after some more progress is made,” Bharat Lal Meena, Deputy Inspector General for the CID in West Bengal, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Staff at the nursing home and the charity were not immediately available for comment.

Police said initial investigations indicated that unmarried women and girls who visited the clinic were duped by staff to give birth and sell their babies.

The police did not give a price, but local news reports noted that the babies were given 300,000 rupees ($4,380) for a boy and 100,000 rupees ($1,460) for a girl. Babies were also stolen from women who delivered at the clinic, but who were told by staff that their children were stillborn.

Some were even shown the bodies of stillborn babies preserved by the clinic to dupe parents, police said —Reuters.