

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 argue that while 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 domestic violence in our own homes. Maybe you were the one who had your hair pulled or your face slapped. Maybe you were the one who did the pulling and slapping. Maybe you were the child who saw or heard it happening.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, let us work together towards zero-tolerance in our communities, in the law and in the justice system. Let us not stop until violence against women, just because they are women, is consigned to the shameful chapter of history where it belongs.

We often think of violence against women only in its most 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 per-

vasive human rights violations. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries. Today, there is no country in the world where women and girls 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 her 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 of violence against women, 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. When the journalist tried to intervene, the man said: "It is OK. She is my wife."

Marital rape is not a crime in Myanmar. This testifies to the 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 the perpetrator on behalf of the 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 for which 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 peo-

ple in conflict-affected areas. But there is no indication that levels of domestic violence are lower in villages and towns. 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 Waingmaw, Kachin. For her, strengthening the legal system must be a priority: "I want to give these women access to medical care and counselling. But not only that. I want to give them access to justice. 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 participa-

tion in the affairs of their communities and countries. It is time to end the gender inequality and the impunity that allow this violence and human suffering to continue 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's at stake:

"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."

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