

# **RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR AND THE WOMEN WHO ARE RESISTING**

*A SPECIAL REPORT BY THE FREE BURMA RANGERS*

*This report contains one graphic photo.*

This report was written, edited, and published by members of the Free Burma Rangers over the course of the Fall 2018-Fall 2019 year.

The Free Burma Rangers (FBR) is a multi-ethnic humanitarian service movement working to bring help, hope and love to people in the conflict zones of Burma, Iraq, and Sudan. Working in conjunction with local ethnic pro-democracy groups, FBR trains, supplies, and later coordinates with what become highly mobile multipurpose relief teams. After training these teams provide critical emergency medical care, shelter, food, clothing and human rights documentation in their home regions.

For more information about the FBR or about this report, please send an email to [info@freeburmarangers.org](mailto:info@freeburmarangers.org)

**“When I was five years old, I watched my mother get raped by a Burmese soldier. I didn’t understand what was happening then, but now I cannot get it out of my head. Those memories... they made me come here [Ta U Wah camp]. I am here as a woman to protect other women.”**  
**-Karen Ranger**

## Introduction

The Burma Army uses rape as a weapon of war. Sexual violence has become a hallmark of the prolonged civil conflict and an indisputable tactic of the Burma Army against ethnic women. After several failed domestic and international agreements, the Burma Army continues to rape with impunity, but women across the ethnic states are tired of living in fear.

Several ethnic women from the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) agreed to be interviewed for this piece, giving personal accounts of their experiences as women in this war, as well as providing one example of how women

across Burma’s ethnic states are taking action against endemic rape in the region. FBR is a multi-ethnic humanitarian service movement working to bring help, hope, and love to people in the conflict zones of Burma. Working in conjunction with local, ethnic pro-democracy groups, FBR trains, supplies, and later coordinates with what become highly mobile multi-purpose relief teams.

This paper examines the use of rape as a weapon of war in Burma’s subnational conflict. More specifically, examining how the climate of impunity, which has enabled the military to avoid prosecution, has galvanized women across Burma to take a more active role in combating gender-based violence. The female Rangers interviewed for this piece have decided to endure arduous Ranger training together to not only strengthen their bodies but to empower their spirits of resistance in hopes of putting an end to a war where, sometimes, the battlefield is their own bodies.



**Figure 1: A map of Myanmar showing the ethnic states in red.**



*Figure 2: Because of the shame and stigma associated with rape, cases are often unreported. Further, women and girls who have been raped fear the consequences of speaking out against the Burma Army. Whether the women become refugees or internally displaced people, they share a desire to return home. If they are able to return home one day, they do not want to be targeted for having spoken out or have their families targeted. While the cost of rape is high for these women, the cost of seeking justice is even higher.*

## Rape as a Weapon of War in Burma

Historically, rape has been strategically and systematically utilized to conquer and annihilate entire communities, and Burma is no exception. Though men and women are both severely impacted by war, women experience unique and devastating effects that then trickle down through family structure and community. As war scholar Cassandra Clifford (2018) stated, “Rape, as with all terror-warfare, is not exclusively an attack on the body--it is an attack on the ‘body-politic.’ Its goal is not to maim or kill one person but to control an entire socio-political process by crippling it. It is an attack directed equally against personal identity and cultural integrity.”

The effects of rape are long-lasting, both physically and psychologically. When rape is used as a weapon of war, however, it is not only an attack on an individual woman but the community as a whole. This is because women are often regarded as repositories of culture. As British sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis points out, one of the most important social constructs of many ethnic communities is that membership is “natural, not chosen,” meaning one is born into it. In this regard, women become the literal propagators of culture and tradition. Therefore, rape

and sexual violence are attacks on culture, as they can tear at the social fabric of a community in a way that other forms of violence cannot. According to a study by UNICEF, rape’s damage is devastating and long-lasting, “because of the strong communal reaction to the violation and pain stamped on entire families” (Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War, 1996).

Rape and sexual violence often become keystones in genocidal campaigns. There are instances of the Burma Army using forced impregnation to cripple societies through humiliation and the purging of a perceived inferior race. Impregnation as a result of rape compounds the stigma already associated with rape. By inflicting unwanted, interracial pregnancies on ethnic women, the Burma Army is not only degrading an ethnic bloodline but also reducing populations by making women and their illegitimate children undesirable pariahs. Ah Ja, a 28-year-old female Ranger from Kachin State explained:

*The Burma Army rapes as a way to get us pregnant, and to have their babies. It is a way of... burmanization I think it’s called. They are trying to get rid of our population by getting us pregnant with Burmese children. Ethnic cleansing. That’s how you say it.*



The “Burmanization” of Myanmar is a domestic policy used to legitimize the militaristic actions of its entire military force, commonly referred to as the Tatmadaw, in their effort to make Myanmar, which is “one of the most diverse countries on the planet... become a completely homogenized one” (Burmanization, Free Kachin Campaign).

Many women do not remain physically or emotionally intact after the attacks and some do not survive at all; all of which are traumas inflicted to cull populations. According to the UN, Tatmadaw soldiers not only raped but “also mutilated the breasts or sexual organs of Rohingya women and girls... [who] suffered serious injuries to reproductive organs, including rape with knives and bamboo sticks” (Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 2018). Many other Rohingya victims were grievously injured during the attacks beyond the scope of the rape itself. Fatama Begum, a 33-year-old survivor recounted,

*[one attacker] stuck a knife into my side and kept it there while the men were raping me. That was how they kept me in place...*  
(All of My Body Was Pain: Sexual violence

against Rohingya women and girls in Burma, Human Rights Watch, 2017)

Those who survived the vicious attacks on them consistently recalled the agony of walking with torn genitals and maimed bodies while fleeing to safety (Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 2018).

Rape offers a mechanism by which the perpetrators can slowly sever the ties of a community. Rape victims are often seen as impure and tainted. The shame of rape is sometimes enough to cause women to flee from home, husbands to reject wives, and families and neighbors to ostracize survivors. Many soldiers in Burma rape ethnic women publicly to maximize humiliation. Rohingya women have reported being gang-raped in front of their entire village, and a Karen Ranger at TUW camp recollected being forced to watch the rape of her mother:

*When I was five years old, I watched my mother get raped by a Burmese soldier. I didn't understand what was happening then, but now I cannot get it out of my head...*

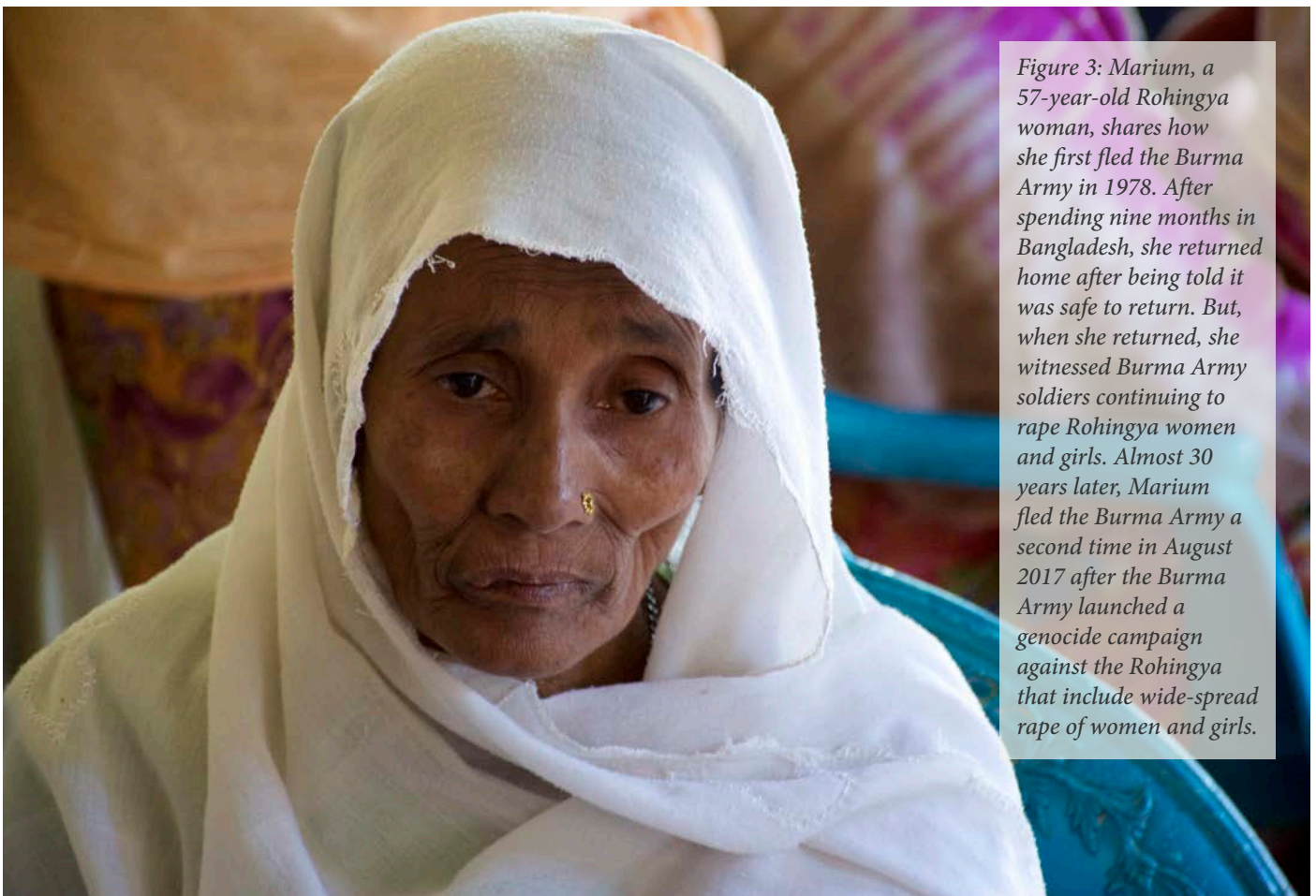


Figure 3: Marium, a 57-year-old Rohingya woman, shares how she first fled the Burma Army in 1978. After spending nine months in Bangladesh, she returned home after being told it was safe to return. But, when she returned, she witnessed Burma Army soldiers continuing to rape Rohingya women and girls. Almost 30 years later, Marium fled the Burma Army a second time in August 2017 after the Burma Army launched a genocide campaign against the Rohingya that include wide-spread rape of women and girls.

**“Women are raped a lot. Especially if you live near a Burma Army camp... you cannot even go to pick fruits and vegetables without fearing getting raped. Burma Army soldiers hide in the jungle, and they chase girls and try to rape them. Just existing is a reason for getting raped.”**  
**- A Karen Ranger**

Rape is an effective genocidal tool. The stigma and shame surrounding rape can have the power to cull entire populations, as women often become undesirable for marriage, thus directly impacting on the continuation and propagation of the culture through lack of reproduction.

## Mass Rape in Burma

Altogether rape is happening with appalling frequency in the ethnic states—a fact that became apparent during the interviews as the women Rangers spoke of rape as if it was as expected as flooding during the rainy season. Naw ‘La Poe, a 17-year-old Karen Ranger, stated:

*Women are raped a lot. Especially if you live near a Burma Army camp... you cannot even go to pick fruits and vegetables without fearing getting raped. Burma Army soldiers hide in the jungle, and they chase girls and try to rape them. Just existing is a reason for getting raped.*

The Karen Ranger’s statement coincides with the findings of various published reports which illustrate the military’s use of sexual violence on a grand scale. It is important to note that these statistics only represent a small portion of actual rape cases due to the social stigma surrounding sexual violence, coupled with the fact that many individuals were murdered before or immediately following the rape. Almost all statistics are underreported.

- Between 1988 and 2004, 125 rape cases were reported perpetrated by military troops, half of

which involved high ranking officers (Shattering Silences, 2004).

- In 2002 the Shan Women’s Action Network, in conjunction with the Shan Human Right’s Foundation, published the report “License to Rape”, citing 173 documented sexual violence cases involving 625 ethnic girls and women from 1996 to 2001 (F, Network, & Foundation, 2002).
- More recently, the United Nations documented over 1,600 reports of rape of Rohingya women in three months (All My Body Was in Pain, 2017).

Just last year, the United Nations conducted an extensive fact-finding mission on Myanmar which consisted of 875 eye-witness testimonies and interviews from individuals across the ethnic states revealing, “a pattern of rape and other forms of sexual violence committed on a shocking scale” (Myanmar Fact-Finding Mission: accounting for the gravest international crimes, 2018).

According to the report, rape victims are typically girls 13-25 years of age, though victims as young as five years old have been reported. The female Karen Ranger, Naw ‘La Poe, recounted a tragic incident as a child when she witnessed the rape and murder of her 12-year-old cousin:

*When the Burma Army comes into my village they rape girls and women. This happened when I was eight... My cousin got raped by the Burma Army. My cousin was shot in the head during fighting so the Burma Army caught her and raped her. She got raped and after she passed away...I saw it happen.*



Compounding on the horror of this issue, the pattern of mass gang-rape has become far more common than that of singular rape. The 2018 UN report found that 80 percent of the corroborated incidents were gang-rapes, 82 percent of which were perpetrated specifically by the Tatmadaw (Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 2018). Of the 104 reports documented by the Women’s League of Burma between 2010 and 2014, almost half were gang-rapes (Same Impunity, Same Patterns, 2014).

These violations are often public or with family members present to maximize humiliation and degradation. In accordance with the report, “sometimes up to 40 women and girls [are] raped or gang-raped together” (Myanmar Fact-Finding Mission: accounting for the gravest international crimes, 2018). Nura Naha, 27, rape survivor and mother of five stated,

*I was held down by six men and raped by five of them. First, they killed my brother ... then they threw me to the side and one man tore my lungi, grabbed me by the mouth and held me still. He stuck a knife into my side and kept*

*it there while the men were raping me, that was how they kept me in place. ... I was trying to move and it was bleeding more. They were threatening to shoot me.*  
(All My Body Was in Pain, 2017)

One Rohingya woman even stated, “I was lucky, I was only raped by three men” (Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, 2018).

A Karen Ranger, Ka Paw, 18, further explained:

*They will rape you in a group, in front of your family, and with other women around. They aren’t doing it for sex. They are trying to show power over us...*

There are even reports coming forward of the sexual assault of men and boys during the Rohingya clearance operations. An investigation by the United Nations found that men and boys were subjected to sexual violence including: “rape, genital mutilation, and sexual torture, sometimes leading to death” (Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar, 2019).



Figure 4: On 19 Jan. 2015 Burma Army troops came into a church compound where two young Kachin missionaries were sleeping and brutally raped and then beat them to death.

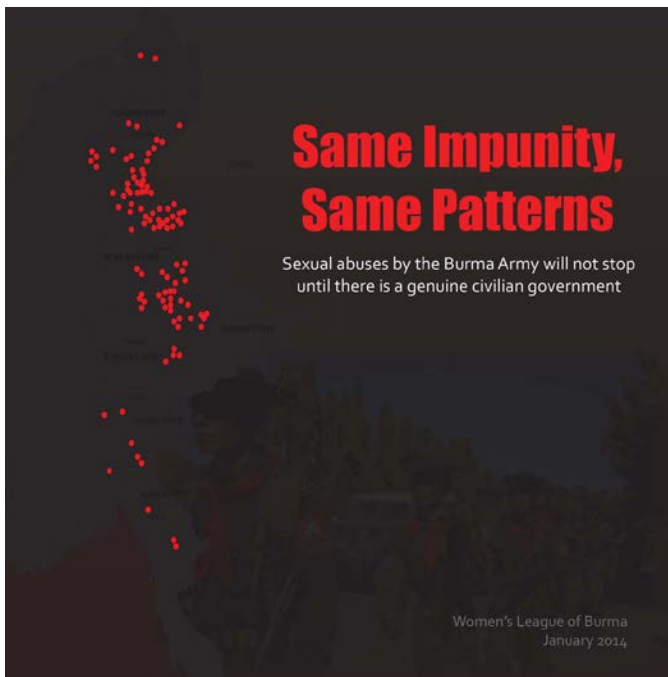


Figure 5: *Same Impunity, Same Patterns* Report by the Women's League of Burma

who are making these claims – would anyone want to rape them?” (Burma: Widespread Rape of Rohingya Women, Girls, 2017).

Though the international community has been ineffective in combating the mass rape in Burma, local women's organizations are acting on their own behalf. Women's groups in Burma are shattering the stigma and silence around rape and are supporting survivors by: “advocating for their rights, setting up trauma counseling centers, lobbying to change laws, offering psychological counseling and access to medical care” (UNBROKEN, 2019). Though the work of these local groups is important and necessary, it is clear that legislative change and a renewed impetus for accountability is imperative in order to break the cycle of impunity.

## International and Local Response

Many of the female Rangers interviewed believe that the best way to combat rape is through accountability and legislative change. They believe that Myanmar should be held accountable for their crimes against humanity on the international stage. One woman from Shan State said,

*The soldiers rape and nothing happens to them. I think that the best way to stop the Burma Army from doing such horrible things is through the use of economic sanctions and through trying battalion commanders in the international court systems.*

Yet, pressure from the international community has had little success. Under Myanmar's 2008 constitution, the army “gifted itself immunity from the country's laws, meaning allegations of rape are only investigated internally by the army, if at all” (Rape: The Burma Army's Unpunished Weapon Of War, 2016). Therefore, despite thousands of reported cases, the military has never been punished for committing sexual violence.

When international organizations demand the Burmese government investigate these crimes, they are constantly met with indignant disregard. During an interview with journalists, a Burmese military commander was confronted with the indisputable evidence of mass rape as a tactic against the Rohingya. He simply replied, “Look at those women

## Ethnic Women Spurred into Action

The fact that the Burma Army has been raping with impunity for nearly seven decades with no end in sight galvanizes ethnic women to challenge gender norms and participate in Ranger training as a way to stand up for themselves and other women across Burma. Ah Ja, the 28-year-old Kachin Ranger explained:

*Women are expected in this culture to get married and have babies, not partake in Ranger training. But we can't sit around and wait anymore for someone to take care of this. We (women) need to fight for other women, we are training here [Ta U Wah Camp] to be strong and protect others against the crimes we have experienced.*

At Ta U Wah camp, Rangers undergo three arduous months of training to develop their physical bodies and minds to provide relief to civilians in conflict zones. The women train alongside men, participating



in strenuous physical training (P.T.) exercises while learning a plethora of skills including: leadership, capacity building, humanitarian relief, medical assistance, reporting, and advocacy.

Along with training their physical bodies at camp, Rangers study leadership and crisis response. These skills empower women to take a lead role in the event of a Burma Army attack, as well as any other crisis they may encounter in their lives. As 20-year-old Karen Ranger Kaw Pru stated:

*We are not here to learn to help ourselves but to learn to help others. I work a lot in P.T. and study in class so when the Burma Army comes to my village I am ready to help many people. I am learning how to be strong in the body and in the mind, so I can help carry people and know how to lead them away from an attack. I know what happens to people left behind...*

The Karen Ranger trailed off. The experiences for her, she said, were too personal and terrible to explain. A male Ranger interviewed from Karenni State gives us further insight,

*When the Burma Army come at night you do not have much time. People are running, and screaming, you cannot see because the night, and you just try hard to get to the jungle to hide. But people get left behind a lot. Babies are smashed into trees so their head explodes. They make bamboo sharp and throw babies on it to [stab] them. They will lock people in their houses and set them on fire. If you are a man they will shoot you. If you are a women they will rape and then shoot you.*

The Rangers are trained to be able to conduct interviews with survivors of human rights abuses, particularly rape, which are important for compiling future statistics. Women Rangers are highly valued conduits for this process as many of the women have experienced sexual violence themselves. They express the importance of learning this skill as these interviews become primary sources for reports published by the Free Burma Rangers. As Ah Ja, the Kachin Ranger, pointed out:

*It is important for women to come forward and to tell their stories of rape and sexual violence because we are the ones it is happening to. We are the ones experiencing*



Figure 6: A female FBR medic treats a young child while on mission in Karen State.





*this kind of attack so we must be the ones telling the story.*

The women train alongside the men in P.T. and self-defense. For many of them, this is a new experience. Naw La Hu, an 18-year-old Karen Ranger explained,

*We learn cooking and sewing when we are very little. The boys play sport but we stay at home and learn from our mothers. TUW camp is very different from what I know. Here it is like I am a woman learning boy things.*

The women interviewed believe that if more women were trained to develop their physical strength, they can begin to combat weaponized rape in Burma.

One new Ranger, a young woman from Karen State named Naw Gay Htoo, shared with us the trauma of witnessing her mother's sexual assault by a uniformed Burma Army soldier. This trauma was part of her motivation for coming to ranger training. She told us:

*I want to make my body strong. I came to Ta U Wah camp because I want to learn to defend myself, in every way possible. I am a target because I am a woman. I want to make a soldier regret he ever tried to touch me.*

Ah Ja agrees, hoping to bring the skills she learned from camp to women in Kachin State.

*Training in Ta U Wah camp, especially in self-defense, makes me feel better. I feel more strong and less afraid. I want to train women in Kachin State and in other states too.*

According to the interviews, the most pivotal changes to the women were not physical but psychological. The women, empowered by their ability to participate alongside their male counterparts in training, realized they were capable of far more than they originally thought. This cognitive paradigm shift is summed up by Ah Ja perfectly:

*Because maybe if all women start putting up a fight and seeing our own worth, the Burma*

Figure 7: Female Rangers hiking while on mission.





Figure 8: Female Rangers at TUW camp participate in a team-building exercise. Every year women from across Burma's ethnic states come to the training to learn valuable skills necessary to combat the injustices happening to them.

*Army would leave us alone. Maybe if we train our bodies and get stronger they will start to see us as people, and not as objects. We must resist to exist.*

Women taking a more active role against the Burma Army is not unique to TUWA camp, but a general trend happening across Burma. Women are joining local militias and becoming soldiers alongside men at unprecedented rates. For example, the Arakan Army, which has grown exponentially in firepower and strength since 2009 is, “drawing as many young female recruits as men” (Women Are Increasingly Drawn to the Arakan Army, 2019). The Kachin Independence Army has also experienced a recent surge of female soldiers as gender-specific experiences such as: “physical and material insecurity, including poverty, rape, and discrimination” have become a catalyst for joining the armed struggle (Hedström, 2015).

## Conclusion

After experiencing decades of sexual violence and institutionalized rape, women across the ethnic states of Burma are taking action. Through participation in Ranger Training, these motivated women are developing critical skills to challenge gender norms and combat sexual violence during conflict. Though this local response is critical in providing immediate aid to ravaged communities, long-term solutions are also necessary. To fully eradicate sexual violence as a tactic of war against the ethnic states, the cycle of impunity must be broken and the Burma Army held accountable for their actions.



## Works Cited

- All My Body Was In Pain: Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma. (2017). Human Rights Watch, 1-46
- Burma: Widespread Rape of Rohingya Women, Girls. (2017). Human Rights Watch.
- Burmanization. (n.d.). Free Kachin Campaign.
- Clifford, C. (2008). Rape as a Weapon of War and its Long Effects on Victims and Society. Foreign Policy Association.
- F., S. H., Network, T. S., & Foundation, T. S. (2002). Licence To Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State. Chiang Mai: Shan Human Rights Foundation & the Shan Womens Action Network.
- Hedstrom , J. (2015). Gender and Myanmar's Kachin conflict. New Mandala.
- KWO Message: On-Going Use of Rape by Burma Army. (2016). Karen's Women Organization.
- Murray, A. F. (2013). From outrage to courage: The unjust and unhealthy situation of women in poorer countries and what they are doing about it. Common Courage Press.
- Myanmar Fact Finding Mission: accounting for the gravest international crimes. (2018). United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.
- Rape: The Burma Army's Unpunished Weapon Of War. (2016). Burma Link
- Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar\*. (2018). Human Rights Council, p.9.
- Same Impunity, Same Patterns: Sexual abuses by the Burma Army will not stop until there is a genuine civilian government. (2014). Women's League of Burma.
- Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impact of its ethnic conflicts. (2019). Human Rights Council, 1-61.
- Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War. (1996). UNICEF
- SHATTERING SILENCES: Karen Women speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's use of Rape as a Strategy of War in Karen State. (2004). Karen's Women Organization, The Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), The Karen Information Center (KIC), The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) The Mergui-Tavoy District Information Department, 1-97.
- Submission to CEDAW regarding Myanmar's Exceptional Report on the Situation of Women and Girls from Northern Rakhine State. (2018). Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights, 1-11
- UNBROKEN: Survivors of Sexual Violence in Conflict. (2019). Global Fund for Women.
- Women Are Increasingly Drawn to the Arakan Army's Fight Against Myanmar's Central Government. (2019). Radio Free Asia.

## Figures

Figure 1: FBR map of Burma's ethnic states

Figure 2: FBR photo.

Figure 3: FBR photo.

Figure 4: FBR Mission Report, photo courtesy of Kachin Baptist Convention

Figure 5: Same Impunity, Same Patterns: Sexual abuses by the Burma Army will not stop until there is a genuine civilian government. (2014). Women's League of Burma.

Figure 6: FBR photo

Figure 7: FBR photo

Figure 8: FBR photo



LOVE EACH OTHER.  
UNITE AND WORK FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND PEACE.  
FORGIVE AND DON'T HATE EACH OTHER.  
PRAY WITH FAITH, ACT WITH COURAGE, NEVER SURRENDER.