**Safeguarding women and girls affected by the crisis in Myanmar’s Rakhine State**

29 November 2016

*Statement on Safeguarding Women and Girls in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*

**UNFPA, Yangon, 29 November 2016** — UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is calling for urgent safeguarding of the health and protection of women and girls in Myanmar’s Rakhine State. All women in Rakhine, including all ethnic and religious minorities, must be given **access to healthcare and other essential services without discrimination**, and they must be protected from all forms of violence, including sexual assault. It is imperative that the violence stops.

There are currently an estimated 40,000 pregnant women in the areas affected by conflict since 2012. **Some 7,600 of these women in the Maungdaw and Buthidaung** areas have had no access to basic and primary health services for almost two months.

During pregnancy and childbirth, obstetric and midwifery care make the difference between life and death, between health and life-long disability. Without access to skilled care and life-saving medicines, thousands of women are left helpless when there are complications such as bleeding and infection. The health, protection and hygiene needs of women and girls in northern parts of Rakhine State are acute. To overlook them has grave consequences. If women cannot access contraceptives, they face unwanted pregnancy and childbirth in destitute and dangerous conditions. When people are isolated or on the run, protective mechanisms within families and communities break down, and women become more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. And whether there is conflict or peace, women and girls continue to have female hygiene needs, not least during pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation.

As the United Nations works to obtain access to the conflict-affected areas, UNFPA stands ready to distribute life-saving medicines and supplies for safe pregnancy and childbirth, as well as contraceptives, female hygiene and dignity kits, HIV post-exposure drugs, post-rape treatments and psychosocial support. UNFPA is working with local authorities and partners towards the resumption of maternal health services, as well as assistance to prevent and respond to violence against women.

UNFPA is committed to safeguarding the rights and dignity of women and girls in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity.

**A silent emergency: Violence against women and girls**

25 November 2016

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 page. 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.\*\*\*

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**.

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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.

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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 people 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.”

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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 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.”

*Janet E. Jackson, UNFPA Representative for Myanmar
Jarmo Kuuttila, Chargé D’Affaires, Diplomatic Mission of Finland
Ann Stödberg, Head of Development Cooperation, Embassy of Sweden Section Office
Peter Tschumi, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland in Myanmar
Gavin McGillvray, Head of Office, UK Department for International Development
Peter Batchelor, Country Director, UNDP Myanmar
Troels Vester, Country Manager, UNODC Myanmar
Jean D'Cunha, Head UN Women, Myanmar*