

International Conference on

# BURMA/ MYANMAR STUDIES 4

## ASSEMBLAGES OF THE FUTURE

*rethinking communities after the state*

# CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS S-Z

2-4 AUGUST 2024  
CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

hosted by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable  
Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
German Academic Exchange Service



4<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BURMA/MYANMAR STUDIES:  
“Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State”  
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### Volume 3: S-Z



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4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies:  
"Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State"  
**PROCEEDINGS**

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)

*The International Conference on Burma Studies has been organized four times. The first International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies was held at Chiang Mai University in July 2015, focusing on the topic "Burma/Myanmar in Transition: Connectivity, Changes, and Challenges. The second ICBMS was held in 2018 at Mandalay University, co-hosted by Chiang Mai University. The third ICBMS, delayed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 2021 military coup, took place as a hybrid event in March 2021 at Chiang Mai University, under the theme "Myanmar/Burma in the Changing Southeast Asia Context. Finally, Chiang Mai University (CMU) hosted the fourth International Conference on Burma Studies (ICBMS4) from August 2 to 4, 2024, under the theme "Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State."*



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## Meandering Complexities and the Kachin Sub-States

Sai Tun Aung Lwin

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### Abstract

The ultimate political aspiration of ethnic minorities in Myanmar has been the establishment of a federal democratic union. This envisioned federal union is proposed to be structured with its federating units reflecting the current administrative configuration of seven states and seven regions. These states, named after their predominant ethnic groups, form a horseshoe pattern around the country. The delineation of these state borders was artificially constructed, based on assumptions regarding the concentration of homogeneous ethnic communities and geographical distinctions. However, these borders are fraught with contentious and complex issues, often misunderstood and historically misrepresented. For instance, the Kachin assert that certain areas in the Northern State should be integrated into a larger Kachin State, referred to as Sub-Kachin State. Furthermore, some Kachin communities in Northern Shan aspire to re-establish an autonomous region within Northern Shan. Similarly, the Palaung or Ta'ang ethnic communities seek to create a distinct state beyond the current boundaries of the Palaung autonomous region. These territorial claims have been met with resistance from local Shan communities, leading to racial tensions and escalating into racial animosity.

This volatile situation poses a significant risk of escalating into racial and violent conflicts. My research focuses on the Kachin in Northern Shan State, an area characterized by the presence of multiple ethnic armed organizations, each asserting territorial claims. This region is a multi-ethnic community, comprising more than five distinct ethnic groups, and functions as a critical economic gateway between China and Myanmar. This study aims to elucidate the intricacies of territorial claims extending beyond current ethnic states or autonomous regional boundaries.

**Keywords:** Ethnicities, Conflicts, Governance, Territorial, Shan State, Kachin, History, Political Economy, Minorities within Minorities

## Introduction

When you talk about Shan State, it evokes images of beautiful mountains, tranquil scenes, and diverse communities still living a traditional way of life.

But the reality is also one of abundant armed forces insignia badges, both pro-regime militias and ethnic rebels; a lack of central government control; and different clans and ethnic groups in every town and village. It is less like the bucolic first picture and more like a state of anarchy. More than 70 years after leaders signed the Panglong Agreement<sup>1</sup>, their vision for a transition to an egalitarian and democratic state in which power rests with the people has failed to materialize in Shan State. Shan State is imbued with symptoms of a failed state at the sub-national level; likewise, for Myanmar, it has been a fragile and stalemate state for a long time.

Shan State is the biggest unit in terms of territory. The 2021 coup triggered a challenge by diverse actors opposed to the military government. The central military-controlled state is now deteriorating. In the borderlands, the territorial control of the state is crumbling. Many revolutionary/resistance movements are trying to establish new forms of political rule to reach a federal democracy. But this is occurring based on an ethno-national logic that sees ethno-national movements claiming the authority to develop autonomous areas for different ethnic groups. This can be seen specifically in the case of the Kachin sub-states in northern Shan State.

Kachin (or Jing Phaw) in the Northern Shan aspire to re-establish their former political systems in terms of local governance while carving out an autonomous region or state. These areas were the first ethnic autonomous region of Shan State (Mong Mit Kodaung Kachin sub-state and North Hsenwi Kutkai Kachin Sub-state) that emerged in the pre- and post-independence era. Along with the 2021 post-coup new politics emerging, the new thinking is to create a cluster or clusters of so-called liberated areas and turn them into independent but federated units.

But the real problem is rather complicated, requiring a closer look. For the northern Shan State, each independent political entity is made up of different ethnic groups. Populations and armed organizations are primarily defined along their ethnicities, as opposed to their residential communities or geographic locations.

One potential flashpoint is the Northern Shan, where there are at least five ethnic communities, each with their own distinct group identities, historical memories, and divergent group and elite interests. This region has experienced long-running armed resistance against the state, producing anarchy.

Not only did many Kachin in northern Shan want to carve out an autonomous area, but the Ta'ang Palaung rebels (TNLA Ta'ang National Liberation Army) also seek to establish a slice of the region to create their autonomous state. This group has envisaged boundaries beyond the current borders of the Palaung autonomous region located in the Northern Shan. Their

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<sup>1</sup> The 1947 Panglong Agreement was the outcome of the Panglong Conference, a meeting on the eve of independence between Burmese nationalist hero Aung San and representatives of several of the largest ethnic minority groups in Burma, namely the Chin, Shan, and Kachin. These groups agreed in principle to the formation of the future Union of Burma.



expansionistic visions encompass the territories of some formerly Kachin sub-state areas. Han ethnic Chinese, Kokang-backed MNDAA rebels, want a similar arrangement like the Ta'ang.

Tensions in Northern Shan State exist not only among ethnic armed groups but also among different ethnicities. Looking back over the past decades of Myanmar's federal movement, the proposed constitution drafted by ethnic armed groups has largely overlooked the state boundary issues, as they are often considered less important<sup>2</sup>. In reality, the state boundary issues are far more complicated than they appear. They represent a time bomb waiting for the political tension to trigger them. The disputes and grievances in these area are exacerbated when political tension arises with a serious impact on local communities that have lived together, often peacefully, for centuries. Without properly understanding the underlying causes and problems specific to local communities, there is no solution. Ethnic communities will get pulled into these political contests. The prospects for the emergence of Myanmar as a federal system of governance remain remote.

To examine this issue, I look at how the borders of the Kachin sub-state were produced. I employ qualitative research methods to examine the Kachin sub-state as a case study. Additionally, I rely on explanatory and descriptive research reports and writings.

This research paper contains four sessions: (A) Historical Background; (B) Changes of the Northern Shan region in the last 70 years; (C) Conflicts, Governance and Geopolitics; and finally; (D) Conclusions.

My approach draws on the key concepts, Zomia and autonomy. Zomia is a geography term coined by historian Willem van Schendel in 2002 to refer to the northern mountainous region of Southeast Asia, including parts of Northern Myanmar. He identified Zomia as the largest remaining region of the world in which people have not been fully incorporated into the nation-states (According to the author, this term encompasses Northeast India, Southwest China, Laos, Northern and Western Thailand, and most of the mountainous region in Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> This includes the research area, Kachin sub-states in Shan Land or the entire Shan State)

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<sup>2</sup> Some leaders have suggested that these concerns can wait until the union and the states have reached an agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Zomia is a new name for virtually all the land at altitude roughly above three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It has an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers, home to around one hundred million minority peoples with large ethnic and linguistic diversity. Geographically, it is also known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif.

Since this huge area lied at the periphery of nine states and at the center of none, bestrides the usual regional designations (Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia), and is characterized by interesting ecological variety and interactions with states, it represents a novel object of study, a kind of transnational Appalachia, and a new way to think of area studies. Once, Zomia was a center of state formation in these areas (for example, the Nanzhao kingdom in Yunnan, Tibetan states, the Ahom kingdom in Assam, and some of the Shan (Tai) Kingdom), but today, its prime political characteristic is that it is relegated to the margins of ten valley-dominated states (such as Mainland Burma, Mainland

All three criteria of sovereign nation-states: (1) physical Space, (2) symbolic space, and institutional space are absent in Zomia.

In his book “The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia” James C. Scott, a famous political scientist and anthropologist from Yale University, argues that the mountainous areas of this region have historically been marginalized politically and culturally, with inhabitants maintaining autonomy by escaping state control and rulers of the plain lands (Scott, 2009).

These two concepts inform my two main research questions:

- (a) What is the basic motivation behind the desire to designate North Shan as a Kachin sub-state?
- (b) What are the specific effects of the efforts to establish exclusive areas of ethnically based control and influence in the Northern Shan region, where multi-ethnicities coexist and central state power is in decline?

## **Part (A): Background**

### **1.1 Kachin Sub-states in Northern Shan**

During the early colonial period after the end of the Konbaung Dynasty, Shan State was divided into five regions. Northern Shan, Myay Lat, Southern Shan, a region governed by the Commissioner of Mandalay Division, and a region governed by the Commissioner of Sagaing Division.

The territories of the Northern Shan region during the early colonial period were:

- (a) South Hsenwi
- (b) North Hsenwi
- (c) Kokang
- (d) Tawng Peng
- (e) Mong Leng

The above mentioned areas were ruled by Sao Fahs<sup>4</sup>. Mong Mit, Mong Leng, and Khamti Long (Putao) were initially included under the region administered by the Mandalay Division

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China, and India’s governments) with which it has antagonistic relationships. These populations are ethnic groups that are 'intentionally' stateless along the border and do not submit to the rule of nation-states such as China, Myanmar, and Thailand. They are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys — slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare. Not so very long ago, however, such self-governing peoples were the great majority of humankind. Today, they are seen from the valley kingdoms as “our living ancestors” and “what we were like before we discovered wet-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization.”

<sup>4</sup> Shan State was a collection of minor Shan Kingdoms called Muang whose rulers bore the title Sao Fah. In British Burma (1885-1948), Sao Fahs were analogous to the princely states of British India.

Commissioner due to their geographical location. Mong Mit became part of Northern Shan State under the Federated Shan States Act enacted in 1922 (Sai Kham Mong, 2005).

While using the term sub-states, we generally intend to refer to two regions, including Hsen Wi (Kutkai) and Mong Mit Kodaung region where another Kachin sub-state existed.

### ***1.1.1 Mong Mit Kodaung Kachin Sub-State***

Kodaung is a region inside the Mong Mit Princely State where the Ta'ang Palaung and Kachin people lived. Kodaung is the first region to achieve autonomy in Shan States. It includes parts of the modern-day townships of Mong Mit, Manton, Namhsan, Mabein, and Nam Kham.<sup>5</sup>

The Kachin people of the Kodaung region served in World War I and fought against the Japanese during the Japanese occupation in World War II. On March 23, 1945, in Manton, during the discussion to organize a “Manaw” ceremony to commemorate the victory against the Japanese, participants discussed 3 political objectives (Kachin Literature and Culture Association, 2014):

- (1) To organize the Manaw celebration to commemorate the victory against the Japanese invaders.
- (2) To form the Kachin government to administer the Kodaung region.
- (3) To establish the Kodaung Region Government Council Office.

These decisions were presented to the British by Sao Khun Cho, the Sao Fah of Mong Mit. Due to the willful approval of Sao Khun Cho, a Cambridge University graduate, a Kachin sub-state appeared in Mong Mit.

The residents of the Kodaung sub-state formed an administration council to govern their own area, and the office of the council was based in Manton, which is in today's Palaung Self-Administered Zone.

The Kodaung Kachin sub-state Council led the work in

- (1) Community administration
- (2) Education (opening schools)
- (3) Healthcare (opening hospitals)
- (4) Road construction
- (5) Suppressing thieves and bandits
- (6) Agricultural extension

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<sup>5</sup> In Kodaung Kachin sub-state territory, the present-day Mong Mit, northeast part of Mong Nin, Manyon, Mo Lo, Tongyi, Yay Pone, and then Hu-Mang, the northwestern part of Nam Hsan Township, almost 80% of the areas of Man Tong Township, currently in the Palaung autonomous Region, Mabein Township, and Ruli River Basin Loi Wein, Loi Sant, touching the Mong Mit border, then Soram, Dinga, YanWu, and Man Swan villages in Namkham township bordering Kachin were included.



(Kachin Literature and Culture Association, 2014, p.192).

In terms of finances, taxes were submitted to Mong Mit Sao Fah, who, in turn, released a budget for local expenditure.<sup>6</sup> Circle Head Men were appointed, and they were all designated as members of the Kodaung Council Executive Committee (Kachin Literature and Culture Association, 2014, p. 192).<sup>7</sup>

### ***1.1.2 Kutkai Kachin Sub-State***

Kutkai is an area under Northern Hsen Wi (Theinni) princely state. In 1945, a total of 25 Duwas and elders signed and presented to the British C.A.S (B) a demand to establish the Kachin areas in northern Shan State as an autonomous region. In 1946, at a Kachin Manaw ceremony for the Allied victory in Myitkyina, a total of 6 Kachin Duwas<sup>8</sup> and elders from the Kutkai area issued a demand that the establishment of a future Kachin State should include Kachin areas in northern Shan State.

In 1947, the year before independence, the Kachin elders of the northern Shan came to the Border Region Administration Committee and proposed:

- (1) To appoint a Kachin representative in the Border Region Administration Body.
- (2) To recognize the Kachin language as the official language in these areas.
- (3) To allow the right to practice Kachin customary law in the area.
- (4) To have the right to deal directly with the Border Region Administration Body for that region.
- (5) To allow the right to elect Kachin representatives based on the population (Sai Kham Mong, 2005, p.114).

The British Border Region Administration Body responded that this proposal was not practical as the Kachin people were scattered in Northern Shan, and it is impossible to define the whole area under Kachin rule (Sadan, 2016).<sup>9</sup> However, the North Hsen Wi (Theinni)’s Sao Fah

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<sup>6</sup> In 1957, the Kodaung Kachin sub-state consisted of 179 villages and was divided into 16 tracts. Presentation on the Sai Zin Didi Zone, *Information about Kachin sub-states for political parties and CSOs in Shan State* (2019, June 30).

<sup>7</sup> Duwa L. Khun Sam served as the chairman of the council from 1946 to 1962, after the formation of the Kodaung Kachin sub-state.

Kachin Literature and Culture Association. (2014). *Mong Mit Sinli Kachin sub-state* (p. 192).

<sup>8</sup> Duwa are traditional chieftains of the Kachin ruling system, but their position and power are not as high as Sao Fahs.

<sup>9</sup> Before the British arrived in Shan, they understood that the relationship between Kachin Duwas and Shan SaoFahs often involved cooperation as well as conflict.

For instance, in 1879, Hsen Wi’s Sao Fah, Hkun Santon Hoon gained power with the help of the Kachin, but he ignored the plight of the Kachin and 13 years later, the Hsenwi Palace was surrounded by the Kachin’s armed forces. Hsen Wi’s prince had to flee to Lashio, administered by the British. After this incident, a total of 54 areas, including the Kachin village tracts in Hsen Wi, Mong Si, and Mong Han territories that had been ruled by the Kachin Duwas in the past were placed under British direct

agreed that if the Shan and Kachin could live together in some sub-regions, he could appoint a Kachin as a representative (or minister) and that representative must be under the direction of the Sao Fah (Sai Kham Mong, 2005, p. 114).<sup>10</sup> Based on these criteria, the North Hsen Wi sub-state was established. The newly formed Kachin sub-state was called the North Hsen Wi Kachin sub-state, and the official recognition letter was issued by the Shan State Government on July 6, 1948.

The boundaries of the North Hsen Wi Kachin sub-state, which includes 46 tracts, were Mong Mit (Kodaung) and Tawng Peng in the west, Hsen Wi proper to the south, and Bhamo District to the northwest and west. In the east, the sub-state reached up to Mong Ya, Mong Yon, Quin Hong, Nam Tau, Mong Si, Nam Swan, Pyin Ye, Kan Mong, Mong Kyut, and Man Mat (Kankaw) regions and, in the west reached as far as Loi Hon, Wanting Kap Na (modern-day Kyukoke Pan Hseng), Mong Ko, Phaung Sai along the Ruili river. The population included not just the Kachin but also the Shan, Ta'ang Palaung, and the Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

It includes parts of the modern-day townships of Kutkai, Hsen Wi, Kong Lon, and Muse.<sup>12</sup> The sub-state headquarters was located in Kutkai, and the Kachin minister was elected by the committee's councilors and Kachin elders. The village tract administration was overseen by Duwas. In urban administration, the district commissioners were responsible. However, in the same way as Mong Mit, the taxes were paid to the Sao Fah, who in turn arranged the budget.

The difference with the Kodaung area is that the Hsen Wi sub-state had the opportunity to run for a seat in the Parliament for the Ethnic House. The Kachin had the right to use the Kachin<sup>13</sup> customary law rather than the Kachin Hills Regulation in Kachin matters<sup>14</sup>. After independence, the Hsen Wi sub-state became a separate sub-state from the Hsen Wi region.

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administration, and the British commissioner granted an appointment letter to the Duwas as headmen according to the Kachin Hill Tract Regulation, altogether 54 village tracts.

<sup>10</sup> He commented that Kachin customary law can be applied to Kachin issues but the Kachin Hill Regulations were not applicable.

Since around 1947, 20 percent of the sub-state's population has been Chinese.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with historian Sai Kham Mong in Yangon, 12 December 2022.

<sup>12</sup> The Kutkai Kachin sub-state covered the entire modern-day Kutkai Township and the wide stretch from the Nam Um and Tima area in the southern part of Muse Township, along the Muse-Kutkai road to Manhan, Mong Yu Lay 105-mile, from there east to Ho Tao, Nam Tau (Kachin Village), Kyu Kok Pan Hseng, Mong Paw, Mong Ko, Phaung Sai up to the Salween River basin. Within Hsen Wi Township, two tracts on the Konglon Town road such as Nati, Mankang, and some areas to the west of Konglon Town, fell under the sub-state, altogether parts of four townships.

<sup>13</sup> This independent existence was only possible due to the great vision of the Sao Fah Sao Hong Pha at a time when the country was facing a crisis.

Interview with historian Sai Kham Mong in Yangon, 12 December 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with historian Sai Kham Mong in Yangon, 12 December 2022.

Among the policy goals of the Kachin Sub-state Council during its existence of the Kachin State Council, point number (3) was to drive a united effort to strengthen the democratic system in Shan State, and point number (2) was to work on the fate of Shan State only with the consensus of all local communities in the state.

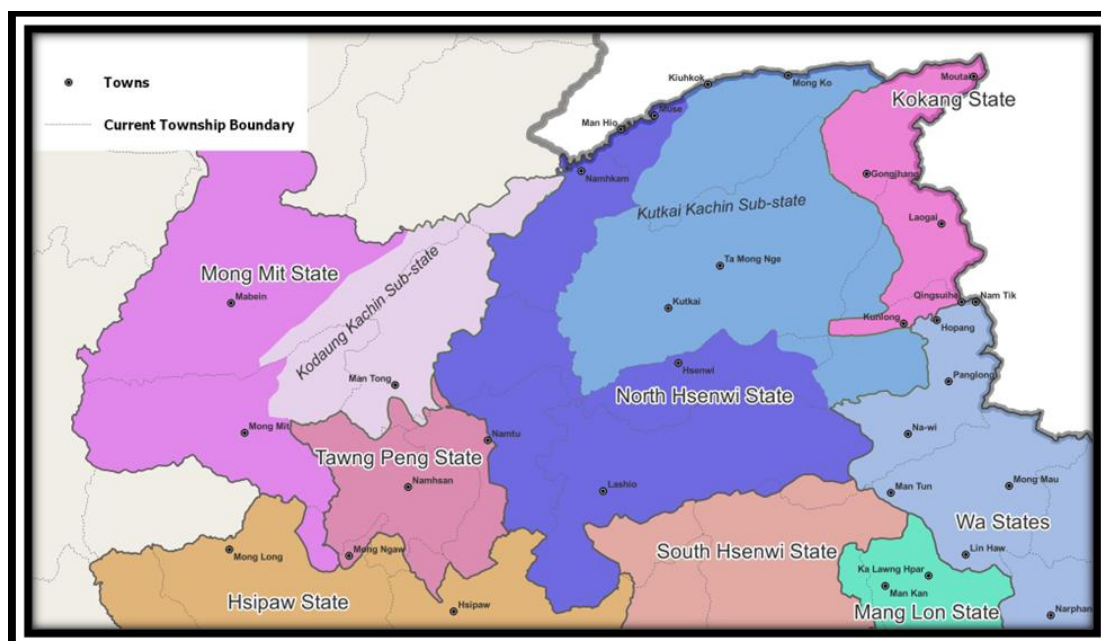


Figure 1: Map of areas where two Kachin sub-states arose (Sai Zin Didi Zone, from Kachin sub-states research presentation by Hsen Pai, 2019)

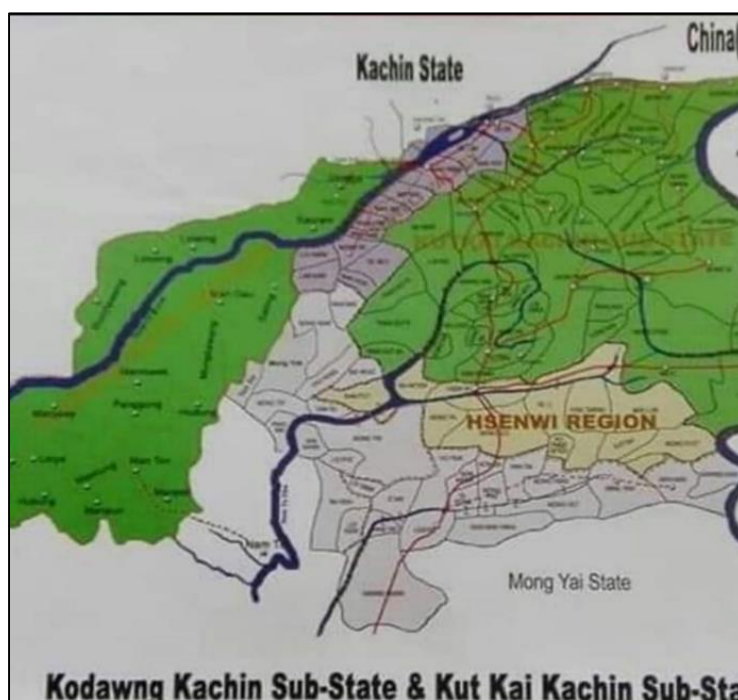


Figure 2: From Mong Mit – Sinli Kachin sub-state, a history book published by Kachin Literature and Culture Association and Kachin Independence Organization (2014)

The self-governing areas (Kachin sub-states) that appeared in Shan State before and after independence, and the princely state of Kokang, are administrations that only practice the Shan State customary Law.

### **1.1.3 Why Did the Sub-states Fade Away?**

*"The beginning was bad and the end was uncertain."*

Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, one of the leaders of the Shan revolution, comments on the wrong approach and building development of unionism (1987).

During the first 14 years after independence (1948-1962), including 12 years of parliamentary democracy and almost two years of military-backed caretaker government, the failed nation-building and state-building by the government resulted in Kachin sub-states like North Hsen Wi, becoming areas rampant with uncontrollable illegal activities and filled with armed factions in the post-parliamentary era.

During these 14 years (1948-1962), during the parliamentary era, from agriculture, production, and trade to defense and infrastructure building, the local people had to rely on their self-collective organizing. They did not receive enough support or services from the central government.

Since the early days of independence, due to the rebellion of Bo Naw Sai and the Kuomintang invasion, the region has been struggling. In 1950, when the rebellion of Naw Sai reached northern Shan State, the local Kachin and Shan leaders were reluctant to counter it but decided to cooperate and defend (Sai Kham Mong, 2023, p.326).

In short, the Shan government and Sao Fahs gave more rights to the Kachin and let them protect their communities. The Villages Defense Forces, also known as the VDF, were especially important because of not enough security forces in the Northern Shan.<sup>15</sup> The same thing happened when the Kuomintang invaded. Until the Kuomintang issue came up, there was only one government UMP battalion in Lashio (Sai Kham Mong, 2005, p. 235)<sup>16</sup>.

In May 1952, the Shan State government submitted a request to the Ministry of Shan Affairs in Yangon to send military forces to fight the Kuomintang. No response was received by the end of the year.

Mayors, Duwas, and headmen from the Kachin sub-state decided to arm themselves with their funds and with the help of the Shan government, reorganize the VDFs and fight, just like in the previous Naw Sai event. The VDFs did not have modern weapons. During the two-year war with the KMT, more than 9,000 houses in Hsen Wi were destroyed.

Looking at regional public service development, poor infrastructure (including roads, schools, and hospitals), a low number of employees, and a lack of basic services for state-building were present in the region throughout the parliamentary era (Sai Kham Mong, 2005).<sup>17</sup> There was

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<sup>15</sup> The Kachin battalions under the government at the time also entered the Kodaung sub-state and attacked the forces of Bo Naw Sai.

<sup>16</sup> In Kokang, which was neighboring Hsen Wi Kachin sub-state, the Kuomintang had been encroaching since 1949 and the Chinese Red Army had also made cross-border attacks (Sai Kham Mong, 2005, p. 235). UMP Union Military Police is a paramilitary force of Burma that derives from British Burma's Burma Military Police.

<sup>17</sup> It can be found in a report during the early independence times of China.

no proper border trade along the China border and the proliferation of unruly cross-border gangs. Some places of the eastern parts of Kutkai became KMT strongholds, and most of the surrounding settlements relied on the mountainous highlands to make a living from poppy cultivation.<sup>18</sup>

The structure of the union was not right, and all the financial budgets of Shan State went to the central government. The former just got a paltry 5000 kyats maximum allocated for the entire region for a budget year.<sup>19</sup>

In 1959, during the caretaker government, according to the restructuring of the Northern Shan administration, 16 of the 45 tracts that had been included in the Hsen Wi Kachin sub-state became part of the Muse and Hsen Wi towns. Rather than being governed by the Kachin customary law, they were supervised by the relevant administrator. The Kachin leaders in North Hsen Wi did not like this change. They appealed to the government of Kodaung, arguing that Kutkai had been governed by the Kachin Hills Law since a long time ago.

During the caretaker government, the VDFs<sup>20</sup> in the Kachin sub-state were disarmed in the same way as the Shan princely states had to give up power. After the coup led by the Revolutionary Council in 1962, Kachin sub-states were scrapped and disappeared under the General Ne Win-led Revolution Council, which spawned decades-long dictatorships.

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(Sai Kham Mong, 2005. *Kokang and Kachin in the Shan State (1945-1960)*. Chulalongkorn University Press, pp. 107-115). The report said that in Kyu Kok PanHseng, a town opposite Wanding, the residents and office for the police personnel are thatched houses with thatched roofs. The Burmese flag is hoisted in front of the camp. The lack of necessary support infrastructure was an embarrassment for public servants, and the assistant civil administrator had also requested more support for the border areas, according to that report (Sai Kham Mong, 2003). There was only one road connecting the region, and it took 4 hours by car to go from the border town of Khuk Kok to Kutkai. Most of the roads connecting the Kutkai sub-state tracts are under Ramshackle.

<sup>18</sup> There were not enough police for community security.

<sup>19</sup> Historian Sai Kham Mong commented on the situation at that time.

<sup>20</sup> VDF is a Village Defense Force comprised of Kachin in Northern Shan.

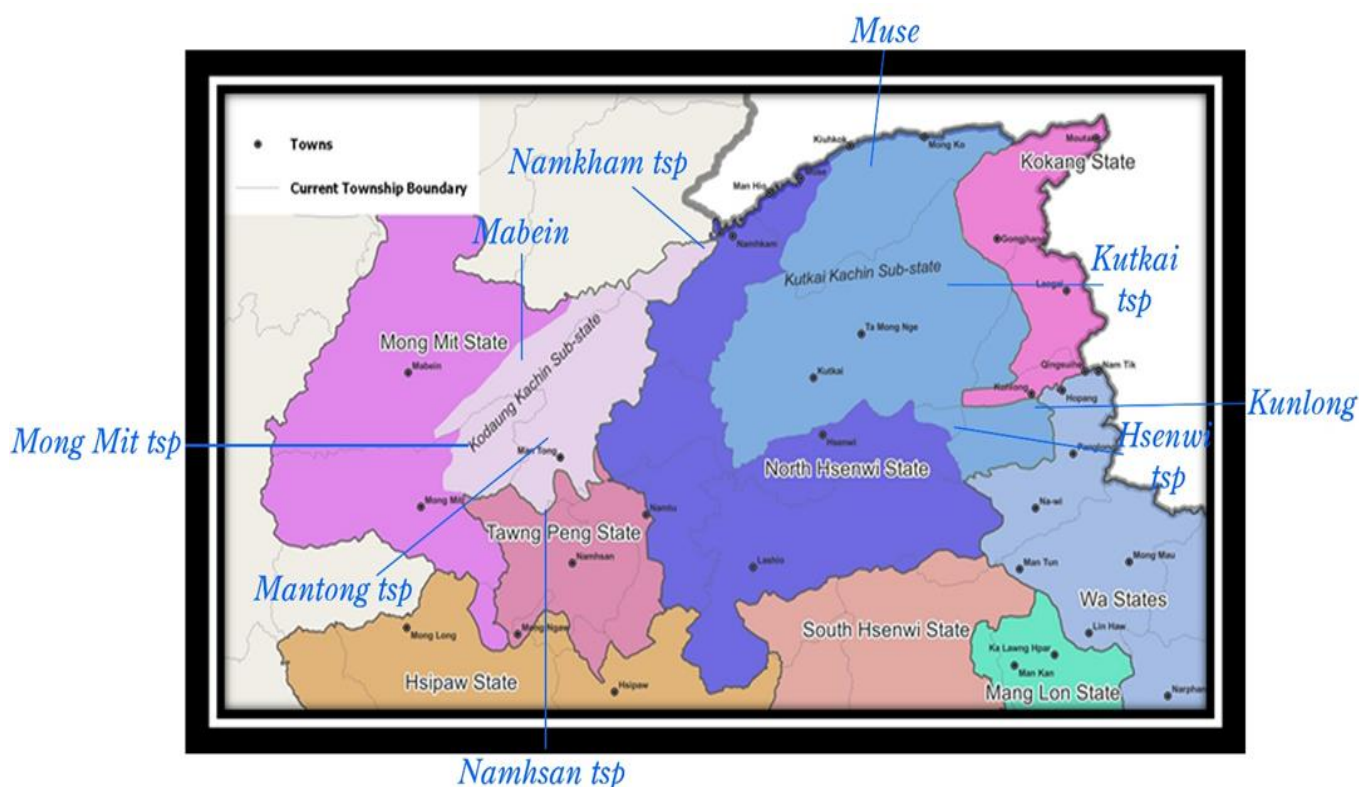


Figure 3: The areas of Kodaung sub-state and Kutkai sub-state overlaid on the present-day townships of Northern Shan State

## Part (B): Changes of the Northern Shan Region in the Last 70 Years (1950- 2020)

### 2.1 Major Events over the Past 60 Years and how they Affected the Region

Looking at the main events in the Northern Shan region over the past 60 years and how they have affected the region, these events are often related to the changes in the political power structure and policies of the central heartland Myanmar as well as changes in China, which are connected geographically. After the KMT invasion in northern Shan (from 1954-1957), Kachin sub-states appeared somewhat secure and stable for three years, but then began to shake up after the military took power for the first time and formed the caretaker government in 1958.

Four events occurred that left the Kachin in Northern Shan increasingly dissatisfied: the caretaker government disarmed the VDFs in Kachin sub-states; the Shan princely states gave up their power; the China-Myanmar border demarcation measures resulted in some Kachin territories being conceded to China; and restrictions were imposed on cross-border shifting cultivation between the Kachin and Jingpo on either side of the border. Along with long-term unrest, the Northern Shan had become a breeding ground for the soon-to-come Kachin insurgency.



In 1961, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was established in the Northern Shan Kachin sub-states area (Lintner, 1999, p. 203).

After the 1962 coup, the junta abolished the state councils and autonomous status for minorities, which encouraged the Shan and Kachin insurgencies that already existed and pushed almost every ethnic group to arm themselves.

However, in a Kachin sub-state such as Kutkai, various armed groups have caused more commotion. The region was contested by three sides, the KIA, the CPB (Communist Party of Burma) with its allies, and the Burmese military.<sup>21</sup> The local people suffered from various conflicts. In early post-independence times, the Kachin were the third largest population in Shan State. But for Kachin, the highest number of displacements happened during the Revolutionary Council era and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) era.<sup>22</sup> During this period, it is estimated that the seat of power of the Kachin moved to Kachin State.

The 1990s were also a period of great change in the region. At that time four events occurred synchronously: developmental peace (ceasefire between the SLORC military government and the Northern Burma base ethnic armed groups), resuming trade with China, ceasefire capitalism, and military government carving out a new form of power in the border areas.

The starting of border trade between China and Burma, and the elites' base ceasefire came along with some stability, development, and changes, but in reality, major benefits were only conducive to the elites.

Locals were suddenly moved from smallholder trading to a capitalist economic era in which companies were established and massive trade developed. It has also resulted in gaping inequality.<sup>23</sup> Most of the locals belonged to an agrarian society at that time.

The ethnic elites, including cease-fire groups who cooperated with the military's strategy, gained great dividends through their share of elitist trade investments.<sup>24</sup> While they received basic development infrastructure from the government, the junta was already carving out a new

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Author Maung Maung Soe, a former member of the Communist Party of Burma who served in the Mong Ko area, Yangon, 10 December 2022.

Even though there were numerous rebellions in Shan State, General Ne Win's group, which received support from Western countries to maintain power with an anti-communist image, was able to expand administrative zones following the new constitution and expand the army control areas as well. At the same time, the Kokang, Chinese volunteer fighters, merchants, and cross-border armed gangs accompanied the CPB, settling in the region.

<sup>22</sup> Kodaung and neighboring areas, which provided the most recruits in the early days of the KIA the most soldiers, were contested by at least three ethnic armed groups while the Burmese military offensive and the efforts of the CBP to gain a foothold in the area created complications. Some Kachin from this region migrated and settled on the Thai border, and most of the Kachin from Northern Shan Kachin sub-states left their homes and moved to Kachin State or cities such as Lashio, Mandalay, and Yangon.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sai Hla Phay, former Member of Parliament for Muse constituency, Muse, 17 May 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Roads, bridges, businesses, buildings, and public services also appeared.

form of power in the border areas (Callahan, 2003). Kevin Woods (2016) referred to the ceasefire truces that began in 1989 as “capitalist truces” (Woods, 2016).

Previously, the insurgent areas were called “black areas.” But under ceasefires, these zones became “brown areas” that belonged to both the government and anti-government forces.<sup>25</sup> In ceasefire areas, the military gained control over natural resources and influenced the people; opportunities they did not have before (Woods, 2016, p.131). Some of the militia units that we had the opportunity to meet during the research trip were formed during the ceasefire period.<sup>26</sup>

Laborers from other regions were brought in for resource production and investment projects. They tried to use the law to change the proportion of the population.<sup>27</sup> Many land confiscations took place. As the Sino-Myanmar trade route grew larger, the Chinese migrated and settled along this route. In summary, this capitalist truce period was neither socially nor economically beneficial for the locals. Capitalism in the northern Shan region was similar to the feudal capitalist economic system of the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>28</sup> Locals faced unexpected threats.<sup>29</sup>

## **2.2 Unsuccessful National Integration and Anarchist Northern Shan during Liberalization**

Over the 10 years from 2011 to 2021, Myanmar partially loosened political and economic restrictions and became somewhat democratic. But in contrast to the central heartland, the Northern Shan region was marred by turmoil with conflict and fighting.

It is an interesting question why the fighting flared up even when elections and parliaments had been revived.

Some journalists thought ethnic conflicts and civil war issues would be solved if the NLD came to power, but this was completely wrong and fighting did not cease during the NLD government. The cause for the resumed fighting in Northern Myanmar was the military’s pressure on ethnic armed groups to transform into Border Guard Forces or people’s militias under the command of Tatmadaw as the constitution had been enacted and democratization

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<sup>25</sup> Once they were designated as a brown area, most of them fell under the control of the junta. However, these areas with diverse interests revealed complex power relations, and the management plans were largely controlled by the government and authorities.

<sup>26</sup> Kutkai-Mong Si study tour, 15 May 2023

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Phone interview with Sai San Kham, PhD candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies at the University of Rotterdam, 10 December 2022.

“The exodus of people because they can’t live in their homeland anymore is related to the political economy as well as structural problems. For example, capitalism arrived before anything was ready. Migrants also arrived and land confiscation happened. How can the local agrarian society withstand this? During the first cease-fire period, the demographics of the population changed considerably.” Sai San Kham remarked.

<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the public could not tolerate the arbitrary human rights violations and threats of the military, even within the ceasefire zones.

was happening.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the military was trying to force ethnic armed forces from Northern Shan to join the fold in the name of national integration and state building by using little democratic space as justification.<sup>31</sup>

However, for a country like Myanmar, transitioning from a non-democratic system to a democracy, state-building alone is not enough.<sup>32</sup> Electoral systems and institutional structures often determine the strength of a democracy, while in some systems societal tensions can exacerbate conflicts. In a country where democracy is not yet mature, due to weak political institutions, legislation, and rule of law, politicians tend to rely on armed response in the name of nationalism (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, p.14).

In the elections in the past 10 years, insurgent ethnic armed groups and their ethnic parties from Northern Shan State have had very little political power and representation in the parliament for various ethnic groups. Looking back over the past 20 years, the number of ethnic armed groups fighting against the government has increased in the previous 10 years compared to the period between 1990 and 2010.<sup>33</sup> For Northern Shan, imbued human rights violations, insecurity, and lawlessness signalize a failed state throughout the liberalization era.<sup>34</sup>

## **Part (C): Conflict, Governance and Geopolitics**

### **3.1 A Glimpse of Inter-Ethnic Armed Conflicts in Kachin Sub-states**

Shan and Kachin are the ethnic groups that fought the earliest armed revolutions in Shan State, and their armed movements fueled some of the inter-ethnic armed conflicts that took place in the former Kachin sub-state areas in the Northern Shan.

The first fighting in the areas of the former Kachin sub-state in Northern Shan was also related to these forces. The earliest battle was in December 1967 between the Shan State Army (SSA) and the Palaung National Front (PNF), which broke away from the SSA, in Mankow, Man Tong District, Palaung Autonomous Region (formerly Nam Tu Township) (Mai Aik Kao, 2018, p. 74). These Ta'ang battalions were formed together with SSIA (Shan State Independence Army), the original organization of SSA, during the Shan State Liberation Army period in the 1960s. They were called the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion and 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Later, fighting broke

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to this, some ethnic groups that had been temporarily disarmed or defeated like the Ta'ang Palaung (TNLA) and Kokang MNDAA reappeared during the last 10 years.

<sup>31</sup> This topic is also related to state-building (sovereignty, rule of law, service) because it is an effort to expand the government's sovereignty as they are forcibly assimilating ethnic groups.

<sup>32</sup> It is necessary to build a state with a common national identity, or in other words, a federal system established by consensus with the end of the civil war.

<sup>33</sup> There was not just fighting between the ethnic forces and the military; ethnic forces were fighting against each other for control over territory in Northern Shan state, offering economic opportunities and income from taxes.

<sup>34</sup> Along with various conflicts, including inter-ethnic fighting, no single group has clear dominance over the region. Of course, Shan state remains in a state of Anarchy.

out when they broke away from SSA, and became PNF (which was supported by KMT remnants) and PSLA (Palaung State Liberation Army which received aid from KIA).<sup>35</sup>

In this situation, three groups were formed around the Palaung Hill region and nearby areas, such as Nam Hsan, Nam Tu, and Kyauk Mae'; the Palaung group that joined with the remnants of the KMT (Kuomintang), the KIA Palaung Joint Group (KIA/PSLA), and the SSA (Shan State Army).<sup>36</sup> After the defeat of KMT remnants and PNF, fighting erupted again between the KIA-PSLA groups and the Shan State Army, taking on the form of a tripartite conflict (Sai Tun Aung Lwin, 2022).

The first clash between ethnic armed forces in the Kutkai sub-state was between the KIA and the SSA. In 1968, the KIA dislodged SSA from Mong Si and Tima areas and then launched a fierce offensive through Mong Yin and Mong Mao until they crossed the Lashio-Namtu railway, according to the Kachin records (Kachin Literature and Culture Association 2014, p.192).

When the Communist Party of Burma established itself in northern Shan, inter-rebel or ethnic conflict patterns changed to inter-factional fighting (Note: with KIA+PSLA on one side, and SSPP+CPB on the other, until 1976.)<sup>37</sup> After the cease fire with the CPB in 1976, the KIA stayed out of the Mongko-Phaung Sai area until 1989.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, a tripartite ceasefire was reached between the KIA, the Shan State Army, and the PSLO Palaung State Liberation Organization in 1980.<sup>39</sup>

However, after the CPB had collapsed, fighting re-emerged between the Kokang MNDAA, which emerged in 1989, and the KIA in the eastern part of Muse, northeast of Kutkai.<sup>40</sup>

In May 1990, after the ceasefire between the MNDAA and the KIA, the fighting between ethnic armed groups in the areas of the former Kachin sub-states stopped for 25 years. When it reappeared after 2015, especially after the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), it was the movement of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) into the Northern Shan region, which sparked clashes with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) (Radio Free Asia (RFA) Burmese, 2016, November 8).

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<sup>35</sup> In 1967, the 5th Battalion, led by Khun Yi and Khun Lay, formed the Palaung National Front (PNF) and merged with the remnants of the Chinese Kuomintang.

The 6th battalion of the SSA led by San Taung (Ta khon Thaung), the group that later became the PSLA Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA), splintered into their group and got help from the KIA Kachin Independence Army.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Sai Kyaw Hla, Secretary (1) of SSPP/SSA, Wan Hai, 12 November 2021.

In the Ta'ang Palaung history book, it is said that the Communist Party of Burma penetrated the area, but it is likely that this happened somewhat later than the period when the SSA-PNF battle began.

<sup>37</sup> In 1968, the KIA and the Communist Party Burma (CPB) began fighting over a territorial dispute when the CPB entered the Mongko area. The areas where the fighting started are in the Kutkai sub-state areas.

<sup>38</sup> Khun Htoo (2021)

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Sai Kyaw Hla, secretary (1) of SSPP/SSA

<sup>40</sup> Mong Mit Sinli Kachin sub-state history, p.212

When we look back over centuries of disputes, conflicts, and relations among four major ethnic groups (Shan, Ta’ang/Palaung, Kachin, and Kokang), the Shan have mostly maintained reasonable relations with the other three communities. But relations between Kachin, Ta’ang, Kachin and Kokang have often been difficult, with regular periods of conflict (Yang Li, 1997, p. 26).<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2 Complex Localized Governance Models

Shan State has always been Myanmar’s most troublesome region partly because of its ethnic diversity, local warlords and militias as well as the increase in drugs and illicit activities. Shan State is bound to remain a cockpit of anarchy where drugs, guns, and money rule supreme (Lintner, 2012). This state has the nature of anarchy, similar to former the Kachin sub-states too. Former Kachin sub-state administration hub in Kutkai, four ethnic armed groups, and ten militia groups are active in the area.

*Even in the Northern Shan administration hub Lashio, there are many cases of unsolved murders, unidentified bodies, and even kidnappings and robberies in broad daylight, you see, a Lashio local described the post-coup rules of law and deteriorating situation.*<sup>42</sup>

(Note: After Operation 1027 (from 27 October 2023 to 11 January 2024) led by Three Brotherhood Alliance, the region became the first major liberated area for rebel alliances after they captured the army’s outpost, camps, battalions, and commands. However, locals in Northern Shan State still face uncertainties and unsound conditions while tensions between inter-ethnic armed groups are arising.)<sup>43</sup>

When I went to Mongsi from Kutkai ahead of Operation 1027, there were at least five different militia units along the way, as well as four ethnic armed groups (KIA, TNLA, SSPP/SSA, and MNDAA) either.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In the early days of Kokang’s 18th-century territory expansion and power consolidating process, the Kachin and Ta’ang relations were much worse than Kokang-Kachin relations. When the Kachin settled in the Northern Shan, their first clash occurred with Ta’ang/Palaung. Their fighting had to stop with the arrival of the British in the Shan States. Mai Aik Kao. (2018). *Ta’ang Palaung history*. Yangon.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Sai Han from Lashio, June 3, 2023.

But Lashio was booming with opulent buildings within two years post-coup. Most funds are funneled through money laundry services of illicit activities. For instance, online scams of the notorious Fully Light group of Kokang Border Guard Force, and Ya Tai bloc’s businesses were operating at that time.

<sup>43</sup> Operation 1027 marked the first and surprising series of victories against the Myanmar regime’s troops in the post 2021 coup, led by three brotherhoods rebels: Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Ta’ang National Liberation Army TNLA, and AA Arakan Army.

Four ethnic armed groups, the Kachin Independence Army KIA, Shan State Progress Party SSPP/SSA, Ta’ang Palaung National Liberation Army TNLA, and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance MNDAA are active in the area along the road, having set up patrols, bases, and administrative areas.

<sup>44</sup> Research trip from Kutkai to Mong Si, 15 May, 2023.

At the entrance of Mongsi village, the signboard announcing the SSPP/SSA administration can be seen, but on the hill inside the village, there is a government military outpost.<sup>45</sup> The tract comprises 21 villages and more than 6,700 people.<sup>46</sup> In the past, disputes in the village, complaints, and office services were provided by the militia and village administrators, but since the 2021 coup, police from the village police station fled, and there has been an increasing number of requests to solve cases through the relevant ethnic organizations.<sup>47</sup> However, this system is not working smoothly because there are too many armed groups.<sup>48</sup>

There is still a market there, but this market is not under municipal administration. The shops inside the market are taxed by TNLA and KIA.<sup>49</sup>

A variety of taxes and military conscriptions pose a burden on the locals. Services come from various armed groups (Especially militia No.2 of Mong Si), however, they are frail. Locals are grappling with insecurities and uncertainties.<sup>50</sup>

The road that connects to the Mong Si area was only a dirt road for the last five decades but it was upgraded to a pebble road in 1996 during the ceasefire period.<sup>51</sup> About 2 miles away from the village, there is a Mong Si militia camp on the hill. IDP camps are also found in Kutkai, which run on support from missionary associations, social charity groups, and international assistance. The same situation is found on the way from Muse to Kyukok Pang Hseng. A TNLA outpost was seen in a Kachin-majority village in the area of the former Kachin sub-state, called Nam Tau, and there was a Mong Paw militia camp about two miles away from the Kyukok Pang Hseng road<sup>52</sup>.

On the Mong Mit (Kodaung Sub-state's) side, the road from Mong Mit to Kyauk Mae - Mong Ngok, the dirt road connection to the Man Tong area, and roads connecting the Molo area along the Ruli river valley and then to Namkham, are not accessible to public transport and some places, where the roads are cut off.<sup>53</sup> Multiple government offices on the outskirts of Mong Mit are covered with vegetation and office services are relocated to the safer town.

Analyzing local public services reveals multiple models including government services, militia service, informal local governance systems with the help of missionary organizations and civil society organizations (e.g., IDP camp, intra-camp governance, education, health services, as

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<sup>45</sup> The Mong Si area is located on the strategic route between Kutkai and Laukkai in the Kokang region. The military came to set up strategic outposts when the war with Kokang resumed in 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Mong Si area administrator, Mong Si, 15 May 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Online interview with an official from TNLA, 27 May 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Ko Shat Kwal from Kutkai, Kutkai, 16 May 2023.

<sup>49</sup> The people are facing unbearable tax burdens after the coup because various ethnic armed groups have increased the rates while local businesses are struggling.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with a restaurant owner in Kutkai.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with locals of Mong Si.

Passenger buses started running between Mong Si and Kutkai at that time.

<sup>52</sup> Research trip to Kyukoke Pang Hseng, 18 May 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Research trip and interviews with the locals in Mong Mit from May 5 to 7, 2023.



well as traditional mediation and settlement of cases), and administration by ethnic armed groups (this model includes interim administration arrangements established after the coup).

### 3.3 Post-Coup Central Power Decline and Expansion of Parallel Local Governance

The ethnic forces operating in northern Shan State are among the ethnic forces that could take advantage of the coup and the weakening of the military and the Burmese central power. In particular, the ability to clear out regional bases that threaten security, dominate and expand in economically important areas, and build administrative zones is a common feature among forces that expand their territories.

In Northern Shan, from February 2021 to mid-2023, the TNLA, KIA, SSPP/SSA, and MNDAA Kokang forces expanded their territories significantly, and after the 1027 Operation, TNLA and MNDAA were managed to accumulate substantially, and the power dynamics of northern Shan have changed.<sup>54</sup>

Among the expanded territories by different groups, there are very few clearly demarcated territories, with consensus from different sides (Jolliffe, 2015). Due to the overlapping of territories, there are also some communication breakdowns and tensions among the ethnic forces. For example, in August 2021, when the governance in heartland Myanmar became uncertain, the Truth and Justice Party MTJP, the political leadership of Kokang MNDAA, sent a notice to the KIO saying that Mong Ko District in Muse Township, Northern Shan State, is their administrative area and that they were reactivating the existing administration.<sup>55</sup>

Mong Ko had been part of the former Kachin sub-state, and the KIO also designated it as an administrative area of the 6th Brigade, so a significant territorial dispute appeared in the media.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Operation 1027 was conducted by three rebel groups: MNDAA Kokang, TNLA Ta'ang, and AA Arakan Army, and their surprise offensive achieved a series of victories against the military regime which led observers to call it "by far the most difficult moment for the regime" since the early days of the 2021 coup.

Historically, there are three ways ethnic armed groups gain control (or spread influence) over territories and people.

They are:

- 1) The method of fighting
- 2) The method of negotiation
- 3) The method of collaboration.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from MNDAA/MTJP to KIO chairman, 19 August 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Social media accounts using ethnic Kachin names have also written a large number of posts highlighting their dissatisfaction with the dispute.

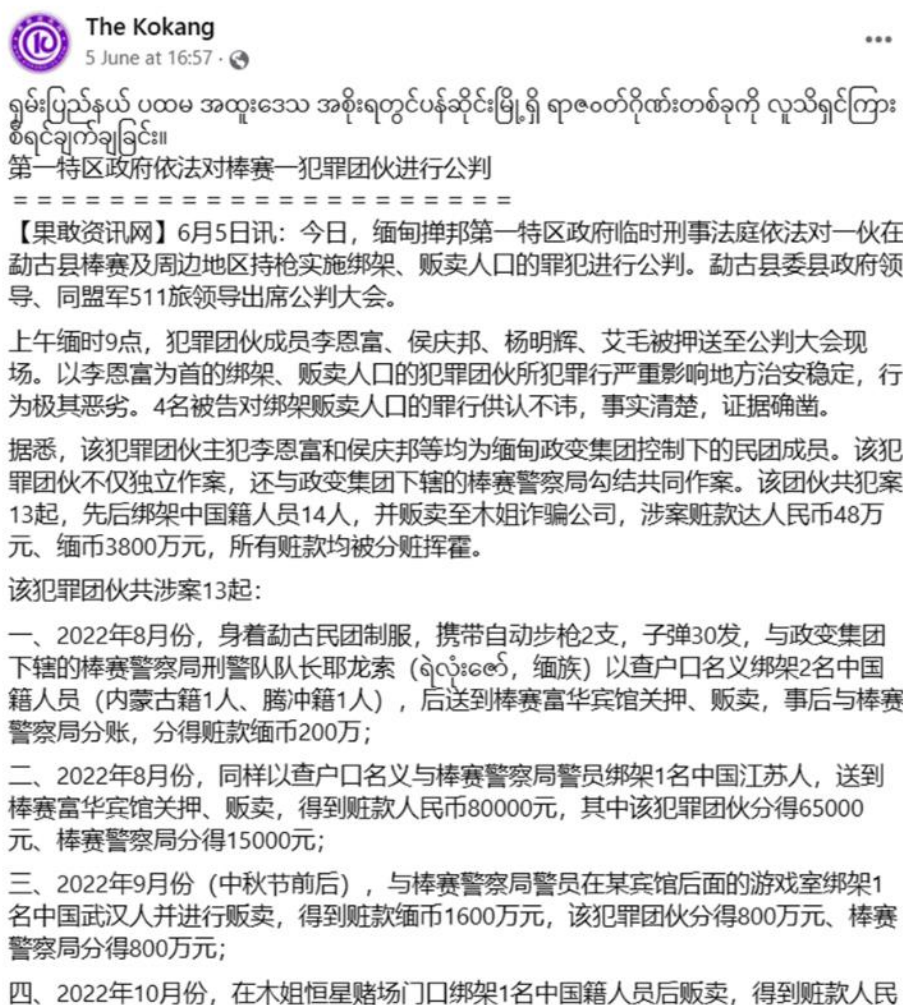


Figure 4: A description of the evidence of the increase in administrative and judicial power by the Kokang Army MNDAA in the Kyukoke Pang Hseng area after the 2021 coup (Reference: From the Kokang News Page)

Again, the Ta'ang/Palaung ethnic armed force, TNLA/PSLF, also wants to establish a Ta'ang Palaung state based on these areas. These issues are seen by the local Shan and Kachin communities as truly unpleasant political demands.<sup>57</sup> However, the Ta'ang have largely welcomed TNLA's growing influence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The differences between ethnic armed groups in territory and administration expansion include not just the practice of administrative powers such as setting up tax regions or recruiting soldiers but also identity issues such as posting Ta'ang/Palaung or Kachin signs at the edge of villages and bringing in people from other areas to settle in the territory where they want to change the demographic composition.

In the historical context, similar practices by the Kachin occurred around World War II. After the Second World War, the Kachin from the mountains moved to the plains en masse. It was

<sup>57</sup> Interview with local Kachin people from Muse, Namhkam, Mong Mit, May 2023 research trip.

encouraged by the British as a reward for their help during the war, but it was not a desirable situation for the Shan and their Sao Fahs (Simms, 2006).

To appease the highland Kachin people, both Mong Mit’s Sao Fah and Sao Fah of Hsen Wi approved the designation of Kachin sub-state territories, despite the British not revealing their opinion.



Figure 5: The formation of a new village in the flatlands of Nam Tu Township, by order of the TNLA/Ta'ang forces after the coup. The village which is on Man San-Lashio was photographed on May 22, 2023.

In Kutkai, Hsenwi, Lashio, and Muse, four ethnic armed groups have overlapping territories. In Mong Mit, Man Tong, and Namkham, at least two to three ethnic groups are setting up administrations.<sup>58</sup>

Before Operation 1027, three armed groups, the MNDAA, the KIA, and the SSPP, had agreed on some principles regarding recruiting soldiers to their respective ethnic troops, and resolved tensions by negotiation with each other.<sup>59</sup> Post-1027 operation, these principles have started to break down.

Kachin, Kokang, and Ta'ang armed groups' affiliated political cooperation committees and consultative councils, as well as political wings, were restructured and released drafts of their constitutions, enabling them to manage their territories according to these legal frameworks (Sai Tun Aung Lwin, 2021).

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<sup>58</sup> Nowadays, in Northern Shan expanding the power sphere or territorial administration includes the issuance of parallel orders to government offices, schools, and public servants. The discussions on taxing and territories did not result in any agreements.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with a SSPP official and a KIO official, June 2023.



Figure 6: The Shan State Progress Party administration sign next to Kyukok, Pang Hseng-Muse Road and a Ta'ang Palaung Village sign on Namtu Lashio Road in May 2023

### 3.4 China's Role and Northern Shan State

China has been mediating and resolving conflicts in Shan State and along the Sino-Myanmar border for decades. It has mediated, hosted, and held discussions not only between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups but also between ethnic armed groups in Shan State.<sup>60</sup> From the inception of the 2021 coup until late 2022, China held a neutral role, in line with a wait-and-see policy. At the same time, they gradually recognized the military junta, increased their contacts at the ministerial level, and pressured some other countries to recognize the junta's legitimacy.<sup>61</sup>

The PRC still considers the NLD to play a role in shaping Myanmar's future political landscape. They dislike the idea of the Burmese military being in control for a long time<sup>62</sup>, but they don't want to see the collapse of the Myanmar army either.<sup>63</sup> However, they couldn't get through their proposed ideas to achieve a breakthrough out of the current turbulence and turmoil.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Yunnan government hosted a ceasefire agreement ceremony for RCSS and UWSA in 2009. It also hosted negotiations between TNLA and the RCSS.

<sup>61</sup> However, the process did not go well, and the islands' ASEAN countries even resisted.

<sup>62</sup> Online interview with Associate Professor Zhao Qin from Beijing who is studying Myanmar (2023 June).

<sup>63</sup> A senior analyst from Beijing, regarding security along the Yunnan-Myanmar border, who declined to be identified, made a remark about Beijing's approach: "So, I would argue that China's support is not for the junta but for a peaceful and stable neighboring government. "On the whole, Beijing pushed for cooperation with the junta after the coup while maintaining a certain distance from it. However, it appears that Beijing overestimated the military junta's ability to control Myanmar's domestic political situation.

<sup>64</sup> Significantly, China's mediation or proposed ideas to achieve a breakthrough in post-coup Myanmar affairs lack of democratic vision and federalism issues.



The PRC also dislikes that Myanmar's opposition more frequently interacts with the US. Therefore, they emphasize that border stability and security are the first priorities in Myanmar, as well as that they endeavor peaceful solutions to the issues.<sup>65</sup>

EAOs are tacitly obliged to protect the PRC's strategic projects, extend geopolitical influence, and prevent the spread of conflicts from within Myanmar into China (ISP Myanmar, 2023). China's authorities periodically tend to urge them not to fight either against the Myanmar army or inter-ethnic armed groups along the China-Myanmar border and border trade roads.<sup>66</sup>

An interesting question is how the ethnic groups will use China's approach as a tool to achieve their goals, while China is only attempting to resolve the Myanmar issue as a domestic matter.<sup>67</sup> The Chinese view Jinpo (Kachin) as one of the ethnic groups that may be difficult to deal with (Long Chenpeng, 2021). In Northern Shan, due to the inability of the Burmese military to deploy forces and attacks from ethnic armed groups, no man's lands have emerged, with at least four ethnic armed groups vying to set up administration in those territories.<sup>68</sup> Later on, the PRC has expressed more worries about the possibility of Myanmar, or Shan State, collapsing.

### **3.5 A Study from the Perspective of Conflict Resolution and Minority Rights**

#### **3.5.1 Conflict Resolution, and Inter-ethnic Conflicts**

“Conflict is an inevitable and frequent phenomenon in social relations. Because violence or conflict is only a consequence and part of an inevitable paradox, conflict cannot be ended, only transformed” (Lederach, 2003).

The approach to conflict in Myanmar is conflict management and conflict resolution (ENAC, Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center, 2023). It is the same pattern of compromising on economic deals and military pressure rather than solving the root cause of the civil war (ENAC, Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center, 2023).

Conflicts between the ethnic armed groups in Northern Shan have been negotiated and handled based on these two systems. For example, the agreement signed in 1976 by the Palaung State Liberation Organization PSLO and the KIO included six main points, mainly intended to resolve the current interest-based issues.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Liu Yun, a senior analyst of Tai he' Institute base in Beijing.

However, some incidents regarding China's approach in post-coup Myanmar, such as accepting U Kyaw Moe Tun as Myanmar's Ambassador to the United Nations, and tacitly accepting the armed offensive against the military and its allies in the Kokang region, show that the PRC is retaining some extent of neutral role in post-coup Myanmar affairs.

<sup>66</sup> Online Interviewed with Col. Sai Su, secretary (2) of SSPP/SSA on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Email interview with Xu Peng, working on a PhD thesis titled “Rebel Governance in Myanmar; Comparison Studies between Kokang and Wa” at SOAS University of London.

<sup>68</sup> In areas where their administrations overlap, they feel uncomfortable with each other and sometimes tensions arise, followed by brief skirmishes in a few incidents.

<sup>69</sup> In the agreement, point no. 3 maintained that the organizations are to help each other, coordinate military missions, if necessary, exchange information about the enemy, and also inform local

It rather resembles the notion of a ceasefire between the SSA and the KIO, PSLO in 1980 (Sai Tun Aung Lwin, 2022). At that time, the understanding and improved relation between the CPB and the KIA, and the ceasefire between the three ethnic armed groups, KIO, PSLA, and SSA, coincided with the fact that these three organizations were under the umbrella of the National Democratic Front, NDF.<sup>70</sup>

During those times, the Kachin and Palaung made demarcations in the territories of the Kachin sub-states and some areas of the current Palaung self-administered zones, as well as Nam Tu and Nam Kham Districts (Kachin Literature and Culture Association, 2014, p. 209).<sup>71</sup> These agreements did not cover deep issues such as freedom, identity, and peaceful coexistence, which may be the root cause of the conflict, even though the ceasefire was maintained for many years.

After the 2021 coup, KIA, TNLA, and the post-coup parallel National Unity Government established connections to those EAOs, and the Ta'ang and Kachin Committees in the NUG's Consultative Council approved laws together. SSPP/SSA viewed this as an attempt to establish territorial legitimacy by the EAOs in collaboration with the NUG.<sup>72</sup> At the height of the tensions, negotiations happened between the KIO and TNLA in Maijayan in May 2023. The agreements included pledges to recognize the previous and maintain the KIO-PSLO agreements from the 1970s, as well as to avoid conflict.<sup>73</sup> However, after operation 1027, the TNLA has become more assertive.

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commanders about troop movements in relevant territories. It also includes a clause saying that any issues arising between the two organizations shall be resolved through conflict resolution. These points are only based on the approaches of conflict management and conflict resolution (Mong Mit-Sinli Kachin sub-states history, KIO-PSLO agreement, 1976, p. 209).

At that time they faced offensives by the CPB and the government military, trying to find a balance to cease the conflicts between these two organizations and the SSA. The cease-fire agreement between these two organizations and the SSA in 1980 also included a mutual cease-fire and pledges to allow friendly troop movements, to exchange information among the troops, and to set up designated movement channels.

<sup>70</sup> In the present day, these three organizations are participating in the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), led by the United Wa State Party (UWSP), but this committee is not an alliance, nor does it have a specific framework for conflict resolution. It follows the same pattern of compromising on economic and military principles. The reason why the committee was formed is likely to have a commonality between the ethnic armed organizations to engage with the governments of Myanmar and China.

<sup>71</sup> KIO explained that such demarcation was not permanent but for coexisting during the period of military campaign, and that it is necessary to renegotiate when the political situation stabilizes.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with a spokesperson from Shan State Progress Party, June 2023.

<sup>73</sup> KIO – PSLF statement issued on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2023.



Some tension occurred between TNLA and MNDAA, two members of the Three Brotherhood Alliance.<sup>74</sup> In such a situation, the SAC regime is likely to have used its long-cherished divide-and-rule strategy among the various groups.<sup>75</sup>

The only successive election-winning political party in Shan State, the SNLD party, tends to facilitate talks among inter-ethnic groups.<sup>76</sup> Conflict transformation is the only way to resolve conflicts in a manner that improves relations between societies.<sup>77</sup>

### **3.5.2 Minorities within the Minority Aspect**

“The right of self-determination of minorities or the right of self-determination of minorities within minorities is a matter to be accepted, but the fact that the groups that seek the right to self-determination themselves have records of torturing, oppressing, and killing people of other races or religions, and other human rights violations is a matter of concern” (Eisenberg, 2004).

Indigenous people in countries today still enjoy limited self-governance and self-autonomy (Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev, 2004). Giving rights to certain groups of people can create stability, but sometimes the demands for giving these rights can provide unexpected challenges to the liberal values that are normally accepted by the public.<sup>78</sup> In a country characterized by deep divisions among factions, sects, ethnicities, religions, and political and structural violence, it can be much worse.<sup>79</sup> The inclusion of historical and cultural information for all groups, non-segregation, and the absence of marginalized communities in the curriculum are important

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<sup>74</sup> TNLA and MNDAA Kokang are an alliance that went hand-in-hand in the recent Operation 1027.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with a militia member from Kutkai, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2023. Before or after the coup, or throughout history after 1962, the Burmese military consistently used a divide and rule policy rather than a proper approach to resolve conflict between ethnic armed organizations in Northern Shan.

<sup>76</sup> SNLD, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy party used to hold discussions with Kachin youth and civil society organizations in Northern Shan to include the voices of all ethnic people in the state for the drafting of the state constitution. However, these activities seemed to have stopped after the coup. They also initiated events of the Ethnic Peace Conference in Shan State, which included ethnic armed groups, civil society groups, and political parties.

<sup>77</sup> The main objective of conflict transformation is to change a violent situation into a peaceful and just social and political environment, rather than hastily removing the visible superficial conflict situation. Thus, what conflict transformation aims to achieve are a) relationship changes, b) systemic change or changes of the deeper elements of the conflict, and (c) cultural and ideological change.

<sup>78</sup> Even within liberal states, the expansion of group rights, such as ethnic and cultural group rights, often leads to tension.

<sup>79</sup> The terms conflict and violence are related but do not mean the same thing. Violence is the use of force to intentionally cause injury, death, trauma or hindrance to the development of oneself, another person, a group of people or society. It can be divided into direct or physical violence, systemic violence and cultural violence. Minority rights claims often emerge as global reminders to re-examine the space afforded to them. It recalls issues like changes in border areas, or redrawing of national borders in cases like Czech and Slovakia, and violent bloodshed, like the case of the Balkans.

The important issue is to avoid ethnicides or genocides, no matter whether they are framed as collective rights or individual rights. Sometimes, even the lack of understanding between communities about why those rights are given can be a major problem. Education becomes important.

factors for the education system to consider to bridge gaps between communities who lack mutual understanding (Eisenberg, & Spinner-Halev, 2004).

The right to use a language is the right of each person. For instance, TNLA's action to ban the Shan language among the Ta'ang/Palaung community, raising a national flag in a multi-ethnic village, and the RCSS/SSA's action pressuring Ta'ang schools are not appropriate.<sup>80</sup> Ta'ang is the only ethnic group who has been using Shan scripts and literature for seven centuries. The history books of both the Ta'ang and Kachin sides also eagerly paint a historical picture digging up aggressions of the other's side in ethnic history.<sup>81</sup>

These kinds of issues are also found among other ethnic groups, where actions are taken to justify their interests in the area in question through historical propaganda, which can cause more controversy and tension. For example, the Wa claimed that the capture of Mong Tong Mong Sat was a rightful reclamation of former Wa territories, based on an arbitrary interpretation of an era from 1,000 years ago, a time when identity politics did not exist.<sup>82</sup>

The current issues of the Northern Kachin sub-states, Palaung's ambitions for statehood, and territorial competition between different ethnic armed groups are extremely complicated.

Usually, ethnic political motivations arise from the interests of elites. Another problem is that none of the major ethnic armed groups that are active in the old Kachin sub-states have homegrown leaders. All forms of setting up administrations based on a single ethnicity do not reflect a bottom-up federal system, including various local communities.

This research could not survey the opinions of people from different economic situations due to the security concerns of the time, but some ordinary Kachin and Ta'ang/Palaung people expressed the view that there is little meaning in achieving a state if there are no peace and harmony.<sup>83</sup> However, this view does not imply that the demands of the ethnic organizations do not reflect the wishes of their respective ethnic people.

The desire of the Kachin to revive a sub-state in the Kutkai area may come from fear and concern that the number of their ethnic population is already low.<sup>84</sup> Some local Kachin and KIO officials also admit this fact.<sup>85</sup> *"According to the 2014 census, there is indeed public concern over the low Kachin population,"* KIO official said.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The choice of language learning and use should be voluntary.

<sup>81</sup> Recent Kachin and Ta'ang Palaung history books, reviewed by both ethnic groups as including content that can damage the image of each other.

<sup>82</sup> It is similar to the relocation of Wa troops to Eastern and Southern Shan State. Ashley South pointed out that these areas were taken over by the Wa forces from the Shan armed forces with the support of the Burmese military. Successive governments encouraged Burmese families to migrate and settle in ethnic areas, causing more confusion (South, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Interview with four local Kachin and Ta'ang Palaung people from Lashio and Namtu, 2023 May research trip.

<sup>84</sup> Phone interview with Lazun David from Kutkai, 8 December 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Online interview with Ko Shak Kwal from Kutkai and a KIO official, 24 June 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with a KIO official, 24 June 2023.

The KIO is said to have originated in Northern Shan, but its power base has moved to Kachin State since the CPB era. However, the issues of human rights violations in Northern Shan, a KIO splinter group in Kutkai district converting into a militia in 2010, and the increasing number of ethnic armed forces in the area, made the Kachin people of Northern Shan wish for a return of the KIA to reestablish its presence and focus in the area.<sup>87</sup> Some argue Northern Shan is not part of the KIA's prior area, but the KIO still follows the policy of the former Kachin sub-states.<sup>88</sup>

There are two blocs in northern Shan among the Kachin regarding the sub-state issue: some Kachin people think it should be incorporated into the larger Kachin State, while most prefer to get a local-level autonomous region under Shan State. The KIO's position is clear, it considers the area to be part of Shan State.

In both old Kachin sub-states, Kachin populations are too low, and in Kodaung tracts, they have become a minority. Ever since Kodaung was formed, the population was smaller than that of the Kutkai sub-state. However, during the period of the Kodaung sub-state, the Kachin population ratio appeared to be larger than that of the Kutkai Kachin sub-state.<sup>89</sup> In Kutkai Township, the old Kutkai sub-state hub, the Kachin population is smaller than that of Ta'ang and Chinese.<sup>90</sup>

Some Ta'ang people also questioned the issue of the Kachin sub-states, pointing out that there is no village with a large Kachin population in the areas of the former sub-states.<sup>91</sup>

Old Kodaung sub-state administration hub Mantong has become a town in the Palaung autonomous region.<sup>92</sup> In both townships Muse and Kutkai, the Kachin population does not exceed 50%. This should not mean that non-majority people are not allowed to rule. Majority rule frequently descends into civil war, and oftentimes the need for self-determination, which

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Lazun David, Ko Shak Kwal from Kutkai, and a Kachin woman from Namtu.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Ko Shak Kwal from Kutkai and a schoolteacher from Kut Kai who lives in Maijyang. Among the policy goals of the Kachin Sub-state Council, point number (3) was to drive a united effort to strengthen the democratic system in Shan State, while point number (2) was to work on the fate of Shan State only with the consensus of all local communities within the state.

<sup>89</sup> Phone interview with U Phaung Lar from Manton, 12 May 2023.

<sup>90</sup> The population statistics of Kutkai Township today is:

Kachin: 45,798, 24% of the township population

Ta'ang: 47,757, 25% of the total township population

Mong Wong and Chinese: 55,252, 29% of the total township population

Kholong Lishaw – 10033, 5.3% of the township population

Shan - 12,600, 6.64% of the total population.

During the existence of the Kutkai Kachin sub-state (1953), the total population of the 46 village tracts was 98,130 people, 58 percent of whom were Kachin, 20 percent were Chinese, and the rest consisted of Shan and Ta'ang Palaung people.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with two Ta'ang Palaung people from Namtu and Namhsan, May – June 2023.

<sup>92</sup> According to the General Administration Department's Population and socio-economy report 2020, in the Muse Area, the Kachin population is smaller than the Chinese one.

arises out of insecurity and fear of persecution, is the reason why ethnic minority people arm themselves.

The Ta'ang/Palaung have awakened a sense of nationalism. Some say that they are aiming to reassert the rights of the Ta'ang people, as they were once part of the princely state called Tawng Peng, ruled by Palaung Sao Fah<sup>93</sup>. “*The proportion of the Palaung population in Shan State is also alarming.*” TNLA Secretary (2) Tar Parn La noted.<sup>94</sup>

However, some analysts point out TNLA has used aggressive manners driven by nationalism to achieve territorial expansion into different ethnic areas.<sup>95</sup> This does not mean all of their actions and policies reflect the view of ordinary Ta'ang people.

After the coup, relationships have become cold between the Ta'ang Palaung troops and the KIO, or between the SSPP/SSA and the TNLA. The relationship between TNLA and KIO has especially deteriorated and even the relationship between the Ta'ang/Palaung and Kachin communities has become increasingly strained.

Responses during the research trip (From May 2023 to June) revealed that most of the local Shan people are more worried about the TNLA than the emergence of the Kachin sub-states in Northern Shan.<sup>96</sup>

Placing new signs in Ta'ang Palaung villages along Namtu-Lashio road, establishing new villages by bringing migrants from other places, and installing Ta'ang signs on the Kutkai-Lashio Road have also raised the concern of the Kachin residents.<sup>97</sup> It is causing more confusion.

### **Part (D): Conclusions**

When we compare the conundrum of the Shan State disintegration scenario with the Eastern European countries around the 1990s, one similarity is that in the post-communist era, Eastern European countries experienced a different form of liberalization during the period before their collapse, like Myanmar, which experienced a period of liberalization from 2010 to 2020 (Cohen & Dragovi, 2007).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with Ta'ang issues analyst So Darn, 29 May 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Tar Parn La, Secretary (2) of TNLA/PSLF, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Sai Wan Sai, an analyst of Shan State affairs, 2024 June.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Shan people from Namhkam, Mong Mit, Kutkai, Namtu and Mansan, Mya 2023 research trip.

<sup>97</sup> A local Kachin woman from Namtu recounted that the TNLA's actions to expand administration townships, land confiscations to build new villages, and posting signs in Ta'ang/Palaung language are worrisome.

<sup>98</sup> The case where nationalists often fail to follow through and fall into the trap of political sovereignty they clamor for is when they are faced with extraordinary regional or global crises, the effects of which are suddenly magnified. These outside events are more forceful than domestic pressure, and because of that, they tend to be short-lived.

It is unlikely that the region is in a state where it could break away from Shan State or from Myanmar's borders without regional or outside factors. However, the situation is on the brink of conflict and bloodshed due to rising tensions at the very least. In the future, the region is very likely to be a failed state.

The current demands for a Kachin sub-state or a Palaung State are not totally unjustified, nor is it the fault of the people demanding those things. It is just the negative product of a system that has been implemented wrongly for many years.

To answer the research questions, exploring the motivations for establishing the Kachin sub-states, the conclusion is that it was an attempt to restore a historical right, fueled by the fear of the Kachin people, who, being a small population, face numerous insecurities, including socio-economic issues, and violation of human rights.

It is also not appropriate to conclude that the desire of other ethnic groups or armed organizations to set up an administrative area in that region based on their identity is merely out of self-interest. For example, the Mong Hawn region on the west side of the Salween had regularly changed hands between the Kokang and the Kachin sub-state. The west of the Konglon area, currently under MNDAA Kokang control, is a part of the Kachin sub-state (Ai Sai, 2024). But it is undeniable that some movements of armed groups emphasize narrow interests. It also helps explain why building a countrywide anti-regime alliance has proven so difficult in the post-2021 coup context (International Crisis Group, 2023).

In terms of the political structure and operation, the plan to forcibly establish administrative areas based on one single ethnic identity in places like Kutkai, Namtu, Muse, and Mong Mit (or) areas where three or four different ethnic groups live, instead of introducing systems that will bring harmony to various people, will only lead to tensions.<sup>99</sup>

The area, which has been lawless since the parliamentary era, has never returned to its original state of stability in the past 60 years. It must be noted that it is an area of great confusion, in line with the research topic.

The region has also been shaped by changes in the surrounding neighboring countries and Myanmar's major incidents.<sup>100</sup> The tension between the different ethnic groups in Northern Shan is not at the level of Balkanization, where one ethnic group attacks the other on sight, but different ethnic groups continue to be locked in an impasse. Since 1962, it has been observed

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<sup>99</sup> In a situation of unstable local ground conditions and administrative structures, compounded by a lack of a central or alternative power center, and no single organization capable of clearly dominating and governing the region, the people are bearing the burden put on them by different armed groups.

<sup>100</sup> At the same time, even when the efforts to establish a federal system were successful, in a federal system of coexistence, the concept of separation and the desire to establish ethnic-based self-administered areas over every area where their ethnic people live, will lead to clashes of political interests in one place or another, and the region will remain a failed state, with the country in a similar position.

that these paradoxes, ambivalences, and deadlocks subside at intervals, only to be revived by tension triggered by any change, weakened central power, or events impacting the region.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Mai Ohn Khaing, former chairman of PSLO Palaung State Liberation Organization and former three-terms Member of Parliament of Amyotha Hluttaw, 25 June 2023.



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## **Economic Challenges and Social Networks: Migration of Myanmar Weavers to Mizoram, India**

**San Win Aung**<sup>102</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This study examines why Myanmar weavers move to Aizawl, Mizoram, India, and the challenges they face. Using interviews and observations, the research explores critical factors such as wage differences, access to information, and moving costs. The findings show that higher wages in Mizoram are a significant reason for migration, as weavers can earn three to four times more than in Myanmar. Social networks and better communication tools help them obtain reliable information about job opportunities. However, the cost of moving can be a significant obstacle, though some weavers receive support from employers or their social networks. Despite earning more, migrant weavers face financial instability and delays in receiving policy support. They also struggle with language barriers and cultural differences in Mizoram. The study recommends that the Mizoram government create fair wage policies and better support systems to help migrant weavers integrate into the community. This research provides valuable insights for those working to support migrant communities in India, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address financial instability, improve access to reliable information, and reduce the financial burden of migration. By understanding the economic and social factors influencing the migration of Myanmar weavers, policymakers and practitioners can develop more effective strategies to support these migrant communities and enhance their overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Migration, Weaving Industry, Myanmar, Mizoram, Labor Market Dynamics

### **1. Introduction**

Myanmar is currently facing an unprecedented crisis, with political instability, economic hardship, and growing violence and insecurity around the country. Since the military takeover in February 2021, living conditions have dramatically worsened, with almost half the population projected to fall into poverty (UNOCHA, 2021). The crisis was exacerbated by a severe third wave of COVID-19 in 2021, which strained the country’s healthcare system and economy. Prices for key household commodities have risen significantly, making some food items unaffordable (UN News, 2021).

Violence and insecurity have increased forced displacement within and into neighboring countries (Global Report, 2022). The conflict in Myanmar is not simply a civil war but also

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involves the military's use of force against civilians. This includes the arbitrary confiscation of private assets, the bombing and destruction of hospitals, schools, and religious buildings, the dropping of firebombs on community homes, and the brutal killing of civilians, including children and the elderly. Additionally, women are daily subjected to sexual assault and murder. The crisis in Myanmar continues to be ignored by the United Nations and the international community, resulting in ineffective delivery of humanitarian aid.

According to Aung Tun, since the 2021 coup, migration (both internal and external) has become a critical determinant in shaping the country's future. The country is at a “Myanmar migration moment” (Aung Tun, 2022). The primary reason for the increase in migration is likely security concerns, with many fleeing to avoid atrocities committed by the State Administration Council (SAC) regime. Political concerns are also important since 2021, with many migrants leaving for other countries or liberated areas to better pursue their determination to overthrow the junta. Many people have also been forced into hiding, not technically migrants, but no longer able to participate publicly in their home communities since the coup for fear of arrest, torture, and death.

While all of these concerns are important in post-coup Myanmar, in a global context, economic factors are now identified as the primary drivers of migration. Economic factors have long been particularly important for many migration pathways in Myanmar, and these routes have only increased in importance since the 2021 coup. One such pathway is the immigration of weavers from Upper Myanmar into Aizawl city of Mizoram State, India, where there is a thriving handloom weaving industry. Migration plays an important role in the increase of the total population and socio-economic condition in Mizoram State.

Aizawl is a Notified Town city in the district of Aizawl, Mizoram. Aizawl city is divided into 76 wards for which elections are held every 5 years. The Aizawl Notified Town has a population of 293,416, of which 144,913 are males and 148,503 are females, as per the report released by Census India 2011. The distance between the Sagaing Region of Upper Myanmar and Aizawl is approximately 483.16 miles (775.5 kilometers) by road. Myanmar weavers seeking economic opportunities often travel from the Sagaing Region to Aizawl, where they can engage mainly in weaving and weaving-related livelihood activities (Assistant, 2024).

This research aims to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of migration and labor market outcomes in Mizoram State by asking: Why do these Myanmar weavers migrate to Mizoram State? What role does the wage differential play in their decisions? How important is access to information about the labor market in Mizoram State? And how useful are their existing social networks? It poses these questions to investigate the impact of wage differences, access to information, and moving costs on the economic and social well-being of migrant Myanmar weavers in India. Qualitative methods were used to answer them, including participant observation, informal conversations, and key informant interviews.

The research continues by giving an overview of the migration pathway between Mizoram State and the Sagaing Region, and the general situation for weavers in both locations. It then explores some frameworks for understanding migration and the three economic factors

identified in this research: differentials, moving costs, and access to information. The study also discusses its methodology before introducing its findings and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another for various reasons such as work, family, conflict, persecution, or environmental factors. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as anyone moving across an international border or within a state away from their habitual residence. People migrate to improve their income, access better health and education, and enhance their overall quality of life. Migration benefits both migrants and their families, and the places they leave and move to. However, not everyone can migrate freely due to border restrictions and unwelcoming attitudes in destination countries, especially for unskilled workers (UNDP, 2009). Understanding migration flows and their impact on development requires a multi-faceted approach, as several theories and frameworks have been proposed to analyze these dynamics. These frameworks provide insights into the motivations behind migration and the factors influencing migrants' decisions and experiences.

The Push-Pull Plus Framework, proposed by Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long (2018), offers a comprehensive model for understanding migration by categorizing drivers into four types: predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating. Predisposing drivers are underlying factors that create a general propensity to migrate, such as economic conditions or environmental degradation. Proximate drivers are more immediate factors directly influencing the decision to migrate, such as job opportunities or conflict. Precipitating drivers are specific events that trigger migration, like natural disasters or sudden political upheavals. Mediating drivers are factors that influence how migration occurs, including policies, social networks, and access to resources. This framework emphasizes that proximate and mediating drivers offer more potential for policy intervention, suggesting that migration policies should be understood within the broader political economy. This nuanced categorization helps policymakers identify which factors can be addressed to manage migration more effectively.

Hein de Haas (2021) introduces the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework, which views migration as a function of individuals' aspirations and capabilities within perceived geographical opportunity structures. This framework draws on Isaiah Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty to explain how structural changes shape people's desires and abilities to migrate. Positive liberty refers to the ability to act on one's free will, while negative liberty refers to the absence of constraints. De Haas argues that macro-structural factors like economic development, social change, and policy environments influence people's aspirations and capabilities. For example, economic growth in a region might increase people's aspirations to migrate for better opportunities, while restrictive immigration policies might limit their capabilities to do so. This framework helps to understand the interplay between individual motivations and structural constraints, offering a holistic view of migration dynamics.

Karen Jacobsen's (2014) Displaced Livelihoods Theory focuses on the livelihood strategies of refugees and forced migrants who live outside camps. Jacobsen highlights the differences between the livelihoods of forcibly displaced individuals and other migrants, emphasizing that

refugees often face unique challenges such as legal restrictions and social exclusion. She argues that traditional refugee programs, which often focus on providing immediate relief, need to be reconceptualized to support both refugees and their host communities in the long term. This includes creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, integrating refugees into local economies, and addressing legal and social barriers. By focusing on livelihood opportunities, Jacobsen’s theory provides a practical framework for improving the well-being of forced migrants and promoting social cohesion in host communities.

The role of social networks in migration is another crucial area of study, with researchers like Boyd (1989) and Massey et al. (1993) emphasizing the importance of kinship and friendship ties in facilitating and encouraging migration. Social networks provide essential information about destination areas’ job opportunities, living conditions, and social support. They help migrants make informed decisions, reduce the uncertainties and risks associated with migration, and offer emotional and material support during the migration process. For instance, migrants often rely on friends and relatives who have migrated for information and assistance, which can significantly ease their transition and integration into new environments. These networks also play a vital role in the continuous migration flow, as established migrants assist new migrants, perpetuating migration chains.

Economic factors are now the primary drivers of migration, with wage differences between regions or countries acting as significant motivators for individuals seeking to improve their financial situation. For example, Myanmar weavers migrate to Mizoram because they can earn three to four times more than they would in Myanmar. This substantial wage gap is a significant factor attracting them to migrate for work. Higher earnings in Mizoram allow these weavers to support their families and achieve a better standard of living, making economic migration a rational choice.

Each of these frameworks offers valuable insights into different aspects of migration. The Push-Pull Plus Framework comprehensively categorizes migration drivers, highlighting areas for policy intervention. The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework emphasizes the interplay between individual desires and structural constraints, offering a holistic view of migration motivations. Jacobsen’s Displaced Livelihoods Theory focuses on the challenges forced migrants face and the need for sustainable livelihood strategies. The role of social networks underscores the importance of interpersonal ties in facilitating migration and supporting migrants.

Despite the extensive research on migration, there is limited understanding of the specific challenges faced by Myanmar migrant weavers in Mizoram. For example, while these frameworks address broad migration dynamics, they often do not consider the unique socio-economic and cultural factors affecting specific groups like Myanmar weavers in Mizoram. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the economic and social factors influencing the migration of Myanmar weavers, providing a detailed analysis of their experiences and highlighting their unique struggles. By focusing on this specific group, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of migration patterns and labor market dynamics, offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in supporting migrant communities.

Interestingly, recent studies underscore the importance of economic factors in driving migration. For instance, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) discuss various migration drivers, including economic opportunities and wage differentials. Human Rights Watch (2022) highlights the ongoing violence and persecution in Myanmar, further intensifying migration pressures. These recent studies and data support the analysis and underscore the relevance of this research in the current context. By integrating these findings, the study not only fills existing gaps in the literature but also provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors driving the migration of Myanmar weavers to Mizoram.

### **3. Research Objectives**

1. To understand the economic motivations behind the migration of Myanmar weavers to Mizoram,
2. To investigate the role of social networks and information access in facilitating migration,
3. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by migrant weavers in Mizoram.

### **4. Research Methods**

From July to October 2022, I conducted a comprehensive study among the community of migrant Myanmar weavers in Zungtui, Aizawl. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide in-depth insights into the migration experience. This method was chosen to ensure that the sample included individuals with various experiences and backgrounds, including variations in age, gender, marital status, and years since migration. The sample size of 17 weavers was determined based on the principle of saturation, which suggests that data collection can cease when no new information or themes are observed in the data. This size is sufficient to capture diverse perspectives while allowing for detailed and manageable data analysis.

#### **4.1. Participant Observation and Documentation of Informal Conversations**

Participant observation was conducted by living among the weavers, visiting their workhouses, and sharing meals with them. This immersive approach allowed for a deep understanding of their daily lives, work environments, and social interactions. Detailed field notes were taken to document observations, focusing on key aspects such as working conditions, living arrangements, and community dynamics. Informal conversations were a crucial part of this method. These conversations were documented through written notes taken immediately after each interaction, ensuring the context and content were accurately captured. This approach provided rich qualitative data that complemented the formal interviews, offering a holistic view of the weavers' experiences.

#### **4.2. In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method for several reasons. First, they allow for a detailed exploration of individual experiences and perspectives, essential for understanding the complex factors influencing migration. Second, in-depth interviews provide the flexibility to probe deeper into specific issues, uncovering nuances that might be



missed with more structured methods. Throughout June and July 2023, I conducted these interviews with the weavers to gather comprehensive data on their motivations for migrating, challenges, and overall experiences. The interviews were semi-structured, combining predetermined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging topics. This approach ensured that the interviews were both focused and adaptable, capturing a wide range of insights.

### **4.3. Key Informant Interviews**

Key informant interviews were conducted with individuals with well-informed perspectives on the weaver community, such as local leaders, employers, and social workers. These interviews provided contextual information and helped triangulate the data obtained from the weavers, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

### **4.4. Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis was conducted in several stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is well-suited to qualitative research and allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of complex phenomena. Qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization and retrieval of data, ensuring a systematic and rigorous analysis process. By employing a combination of participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews, this study provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the economic and social factors influencing the migration of Myanmar weavers to Mizoram. The chosen methods and sample size were carefully considered to ensure the collection of rich and relevant data, contributing to the overall robustness and credibility of the research findings.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. Wage Differences**

The primary reason for migrant Myanmar weavers coming to Mizoram for work is the significant wage difference, as indicated by most respondents. While other factors such as economic difficulties, experiences of humiliation and discrimination, and involvement in the 1988 political process also play roles, they are generally considered secondary to the wage gap. U Saw Win, a 54-year-old from Amarapura Township who arrived in Aizawl in November 1988, shared these insights.

Many Myanmar weavers who migrated to Mizoram in the 1980s are experts in their craft and work professionally. They have separate accommodations and do not need to live in the weaving buildings, as their workshops and homes are distinct. Their wages are approximately three to four times higher than local wages. For instance, a family that works diligently in weaving for four or five years in Aizawl can save enough to buy their own houses back home and become weaving business owners. Single individuals can earn enough in two days to sustain themselves for a week, and some claim that a week's work can cover their expenses for an entire month.

Burmese migrants performing basic weaving rather than actual weaving can earn up to twice the local wages. Mid-level experts earn up to three times more, while highly skilled experts earn four times or more than local wages. This wage difference significantly attracts Myanmar weavers to migrate to Mizoram for work.

Daw Cherry, a 57-year-old from Monywa Township who migrated to Mizoram in 1999, shared her experience:

*I came here to do weaving due to the economic crisis in my home country. Back there, a daily wage of 2,000-3,000 kyats was insufficient to cover a day's food. Here, I earn about 400-500 rupees a day, which is equivalent to more than 10,000 kyats and is sufficient. As I've grown older, my needs have changed. In the ten years since I arrived, my expenses have increased significantly. Now, I earn enough to sustain myself for a week and am not in debt.*

Wages for migrant Myanmar weavers in Mizoram can range from a minimum of twice the local wages to a maximum of four or five times. Some local families who cannot afford to own a house migrate as a family to work in Mizoram. By working hard for five to ten years, four or five family members can gradually save enough money to buy a house and farm in their area. After accumulating enough investment capital, many have achieved entrepreneurial success in their home country. Individual migrants often have comfortable lives and good incomes, but their savings are often weak. Wages are paid weekly on weekends, but many migrants spend their earnings on weekends and end up in debt as time goes by. As they age and their labor force decreases, some struggle to balance their income and expenditure, and may face financial difficulties.

U Myint Zaw, a 53-year-old from Shwebo Township who migrated to Mizoram in 2006 to join his relatives, has lived in Mizoram for 17 years. He struggles financially as an unmarried single man:

*I have been weaving since I was 36 years old and am skilled in preparing looms and other weaving-related tasks. However, as a single worker, I spend everything I earn. I worked for the same employer for many years and was treated like family. However, due to an issue last month, I had to move to another house. The fabric design there is difficult, and the wages are low, so I want to move again. My wages are twice or three times the domestic wages, but I spent everything without saving, so now, I am not very comfortable.*

U Zaw Tun, chairman of the Myanmar Social Welfare Association in Aizawl, noted that the 1980s and 1990s were a good time for migrant Myanmar weavers:

*At that time, people from Shwebo Township came to Mizoram as professional weavers. Employers provided them with private accommodations and ensured they lived comfortably. Workshops were located separately from their living quarters. The number of weavers was small, so employers took care to provide for their needs. However, over the 1990s, the number of weavers increased exponentially, and they could no longer have their accommodations. They had to live and work together in the workshops. In the 1980s and 1990s, the exchange rate was around 1 rupee to 2 Myanmar kyats, so wages were very*

*good, and the weavers could support their parents, family members, and relatives in Myanmar.*

Of around 1400 migrant Myanmar weavers currently working in various areas of Aizawl, 17 weavers participated in a study conducted between June 10, 2023, and June 26, 2023. The wage difference, the year they arrived, their age, gender, and marital status are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Wage differences of participants and their demographic data

No	Participant	Wage Difference	Arrived Year	Age	Male/Female	Marital Status
1	A	4 Times	1986	52	Male	Single
2	B	3 Times	1987	55	Female	Married
3	C	4 Times	1988	54	Male	Single
4	D	4 Times	1990	51	Male	Married
5	E	2 Times	1990	67	Male	Married
6	F	2 Times	1992	42	Male	Married
7	G	3 Times	1999	57	Female	Married
8	H	4 Times	2000	45	Male	Married
9	I	2 Times	2002	60	Male	Married
10	J	3 Times	2006	53	Male	Single
11	K	4 Times	2007	52	Male	Married
12	L	3 Times	2007	40	Male	Married
13	M	3 Times	2010	30	Male	Married
14	N	4 Times	2017	46	Male	Married
15	O	4 Times	2019	39	Male	Married
16	P	3 Times	2022	40	Female	Married
17	Q	2 Times	2022	52	Male	Married

Many Myanmar migrants who have settled in Aizawl work as weavers, earning an average weekly wage of Rs 2,500 to 3,500. Some are employed as in-charge in weaving mills, where they act as liaisons between the weavers and the employer, communicating the desired fabric design by the employer and ensuring that the employer pays the weavers their weekly wages. Fluency in the local Mizo language is essential for this role. Those in charge are also responsible for operating the rotor for the loom and are compensated accordingly, typically earning a monthly salary of Rs 3,000 to 5,000. Some Myanmar migrants who have not mastered the art of weaving instead engage in spinning, earning a weekly wage of Rs 2,000 to 3,000. Some work as fabric designers, earning a weekly wage of approximately Rs 10,000. Based on their weaving skills, individuals can earn a weekly income ranging from a minimum of 2,000 rupees to a maximum of 10,000 rupees.

## 5.2. Access to Information

During the 1980s and 1990s, information about weaving conditions in Mizoram was primarily communicated through face-to-face interactions and written correspondence. Messages could also be received from traders in Chin State who had connections with Mizoram State. Additionally, information could be obtained from the majority of Mizo people who settled in the town of Kalembo in Tahan Ward of Sagaing Region.

U Tin Tun, a 67-year-old man from Shwebo Township who has been a migrant since 1990, said:

*At that time, information about the employment situation was available only through those who traded in Kalembo and Aizawl. It was possible to travel by car from Shwebo to Monywa and Monywa to Kalewa by ship, Kalewa to Kalembo and then to Tedim by car. From Tedim to the Indo-Myanmar border, travel was only possible on foot. From the border Tiau to the Champhai of Mizoram state, travel was only possible on foot. However, Aizawl was accessible by car from Champhai. And depending mainly on the weather conditions, road conditions, and the traveling companions, the journey from Shwebo to Aizawl could take about a week and more.*

After 1988, many residents of Shwebo Township relocated to Aizawl to pursue careers in weaving. During periods of high demand for skilled weavers, Mizo businessmen sent representatives to Kalembo to recruit weavers, offering to cover all travel and food expenses. Some migrants to Aizawl have family, relatives, or friends already living there, while others have made the move through contacts or acquaintances. However, some have ventured to Aizawl without any prior connections, seeking employment in the weaving mills upon arrival.

By the 2000s, improvements in road transportation had facilitated mutual relations between Mizoram, Chin State and Sagaing Region. With good telephone communication at Rikhawdar on the Myanmar border, timely information could be obtained from the Mizoram side, including the demand for weaving workers and business conditions. This information could be easily accessed by making inquiries at the border. Additionally, with regular motorcar contacts available every week, it became easier to obtain information. Crossing the border creek, Tiau from Rikhawdar leads to the village of Zokhawthar on the Indian side, with a motorcar service to Aizawl. As a result, communications have become more convenient and information can be obtained faster than before.

Since 2010, advancements in communication technology have made it easier for people to connect through social networks. This has greatly benefited the weaving industry in Aizawl, as Mizo employers can easily find out about the demand for workers and expand their businesses by importing looms, rotors, and cotton spinning machines from Myanmar. Moreover, the convenience of money transfers has facilitated the hiring of Myanmar weavers, who now travel more frequently due to the development of information technology.

Ma Maw Nyein Htwe, a 40-year-old immigrant who arrived in Manipur from Myanmar with her family in 2022, shared her experience. She said:

*We moved from Manipur to Aizawl through the help of a former employer in Aizawl who reached out to us over the phone. However, due to the crisis in Manipur in May 2023, we no longer felt comfortable living and working there as Myanmar migrant weavers. So, we decided to move again to Aizawl. Although our salary is not as high as in Manipur, we feel more confident working here because there are no arrests.*

### 5.3. Moving Costs

Myanmar migrant weavers come to Aizawl in Mizoram to seek employment opportunities. Some are recruited and brought in by their employers who cover their expenses, while others come at their own expense after first establishing a contact in the area.

U Min Thu, a 42-year-old migrant weaver from Shwebo Township in Sagaing Division, shared his thoughts on the route and cost of travel to Aizawl:

*If you are traveling from Monywa or Shwebo in Sagaing Region, or Amarapura in Mandalay Region, you can first reach Kalembo. From there, you can pass through Chin State and arrive at Rikhawdar, a town on the Indian border. From Rikhawdar, you can cross the Tiau border creek and reach Zokhawthar village on the Indian side. The journey from Zokhawthar to Aizawl takes about 10 hours by car. If you are coming from Shwebo Township in Sagaing Region, the cost of reaching Aizawl is approximately 250,000 Myanmar Kyats. However, if your employer covers your travel expenses, you will not have to bear any costs.*

Although Myanmar weavers are not officially coming to India to work, they do not need to provide any evidence of their employment. If they are coming to work in the weaving industry in Aizawl, they can complete the necessary formalities at the border gate. The cost mentioned above refers only to the travel expenses.

Table 2: Comparison of moving costs to common destination countries for prospective economic migrants from Myanmar

No	Country	Estimated Moving Cost in MMK	Remark
1	Korea	6,500,000.00 - 7,500,000.00	Legally
2	Singapore	6,500,000.00 - 7,000,000.00	Legally
3	Malaysia	6,000,000.00 - 7,000,000.00	Legally
4	Thailand	2,500,000.00 - 3,000,000.00	Legally
5	India	200,000.00 - 250,000.00	Illegally

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Weavers in Sagaing Region

Sagaing Region, located in upper Myanmar and bordering India, is the second-largest region in Myanmar, covering 93,702.48 square kilometers. It is divided into nine districts and 45 townships, including the Naga Self-administered Zone near the Indian border. The capital, Sagaing City, is adjacent to Mandalay. With a population of approximately 5,325,347 and a density of 56.8 people per square kilometer, only 17 percent live in urban areas (2014 census data). The cultural and economic landscape of Sagaing is rich and deeply intertwined with Theravada Buddhism. The region has a long history and has significantly shaped Myanmar's cultural heritage.

Sagaing's economy is diverse, with significant involvement in agriculture, horticulture, and industry. The region is known for its fertile soil and favorable climate, supporting various crops. Besides agriculture, Sagaing has a growing industry sector producing goods for domestic

and export markets. The traditional handicraft industry, especially weaving, is prominent in townships like Shwebo, Monywa, Kalay, and Sagaing. The region is famous for high-quality textiles, including blankets, shawls, clothing, and cotton bags.

The weavers in Sagaing Region, particularly in Shwebo Township, are renowned for producing the traditional Seikkun fabric, a craft passed down through generations which is also famous nationwide for its exceptional quality. Weaving is the primary source of income for many families in this area, with both handlooms and mechanized looms being used. However, the industry has faced significant challenges due to recent conflicts. Many weavers have lost their homes and looms to arson attacks by junta troops, severely impacting their livelihoods. Despite these hardships, the community remains resilient, hoping for support to rebuild their lives and continue their craft.

In Monywa Township, traditional weaving has been a significant part of the local economy, particularly in villages like Kyouksitpone Myauk and Kan Pyar Gyi. However, the industry has faced a decline due to various challenges. Many weavers have had to seek alternative employment as the demand for traditional woven products has decreased. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, causing disruptions in the supply of raw materials and limiting market opportunities. In spite of these setbacks, some weaving workshops have resumed operations, striving to preserve this cultural heritage while adapting to new realities.

## **6.2. Weaving Industry in Mizoram State**

Mizoram State, with a predominantly Mizo population that speaks Tibeto-Burman languages, has over 1 million people, mainly in rural areas. The capital city, Aizawl, is expanding. Most of Mizoram borders Chin State in Myanmar.

Mizoram's economy is supported by agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and industry. The state has a traditional cottage industry of handloom weaving and a growing power loom textile industry, producing diverse garments.

The weaving industry in Mizoram State is a vital part of the region's cultural and economic fabric. Weaving is a revered art form among the Mizo people, integral to their culture and a significant employment source, contributing to poverty reduction and the state's economy. Mizo women learn to weave early, producing *puans* on traditional looms for the cottage industry. Similar to *longyis*, these garments are known for their intricate designs and worn during traditional ceremonies. The weaving clusters in Serchhip and Aizawl districts are renowned for their high-quality textiles within and outside Mizoram. The Thenzawl handloom cluster has empowered underprivileged women, with 98 percent of micro handloom enterprises owned by women. However, the Zuangtui handloom cluster faces financial constraints, health problems, and inadequate government support. The state government supports the weaving industry through skill development programs, financial assistance, and marketing support, aiming to improve weavers' skills, access to capital, and market their products effectively.

In recent years, there has been a push towards modernizing the industry while maintaining its traditional roots. This includes the introduction of new designs and patterns that appeal to

contemporary tastes, as well as the use of natural dyes and eco-friendly materials. Additionally, the state has seen an increase in the participation of younger generations in weaving, which helps in keeping the craft alive and relevant.

### 6.3. Contextual Background: The Migration Pathway

The India-Myanmar border spans 1,643 km, separating Indian states Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram from Kachin and Chin states, and Sagaing Region in Myanmar. People have moved across these regions for centuries. However, ethnic conflict and minority suppression in Myanmar have intensified migration to northeast India. Shared cultural ties facilitate cross-border movement between groups in this area (Sangpuii, 2016). Significant migration from Myanmar to northeast India occurred after the 1962 military coup. Another wave followed the 1988 military coup, which saw mass violence and torture, pushing many to flee to Mizoram and other neighboring countries. After the February 2021 military coup, pro-democracy protests were violently suppressed, leading many from Chin State to seek refuge in Mizoram. Over 40,000 refugees, mostly from the Chin ethnic group, have found shelter in Mizoram since the coup (K. Vanlalvena, MNF, Rajya Sabha member). Few refugees are Bamar. Sagaing Region was mostly spared routine military violence, until the 2021 coup. It has since become a frontline in the battle against the junta, suffering thousands of deaths, air strikes, and mass arson. This destruction has forced many from Sagaing Region to seek refuge in neighboring cities and countries. Many skilled weavers from Sagaing Region have relocated to Mizoram, continuing their profession and blending economic migration with seeking refuge.

This case study contributes to the existing migration literature by thoroughly examining the specific socio-economic dynamics of Myanmar weavers migrating to Mizoram. The findings align with several established migration frameworks yet extend our understanding by highlighting the nuanced experiences of this particular group.

Firstly, The Push-Pull Plus Framework (Van Hear, Bakewell, & Long, 2018) categorizes migration drivers into predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating factors. This study identifies wage differences as a key proximate driver for Myanmar weavers, supported by the data showing significantly higher wages in Mizoram. The role of social networks, acting as mediating drivers, also aligns with this framework, providing crucial information and support to migrants. Secondly, Hein de Haas's Aspirations-Capabilities Framework (2021) views migration through individuals' aspirations and capabilities within geographical opportunity structures. The study's findings that economic opportunities in Mizoram enhance weavers' aspirations to migrate fit well with this framework. The constraints imposed by limited financial resources and the need for social connections highlight the structural barriers influencing their migration capabilities.

Thirdly, Karen Jacobsen's Displaced Livelihoods Theory (2014) emphasizes the livelihood strategies of refugees and forced migrants. The study shows that despite being skilled weavers, migrants face unique challenges, such as financial instability and the need for better integration support. This aligns with Jacobsen's argument that traditional refugee programs must evolve to support sustainable livelihoods and integration into local economies. Fourthly, Research by Boyd (1989) and Massey et al. (1993) underscores the importance of kinship and friendship



ties in migration. This study confirms that social networks are critical for Myanmar weavers, providing essential information, emotional support, and financial assistance. These networks help migrants navigate the complexities of moving to a new place and integrating into the community, thus perpetuating migration chains. Finally, economic factors, particularly wage differentials, are primary drivers of migration, as evidenced by the significantly higher earnings in Mizoram. This aligns with broader migration literature, which identifies economic opportunities as crucial motivators for migration.

## **6.4. Discussion of Key Factors**

### **6.4.1. Wage Differentials**

Differences in wages between regions or countries, known as wage differentials, can significantly influence people's decisions to migrate for economic reasons. Higher wages in one location attract workers from lower-wage areas seeking to improve their financial situation. This is particularly true for low-wage workers who can substantially increase their living standards by moving to higher-wage areas.

For instance, if urban areas offer higher wages than rural areas, workers may migrate from rural to urban regions. Similarly, workers may migrate internationally if one country offers higher wages for specific jobs. Wage differentials arise from various factors, such as variations in the cost of living, job market conditions, and the balance between labor supply and demand. Governments and organizations may address wage differentials through policies like minimum wage laws, collective bargaining agreements, and targeted economic development programs. Migrant workers contribute to the economic development of their destination by filling labor shortages, increasing productivity, and stimulating economic growth. However, economic migration can also lead to increased competition for jobs and housing, and the loss of skilled workers in the origin locations.

### **6.4.2. Moving Costs**

Moving costs and relocating expenses significantly influence individuals' decisions to migrate for economic reasons. These costs include transportation, housing, and obtaining necessary documents or permits. For migration to be feasible, the financial benefits of moving must outweigh these costs. For some workers, the potential financial benefits of migrating justify the costs. Higher wages, better job opportunities, or improved working conditions in the destination can make migration worthwhile. For others, high moving costs may prevent migration even if it would be beneficial. Financial assistance or help with obtaining necessary documents can reduce moving costs and enable economic migration. Indirect costs, such as feelings of loneliness, prejudice, or challenges in obtaining resources in the new location, also impact migration decisions. Weighing the potential financial benefits against the direct and indirect costs helps individuals make informed migration decisions.

### **6.4.3. Access to Information**

Access to information is crucial in migration decisions. Accurate information about opportunities, living conditions, and social networks in other locations helps individuals make informed choices about migration. Information can come from personal connections, media

outlets, and governmental and non-governmental organizations. Digital technology and social media have made accessing information about other places more accessible. This allows individuals to learn from the experiences of others who have migrated and research living conditions, job opportunities, and social services in potential destinations.

Access to accurate and up-to-date information is essential for those considering migration. It provides insights into the benefits and challenges of migrating, helping individuals make informed decisions. Online resources can offer information about legal requirements for migration and comparisons with the cost of living.

#### **6.4.4. Existence of Social Networks**

Social networks significantly influence migration decisions by providing valuable information and support to migrants. These networks help individuals decide where to move and what to expect upon arrival. Social networks offer material and emotional assistance, such as financial aid, housing, and the comfort of having friends and family nearby. As migrants settle, their social networks expand, offering new connections and opportunities that help them integrate into their new communities. Supportive social networks enhance migrants' sense of belonging and integration, providing opportunities for social engagement and community involvement. These connections offer emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of community, making social networks a compelling reason for migration.

Focusing on Myanmar weavers migrating to Mizoram provides a nuanced understanding of their motivations and challenges, contributing valuable insights to academic research and policy-making. By examining wage differentials, moving costs, access to information, and social networks, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the factors driving migration and the experiences of migrant weavers. This research underscores the need for targeted interventions to support migrant communities and enhance their well-being.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study highlights key factors influencing the migration of Myanmar weavers to Mizoram, including wage differences, access to information, and moving costs. The findings show that higher wages in Mizoram are a significant motivator, but financial instability remains challenging for some migrants. Social networks provide essential information and support, helping weavers make informed decisions and integrate into their new environment. Moving costs can be a barrier, but employer support can mitigate this issue.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

### **7.1. Financial Literacy Programs**

Implement training programs to help migrant weavers manage their money better. These programs should teach them how to save, budget, and plan for the future. By improving their financial skills and avoiding debt, weavers can reduce financial instability.

## 7.2. Information Access

Set up information centers or online resources where weavers can get reliable and updated information about Mizoram's job opportunities and living conditions. These resources should provide details about wages, living costs, and working conditions, helping migrants make informed decisions before they move.

## 7.3. Employer Support

Encourage policies that require or reward employers who help with the moving costs for migrant workers. By covering these expenses, employers can reduce the financial burden on weavers, making it easier for them to migrate. This support can be included as part of employment benefits or incentives for businesses that hire migrant workers.

Indeed, this study contributes to the existing knowledge by providing a detailed analysis of the economic and social factors influencing the migration of Myanmar weavers to Mizoram. It fills a gap in the literature by focusing on a specific migrant group and their unique challenges and opportunities. The insights gained are relevant to policymakers and practitioners who aim to support migrant communities and develop effective migration policies. By addressing both the positive and negative aspects of migration, this research offers a balanced view and actionable recommendations to improve the well-being of migrant weavers in Mizoram.

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## **Examining Constraints on Women Occupying Decision-making Roles in Myanmar’s National Unity Government**

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### **Abstract**

This research study examines the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles within the National Unity Government (NUG) and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) in Myanmar, following the 2021 coup. Despite active participation in political movements, women continue to face barriers hindering their involvement in leadership positions. The study aims to explore the challenges and perspectives surrounding women's participation in these key political entities. The research methodology employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 10 participants to capture diverse viewpoints. Findings from the study reveal persistent disparities in women representation in leadership roles within the NUG and NUCC. Security concerns and transparency issues emerge as significant obstacles, particularly in urban areas where risks exist. The study emphasizes the importance of evaluating the qualified skills required for government positions to address gender disparities effectively. Discussions focus on themes such as security concerns, transparency, political background, accessibility, and institutional support influencing women's participation in leadership roles. The study underscores necessary and more transparent application processes, enhanced security measures to foster inclusivity, and ensure the applicants' quality. While religious and cultural norms have a limited impact on women's participation, security and transparency remain critical for improvement. Future research should focus on enhancing transparency and security measures to facilitate women's participation in political processes. The study acknowledges limitations related to the sensitive political environment and emphasizes the importance of safeguarding sensitive information. Overall, this research contributes to the discourse on women's political participation in post-coup Myanmar by addressing key challenges and perspectives. By promoting inclusivity, transparency, and quality evaluation in the application process, the study aims to pave the way for a more diverse and representative government. Further research is needed to delve deeper into these issues and understanding of women's roles in political leadership in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Women leadership, Political Participation, Gender Disparity, Decision-making in Myanmar, National Unity Government (NUG)

## Introduction

While there have been significant advancements in recent years towards gender equality in politics globally, some of the key roles that women have played in political movements worldwide remain unrecognized. Women have been at the forefront of political movements globally advocating for women's rights, e.g. related to reproductive rights, equal pay, and ending violence against women (Paxton, Hughes, & Green, 2006). Despite their active participation in such movements, women are still significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles, reflecting the historical underrepresentation in decision-making and leadership (Kumar, 2002). This underrepresentation is evident in various political arenas, including government, party leadership, and executive roles. While progress has been made in promoting gender equality in politics, the number of women occupying decision-making roles is still insufficient compared to men. In the case of Myanmar, the country has suffered from endemic poverty, poor governance, internal armed conflicts and several military coups since independence in 1948. Since then, women have played a significant role in many political movements, advocating for democracy, human rights and social justice (Maizland, 2022). However, the history of military engagement in Myanmar's governance continued, following the Min Aung Hlaing-led military coup of February 2021 that saw the elected civilian government toppled and many of its leaders arrested, including Daw Aung San Su Kyi. Most Myanmar civilians were outraged by the coup (Bhattacharyya, 2023). In response to the illegal coup and the military junta's brutal response to the protests that resulted, on March 8, 2021, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was established. The NUCC serves as an advisory body to the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG was formed by democratically elected lawmakers who had been sidelined by the coup. It was established in opposition to the military junta, acting as a form of government-in-hiding and alternative political representation for the nation. The NUCC brings together diverse stakeholders, including the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – representing the elected parliament, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that have long fought the central government, civil society groups, and representatives from various ethnicities. Women's participation in the NUG and NUCC is characterized by significant underrepresentation in top leadership roles. The CRPH released the Federal Democracy Charter 2021 on March 31, marking a significant step by distancing itself from the military-drafted 2008 constitution. This charter outlines core principles and a roadmap for establishing a civilian-led Federal Democratic Union, including the formation of the NUG. The NUG, officially appointed on April 16, comprises 11 ministries and a 26-member cabinet, retaining key figures such as President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Mahn Win Khaing Than assumed the role of Prime Minister, and Duwa Lashi La became Acting Vice-President, later taking on the role of Acting President. The NUG has demonstrated a commitment to addressing unresolved issues from the previous civilian government's term and engaging in consultations with EAOs and various stakeholders, distinguishing its approach from the junta's ceasefire overtures (Moe Thuzar and Htet Myat Min Tun, 2022). A total of 37 individuals fill 38 positions in the 17 ministries of the NUG. Of 17 ministries, 3 are women, indicating significant underrepresentation. Among the heads of the government, Daw Aung San Su Kyi is the only female leader of 4, while there are 3 female deputy ministers of 17 (National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar,



n.d.). This paper explores the perspectives of various individuals including local People's Defence Force (PDF) members, the armed wing of the NUG, academics, fundraisers, and student activists of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). It seeks to understand the factors contributing to the low representation of women in ministerial roles within NUG and in top leadership positions within the NUCC, despite women's active participation in the democracy movement.

Women's participation in decision-making roles within the NUG and the NUCC is of great importance against the backdrop of Myanmar's political landscape following the 2021 coup. While women are heavily involved in active movements against the coup, persistent barriers continue to hinder their involvement in leadership positions and decision-making roles within these two entities. To drive an addressing of these challenges to women holding leadership positions, this paper has two objectives. The first is to pinpoint and analyze the challenges hindering women's participation in decision-making roles and the second to underscore the importance of addressing the cultural and religious challenges to fostering inclusive perspectives in Myanmar's politics.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper utilized a qualitative methodology to investigate the various perspectives of those involved in the Spring Revolution, the mass movement against the 2021 military coup. It aims to provide in-depth insights into their perspectives and experiences linked to women's participation in leadership roles in the NUG. The study used purposive sampling to recruit 10 participants, ensuring representation from different backgrounds, demographic groups, and roles related to the revolution, with 50% of the participants being women. Interviews were conducted in February 2024, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, due to the participants' tight schedules and internet disruptions. The researchers were only able to contact a few participants due to trust issues, communication challenges, and the need for anonymity of the participants, which made conducting the research challenging. Ethical considerations were privileged, including maintaining confidentiality by not asking for real names and ensuring informed consent. Protocols for data security were also implemented by restricting access to collected data solely to the researcher, to safeguard the privacy of both the researcher and the participants. This sample composition aimed to capture a comprehensive range of experiences and perspectives related to political activism. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, with semi-structured questions to gather insights and perspectives on participation. The analysis process involved coding the transcripts to categorize respondents' perspectives on women's political participation in leadership roles. Thematic analysis was employed to uncover commonalities and variations in participants' opinions, contributing to a deeper understanding of attitudes toward women's involvement in political leadership roles.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include the need for further exploration and understanding of certain aspects related to the NUG. Due to security concerns and the sensitive nature of the political environment, part of the information provided by the respondents had to be omitted to ensure

the safety and security of both entities. Additionally, certain details shared during the interviews may be considered private or confidential, and as such, were not included in the analysis out of respect for the privacy of the individuals and the organizations involved. This limitation highlights the challenge of conducting research in politically volatile contexts and underscores the importance of balancing the need for transparency with the imperative of protecting sensitive information. Further research with appropriate safeguards in place is necessary to delve deeper into these issues and gain a more comprehensive understanding of women's participation in leadership roles within the NUG and NUCC.

### **Literature Review**

To examine the challenges of women participation in leadership roles, the study will first review women's political participation in the United States, assessing whether a lack of constitutions, provisions, or legal enforcement exist as a deterrent. The U.S. Constitution's Nineteenth Amendment established women's suffrage in 1920, but voting rates didn't equal those of men until the 1980s. Even though the Constitution allowed women to vote, it took 40 years for women to vote at the same rate as men. Women are now equally likely to engage in political activities but are less likely to hold elected offices. In the United States, only certain groups can effectively seek and win elective office. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Amendments of 1972 of the USA allowed women to acquire skills and experience. However, supportive public attitudes and voter support are essential to women's success. During the selection process for public office, women may not receive the necessary support from party leaders and fundraisers, which may deter them from participating in primary nomination contests. This selection process contributes significantly to women's limited access to elected office (Conway, 2001). In order for women to be elected, supportive public attitudes and voter support are still essential to success in politics despite not only their right to vote but also their chances to acquire skills and experiences being constitutionally allowed. One approach to ensuring women representation in politics is to establish quotas. For example, 12 Latin American countries have enacted laws to establish a quota of a minimum of 20 to 40 percent of participation of women as candidates in national elections. In the states of northern Europe, there is a female participation rate of 39%, while for the rest of Europe and the United States, it is 13%. However, quotas have not produced a high number of women leaders due to other challenges such as a failure to reform institutional principles, low efficiency, low accountability, and low enforcement of quotas and other women's rights (Htun & Jones, 2002). By conducting an evaluation on the literature, Conway (2001) as well as Htun and Jones (2002) showed that enacting national laws and articulating women's participation in the constitution do not solely by themselves enhance women's access to leadership roles.

Government politics and institutions are notoriously resistant to including women, their interests, and perspectives. Historically, women have been largely excluded from traditional political activities and were not encouraged to define their activities as political. This exclusion is grounded in a patriarchal politics (Kumar, 2002) that conditions and inhibits women's participation in decision-making processes. As a result, women have been excluded from the world of public politics and, consequently, from decision-making structures and processes. Feminists in the 19th century fought for the right to vote and run for office, and significant

progress has been made over time, with both Western liberal democracies and other states granting the women the right to vote. Women were allowed to vote in Britain in 1918, in India in 1945, and in Portugal in 1975. It was only in the 20th century that women began to enter and participate significantly in national politics. One of the challenges for women in leadership positions is the relative lack of female role models in both business and politics (Kumar, 2002). This lack of representation can discourage potential female candidates and perpetuate the cycle of underrepresentation. Kumar's literature review discusses common challenges faced in South Africa, such as structural barriers, cultural norms, underrepresentation, and limited access to decision-making spaces. It emphasizes the contextual nuances of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. Strategies from South Africa, including legal and policy frameworks, participatory governance, gender-sensitive policy options, capacity building, and grassroots initiatives can be considered potential lessons for Myanmar. Additionally, insights from Amanda Gouws' (2008) work highlight stereotypical beliefs, lack of support structures, closed political opportunity structures, the gap between women leaders and followers, and challenges in gender machinery structures in South Africa (Gouws, 2008).

In the case of India, women have historically endured suffering and exploitation, facing various forms of discrimination and violence both within the male-dominated society and within their own families. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality and provisions for women's political participation in India, their involvement in politics has declined since independence. Women's engagement in Indian politics can be traced back to the anti-colonial movement, where they actively participated alongside men in various nationalist activities. Figures like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu played pivotal roles in mobilizing women during this period. Mahatma Gandhi also played a crucial role in awakening political consciousness among women and encouraging their participation in the freedom struggle, cutting across caste and class barriers. However, despite these efforts, cultural, social, and political constraints continue to impede women's political participation in India. Structural barriers, discriminatory laws, and institutional restrictions limit women's opportunities to vote and hold office. Additionally, women often face a capability gap, lacking the resources and connections needed for effective leadership roles. Economic barriers, traditional gender roles, and violence against women further exacerbate these challenges. Moreover, the electoral process in India has become prohibitively expensive, making it difficult for women to finance political campaigns. Lack of proper planning and failures in women's welfare policies contribute to this situation. Corruption and centralization of power pose fundamental obstacles to women's political empowerment, undermining efforts to promote gender equality and women's rights in the country (Chadha, 2014).

### **Political Participation**

Political participation can be defined as “the activities of citizens who attempt to influence the structure of government, the choice of government agencies, or government policy” (Conway, 2001). In the United States, for most offices in most states, elected positions are disproportionately held by white men due to a combination of historical factors, systemic biases, and social networks that favor white male candidates. Studies have shown that white men often benefit from greater access to political resources, influential networks, and financial

support, which collectively create significant barriers for women and minority candidates to enter and succeed in political office. This disparity is reinforced by entrenched social and institutional practices that maintain the status quo, limiting the opportunities for diverse representation. A study of political participation rates from 1952 to 1972 (Andersen, 1975) found that the participation gap between housewives and working women widened over time, with the latter participating among men. This analysis was further refined by Welch (1977) and McDonagh (1982), who pointed out positive effects of employment on women's participation. Research in the behavioral and social sciences by Welch and McDonagh has shown differences in gender role socialization and psychological and attitudinal variables between housewives and working women, which may have implications for policy. Cultural theory suggests that traditional roles as wives and mothers, along with a lack of family support, contribute to the low election rates for women. Additionally, men often gain skills relevant to a political career through non-political activities, in which they are more likely to participate. Research indicates that elected office in the US typically follows a political career progression, and women often lack the necessary support networks at the local level. However, women are generally perceived as more capable in handling domestic issues such as education and social welfare, whereas men are viewed as more competent in dealing with political issues like finance, foreign policy, and national security (Burrell, 1994; Sapiro, 1981, 1982).

According to another extensive research in the United States in 2000 by interviewers Di Vail, democrat Celinda Lake, and democratic strategist Mary Hughes (Kumar, 2002), women candidates should be perceived as aggressive and tough. The survey also found that female candidates have an advantage over men on issues such as social planning, education, and prioritizing people's interests. Even in Western society, the status of women has fluctuated. Their participation has not been improved by the rise of the modern state and Western notions of civil liberties and the functioning of democracy. In traditional societies, women who are members of the landed aristocracy derive their power from their marital status. As states become more democratic, elite women lose power, while middle-class and poorer women do not gain power. The findings reveal that ensuring gender equality in decision-making requires women to be more involved in creating ideologies, structures, and institutions. They must combine civil and legal rights while unravelling the mysteries of patriarchal law and dismantling structures of gender oppression. The research also suggests that the presence of female candidates alone does not contribute to increased women's involvement in the electoral process. Instead, the combination of women representation in politics and issues related to women candidates serves to increase women's psychological involvement in the electoral process. As the number of female candidates continues to grow, female candidacy may increase psychological engagement among women if concerns about female symbolic representation are at the forefront. From the perspective of democratic theory, the most alarming observation that could be made is that a circular process is at work. Citizens who do not believe that their interests can be effectively represented with current voting options will not participate in the electoral process, further reducing the likelihood of effective representation (Kumar, 2002). Additionally, research from around the world has shown that as women gain more representation in political office, the aspirations of other women grow, reinforcing their belief in women's capacity for political success. This highlights the effectiveness of women's political

participation and leadership (WPPL). Providing school-based training on gender equality and correcting misperceived beliefs are crucial steps. To further enrich our understanding, future research should adopt an intersectional approach to analyze how factors like race, class, and age intersect with gender, offering a more nuanced perspective on seeking leadership and decision-making processes (International IDEA, 2020; Mansbridge, 1999; Palmer & Simon, 2006).

In the discourse surrounding women's political participation in South Africa, Hakim (1998) and Hicks (2011) offer distinct yet complementary perspectives, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the political arena. Hakim's stance, rooted in preference theory, contends that women's choices regarding political engagement are influenced by personal preferences, suggesting a voluntary segregation of men and women in political life. On the contrary, Hicks (2011) delves into structural barriers and societal norms, emphasizing the systemic hurdles hindering women's participation despite their willingness. Hakim's emphasis on individual agency and preferences provides a valuable counterpoint to Hicks' structural analysis. However, Hakim's approach has faced criticism for potentially overlooking societal constraints. In contrast, Hicks, drawing from South Africa's context, incorporates feminist theory, intersectionality, and institutional analysis. Feminist theory enriches the understanding of pervasive patriarchal norms, while intersectionality recognizes the compounded challenges faced by women from marginalized groups. Institutional analysis unveils the structural factors within political systems perpetuating gender inequality. A critical juncture emerges when examining the concept of choice – Hakim argues for women's voluntary withdrawal, while Hicks underscores the structural constraints on women's agency. A nuanced synthesis of these perspectives acknowledges both individual agency and structural impediments, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate landscape of women's political participation. This comparative analysis aims to stimulate further discussions on the intersections of personal choices and systemic barriers in shaping women's roles in politics.

### **Religious and Cultural Challenges**

Women's engagement in Indian politics is influenced by various socio-cultural, religious, and economic factors. One significant challenge hindering women's political participation is the lack of economic resources and addressing this is crucial for enhancing women's involvement in politics. Economic empowerment, particularly through access to employment opportunities, not only provides women with financial independence but also fosters professional skills and confidence, which are essential for political engagement. Cultural norms also play a significant role in shaping perceptions of women's leadership abilities. Stereotypes portraying girls as weak and unfit for leadership positions serve as major barriers to their political participation. Particularly in rural areas, women often face subordination to men, both within families and society at large. Religion further reinforces cultural beliefs about gender roles and leadership. Across various religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, arguments asserting the inferiority of women to men persist. In Hinduism, for example, traditional views tend to oppose women's involvement in leadership roles, citing their supposed subservience to men. These cultural and religious attitudes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in political

spheres in countries like India. Similarly, in Myanmar, where Buddhism plays a significant role in shaping societal norms, traditional beliefs about women's roles also contribute to their underrepresentation in political and leadership positions. A research study shows (Varghese, 2020) that cultural barriers and patriarchy continue to impede women's participation in both the political sphere and democratic governance. High levels of domestic responsibility prevent more women from pursuing long-term political careers. In many cases, joining a political party and participating in its activities is necessary for women to develop more social and communicative skills in society. This may appear to be an additional obligation to comply or act in accordance with the party's interests. Lack of economic security prevents women leaders from focusing on establishing themselves in the political arena. Despite years of involvement in party activities, patriarchy and gender segregation at multiple social levels remain major factors preventing women from maintaining a presence in politics. Various forms of gender-based violence in the form of verbal harassment against women in politics constitute an additional obstacle (Varghese, 2020).

The examination of women's engagement in political spheres, particularly concerning the intricate interplay of religion and culture, constitutes a vital focus within the scholarly works of Hicks and Hassim. Both scholars explore the multifaceted challenges that women encounter, unravelling the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms and deeply ingrained cultural expectations. Hicks, in her detailed exploration of local governance dynamics in South Africa, and Hassim, focusing on the transitional phases during apartheid, offer insights into the multifarious factors shaping women's political roles. The convergence of their perspectives highlights the shared societal structures that confine women to predefined roles, limiting their active participation in political processes. Hicks further enriches the comparative analysis by extending her inquiry to the post-coup environment in Myanmar, introducing a unique set of challenges specific to the national-level governance context. This distinctive backdrop adds a layer of complexity to the examination, considering the implications of political instability on women's participation. The identification of commonalities, such as gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, and underrepresentation, underscores the universality of challenges faced by women in politics across different cultural and religious contexts.

However, the synthesis of Hicks' (2011) and Hassim's (2002) approaches reveals not only commonalities but also distinctive factors, offering a comprehensive view of the complex landscape of women's political participation. Hicks' emphasis on neglected policy frameworks and gender transformation in local governance intersects with Hassim's insights into overcoming resistance during South Africa's transition from apartheid. The combination of these perspectives forms a robust analytical framework, enabling a deeper understanding of the complex intersections of religion, culture, and women's political engagement. Moreover, this combination contributes to the enrichment of the broader literature on women's political participation by providing a more complete exploration of the challenges and opportunities set in religious and cultural contexts. By recognizing the distinctive features of Myanmar's post-coup dynamics, the comparative analysis goes beyond a simple juxtaposition of commonalities and differences. It serves as a foundation for developing strategies that acknowledge the contextual complexities of religion and culture, thereby advancing the discourse on women's political participation in diverse global contexts. The identified gap lies in the need for a more

explicit exploration of the interplay between religion, cultural norms, and women's political participation in the specific context of Myanmar. The imperative of women's participation in leadership and governance in Myanmar has garnered increasing attention, shedding light on the entrenched gender disparities within the country's political landscape. May (2016) emphasizes this urgency through the lens of Political Gender Quotas, which is a mechanism established to ensure a certain percentage of women are included in political representation, especially in legislative bodies, highlighting the reality of women's underrepresentation in governance and public life. Despite the existence of initiatives such as the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013–2022, progress has been slow in addressing the systemic barriers hindering women's progress in political spheres. May's (2016) qualitative analysis examines the complexities surrounding women's limited engagement in governance, revealing deep-seated societal norms that dictate distinct roles for men and women. This exploration illuminates a critical gap in the literature, emphasizing the need for further research into the underlying factors perpetuating gender disparities in political representation. The role of young women in Myanmar's anti-coup movement, as highlighted by the International Crisis Group (2023), signifies a significant shift in challenging traditional gender norms and hierarchies. However, the report underscores persistent challenges such as limited power within opposition movements and the imperative need for deeper inclusivity of women and youth from various socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in Myanmar. While these studies provide valuable insights, gaps persist in understanding the nuanced experiences and barriers faced by women parliamentarians in Myanmar, particularly in navigating political leadership roles. Latt et al. (2017) shed light on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, yet there remains a need for comprehensive research into the specific obstacles hindering women's entry and success in political life. One notable gap in the literature is the lack of emphasis on intersectional challenges faced by women, including those from marginalized communities, ethnic minorities, and rural backgrounds. Additionally, the discourse on policy influence and advocacy could benefit from a deeper exploration of the impact of women representation on legislative outcomes and policy formulation. The significance of women representation in leadership extends beyond symbolic presence; it serves as a catalyst for diverse perspectives, advocacy for gender equality, and policy initiatives that address systemic inequalities. By addressing these gaps and amplifying the voices of women in political discourse, Myanmar can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable governance framework. Therefore, while existing literature highlights the importance of women's political participation, there remains a critical need for further research to address gaps in understanding the complex challenges and opportunities for women in leadership roles within Myanmar's evolving political landscape.

### Findings

Based on the interview data, this study suggests that, during this revolutionary period, there is a stronger focus on the qualifications and availability of individuals for leadership positions rather than on their gender. The majority of respondents highlighted that qualities and competency should be prioritized in selecting leaders, rather than merely aiming for gender representation. Nine out of ten respondents recognized prominent figures like Ei Thinzar Mg, who



displayed resilience amid adversities. She is a powerful and inspirational pro-democracy advocate and currently a Deputy Minister for Women, Youths, and Children Affairs at NUG. Following the February 1, 2021, she became a symbol of the very first nonviolent public resistance<sup>103</sup>, and for the passion and dedication of women in challenging the military regime. However, insights from participants into NUG indicate a nuanced scenario. While there was initial optimism about the inclusion of various organizations within the NUCC and the NUG, the amount of women's involvement remains unclear in NUCC. While data on the exact ratio of women in top positions is limited due to security concerns, the NUCC reportedly includes female representatives from various backgrounds, reflecting its commitment to inclusivity. The NUCC's broad-based structure signifies a pivotal shift in Myanmar's political landscape, fostering dialogue and collaboration amongst previously divided groups, with the shared objective of achieving a federal democratic future. Additionally, the involvement of women participating in leadership roles in NUG indicates gender disparities between men and women. According to respondents, security concerns emerged as a predominant challenge, particularly in urban areas, where the risk for women joining NUG and NUCC was deemed substantial. The focus on security risks and the perception that certain positions might be more suited to those outside Myanmar raised questions about the barriers faced by women in actively participating in these political entities. The NUG emerged in response to the military coup that took place on February 1, 2021. Its existence began with the formation of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on February 5, using its members' election legitimacy to support the legitimacy of the anti-junta movement. Acting quickly, the CRPH named an interim government on March 5 that comprised acting ministers for many important ministries. Former Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than assumed the role of acting vice-president on March 10.

Based on respondents' perspectives gathered from the in-depth interviews (IDIs), it is evident that women's participation in the NUG and the NUCC during the Spring Revolution is viewed positively. Respondents emphasized the importance of unity in fighting against injustice, with both men and women actively participating in various aspects of the revolution without discrimination. They noted instances where women, such as Ei Thinzar Mg, played leadership roles in organizing protests against the military coup. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the equal footing on which men and women operate within the revolutionary movement, particularly in military affairs, where individuals are valued based on their abilities rather than gender. Communication and trust were identified as key factors for participation in government departments, with emphasis placed on performance matching responsibilities, and the need for connections and trust to secure positions within the NUCC. The respondents expressed optimism about the impact of women's participation on public awareness and perspectives regarding the Spring Revolution. They emphasized the strength and creativity of women participants and acknowledged the significant involvement of women in major responsibilities

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<sup>103</sup> “An inspiring and influential pro-democracy voice who emerged as a symbol of peaceful public resistance just days after the February 1, 2021, coup d’état, Ei Thinzar Maung serves as Burma’s pro-democracy opposition NUG Deputy Minister for Women, Youths, and Children Affairs.” American Women for International Understanding. Ei Thinzar Maung. <https://awiu.org/iwoc-celebration/ei-thinzar-maung/>

within the movement. While respondents did not specifically address issues related to religious and cultural norms, they emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive environment where leadership roles are accessible to all, rather than being dominated by older individuals, and they highlighted the need to encourage women's participation at various levels of responsibility. Overall, the perspectives shared by the respondents highlight the inclusive nature of women's involvement in the revolutionary movement as well as the need for continued support and encouragement to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

### **Discussions**

The examination of women's participation in decision-making roles within Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) reveals persistent disparities, despite women's active involvement in political movements. Globally, similar challenges arise where women's engagement in political activism often fails to translate into equal representation at higher leadership levels. For instance, within the NUG, only three out of 17 ministers are women, underscoring a significant gap in substantive representation. This mirrors broader global trends where women's active participation in political movements does not necessarily lead to commensurate representation in top leadership positions (Conway, 2001; Htun & Jones, 2002). The literature highlights several systemic challenges hindering women's political participation, including cultural and institutional barriers. These barriers are evident within the NUG, as our findings underscore the challenges faced by women in assuming key leadership roles. Security concerns and transparency emerge as critical factors influencing women's decision-making within the NUG, aligning with broader discussions on the impact of security dynamics and procedural transparency on women's political engagement.

Despite the literature indicating significant challenges posed by religious and cultural norms in women's political participation, the Myanmar scenario presents a unique context where these dimensions do not appear as prominently influential. In Myanmar, the ongoing revolution against not only the military but also against traditional norms highlights a broader societal push for change where women are often suppressed and undervalued within the existing system. Historically, religious and cultural norms have shaped gender roles and perceptions, constraining women's opportunities in political leadership. Literature reviews by Kumar (2002) and Chadha (2014) emphasize how entrenched patriarchal beliefs and cultural practices can limit women's access to decision-making roles. These norms often define women's roles within the household and community, reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their potential for leadership. However, within the current political landscape of Myanmar, characterized by widespread protests and resistance movements, traditional norms are being actively challenged. The focus has shifted towards broader societal transformation rather than adherence to conservative gender roles. Women activists, such as those involved in the anti-coup movements, are asserting their voices and challenging the status quo, aiming for equitable representation and leadership roles.

Firstly, a predominant theme across the interviews is the significant impact of security concerns on women's reluctance to assume leadership positions. The apprehension related to personal

safety, especially in urban areas, underscores the complex dynamics and risks associated with political involvement. This aligns with the broader context of political unrest and the potential for persecution, making leadership roles particularly challenging for women. Secondly, the notion of transparency and trust in the selection process for leadership roles emerged as a crucial aspect. The lack of clear avenues or procedures for women to join the National Unity Government (NUG), coupled with security concerns, raises questions about the transparency of the processes involved. The literature review highlights the persistent barriers to women's participation in decision-making roles within political entities like the NUG and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) in Myanmar. Although women have historically played active roles in movements against oppressive regimes, their access to leadership positions remains limited. Comparative studies, such as those analyzing women's political participation in the United States, Latin America, and South Africa, reveal that while legal frameworks and quotas can facilitate women's entry into politics, systemic cultural and institutional barriers often hinder their effective participation and leadership. This suggests that Myanmar must address not only legal and procedural transparency but also foster genuine inclusivity. Despite institutional and quota-based efforts, there remains a critical need for advocacy and awareness to ensure women can participate without barriers, thereby enabling them to inspire and support other women in leadership roles. Trust, not only in the system but also in ensuring personal safety, emerges as a critical factor influencing women's decisions to step into leadership roles. Political background and accessibility constitute the third factor. The prominence of figures like Daw Zin Mar Aung and Ei Thinzar Maung, who have a pre-coup political background, suggests that prior engagement in politics might influence women's leadership roles within the NUG. Moreover, the physical inaccessibility of NUG, with many ministers based abroad, poses a potential barrier for future generations seeking leadership roles. Institutional support is the last factor, as the absence of specific ministry departments for women's rights and child's rights affairs within the NUG indicates a potential gap in institutional support. While women demonstrate strength and participation in various capacities, the lack of dedicated structures might limit their ability to address gender-specific issues systematically.

Based on the findings from the respondents' perspectives regarding the NUCC, several key themes emerge, shedding light on the dynamics of women's participation in this context. Firstly, the respondents emphasized the importance of unity and inclusivity within the NUCC, highlighting that both men and women should be actively involved in decision-making processes without discrimination. This indicates a recognition of the value of diverse perspectives and experiences in shaping the direction of the revolutionary movement. Moreover, the respondents noted the significance of communication and trust in determining participation within the NUCC. They highlighted the need for individuals to demonstrate their abilities and connect with others effectively to secure positions within the committee. This underscores the importance of building networks and fostering relationships to navigate the political landscape effectively. Additionally, the respondents expressed optimism about the impact of women's participation within the NUCC on public awareness and perspectives regarding the Spring Revolution. They recognized the strength and creativity of women participants and emphasized the need for their voices to be heard and respected within the decision-making processes of the committee. Furthermore, while the respondents did not

specifically address issues related to religious and cultural norms, their emphasis on welcoming adults in leadership roles and encouraging women's participation suggests a recognition of the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment within the NUCC.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary challenges hindering women's inclusion are deeply rooted in security concerns and the absence of transparent policies for applying to the two entities (NUG and NUCC). The findings suggest that the focus of future research should shift from addressing gender disparities to the quality and skills required for government positions without gender discrimination. The paramount role of security concerns, both for women considering to reach leadership roles and for the NUG and NUCC themselves, emerges as a key area requiring comprehensive examination. Additionally, enhancing transparency within the two entities to facilitate applications from both men and women could significantly contribute to achieving better inclusivity while relying on the quality of the applicant and protecting the privacy and security of the organizations themselves. In essence, while gender disparities may persist, the current critical barriers lie in security considerations and the need for a more transparent application process. In contrast to expectations, religious and cultural norms appear to have a limited impact on women's participation in political leadership, particularly in the current revolutionary times where the majority of participants are youth. As Myanmar navigates its political landscape, it becomes imperative to address these fundamental challenges to foster a more inclusive and representative government. Further, conducting well-protected research and implementing policy adjustments are essential steps to dismantle these barriers, ensuring that both entities reflect the diverse voices and talents of Myanmar's citizens who aspire for change.

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## **Beyond Borders: An Analysis of Operational Challenges in Assisting Myanmar Refugees at the Karen-Thai Border after 2024**

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**Naw La Woon Shin**

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### **Abstract**

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, has resulted in a humanitarian crisis marked by extensive crimes, mass displacement, and an urgent need for humanitarian aid, particularly along the Karen-Thai border, a situation that worsened in 2024. This research aims to analyze the operational challenges faced by humanitarian organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) in delivering aid to Myanmar refugees in the borderland. The study hypothesizes that these challenges are significantly influenced by political, economic, and logistical factors, necessitating a thorough investigation. With over a million internally displaced persons and an estimated 14 million requiring immediate aid even within Myanmar, the international community faces obstacles in providing assistance due to restrictions imposed by the military junta. Local CSOs operating along the Thai-Myanmar border have become crucial in delivering aid, yet encounter numerous operational difficulties impacting their effectiveness. This study investigates how escalating armed conflicts in 2024 in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland exacerbate operational challenges faced by humanitarian aid workers. The research objectives include analyzing operational challenges, assessing CSOs' effectiveness, and proposing efficient techniques for aid delivery. Sub-questions also explore financial restrictions, banking system hurdles, access limitations, bans on humanitarian work, and security challenges. A mixed-methods approach involving qualitative and quantitative analyses, including in-depth interviews with community workers from NGOs and CSOs, will be employed. The research's significance lies in informing humanitarian actions, influencing policy, and fostering collaboration for more efficient aid delivery to impacted refugees. Interview questions cover political, economic, operational, and manpower challenges. By addressing these issues, the research aims to contribute meaningfully to improving humanitarian assistance in the Myanmar crisis context.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian Aid, Refugee Assistance, Border Challenges, Thai-Myanmar Border, Civil Society



## Introduction

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, has precipitated widespread human rights violations, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis. The junta's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protests, widespread arbitrary arrests, and systematic violence against civilians have led to mass displacement across the country, including in the Karen region along the Thailand Border. Humanitarian needs in Myanmar have escalated dramatically in recent years, exacerbated by political instability and economic challenges. Today, approximately 18.6 million people, nearly one-third of the population, require urgent humanitarian assistance, a stark increase from 1 million before the military takeover in 2021 (EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2024). Inflation and ongoing conflict have further compounded these challenges, driving up the costs of essential commodities like food and fuel. As a result, a quarter of the population faces hunger, with the healthcare system in near collapse, posing severe risks of malnutrition and illness, particularly among children. Compounding these issues, widespread conflict has disrupted educational access for about one-third of Myanmar's children, either due to the absence of schools or the threat of airstrikes. Humanitarian efforts to alleviate these crises are hindered by severe restrictions imposed by Myanmar's military regime, complicating the delivery of aid and exposing aid workers to heightened risks. Since 2021, the environment has grown increasingly hostile, with aid workers facing bureaucratic obstacles and dangers that have resulted in numerous casualties and arrests. Despite these daunting challenges, local civil society and grassroots organizations continue to play a pivotal role in providing essential aid to their communities, often under perilous conditions. Despite these efforts, Myanmar remains largely overlooked on the global stage of humanitarian funding. The United Nations' 2023 Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan received only a fraction of its required funding, leaving a substantial deficit of \$600 million and leaving 1.9 million vulnerable individuals without sufficient aid. While the European Union has allocated significant resources to support these efforts, the magnitude of the crisis demands additional international support to meet the escalating humanitarian needs (Hastert, 2024).

According to Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2023), the military has committed extensive crimes against humanity, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances targeting civilians, villages and schools. These violations have forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes and seek refuge in borderland areas, particularly along the Karen-Thai border. Following the coup, the Myanmar military intensified its offensives against ethnic armed groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU), and People Defense Forces (PDF), exacerbating the already volatile situation in the Karen region. Reports from the Karen Human Rights Group indicate that the military's scorched-earth tactics, including the burning of villages and targeted attacks on civilians, have displaced thousands of Karen people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2024) estimates that over a million people have been internally displaced since the coup, with many fleeing to the Thai-Myanmar border in search of safety. The Karen-Thai border has long been a refuge for those escaping conflict in Myanmar. However, the influx of refugees since 2021 has strained resources and heightened the need for humanitarian assistance. The International Rescue Committee reports that the borderland areas are

experiencing severe shortages of food, medical supplies, and shelter, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (International Rescue Committee, 2023). Humanitarian organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) have been pivotal in providing aid, yet their efforts are hampered by numerous operational challenges. Humanitarian aid workers in Myanmar face significant risks, including persecution by the military. Many have to work anonymously to avoid detection and arrest. The military junta has targeted aid workers, accusing them of supporting opposition forces. Numerous aid workers have been detained, tortured, and in some cases, forcibly disappeared. The need for anonymity complicates coordination and communication efforts, undermining the efficiency of aid delivery. Economic sanctions and the military's control over financial institutions pose significant barriers to humanitarian operations. The junta has seized bank accounts and frozen the assets of numerous aid organizations and their workers. These financial restrictions severely limit the ability of humanitarian organizations to transfer funds, pay staff, and procure necessary supplies. The restrictions make it hard for aid workers to do their jobs efficiently, making the humanitarian crisis worse. Humanitarian aid workers face challenges not only from the Myanmar military, but also from Thai authorities. Thailand has tightened border controls, restricting the movement of refugees and aid workers. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights report that Thai authorities have sometimes sent refugees back to conflict zones in Myanmar, violating international human rights laws and principles (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023). Additionally, the complex dynamics between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups create a perilous environment for aid workers. The Karen Human Rights Group documents instances where aid convoys have been attacked, and supplies looted by both military and non-state actors. The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, particularly along the Karen-Thai border, underscores the dire need for effective and coordinated aid delivery. However, the operational challenges faced by humanitarian organizations and CSOs in delivering aid to Myanmar refugees are multifaceted and complex. These challenges, including persecution, financial restrictions, and security threats, significantly impede their efforts. In essence, they are influenced by political, economic, and logistical factors, which hinder the effectiveness of aid delivery. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and ensure aid reaches those in desperate need. The objectives of this research are threefold: to analyze the operational challenges faced by humanitarian organizations and CSOs in delivering aid to Myanmar refugees at the Karen-Thai border, to assess the effectiveness of CSOs in providing aid in this context, and to propose efficient techniques for overcoming operational challenges and improving aid delivery. The main research question guiding this study is: What are the operational challenges faced by NGOs and CSOs in delivering aid to Myanmar refugees at the Karen-Thai border, and how can these challenges be overcome? This study is significant in several ways. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the operational obstacles faced by humanitarian organizations and CSOs in a critical crisis context. The findings will inform humanitarian actions, influence policy, and foster collaboration for more efficient aid delivery to impacted refugees. By addressing these issues, the research aims to contribute meaningfully to improving humanitarian assistance in the Myanmar crisis context.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide detailed insights into complex humanitarian issues. The primary methods used include in-depth interviews (IDIs) and literature analysis. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with key informants to gather firsthand information about the humanitarian crisis. The informants included humanitarian aid workers, displaced persons, local community leaders, and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience and knowledge of the situation in Myanmar. Participants were recruited through existing networks and collaborations with humanitarian organizations operating in the region. The interviews were conducted both in-person and remotely, depending on the accessibility and safety of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, which included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences, challenges, and perspectives on the humanitarian crisis. The interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, involving familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. The literature analysis involved a comprehensive review of existing research and reports on the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, including academic articles, reports from international organizations, policy documents, and media articles. Data sources for the literature analysis were identified through database searches, reviewing reports from organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and various NGOs, and grey literature such as policy briefs and press releases. The literature was analyzed using content analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. Content analysis systematically examined and categorized the content of the literature, identifying key themes, trends, and gaps in existing knowledge. Narrative analysis focused on understanding how the humanitarian crisis is portrayed and described in various sources, analyzing the stories and accounts presented to identify underlying narratives and perspectives. Discourse analysis examined the language, terminology, and framing used in the literature, uncovering the power dynamics, ideologies, and assumptions embedded in the discourse. Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their rights. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant information and securely storing data. Despite the comprehensive approach, the research methodology has certain limitations. The reliance on qualitative methods may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the challenging context in Myanmar may have affected the accessibility and safety of participants, potentially influencing the breadth of perspectives gathered. By combining in-depth interviews and comprehensive literature analysis, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, highlighting the urgent needs and challenges faced by affected populations.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be noted. Firstly, we faced challenges in gathering more participants who met our specific criteria. Many of the potential participants were located in different parts of the country, making it difficult to reach them. Due to these logistical issues and safety concerns, we were unable to conduct in-person interviews. In-person interviews could have provided more detailed data and firsthand experiences, giving us a deeper understanding of the humanitarian crisis. As a result, our research relied heavily on the participants we were able to connect with through remote methods. This reliance on remote interviews limited our ability to observe the situations and contexts ourselves, which might have added valuable insights to our study. The data collected, while informative, may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of those affected by the crisis across different regions of Myanmar, especially given the internet cutoffs by the Myanmar military and ongoing persecution. Moreover, the reliance on available literature and reports also introduced limitations. Although the literature provided significant background and context, it may not reflect the most current and dynamic aspects of the crisis in Myanmar. The rapidly changing situation on the ground can result in gaps or outdated information in published sources. Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. However, future research should aim to overcome these challenges by developing stronger connections within the country and utilizing more varied methods to gather comprehensive data.

### **Literature Review**

The Karen-Thai border has long been a site of conflict and displacement. Historical conflicts between the Karen ethnic group and the Myanmar government have led to a continuous flow of refugees into Thailand. The situation worsened following the 2021 coup, with the military's crackdown on dissent causing widespread displacement and suffering. The escalation of armed conflicts in 2024 has further complicated the humanitarian situation, making it increasingly difficult for aid organizations to operate effectively. Humanitarian logistics encounters challenges such as conflicting objectives from various stakeholders, coordination difficulties, high uncertainty, and limited resources (Çelik et al., 2014). Operations research techniques offer valuable tools to enhance humanitarian logistics operations by providing decision aid tools for network design, port simulation, demand estimation, and post-disaster medical response (Çelik et al., 2014). These tools enable optimization of resource allocation, improvement of supply chain efficiency, and enhancement of decision-making processes in addressing both sudden-onset disasters and long-term development issues. Best practices for managing logistics in humanitarian crises involve leveraging OR/MS methodologies to tackle challenges, developing efficient supply chain strategies, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and implementing effective decision support systems to ensure prompt and efficient response to disasters while also focusing on long-term development objectives (Çelik et al., 2014). This comprehensive approach helps in mitigating the impact of disasters, reducing suffering, and advancing humanitarian efforts. In a similar vein, Kara and Savaşer (2017) identify key challenges in humanitarian logistics, including limited resources, high uncertainty,

conflicting goals among stakeholders, funding constraints, and strict time constraints. Coordination among various stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and international organizations, is a significant challenge in humanitarian logistics. Ineffective coordination can lead to duplicated efforts, resource wastage, and inefficiencies in aid delivery. This problem is exacerbated by the involvement of multiple actors with differing priorities and operational procedures, which complicates the logistics network and delays response times (Negi, 2022). Effective coordination mechanisms are essential to streamline operations and ensure that resources are utilized optimally. Humanitarian organizations often operate under severe resource constraints, which include limited financial, human, and material resources. The importance of effective disaster operations management lies in optimizing resource allocation and response efforts (Altay & Green, 2006). The complexities of humanitarian logistics in disaster relief operations shows the need for efficient coordination and distribution of aid. Additionally, Kovács and Spens (2009) identify challenges in humanitarian logistics, emphasizing the importance of addressing logistical barriers to enhance aid delivery. In the context of natural disasters and humanitarian crises, the timely and efficient delivery of aid is critical. Loquinte et al. (2015) present a humanitarian logistics framework for disaster response, drawing on the case of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines to illustrate effective logistics strategies. Similarly, Panda (2012) discusses Japan's disaster response management and highlights lessons that can be applied to improve humanitarian logistics practices globally. Furthermore, the role of technology and information management in humanitarian logistics cannot be overlooked. Wright (2011) emphasizes the importance of enabling disaster response through effective logistics strategies and technological solutions. Van Wassenhove (2006) discusses the significance of supply chain management in humanitarian aid logistics, emphasizing the need for efficient information sharing and communication systems. In conclusion, the literature reviewed underscores the importance of addressing operational challenges in humanitarian logistics to enhance aid delivery to Myanmar refugees at the Karen-Thai border. By drawing on insights from existing research and best practices in disaster response management, organizations and governments can better support refugee populations in crisis situations. The findings from this literature review will inform the analysis of operational challenges and the development of strategies to assist Myanmar refugees effectively beyond borders

The comprehensive survey conducted by Hellingrath and Widera (2011) provides critical insights into the multifaceted challenges faced in humanitarian logistics. The survey, which included logistics managers from relief organizations, logistics service providers, and academics, identified significant issues across certain key areas: Information and Technology, Processes, Organization, Coordination, Infrastructure, and Politics, Government. A notable finding was the scarcity and incompatibility of information systems specifically designed for humanitarian logistics, underscoring the need for a common inter-organizational system to enhance transparency and functionality. Challenges in process execution, such as last-mile delivery and the integration of strategic partnerships, were also highlighted, along with the necessity for improved performance measurement and systematic analysis of services provided. In the realm of infrastructure, the lack of suitable transportation planning methods for damaged infrastructures and the absence of a central database for available transport

infrastructures were significant obstacles. Additionally, the survey emphasized the importance of local authority collaboration and effective communication technologies in aid operations. The results underline the critical need for integrated systems, strategic partnerships, and robust infrastructure planning to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian logistics (Hellingrath & Widera, 2011). Financial limitations restrict the procurement of necessary supplies and the deployment of personnel, while shortages in human resources can lead to overburdened staff and decreased operational efficiency (Negi, 2022). Addressing these constraints requires strategic planning and the mobilization of resources from various sectors to support humanitarian efforts. The quality and availability of infrastructure play a crucial role in the success of humanitarian logistics. Poor infrastructure, such as inadequate transportation networks, insufficient warehousing facilities, and unreliable communication systems, can severely impede the delivery of aid. Disasters often further degrade existing infrastructure, making it even more challenging to reach affected areas (Negi, 2022). Investment in resilient infrastructure and the development of contingency plans are necessary to overcome these limitations and ensure that aid can be delivered efficiently.

In the literature on humanitarian logistics, significant distinctions are drawn between commercial logistics and humanitarian logistics, particularly concerning the challenges faced by the latter, such as uncertain demand, disrupted transportation routes, and the complex coordination among multiple stakeholders (Mora-Ochomogo et al., 2016). These unique challenges necessitate specialized approaches to inventory management, which differ markedly from conventional strategies due to the urgent nature of humanitarian aid delivery. Humanitarian logistics prioritize rapid response over cost efficiency, aiming to pre-position supplies regardless of holding costs to ensure timely delivery. Unlike commercial sectors that employ Just In Time strategies to minimize storage, humanitarian organizations face varied and unpredictable goals, dictated by factors like organizational mandates or the sporadic nature of crises. For instance, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies strives to have enough supplies pre-positioned to aid 5,000 families within the first 24-48 hours of a disaster, and an additional 15,000 families within 14 days. Furthermore, humanitarian logistics reject the notion of backlogging, as delays in supply delivery can lead to life-threatening consequences for affected populations (Mora-Ochomogo et al., 2016). Unlike commercial settings where backorders are managed, humanitarian logistics require immediate availability of supplies upon demand, akin to "lost sales" in commercial terms if not promptly available. Donations form a critical part of the supply chain in humanitarian operations, varying greatly in availability and type depending on donor preferences and the media coverage of disasters. NGOs must maintain transparency and accountability to donors, influencing decisions on resource allocation and operational efficiency. Scarcity and surplus of resources pose additional challenges, where matching demand with available supply becomes crucial in disaster relief scenarios. Local inventories may be depleted or destroyed, necessitating international aid and logistical support, often involving multiple international agencies. The variability in human resources and their availability further complicates humanitarian logistics, where fluctuating funding affects staffing levels and skill sets, necessitating multitasking and adaptive workforce management. Moreover, political and cultural factors influence logistical operations, requiring careful negotiation and adaptation to local norms and governance

structures. Effective inventory management in humanitarian logistics demands tailored strategies to address these challenges, emphasizing rapid deployment, flexibility in warehouse locations, and robust supply chain partnerships to ensure timely and efficient aid delivery. Future research must focus on refining inventory models to encompass these unique humanitarian dynamics and qualitative factors that affect operational success. Addressing the challenges in humanitarian logistics requires the concerted effort of various stakeholders, including governments, policymakers, and non-profit organizations. Collaborative strategies and policies are needed to enhance coordination, resource allocation, and infrastructure development. The collaboration between academia and humanitarian organizations is essential to enhance applied research, facilitating a deeper understanding of real-world challenges and fostering innovative solutions (Leiras et al., 2013). Governments and international bodies must play a proactive role in supporting humanitarian organizations through funding, policy frameworks, and logistical support (Negi, 2022). Effective stakeholder engagement and collaboration are key to overcoming logistical challenges and improving disaster response outcomes. Continued research in humanitarian logistics is crucial for developing innovative solutions and improving the overall preparedness and response mechanisms of humanitarian organizations. Investigating new methodologies, technologies, and best practices can help address the logistical challenges identified and enhance the efficiency of disaster relief operations (Negi, 2022). By focusing on research and development, the humanitarian sector can better anticipate and respond to future disasters, ultimately reducing the suffering of affected populations.

### **Findings**

The political situation in Myanmar significantly impacts humanitarian efforts. Participants from our interviews noted the urgent need to remain low-profile to avoid military detection. The military's strict control and surveillance can lead to severe repercussions for those perceived as enemies of the state. Humanitarian organizations often operate anonymously to bypass military blockages and avoid attracting unwanted attention. The Organization Registration Law, enacted on October 28, 2022, mandates that all organizations in Myanmar register with the junta's Ministry of Home Affairs within 60 days or face severe penalties, including imprisonment and hefty fines. This law has introduced stringent reporting requirements, increased the risk of surveillance and targeting by the regime, and has made it difficult for organizations to secure funding, as many donors require official registration. The political and safety concerns, along with ethical dilemmas of aiding those in conflict zones, further complicate operations. Additionally, the inconsistent implementation of the law adds uncertainty, leaving organizations unsure of how strictly it will be enforced, thereby creating significant challenges for NGOs and CSOs in continuing their humanitarian work. This necessity aligns with literature highlighting complex coordination and conflicting objectives among various stakeholders, including governments and NGOs (Çelik et al., 2014). Military scrutiny, asset freezing, and aid confiscation further strain the limited resources available for humanitarian work. The escalation of armed conflicts following the 2021 coup and subsequent military crackdown has exacerbated these challenges. Historical conflicts, such as those along the Karen-Thai border, have led to a continuous flow of refugees and displaced persons,

complicating the humanitarian situation (Kara & Savaşer, 2017). The increasing tension and violence have made it more difficult for aid organizations to operate effectively, as described by participants who highlighted the precarious nature of delivering aid without being detected by the military. Participants recounted numerous instances where military forces blocked trucks carrying essential aid for refugees. The military selectively confiscated items deemed useful, allowing only fewer valuable supplies to pass through. This selective seizure hampers the delivery of vital aid and illustrates the arbitrary nature of military control. The presence of multiple actors with differing priorities complicates the logistics network and delays response times. In Myanmar, military interference exacerbates these issues, leading to resource wastage and inefficiencies. Additionally, the need to work discreetly and reliance on remote interviews limited our ability to observe situations firsthand, as noted in the limitations section. The military's actions further constrain the humanitarian response, emphasizing the need for strategic planning and resource mobilization to support these efforts effectively. Despite ASEAN's non-interference policy and pressure from Western countries, the military's continuous suppression of humanitarian workers remains unacceptable. The complex stance of the Thai government impacts the ability of current humanitarian workers to operate efficiently. Thailand's close alliance with the Myanmar military (SAC) presents significant challenges for aid workers striving to deliver aid to refugees.

In addition, the logistical challenges faced by humanitarian workers in Myanmar are immense. Participants highlighted the reliance on local and foreign donors who provide direct support to their operations.

This direct funding is crucial as it allows humanitarian organizations to operate independently, avoiding formal affiliations that would require registration with the military, and subject them to financial scrutiny and potential asset seizures. The military's control over financial transactions and resources often results in the freezing or confiscation of funds, as noted by the interviewees. Moreover, the economic challenges are compounded by the fluctuating availability of resources and the variability in donor support, which depends heavily on media coverage and donor preferences. The literature supports these findings, highlighting severe resource constraints faced by humanitarian organizations, including limited financial, human, and material resources (Negi, 2022).

This variability poses challenges in matching the demand for aid with available resources, affecting the efficiency and timeliness of humanitarian operations. Operating independently without formal associations is a strategic response to mitigate the risk of military interference and asset seizure. Furthermore, collaboration with ethnic rebel groups is another significant aspect of the logistical strategy. These groups often facilitate access to refugees within their territories, but this cooperation also places humanitarian workers at risk of being labeled as terrorists by the military. This association with rebel groups exposes them to targeted attacks and increased scrutiny, complicating aid delivery. The literature on humanitarian logistics underscores the importance of overcoming these constraints through strategic planning and resource mobilization from various sectors (Çelik et al., 2014).

According to the participants, economic influences pose significant challenges to humanitarian workers operating on the ground in Myanmar. These challenges primarily stem from financial



constraints, funding uncertainties, and the economic impact of political instability. These constraints hinder their ability to respond promptly and effectively to humanitarian crises. The need for strategic financial planning and resource mobilization is critical to mitigate these challenges and ensure sustainable humanitarian operations. In conclusion, economic influences significantly impact the operations of humanitarian workers in Myanmar, affecting their ability to deliver timely and effective aid to those in need. Addressing these economic challenges requires innovative financing mechanisms, resilient fundraising strategies, and strategic partnerships with donors to support ongoing humanitarian efforts in the region. Also logistically, the rough terrain and poor infrastructure hinder the transportation of essential supplies, with narrow, unpaved roads becoming impassable during the rainy season, causing significant delays. Additionally, frequent landslides and flooding further obstruct access routes, making it difficult to reach remote areas where the most vulnerable populations reside. Environmental challenges are compounded by the dense jungle and mountainous landscape, which not only complicate navigation but also expose workers to natural hazards such as snake bites, malaria, and other tropical diseases. Socially, the language barrier between aid workers and refugees poses a significant challenge, as many Karen people speak only their indigenous language, requiring interpreters who are not always available. This linguistic divide hampers effective communication, leading to misunderstandings and reduced efficacy in aid distribution and needs assessment. Furthermore, the cultural differences and historical mistrust between the refugees and Thai authorities often result in reluctance among refugees to engage with aid efforts, fearing repercussions or discrimination. Bureaucratically, the Thai government's strict regulations on the movement and activities of humanitarian organizations create a complex web of administrative hurdles that delay or block aid efforts. This includes the requirement for multiple permits and the necessity of navigating through layers of red tape, which consumes valuable time and resources that could otherwise be directed towards aid delivery. The process of obtaining these permits is often opaque and influenced by local politics, leading to unpredictable delays. Moreover, the Thai authorities' intermittent enforcement of border controls means that aid workers are subject to sudden and arbitrary restrictions, preventing them from crossing the border to deliver aid or evacuate the injured. These restrictions can change rapidly, with little to no warning, leaving organizations unprepared and unable to adapt swiftly. In addition, the lack of consistent and reliable electricity in many refugee camps hampers the storage of perishable supplies such as food and medicine, while also limiting the ability to maintain communication systems critical for coordinating efforts. The scarcity of clean water and sanitation facilities in these camps exacerbates health issues, leading to outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and dysentery, which further strain the already limited medical resources. Finally, the constant threat of violence from various armed groups operating in the border region adds an ever-present risk to both refugees and aid workers. These groups often view humanitarian supplies as valuable resources and may attack convoys or camps to seize them, necessitating additional security measures that complicate logistics and increase costs. The cumulative effect of these diverse challenges creates a highly volatile and unpredictable environment, requiring humanitarian workers to be exceptionally adaptable, resourceful, and resilient in their efforts to provide aid and support to the Karen refugees at the Thailand border.

## Conclusion

Despite the extensive literature on the challenges faced by humanitarian workers, there remains a significant gap between academic research and the realities on the ground. This disparity is evident in the dynamic and complex nature of humanitarian work, which varies significantly based on geographical, political, and social contexts. Humanitarian crises are influenced by a multitude of factors, including the political landscape of the affected region, the involvement of neighboring countries, and the diverse array of participants in the conflict. These variables create a constantly shifting environment that is difficult to capture fully through academic studies alone. The findings of this paper highlight the critical need for protecting humanitarian workers in accordance with international and humanitarian laws. The United Nations and other international organizations must work closely with those on the ground who are directly involved in delivering aid to refugees. This collaboration is essential to ensure that humanitarian efforts are effective and that the needs of affected populations are met. One of the significant challenges identified is the inconsistency in variables that affect humanitarian operations. These variables are heavily influenced by the local geopolitical situation, the policies of neighboring countries, and the presence of various stakeholders, including non-state actors and rebel groups. The fluid nature of these factors means that humanitarian workers often operate in unpredictable and hazardous conditions. Therefore, there is a pressing need for real-time data collection and analysis, which can only be achieved through close cooperation between academics, researchers, logistical professionals, and humanitarian workers on the ground. In particular, the situation along the Karen-Thai border exemplifies these challenges. The ongoing conflict and the resulting displacement of populations have created a humanitarian crisis that requires urgent attention. ASEAN's current approach, characterized by the five-point consensus, has been ineffective in addressing the needs of refugees and protecting humanitarian workers. There is a need for ASEAN to abandon this consensus and apply more pressure on the Myanmar military junta. Additionally, collaboration with Thailand is crucial to manage the refugee crisis effectively and to ensure the safety of those delivering aid. The protection of aid workers is paramount. Sanctions should be imposed on the Myanmar military junta if they interfere with humanitarian operations or target aid workers. These sanctions can act as a deterrent and ensure that humanitarian workers can operate without fear of retribution or violence. To improve the delivery of aid in the Karen regions, it is essential to establish a robust platform that facilitates smoother and more efficient aid distribution. This platform should be built on the principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in the process. It should also leverage technology to streamline operations and improve communication and coordination among different actors. Moreover, there is a need for strategic financial planning and resource mobilization to overcome the economic challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. The reliance on local and foreign donors is critical, but this support must be stable and predictable to avoid disruptions in aid delivery. Innovative financing mechanisms, resilient fundraising strategies, and strategic partnerships with donors are necessary to ensure sustainable humanitarian operations. In conclusion, while the academic world has extensively documented the challenges faced by humanitarian workers, there is a clear need for a more integrated approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice. Protecting humanitarian workers and ensuring the efficient

delivery of aid requires a concerted effort from international organizations, regional bodies like ASEAN, and local stakeholders. By working together and adopting a proactive and flexible approach, it is possible to address the complex challenges of humanitarian crises and provide the necessary support to those in need. The findings of this paper underscore the importance of this collaborative effort and highlight the urgent need for action to protect and empower humanitarian workers in their vital mission.

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## Unexpected Immobility: Finding Purpose and Identity among Generations of Kachin Youth in Chiang Mai

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### Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the existential and experiential dimensions of im/mobility within the Kachin diaspora community in Chiang Mai. While initially arriving with plans for temporary employment or onward migration to a third country, many Kachin individuals found themselves unexpectedly rooted in Thailand. They have settled down, started families, and institutionalized their status in Thailand. Yet, given their original intentions of transition, many of these migrants view their current situation with exasperation. They feel stuck. In contrast, their offspring, who have only lived in Thailand, view their situation differently. This is exemplified by intergenerational differences in migrants' relationship to Kachin identity. While parents strive to maintain Kachin identity, their children increasingly identify with Thai culture, feeling detached from their Kachin heritage. The transition from temporary migrants to embedded residents reflects a profound shift in perception. As aspirations for mobility give way to the reality of prolonged stay, a generation gap emerges in response to this situation. Attending to lived experience, this paper examines how the Kachin diaspora make sense of their unintended settlement in Thailand. More specifically, I explore the role of Christianity in providing meaning and purpose amidst uncertainty. Through beliefs in divine purpose and plans, the older generation of migrants reinterpret their prolonged stay as part of a larger existential journey, transitioning from a temporary existence to a deeper sense of rootedness. On the other hand, as the younger generation distances itself from religious narratives, alternative frameworks for understanding and navigating identity and purpose emerge. By attending to the complexities of transition, displacement, and the search for identity, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on immobility and belonging in Myanmar's borderlands. It underscores the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate existential dilemmas and construct meaning within the context of unexpected immobility.

**Keywords:** Kachin, Migration, Ethnic Identity, Religious Beliefs, Im/mobility, Generational Gap, Youth, Chiang Mai

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## 1. Introduction

How does it feel to leave home for a better life, risking arrest, deportation, and endless dangers, only to remain stuck in transit? How do migrants cope with these challenges and adapt, finding purpose while preserving their culture and identity? What are their hopes for themselves and their children? And how do their children, born in one country but told they belong to a distant land they barely know, feel?

As I became involved with the Kachin community in Chiang Mai, I grappled with burning questions about migration and identity. Arriving in Chiang Mai from Burma in early 2021, I, like many, faced a life-altering year. Some chose to stay and sacrifice for a greater cause, while others, including myself, left the country. We all carried a heavy sense of survivor's guilt, feeling indebted and perhaps ashamed for leaving loved ones behind in a crisis. How we address these emotions - by supporting those back home, advocating for change, or simply taking things one day at a time - helps us navigate and potentially thrive in exile. This article is my modest effort to make use of my unexpected time in Thailand, hoping to contribute to a deeper understanding of the mobility and immobility experienced by those who have crossed from Burma to Thailand.

Given Burma's post-Colonial history of turmoil, my generation's experiences of upheaval and exile are not new phenomena. For decades, people crossed between Burma and Thailand uncountable times, for a multitude of reasons and motivations. The mobility and immobility between Burma and Thailand, its exchange of goods, peoples and ideas or lack thereof, across this imagined, yet very real border, has considerable effects on the ethnic makeup, economics and politics of both countries and the Southeast Asian region.

The following excerpt is from an interview with a male Kachin, who migrated into Chiang Mai, Thailand in the late 1990s. This story is exemplary of how many migrants from Kachin and from Burma as a whole come to migrate and stay in Thailand. Throughout the article, I depend on these personal accounts to understand how Kachin migrants from Burma, and their children experience and perceive mobility and immobility. This excerpt is from Chris, who told me his story of arrival and prolonged stay in Thailand. Together with his sweetheart, he crossed the border, imagining higher education and a journey to the West awaiting them.

*After high school, my mother couldn't afford to send me to college. I figured I would make some money so I went to the jade mines. One day my mother calls, saying she found a school for me in Thailand. So on a cold morning in 1999, I and my girlfriend found ourselves on a truck with thirteen other Kachin, including a baby. We were headed towards the Thai - Myanmar border. None of us had any travel documents. After hours of driving, hiding, crossing a river, and changing trucks, we arrived in Ban Mai Sammakhi. I still remember our group. Zach, who looks a lot like you, moved to Australia. Another migrated to Sweden. Two got to New Zealand. Four went back. One died. Five of us remained in Thailand. We're not in touch anymore.*

In a continued conversation, Chris shared his experiences of prolonged stay in Chiang Mai. He told me about his unmet dreams for education, the language barrier, and difficulties of life as an undocumented person.

*When we arrived in Chiang Mai, we had to live in a shared room with three other Kachin migrants. If the police came to check our neighborhood, we had to hide someplace else. When I got caught, my friends had to ‘bail’ me out. When my friends got caught, we ‘bailed’ them out too. College was a night school at a Buddhist monastery. I didn’t pass the English exams, so a third country was impossible. I looked for jobs, made money. It was hard. The pay was low and I wasn’t skilled at anything yet, so I took odd jobs. In short, we were second class people. We cleaned the dirty toilets, did jobs Thai workers wouldn’t. It felt meaningless but I had to support my family back home. My younger brother’s wedding, my younger sister’s college education, I paid for them all. That’s how we lived. We moved here together, got married here, and had children.*

This story highlights the broader experiences of first-generation Kachin migrants in Chiang Mai. Like Chris, many come to Thailand hoping for a brief pause, a chance to earn money and return to Burma, or to move on to third-country resettlement through the UNHCR program. However, their hopes are often dashed by the realities of their precarious status in Thailand, where they face marginalization and must confront existential questions about their purpose and identity.

Through the experiences of these “unintentional” Thai-Kachin, I explore how generations make sense of their purpose and belonging, and how church and religion influence these transitions. I also examine the perspectives of younger Kachin, some newly arrived, and others born in Thailand, who often find that the same religious institutions that gave their parents security now feel restrictive. This contrast highlights generational differences and emerging alternative frameworks regarding purpose and identity among Kachin today.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

I place my focus on the questions of prolonged stasis and ethnic identity through the lens of (im)mobility. Departing from the notion that mobility and immobility are two exclusive categories, I favor the idea that both are in interplay. Immobility in this case of Kachin migrants in urban Chiang Mai is not just physical. The existential sense of immobility they feel is of equal importance and takes on real life implications. Hage’s (2005) perspective is used as my primary definition where immobility is, “*lack of agency, stuckness*” whether that stuckness is physical or existential. Interviews with Kachin youths and parents alike show immobility can be experienced in tangible *and* intangible ways. It can be something that obstructs actual physical movement, and/or something that creates a sense of stuckness in one’s life. Likewise in terms of mobility, rather than making factual, definitive statements of what it is, or isn’t, I take the approach of seeing it as a cultural construct, experienced and imagined (Salazar & Smart, 2011). This point of view is an instrumental asset in applying an emic approach on how the Kachin migrants themselves define what it means to be stuck, and what it means to be mobile, or get out of this state and feeling of stuckness.



... just as there is an imaginary existential mobility, there is also an existential sense of immobility, or ‘stuckness’ ... the experience of lacking agency to drive one’s own actions in a desired direction or the sense of existing according to one’s own will (Hage, 2009, p.9).

Theoretically, this research is inspired by existential anthropologists Annika Lems, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Bern, and Jelena Tošić, an assistant professor for Transcultural Studies at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Their collaborative work on the dialectics of (im)mobility, along with others such as Hackl et al. (2016), Palmberger & Tošić (2017), and Schapendonk (2017), exemplifies ethnographic work that moves away from polarized notions of movement and stasis. Instead, their works place careful attention on underlying social, political and economic specifics that allow some to move freely and forces others to stay put. They pointed out the paradoxical dynamic between immobility and mobility, in that enduring situation of immobility, individuals assume a sense of agency in taking control of how one reacts and perceives their stuckness. I would add that in situations of existential stuckness, individuals are finding ways to not only accept stasis but also define and realize new directions of mobility. This current article also suggests the possibility that across generations, cultural/religious institutions can prioritize certain forms of mobility, and underprioritize or even obstruct others.

While ethnicity may not be the most salient identity among second-generation youths or youths raised in countries other than their parents’ home country, Reynolds and Zontini (2015) argue that migrant youths increasingly link themselves to their parents’ homeland in more than symbolic ways. The idea of their parents’ homeland, or their homeland, can still be significant, albeit in forms different from those of their parents (Reynolds and Zontini, 2015, p.382). Moving from the common subtext that youths feel a weaker connection to their parents’ homeland, various authors have shown how youth may experience and utilize their transnational connections in different ways (NurMuhammad et al., 2015; Mufasta, 2015; Aarset, 2015).

They also show how these ways of “doing identity” can be embedded in aspects of youths’ daily lives that they may perceive as unremarkable (Reynolds & Zontini, 2015, p.384). These “unremarkable” areas of “doing identity” or of being Kachin in our context will be the primary focus, alongside personal accounts of experiences and perceptions toward Kachin identity and culture. A second notable point from the same authors is the caution against treating transnational identities as homogenous categories. They rather suggest viewing them as ongoing products of processes intersecting upon race, class, gender, age/generation, histories of migration and sexuality (Reynolds & Zontini, 2015, p.385). While this article mainly focuses on how age/generation and experiences of religious institutions contribute to experiences and formulation of ethnic identities, it also explores in brief the possibilities of much needed further investigation into other sections. More attention is due to placing migrant youths at the center of transnationalism studies (Reynolds & Zontini, 2015). I align with this notion by looking towards the identities and stories of current Kachin youths, and their parents, many of whom crossed into Thailand as youths themselves.

A study conducted by Crul and Dommernik (2003) on second-generation Turkish and Moroccan youths in the Netherlands highlighted the generational differences in how identity and integration was perceived and experienced within an urban context. Additionally, they showed how (im)mobility is a complex interplay where, even within the same ethnic communities, experiences of mobility and immobility significantly vary. Alluding to the intersectionality at play, these points greatly informed this research, helping to identify the complexities within the Kachin community in urban Chiang Mai.

The research paper "Faith and Suburbia" by Dwyer et.al. (2012) greatly informed my understanding of existential immobility or "stuckedness", which has been particularly relevant for analyzing the experiences of different generations of Kachin migrants in urban Chiang Mai. Their idea that the religious spaces mitigated feelings of existential immobility also persuaded this research to investigate the role of the church in (im)mobilities of the Kachin community, focusing on the everyday "unremarkable" religious practices through the church, as well as the alternative everyday practices emerging among newer generations.

### **3. Site and Methodology**

The ideas presented in this paper stem from my three-year fieldwork within the Kachin community in urban Chiang Mai, focusing particularly on the congregation of the "Wunpawng Christian Church." Viewing this church as a microcosm, my broader research examines the ethnic, denominational, class, and generational diversities among the Kachin people. Through participant observations and in-depth interviews, I have explored the connections between their homeland and host country, as well as the dynamics of community and individual identity.

Although the initial focus was on Wunpawng Christian Church, my research has expanded to encompass the broader Kachin community in urban Chiang Mai. For this study, I narrow my scope to examine the experiences, perspectives, and emotions of first-generation childhood migrants, and second-generation Kachin migrants through ongoing serial interviews and numerous informal conversations since my arrival in Chiang Mai in 2021. These interactions occurred during social gatherings both within and beyond the church setting. From these exchanges, I identified themes such as arrival, long-term settlement, meaning, purpose, and identity. These themes have been instrumental in understanding how Kachin migrants interpret their movements, the significance of Christianity in Kachin diaspora communities, and the variations in Kachin identity, purpose, and sense of belonging across generations.

### **4. Background**

#### **4.1. Arrival of 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Kachin Migrants in Chiang Mai**

Based on my interviews, first-generation Kachin in Chiang Mai mostly arrived between the 1980s and 1990s. Many initially settled in Ban Mai Sammakhi, the sole Kachin village in Thailand, located in Chiang Dao. The waves of Kachin migration from Burma to Thailand have consistently mirrored broader political upheavals in Kachin State and surrounding areas. A Kachin minister who arrived in Chiang Mai in the 1980s recalled that the migration traces back to the early 1960s, when the first KIA soldiers established the city as a hub for jade and arms

trade routes during the initial stages of armed resistance. Chiang Mai not only served the KIA but also facilitated logistics for other ethnic armed groups, like the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP). Concurrently, civilian Kachin migration surged in the 1980s and 1990s, following the aftermath of the 1988 Revolution and subsequent crackdowns. These migrants, forming Chiang Mai's first-generation Kachin community, arrived seeking refuge from conflict, employment opportunities, or access to education that became increasingly limited in Myanmar.

Migrating to a host country brings numerous challenges, especially for undocumented Kachin who crossed into Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s. Their mobility within the country was restricted as they feared being identified as illegal and deported. This not only hindered their daily movement but also complicated their plans for further migration to a third country. Many found themselves "stuck" in a foreign land, struggling to integrate or find employment.

While the entirety of Kachin migration into Thailand cannot be painted, I present personal accounts of arrival and prolonged stay. These vignettes offer a glimpse into the (im)mobilities of first-generation Kachin migrants and how they navigated the gap between their hopes and realities.

For example, Daniel crossed the Burma-Thailand border in 1997 with hopes of a short stay before moving to a third country. His journey highlights the all-too-common challenges of undocumented Burmese migrants at the time—lack of documentation, discrimination, and the constant threat of arrest.

*I arrived here in 1997. I was just visiting to get some experience. I had no plans to stay. I planned to find a way to go abroad after a few months. When I started attending Thai language school, and volunteered at the church, I found myself staying indefinitely. Back in those days, there weren't any worker cards for people from Burma. Whether you were Jinghpaw (Kachin) or Myen (Bama) you were called “Phmā.” We weren't accepted as much as we were now because they hated the Burmese very much. They were taught bad things about the Burmese in their schools. If we spoke another language like we are doing, they would have reported it and we would be arrested by now. That was the level of security concern back then. There were no hilltribe cards being issued. There was nothing really.*

Like Chris and Daniel, most first-generation Kachin migrants in Chiang Mai come from either Kachin State or northern Shan State. They identify as Jinghpaw Wunpawng or Wunpawng/Kachin and speak Jinghpaw along with other Kachin languages such as Lavo or Zaiwa. Growing up in Burma, many lived in communities directly or indirectly affected by the long-standing conflict between the Kachin Independence Army and the Tatmadaw. Despite the ceasefire from 1997 to 2011, the conflict has deeply impacted the Kachin and other ethnic groups caught in the crossfire. The trauma and loss from this prolonged conflict remain a shared experience among the Kachin community. First-generation Kachin migrants maintain strong kinship and social ties with relatives back home and stay connected to the situation in Burma, whether through direct involvement or through relatives affected by the war. Compared to their children, they are much more focused on Kachin and Burmese politics.

Many arrived in Thailand under difficult conditions and still carry memories of those challenges. Despite better opportunities and status now, they continue to view Thailand as a

transit country - an initial step towards resettlement in a third country. Even as they integrate into Thai society, first-generation Kachin maintain a connection to their Kachin identity and memories of their homeland. They are more likely to return to Burma, whereas only one in ten Thailand-born Kachin has visited their parents' hometown in the past twenty years. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing conflict further diminished opportunities for Kachin heritage tourism.

In response to their common challenges and sentiments, the Kachin community in Chiang Mai collectively organize events and create social spaces where Kachin history, language and culture can be observed and transmitted to the younger generation. The focus of my fieldwork, Wunpawng Christian Church in Chiang Mai is one such space (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Photo commemorating the inaugural plot clearing of Wunpawng Christian Church in Chiang Mai, August 16, 1998.

Overall, first-generation Kachin migrants are more likely to value kinship relations, speak Jinghpaw and other Kachin languages, and hold onto many of the Kachin customs and traditions that they inherited from the homeland. This observance manifests in important life events such as naming ceremonies after birth, weddings and funerals, and socio-religious events such as New Year, Thanksgiving, and Christmas (see Figure 2). On such occasions, they take a leading role as torchbearers of Kachin culture and identity. For them, Thailand was perceived as a transit country; a launchpad to a third country, where they unexpectedly overstay. However, over time, they redefine their unexpected immobility. Gradual social integration and recognition, improvement in documentation status, and economic opportunity all contribute to the growth of the Kachin community in urban Chiang Mai. In a positive feedback loop, better conditions give deeper meaning and purpose to their stay in Thailand. Deeper meaning and purpose increase the chances of achieving better conditions. Seeking the

origins of this deeper meaning and purpose, despite immobility among the Kachin, led me to Wunpawng Christian Church. As will be discussed in the next sections, the church played a vital role for first-generation Kachin. Whether that remains true for the next generations is questionable.



Figure 2: Kachin elders lead youths in the traditional "Htawng Ka" dance to celebrate Christmas.

#### 4.2. Diverse Experiences and Identities of Kachin Youth in Chiang Mai

As Kachin youth migrants from the 1990s settled and built communities around church and kinship, their households grew in two ways: through the birth of a new generation and the migration of relatives from Myanmar. Kinship is highly valued in Kachin society as a core part of their identity. The emphasis many Kachin place on these ties and the mutual support they provide is a key factor driving Kachin migration and keeping their diaspora communities cohesive. Through these processes - and due to unfavorable conditions in Myanmar - the Kachin youth population in Chiang Mai has steadily grown over the past two decades.

Thus, some of the current Kachin youths are born and raised in Thailand, some arrived as children with their families or migrated to Chiang Mai to be with their families, others arrived as youths or young adults. Because of these different life timelines, these youths themselves are diverse in terms of where they are educated, the languages they speak, and their cultures and peer groups. Another notable differentiating factor is the socio-economic status of their parents. A few of the Kachin youth that I interviewed came from well-to-do elite families. These youths had access to private international schools. They grew up socializing mainly in an English-speaking, cosmopolitan peer group of upper-middle-class expat children. This influences their self-perceptions, worldviews and culture. For example, they were more likely to value individualism, understand themselves as citizens of the world, and indulge in global

pop culture. Interestingly, in relation to their international peers, they saw themselves and their families as underprivileged.

Youths born or raised to less well-to-do families were more likely to have gone through the Thai public education system. These youths are more likely to prefer speaking Thai and are more in-tune with Thai pop-culture and identity. As one young informant shared, in the day-to-day, being Kachin (as their parents wished them to be) wasn't as relevant for them as being Thai, *“If I was asked who I am, I would just say Thai. If they ask me about my family, I would say my parents come from Kachin.”*

When asked about their future careers and education, they showed more concern with being able to get good grades to attend a good college in Chiang Mai or Bangkok, and learning Mandarin or English for better job prospects was more imperative than learning Jinghpaw or going to church to keep their parents happy.

Regardless of their parents' socio-economic standings, Kachin youths born and raised in Thailand share several key traits. First and most obviously, they are fluent in Thai and can easily relate to Thai society and culture. Secondly, the idea of Kachin or Myanmar as their homeland is almost an abstraction. Out of ten youths interviewed, only two had ever been to their parent's hometowns in Kachin State and Northern Shan State. Even then, they noted being too young to remember anything significant. The overall political instability in Myanmar in the past decades and their parents' focus on work and settlement in Thailand further complicate the prospects of any homeland visitations.

Participant observations among both upper-class and low-income Kachin families show that while parents try to speak Jinghpaw with their children, they often default to Thai as the main language. Though not the sole marker of Kachin identity, parents worry that not speaking Jinghpaw will further distance their children from the Kachin community and identity. Summer language schools and Sunday school programs have been developed to address this concern. Many parents also noted the challenge of bonding over Kachin culture, as their children tend to self-isolate at home, making it hard to share cultural traditions and language. When asked about her family's language use, one grandmother said,

*They know a bit. Although they can't talk in Jinghpaw much, they understand it. But we don't talk much. My children and grandchildren go to school or work and come back and just stay in their rooms. There are even days when we don't talk at all. They're just on their phones.*

This also alludes to increasing smartphone usage among younger generations. The influence of social media on youth's perceptions, who often form social connections and are exposed to other cultures and identities through this relatively new technology, deserves further study.

Among Kachin migrants who were raised in Myanmar and later moved to Chiang Mai as youths, several patterns emerge. They arrive for various reasons, falling into two main categories: those entering the workforce and those pursuing higher education. However, these paths are fluid - many who begin working eventually pursue education, while those focused on

education often find work in Thailand or abroad. Their experiences before and after arriving in Chiang Mai influence their language preferences and identity as they seek better opportunities.

Kachin youths pursuing education in Thailand typically speak English well enough to attend universities where English is the medium of instruction. Though they may later find jobs in Thai organizations, making Thai more relevant, they largely operate in a linguistic space that requires Kachin, English, and Burmese. There is also a noticeable, though less common, tendency to avoid using Burmese in public, favoring English or Jinghpaw. This reflects a broader social dynamic in Thailand, where speaking English can help young migrants avoid the stereotypes often attached to Burmese speakers.

In contrast, Kachin youths less proficient in English learn Thai earlier, as it is essential for job opportunities. For them, Thai language and culture become more central as they engage directly with the local workforce and socialize with Thai peers. Being able to speak Thai and adapt to local norms is crucial for their social mobility.

A diverse group of multilingual Kachin youths gathers every Sunday afternoon at a quiet coffee shop near the Kachin church. The shop, mostly empty except for a few FoodPanda drivers and takeaway customers, comes alive during the break between the midday and youth services. It's a weekly tradition for these young men and women to meet, chat, relax, and for some, smoke (mostly the men). Away from the formality of church, they speak freely about topics not usually discussed in that setting. The scene unfolds in a shaded courtyard with four wooden tables. At one table, a young man working at a car body shop explains the Thai car market to his friends in Thai. Another table erupts in laughter as they joke with the owner about mismatched orders. I struggle to order in broken Thai. Nearby, two new students at Chiang Mai University chat in Burmese about the upcoming semester. Although it seems like a mix of Thai and Burmese speakers, soon enough, everyone returns to Jinghpaw. This shows how language and space intersect to create a unique social environment for Kachin youth. The coffee shop acts as an informal space where diverse linguistic practices - Thai, Burmese, and Jinghpaw - reflect the varying experiences and identities of the group. It also illustrates how language may be used fluidly depending on the topic or context. In this space, away from church formality, these youths negotiate their identities and connections, forming a microcosm of diasporic life that balances adaptation to Thai society with the preservation of their Kachin heritage. The degree of this adaptation, however, varies from person to person, shaped by individual backgrounds, social networks, and personal goals.

### **4.3. Generational Experiences of Ethnic Identity and Religion**

Understanding how different generations experience ethnic identity in diaspora is crucial for interpreting the shifts within the Kachin community in Chiang Mai. It is important to clarify how "generations" are defined in this context, as these distinctions carry unique socio-cultural and historical meanings. Here, three generational categories are helpful: the first generation refers to current adults who came from Myanmar as youths, the middle generation refers to those who migrated as children or young teenagers, and the second-generation are born and raised in Thailand. These distinctions are not rigid, with overlaps in how individuals identify across these categories, but they help outline broader patterns in the community.



Despite community efforts to preserve Kachin heritage through community events and the church (see Figure 3), younger Kachin tend to be less engaged with Kachin identity and culture on their own initiative. This growing detachment is a source of concern for 1<sup>st</sup> generation parents, many of whom feel that their children are becoming disconnected from the Kachin homeland and the realities faced by Kachin communities in Myanmar.

For the second-generation Kachin born and raised in Thailand, their primary connection is to Thai society. This shapes their worldview through education, socialization, and daily life. These youths typically find it easier to integrate into Thai culture, identifying more with their local surroundings than with their parents' Kachin heritage. For them, Kachin identity is something imposed externally by their families and community, rather than something they actively embrace. Many second-generation youths have never visited Kachin or Shan State and express little desire to be involved with the Wunpawng Christian Church or the broader Kachin diaspora community. Their ties to Kachin identity are largely symbolic or familial, rather than rooted in lived experience.



Figure 3: Kachin woman helps young girls prepare their Kachin dress before the WCC's culture show.

In contrast, the middle generation youths (those who migrated from Myanmar at a younger age) are in a more complex position. They straddle two worlds: they have a connection to their homeland and Kachin identity, but they also experience a degree of alienation from both Myanmar and Thailand. While some manage to adapt to Thai society and build new lives there, many feel disconnected from both cultures. This can lead to a feeling of being "in-between," where they neither fully belong to their homeland culture nor fully integrate into Thai life. Some in this group may consider migrating to a third country or even returning to Myanmar, repeating the cycle of migration experienced by earlier groups in the diaspora.

Despite these generational differences, both middle and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Kachin youths are more likely than their 1<sup>st</sup> generation parents to seek belonging and purpose beyond the immediate Kachin community and the church. For many, this means exploring other cultural and social spaces that reflect their diverse backgrounds and aspirations. The church, which holds significant importance for first-generation Kachin as a symbol of ethnic and religious identity,



may not carry the same weight for younger generations, who often navigate a more fluid sense of identity in the diaspora.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. Generational Reflections on Unexpected (Im)mobilities**

When examining how different generations of Kachin migrants perceive immobility, it becomes clear that each generation defines "stuckness" differently based on their unique experiences. The concept of mobility - whether social, economic, or geographical - also varies across generations, reflecting their specific challenges and aspirations.

For first-generation Kachin, immobility is understood in practical and socio-economic terms. They feel stuck due to fears related to undocumented status, job instability, social exclusion, and prolonged separation from family. Mobility for them means securing documentation, finding stable work, and maintaining family connections through support or communication. They also see mobility as the possibility of migrating to a country with better opportunities. Their Kachin identity and community provide crucial support, while faith and religious practices help them navigate these challenges.

The middle generation experiences immobility on socio-cultural and psychological levels. Living in Thailand, they often feel confined by traditional Kachin norms and religious expectations. This pressure limits their personal freedom and exploration, leading some to distance themselves from the community, while others try to balance both worlds. For the middle generation, mobility involves redefining their identity and aspirations beyond traditional expectations, breaking free from internal and external constraints, and seeking personal growth and new purposes.

The second-generation, or the "Made in Thailand" group, views immobility through the lens of socio-economic advancement and education. They feel constrained by the community and religious practices they were born into, which they may not fully relate to. They aspire to move to a different city or country for better opportunities, but struggle with a sense of disconnect from their Kachin identity. For them, mobility is about pursuing education, career growth, and relocation to overcome the limitations of their current environment.

Across these generations, we see varying interpretations of both immobility and mobility, shaped by each group's unique experiences, goals, and challenges. While the first generation focuses on survival and stability, the middle generation seeks personal autonomy and self-definition, and the 2nd generation is driven by aspirations for socioeconomic success and personal fulfillment beyond the bounds of the Kachin community.

### **5.2. Understanding (Im)mobility through Faith**

Building on the generational perspectives of (im)mobility, it is crucial to explore how these experiences are navigated, particularly through faith. For the 1<sup>st</sup> generation Kachin, religion plays a central role in making sense of the uncertainties and struggles they face. As “ready-

*made*”<sup>105</sup> Christians, born and raised within the Kachin Christian tradition, their faith is deeply tied to memories of their homeland and the broader Kachin Christian community, whether in Myanmar or across the global diaspora.

For many, faith provides not only emotional solace but also a sense of purpose and direction in navigating their immobility. The hardships they encounter, whether related to migration, employment, or family separation, are often reframed through a religious lens, viewing their life paths as part of God’s plan. One first-generation Kachin migrant expressed this by saying, *“Everything that happened to me led me to Chiang Mai, where God planned for me to serve Him. Even when our firstborn died, although we didn’t know at that time.”*

Here, despite experiencing immense personal loss, this individual found meaning in their situation through faith, interpreting their journey as divinely ordained.

For others, faith is intertwined with experiences of healing and transformation. One woman recounted,

*I thought I was going to die, so I came to say goodbye to my sisters. But God healed me in Thailand. I believe He wanted me to be a Sunday School teacher for the Kachin children, and tailor for the Kachin women here in Chiang Mai.*

Her sense of mobility, in this case, is not about physical relocation but about finding a new purpose in her community, which she attributes to God’s intervention. Faith, therefore, becomes a key mechanism for transforming immobility into a form of spiritual and social mobility, where serving others within the Kachin Christian community gives meaning to her life in Chiang Mai.

These expressions of faith are not isolated incidents but reflect a broader collective understanding among first-generation Kachin. Their prayers often emphasize unity and purpose despite geographical dispersion: *“Dear Lord, today, we Kachin are dispersed all over the world, but wherever we are, we believe You place us to be the Light for those who don’t know You yet.”*

In this sense, (im)mobility is framed not as a burden but as an opportunity to fulfill a divine mission, reinforcing the importance of their religious identity in navigating the challenges of diaspora life. For the first generation, faith acts as both a coping mechanism and a source of empowerment, helping them make sense of their circumstances and offering a pathway toward emotional and spiritual resilience.

### **5.3. Institutional Support and Social Mobility**

The formation and growth of the Wunpawng Christian Church has been integral to how the first-generation Kachin navigate their (im)mobility in Chiang Mai. Originally starting as an informal gathering of Kachin migrant youths for Bible study, worship, and socializing, the church has since developed over two decades into one of the most significant social, religious,

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<sup>105</sup> This term came from a young Kachin woman who used it to explain her Kachin Christian identity and faith.

and cultural institutions for the Kachin community in urban Chiang Mai. Its establishment has not only provided a spiritual home but also served as a crucial source of practical support, social mobility, and community cohesion.

For many Kachin migrants, the church has offered a lifeline during difficult times, especially for those without legal documentation or a strong command of the Thai language. As one member recalled,

*During those times, like that... through word of mouth, they would give us news, documents. The problem was that for a lot of us, since we didn't have official documents, they would help us in getting the documents, and those who knew Thai would help as in-betweens.*

The church became a hub where members could share information, offer translation assistance, and help one another navigate the legal and bureaucratic challenges of life in Thailand. The sense of mutual support fostered within the church has been pivotal for many in overcoming the immobility they face, particularly in securing legal status and employment opportunities.

Beyond providing logistical and legal assistance, the church has also played a key role in helping its members achieve greater social mobility. Many Kachin who arrived in Chiang Mai without significant resources or social connections found that working for or being involved in the church helped them establish a sense of belonging and security. One informant noted,

*When we first came here, we had nothing. We are not from a Hpyen Du (military officer) lineage, nor from a Hpung Up (pastor) lineage, but by working for the church, we have been able to make a place for ourselves here in Chiang Mai.*

For individuals from less privileged backgrounds, contributing to the church offered a pathway toward social standing and respect within the Kachin community, allowing them to build their lives in the diaspora. Additionally, the church's material resources, such as providing transportation to and from services or visiting sick members, have been essential in fostering a strong community spirit. As one member explained, “*When the church got a vehicle, they would help transport church members to and from church. They would also visit the sick. It is like the basics, right?*”

These seemingly simple acts of care and support illustrate how the church has become more than just a religious institution - it is a central pillar of the Kachin community's survival and social mobility in Chiang Mai.

In essence, the Wunpawng Christian Church has functioned as both a spiritual and practical institution, providing pathways out of immobility for many first-generation Kachin migrants. It offers them not only a sense of belonging but also the tools and support needed to navigate the challenges of life in diaspora, from securing legal documentation to building social networks and improving their socio-economic standing.



Figure 4: The flags of the Kachin Baptist Convention, and Thailand fly atop Manau poles in WCC's 25th Anniversary Celebration

#### 5.4. Divergent Paradigms & Experiences in Church and Religion

Moving on from the relationship between religious faith and (im)mobilities for the first generation, it is important to explore how younger generations, both "Made in Thailand" and those "caught in-between," perceive church and religion.

For the first generation, the church plays a central role in reinforcing cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and offering spiritual support. Participation in church activities is voluntary and rooted in deep tradition and faith. For them, the church is not only a religious institution but also a space that maintains their connection to their homeland and provides a vital support network in their diasporic experience.

In contrast, younger generations, particularly the "Made in Thailand" youth, often experience the church differently. For them, church attendance can feel obligatory, and rather than being a source of comfort or identity, it is seen as a restrictive institution that limits their social freedom and personal interests. The pressures of weekly church attendance clash with their desire to engage in more secular activities, leading to resentment towards religious expectations.

One young person shared the frustration they felt when their social life was restricted because of church:

*I missed many birthday parties, I missed everything, bruh, they (Buddhist friends) hung out on Sundays, I'm like - jealous of Buddhism because they pray to - they pray to their Buddha, but they're not forced to go anywhere, they're not forced to go to temples on Sundays. My time, I thought that my time got wasted. So right now, at church, I just play with my phone.*

Others expressed similar discontent with the repetitive and enforced nature of their participation in religious activities:

*It is just the repetitiveness of reading scriptures, even though I don't wanna do it - it is like force-feeding people - things that you don't wanna do - so it just comes to a point where I don't like Christianity as a whole because of this Sunday School.*

For many of these young Kachin, attending church is experienced more as a chore than an act of devotion or community participation. Another youth stated, “*It is like we've been forced - we've been forced - like every Sunday it is a chore.*”

These sentiments highlight the generational divergence in religious experiences. While the first generation may view the church as a foundational part of their lives, younger generations may feel alienated by its traditions, perceiving it as an obstacle to their individual social lives and personal freedom. This shift in perception reveals how changing cultural environments and generational perspectives can lead to differing relationships with religious institutions within diasporic communities.

## 6. Discussion



Figure 5: A young Kachin artist's self-portrait. Art in its various forms, has become one of the popular methods for self-expression and exploration among Kachin youths.

### 6.1. Alternative Frameworks of (Im)mobility

Younger Kachin are adopting different views on (im)mobility compared to their parents. For first-generation Kachin, (im)mobility is understood through religious and communal lenses, with life's meaning tied to faith in God and belonging in the Kachin community. When asked why they came to Thailand, many first-generation migrants frame their answers in terms of

religious belief, such as, “*God Wills it.*” This reflects their strong belief that their movement, whether voluntary or forced, is part of a divine plan. Their faith provides them with a framework to cope with and make sense of the uncertainties and challenges they face in a foreign land.

In contrast, younger generations, including those “Made in Thailand” and those who are “caught in-between,” often turn to more secular or existential frameworks. Rather than attributing their circumstances to a higher power, they are more likely to describe their presence in Thailand with phrases like, “*The flow of continuity, fate wills it.*”, or “*Whatever happens, happens.*” These statements reflect a more detached, sometimes absurdist view of their situation. For these younger Kachin, life’s meaning is not necessarily handed down by religious tradition or community but is something they must create for themselves. This existential approach to (im)mobility emphasizes the randomness of life events and the individual’s responsibility to find their own purpose amid uncertainty.

## 6.2. Navigating (Im)mobility

Just as their perceptions of (im)mobility differ, so do the ways in which different generations navigate it. The first-generation tends to cope with and navigate their immobility through collectivism and interdependence, relying on the church and community to provide emotional and social support. One first-generation Kachin recalled the comfort and connection they felt after attending a Kachin church service upon their arrival in Thailand:

*I did not know a single word of Thai when I first arrived, I felt like a deaf person wherever I went. I felt lonely because I had no one to smile to. So, when I went to church that Sunday, I felt so warm and safe because everyone was speaking Jinghpaw, and the sermon was in Jinghpaw. I was back in my homeland. From then on, I knew I was going to be here every Sunday.*

For the older generation, the church is a vital lifeline that helps them navigate their feelings of displacement and provides a sense of home and continuity in a foreign environment. This reliance on community and faith is a defining characteristic of how they deal with the challenges of (im)mobility.

In contrast, younger generations seek mobility by focusing on individualism and self-reliance. Rather than turning to the community or the church, they often look inward or to modern, secular activities to cope with feelings of being “stuck.” One second-generation youth expressed this shift in focus with a simple yet telling statement, “*Gym is my therapy.*”

For these younger Kachin, personal activities like fitness serve as an outlet for stress and a means of emotional self-regulation. This shift away from collective forms of support, such as the church, towards self-driven activities reflects a broader generational trend of seeking independence and personal growth. The younger generation’s navigation of (im)mobility is not about maintaining a connection to the homeland or relying on ethnic traditions but about finding new ways to move forward, define themselves, and find purpose in their own terms.

The generational divide in how (im)mobility is perceived and navigated among the Kachin in Chiang Mai highlights broader themes of collectivism versus individualism, religious faith versus secular meaning-making, and the ongoing search for belonging and identity within the diasporic experience. While the older generation remains anchored in traditional frameworks of community and faith, the younger generation is increasingly turning to self-reliance and modern alternatives to chart their own paths.

## **7. Concluding Paradoxes of (Im)mobility: Reflections on Generational Experiences**

Reflecting on the complexities of (im)mobility in the Kachin diaspora, I acknowledge that clear conclusions may be elusive. However, ongoing reflections from this research continue to shape my understanding. One key paradox is the idea of finding mobility within immobility. While immobility typically implies being stuck, real-life situations show that even in stasis, people can find agency and resilience. This tension between endurance and agency is central to this paper, exploring how individuals navigate immobility. Another reflection is how different generations experience (im)mobility. Older Kachin generations find purpose through religion and community, while younger generations often adopt more secular or independent frameworks. However, these patterns are not rigid, with individuals crossing generational lines in their approaches. A key observation is that spaces offering mobility for one generation can feel restrictive to another. For example, the church, a source of stability for older Kachin, can seem limiting to younger members seeking personal freedom. This isn't a simple dichotomy but highlights internal divergences within spaces that seem unifying. At its core, this research explores how people reconcile the tension between choice and circumstance, and how perceptions of (im)mobility shift across generations. Social and religious frameworks that provide belonging for one group can feel like stasis for another. Ultimately, this work contributes to a broader anthropological inquiry into how people navigate movement and stasis, showing that mobility and immobility are not fixed but experienced differently across generations.

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## **Accessibility of Virtual Instruction for Education Students at the Tertiary Level in Myanmar**

**Tauk<sup>106</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This research examined the challenges and opportunities faced by university students of education in accessing instruction via virtual platforms since the coup in Myanmar. It further explored how students ensure their continued access to education. A mixed-method research design was used, combining surveys and interviews with students. All research participants were education students from selected universities. To compare the different strategies used by students to ensure access to virtual education as a function of age, year and region, T-test and ANOVA were used. Thematic analysis showed that the challenges faced by students in the context of virtual education included poor internet connection, a lack of electricity, security concerns, and communication gaps during group activities. The benefits for students included access to education programmes of foreign universities, which enhanced their personal and professional development. The qualitative data supported the findings of the quantitative study. This research contributes to the raising of awareness of the standard of current virtual education and highlights strategies of students to ensure their education during the current political situation in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Accessibility, Virtual Education, Virtual Instruction

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## 1. Introduction

Conditions for teaching and learning at universities within Myanmar have become less safe since 2021, as a result of the military coup, coupled with almost 18 months of university and college closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, boycotts by students and teachers involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have had a significant impact on higher education learning and provision (University World News, 2021). To address this problem, the Ministry of Education under the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) announced an Interim Advanced Education initiative, which began in June 2023.

Virtual learning enables students to study at home safely and ensures that education can continue despite the escalating fighting and unrest in the country since late 2021. The NUG was set up by Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, a group of elected lawmakers ousted by the February 2021 military coup, and comprises representatives of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and ethnic minority groups. Alternative, but limited, online learning services like Spring University Myanmar (SUM) have also appeared as an option for higher education and vocational education for Myanmar youth (University World News, 2021).

Spring Normal University (SNU) is a virtual university under the auspices of the NUG. It is a pre-service and in-service teacher training institution which is dedicated to two teacher-training pathways: (1) providing an online learning platform for continuous learning, and (2) conducting workshops for the capacity building of in-service and pre-service teachers in Myanmar. In this way, it has sustained teachers' professional development and preparation for the teaching profession, which is in high demand now. It also helps address the teacher shortage that has followed the February 2021 military coup.

The National University of the Union of Myanmar (NUUM) is a collaborative initiative bringing together individuals from diverse academic, ethnic and professional backgrounds, including former instructors and professors from Universities across Myanmar, Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and others. They have been joined by members of the Myanmar diaspora as well as friends of Myanmar from the United States and around the world. NUUM seeks to provide continuing learning opportunities for Myanmar students whose education has been disrupted by COVID-19 and the February 1 coup, through the delivery of high quality, equitable, and accessible academic programmes and courses, as well as professional development and teaching opportunities for Myanmar higher education teachers and emerging leaders in the form of training and fellowship opportunities (NUUM, 2021).

Education is the foundation of the development of the nation, and it is delivered through different systems. Among these, virtual education is one of the most popular and important methods since the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup in Myanmar. Virtual education means distance education that is largely web-centered but does not necessarily limit itself to learners outside a conventional classroom. It uses multimedia and, in addition to delivering content, also enables a high level of interaction among learners, teachers, peers and administrators, both synchronously and asynchronously (Law Insider, n.d.).

According to Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999), the right to education is legally guaranteed for all without any discrimination, and state parties, including Myanmar, have the obligation to protect, respect, and fulfil the right to education. The realization of education is important because it is seen as a powerful tool of agency, which is instrumental in bringing about desired changes in the social and cultural life of a nation (Hussain, 2004). Thus, one of the aims of education is to bring about desirable changes in the learner in respect of knowledge, skills and attitudes, in such a way that one may effectively perform changing roles in a changing society. Education has been regarded as a matter of national importance and an indispensable element in the difficult task of building a nation (Belagali, 2011, cited in Maliki, 2013).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup, the people of Myanmar face many changes and challenges. One of the most challenging environments has been that of education. Many students are looking for the option of attending a virtual university because they are unwilling to continue their education under the military regime. Hence, various forms of virtual education, operated by different stakeholders beyond the military regime, have emerged since 2021, with the aim of meeting the education needs of students.

Most current university students in Myanmar are familiar with technology and curious about what they encounter in online classes. Moreover, they face challenges to attend Universities run by the military-led government, the State Administration Council (SAC), due to the political situation. Physical universities opened by private institutions are expensive and not accessible to all students, thus discriminating against poorer students. To ensure learning opportunities for all university students, the accessibility of virtual education is important for individuals and society to invest in people for nation building. Education is fundamental for human, social, and economic development and a key element to achieving lasting peace and sustainable development. It is a powerful tool in developing all citizens' full potential, ensuring human dignity, and promoting individual and collective well-being (Right to Education Initiative, 2022). University students in Myanmar can have the opportunity to study further in foreign institutions from their own homes through virtual education. This research is focused on the challenges and opportunities for students in accessing virtual education. The specific objectives of the research are to:

- Identify the challenges and opportunities for university students studying education in accessing virtual learning,
- Compare strategies used by university students of education to access virtual education in terms of age, year and region,
- Make recommendations to enhance the accessibility of virtual learning for education students in Myanmar

Study hypotheses include:

- There are significant differences among students regarding the challenges and opportunities in accessing virtual learning as a function of age, year and region.
- Students have developed positive strategies to cope with the challenges and access virtual learning.

### ***Scope***

Participants in this study are education students who reside across Myanmar and are enrolled in either one of the private virtual universities or virtual universities under the NUG. Additionally, students from the University of Education who had discontinued their studies were also engaged.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1. Learning Theory**

All learning theories deal with the areas of capacity to learn, the role of practice in learning, motivation, understanding and insight, transfer of learning and retention and forgetting (Hilgard, 1986, cited in Khin Zaw, 2001). These theories point out that meaningful materials and meaningful tasks are learned more readily than nonsense materials, and more readily than tasks not understood by the learner. They contend that students who have a sound understanding of important principles that were developed through their own critical thinking will be better prepared for the complex, technological world. The nature of constructivist learning is active; it is the interaction of ideas and processes.

In practice, even without formal training or knowledge of different theories of learning, all teachers and instructors will employ one of these main theoretical approaches in their teaching, whether or not they are aware of the educational jargon surrounding these approaches. As online learning, technology-based teaching, and informal digital networks of learners have evolved, new theories of learning are emerging. With knowledge of alternative theoretical approaches, teachers and instructors are in a better position to make choices about how to approach their teaching in ways that will best fit the perceived needs of their students, within the wide range of learning contexts that teachers and instructors face. This is particularly important when addressing the diverse requirements of learners in a digital age. Furthermore, the choice of or preference for one particular theoretical approach will have major implications for how technology is used to support teaching (Bate, 2024). Therefore, to implement and promote virtual education systematically, technology is essential in the digital age. Due to the COVID- 19 pandemic and the military coup, the virtual education courses have become very popular among teachers and students in Myanmar.

### **2.2. Types of Virtual Courses**

Virtual education became widely used in late 2019 following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Myanmar, and gained more popularity since the military coup. During the pandemic, government offices, NGOs, and companies widely used online platforms and virtual methods for meetings. As a result, these virtual methods, including online universities, online training, and online research, have become more common in Myanmar. Students also followed their teachers' convictions and the NUG government's recommendations, leading to the continuing application of virtual education in Myanmar.

There are typically three types of virtual courses, depending on the nature of instructional interaction between the teacher and learner.

Asynchronous online courses do not take place in real-time. Students are more self-directed, doing the course work and assignments within a certain time frame. These courses are particularly effective for students with time constraints or busy schedules, and students can use only one device and flexibly work on their assignments at home. The teacher-student interaction takes place through discussion boards, blogs, email, and other channels. There is no scheduled class meeting time. Asynchronous courses have proven to be one of the most useful methods in virtual universities. This approach enhances access to virtual education in the digital age, particularly during the current political conflict in Myanmar.

In contrast, synchronous online courses require the instructor and student to interact online simultaneously. These learning environments enable students to participate in a course from home in real time.

Hybrid online courses, or blended courses, facilitate both in-person and online interaction. These courses require in-person meetings during the semester, complemented by computer-based communication in between those face-to-face sessions. Hybrid virtual learning can thus include both asynchronous and synchronous and face-to-face, real-time, interaction (Dung, 2020).

### ***2.3. The Right to Receive an Education: Some General Remarks***

When discussing access to education, it is important to look at the 4A framework used to understand human rights obligations, namely: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. This research specifically focuses on *accessibility* as the main criterion to study. Accessibility is defined in the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No.13 on the right to education (1999) as follows:

“Accessibility - educational institutions and programs have to be accessible to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Accessibility has three overlapping dimensions: (i) Non-discrimination (ii) Physical accessibility (iii) Economic accessibility.”

### ***2.4. Previous Related Research***

This research focuses on the accessibility of current virtual education at the tertiary level in the context of the ongoing military coup. It aims to point out the strengths and impacts of current virtual education while advocating for an increased outreach to Myanmar students in need by international donors and implementers such as NUG, NGOS and INGOS. In comparison to the parent field of distance education, which traces back to the late 1800’s, online learning is a relatively young field. Because it lies at the junction of distance education, human-computer interaction, instructional technology and cognitive science, the field of online learning is considered as multidisciplinary (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p.568, cited in Simon, 2012).

Several countries had developed significant infrastructure for online education before the pandemic hit the world (Mishra et al., 2020, cited in Goswami et al., 2021). Despite this, not all universities were prepared to shift to complete online education. Some empirical studies suggest that students have a better learning experience in a physical classroom than through

online education (Bojović et al., 2020, cited in Goswami et al., 2021). Students miss the assistance they obtain from their peers in classrooms and laboratories, and access to a library (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020, cited in Goswami et al., 2021). However, students also believe that online education facilitated the continuation of their studies during the pandemic (Mishra et al., 2020, cited in Goswami et al., 2021). Moreover, As Howland and Moore (2002) pointed out, the level and quality of communication between students and between students and instructors was a critical issue. Petride (2002) revealed that the immediacy in responses affected learners’ experiences. The current study may be helpful in understanding the effectiveness of online learning, especially among vulnerable groups of society during the military coup in Myanmar.

### 3. Methodology

This study addresses the challenges and opportunities for university students of education in Myanmar in accessing virtual education and explores their strategies to enhance access. A mixed-method research design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the quantitative study, a survey was used to test hypotheses and answer questions concerning the current status of the subjects of the study (Gay, 2011). In the qualitative research study, interviews were conducted with 10 education students accessing virtual education to complement the data obtained from the questionnaire. The data collection was conducted from October to December 2023. Survey questions were shared with university education students in selected universities using a convenience sampling method; this received responses from 111 participants (Table 1). To identify 10 students for the interviews, a snowball sampling method was applied.

Table 1: Population and sample size of the quantitative and qualitative approaches

University type	Code	No. Interviews	No. surveys
Private Virtual University	U1	3	24
Virtual University under NUG	U2	3	40
University for freelance students and teachers	U3	4	47
<b>Total</b>		10	111

Table 2: Total number of responses by region

Region/ State	No. of students	Region/ State	No. of students
Yangon	33	Kachin	12
Mandalay	18	Shan	5
Sagaing	10	Mon	2
Magway	9	Karen	1
Bago	10	Kayah	2
Ayeyarwaddy	6	NayPyi Taw	3
<b>Total</b>			111

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This study focuses on the analysis of data to generate findings and interpretations related to the challenges and opportunities faced by education university students in accessibility virtual education in Myanmar and their coping strategies to enhance accessibility.

##### 4.1. Quantitative Results

###### *Accessibility to Virtual Education*

As can be seen in Tables 3 and Table 4, there was no significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the students who were above or below 20 years of age, or across regions, with regard to teaching and learning, internet connection and accessibility, communication between teachers and students, understanding, and awareness of their rights to education. This indicates that education university students in the sample selected universities do not exhibit any significant differences in terms of challenges they face and issues of accessibility to virtual learning, regardless of age and region. It can be interpreted that the students in the selected virtual universities face the same challenges, such as the issues with connectivity and security concerns about their personal information, due to the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar. However, the students have developed strategies to overcome these barriers and continue their studies in their class.

Table 3: Results of the T-test analysis of students’ accessibility to virtual education in relation to age

Dimension	Age	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	P
Teaching and Learning	Above 20	105	3.457	0.584	0.151	0.618	109	0.538
	Below 20	6	3.306	0.571				
Internet Connection and Accessibility	Above 20	105	3.144	0.689	-0.272	-0.915	109	0.362
	Below 20	6	3.416	1.026				
Communication between teachers and students and Issues	Above 20	105	3.239	0.493	-0.239	-1.155	109	0.251
	Below 20	6	3.479	0.548				
Understanding and rights to education	Above 20	105	3.436	0.683	0.242	0.859	109	0.392
	Below 20	6	3.194	0.323				
Overall	Above 20	105	3.313	0.430	-0.045	-0.254	109	0.800
	Below 20	6	3.359	0.391				

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4: Results of the T-test analysis of students' accessibility to virtual education in relation to region

Dimensions	Residence	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	P
Teaching and Learning	Region	8	3.40	0.56	0.214	-.599	10	0.12
		9	6	3				
	State	2	3.62	0.63				
		2	1	8				
Internet Connection and Accessibility	Region	8	3.17	0.67	0.056	0.335	10	0.73
		9	0	9				
	State	2	3.11	0.82				
		2	3	9				
Communication between teachers and students	Region	8	3.24	0.47	-.0326	-.275	10	0.78
		9	5	4				
	State	2	3.27	0.58				
		2	8	6				
Understanding and rights to education	Region	8	3.38	0.67	-.0208	-.312	10	0.19
		9	2	7				
	State	2	3.59	0.63				
		2	0	1				
Overall	Region	8	3.29	0.39	-.0947	-.391	10	0.35
		9	6	8				
	State	2	3.39	0.53				
		2	1	0				

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### ***Accessibility of Virtual Education in Terms of Educational Institution***

The data indicate no significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the students in private virtual universities, virtual universities under the NUG, and those self-studying in any university, in relation to education level, teaching and learning, internet connectivity and accessibility, communication between teachers and students, understanding, and awareness of their rights to education.

This can be interpreted in a way that the students in this study do not show any significant differences and face the same challenges and opportunities in studying virtually. Moreover, the students in the selected virtual universities get the chance to attend virtual education despite the challenges caused by the current political situation. They have better internet access than those living in conflict-affected areas such as Rakhine, Chin and Kayah state. Therefore,



students wish to continue their studies abroad after completing their virtual education and are proud of their engagement with virtual education as a result of their direct involvement in the CDM.

Table 5: Results of the Analysis of Covariance on the accessibility of current virtual education in relation to educational platform

Dimensions	Educational Platform		N	M	SD	Ms	F	p
Teaching and learning	Private University	Virtual	24	3.388	0.557			
	Virtual university	Under NG	40	3.595	0.604	0.684	2.054	0.133
	Self-study	in any university	47	3.354	0.562			
Internet Connection and Accessibility	Private University	Virtual	24	3.298	0.725			
	Virtual university	Under NUG	40	3.108	0.762	0.303	0.600	0.550
	Self-study	in any university	47	3.131	0.655			
Communication between teachers and students and Issues	Private University	Virtual	24	3.218	0.439			
	Virtual university	Under NUG	40	3.275	0.496	0.024	0.96	0.909
	Self-study	in any university	47	3.250	0.529			
Understanding and rights to education.	Private University	Virtual	24	3.437	0.512			
	Virtual university	Under NUG	40	3.604	0.654	1.265	0.290	0.059
	Self-study	in any university	47	3.262	0.725			
Overall	Private University	Virtual	24	3.326	0.369			
	Virtual university	Under NUG	40	3.386	0.412	0.205	1.125	0.328
	Self-study	in any university	47	3.249	0.463			

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## 4.2. Qualitative Results

In the survey questionnaire, three open questions are discussed alongside interview data. These questions focus on challenges faced by students; transforming/enhancing opportunities in the light of challenges and crises; and suggestions and comments concerning virtual learning. The greatest challenges faced by students in accessing virtual learning comprise:

- Electricity shortages and poor internet connectivity: students across the country face limited electricity supply and poor internet connection, largely due to the current political situation. Additionally, students cannot afford to buy mobile data or pay for Wi-Fi.
- Challenges to collaboration: students need to spend more time to ensure cooperation with their peers and teachers due to delayed responses from teachers and students and poor internet connectivity. These communication challenges limit cooperation among students, particularly in relation to working on assignments.
- Limited technical skills: many students are unfamiliar with information technology, such as starting the computer, accessing software applications and navigating the screen. Without these skills, online learning becomes stressful.
- Security concerns: students have concerns about the security of their personal data and safety of themselves and their family members.
- The needs of pedagogical skill: students in the selected virtual universities need to become familiar with the pedagogical skills of their teachers in the virtual class. For example, some slow learners find it difficult to discuss the lessons with the teachers due to their different teaching methods.
- Loss of concentration: students explained that they easily lose concentration since the interaction between teachers and students is weak, e.g. due to the use of pseudonyms or cover names, security concerns, and the fact that the camera is turned off during the lesson.
- The students need support with mobile data or Wi-Fi fees due to not having a stable income in the family in the current political situation.

The most significant challenges identified by the respondents are shown in Table 6 and Figure 1.

Table 6: Challenges faced by students

No.	Items	Percent
1.	Electricity shortages and poor internet connection	50.5%
2.	Challenges to collaboration	16.2 %
3.	Limited technical skills	3.6 %
4.	Security concerns	1.8%
5.	The needs of pedagogical skill	6.3%
6	Loss of concentration	18%
7.	The students need support	3.6%

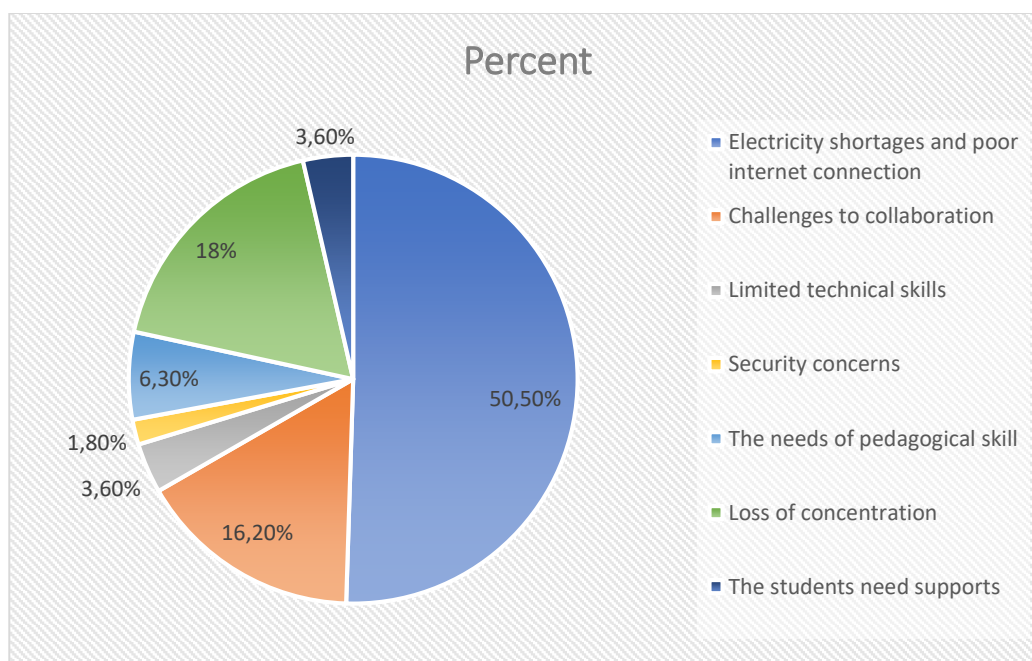


Figure 1: Challenges faced by students

A student summarized these challenges:

*The greatest challenges that I face in studying and attending virtual class are the electricity and internet connection issues. But all virtual classes share a recorded classroom video so it's more convenient for students who attend the online virtual class (Personal interview, 20 November 2023).*

Students have developed strategies of using backup power sources to overcome electricity shortages and preparing extra computers and tablets to attend virtual classes.

Some students lack money to pay for internet data and Wi-Fi. One of the Students said “*It is important to support me with internet data in virtual education ... It would be great if they can provide us with some support, such as a phone bill or something*” (Personal interview, 20 November, 2023). Whilst some students can’t afford internet data and Wi-Fi fees, it remains convenient to attend virtual education because there is no need to pay tuition or other fees.

Respondents in Mon and Chin, Kayah, Kayin and Rakhine states face a greater political crisis than other regions. For example, students in Rakhine state cannot attend any physical university. Students in these states experience greater challenges with electricity shortage and poor internet connectivity compared to those in Yangon and thus, have limited chances to attend virtual education. Since students in Yangon region can study virtually more easily than those in conflict-affected regions and states, the number of participants from Yangon is higher than from elsewhere. Therefore, students in Yangon provided more responses to the issues of the electricity shortage and poor internet connectivity in virtual education.

According to the news of Khit Thit Media, the war and political crisis have severely affected many regions and states of Myanmar since the beginning of 2022. There are many refugees and migrants in Sagaing region and Rakhine, Chin, Kayah, Kayin and Eastern Shan states, and

students in these regions face particular challenges in accessing virtual education. Those facing challenges due to the lack of familiarity with technological tools are mainly from Karen State, Sagaing region, Yangon region and Bago region, with their education level ranging from first year undergraduate to postgraduate level.

One student explained: *“It is essential to integrate interactive tools into virtual education to stimulate students who are less active in asking questions or expressing concerns during live sessions, such as Padlet and other Q&A tools, as well as quizzes, etc.”* (Personal interview, 22 November 2023). It can be interpreted to mean that the teachers in selected virtual universities are not all familiar with technology. Thus, there is a need for teachers to actively observe and monitor student participation to apply an appropriate teaching pedagogy. To overcome this, they need training or to develop better skills.

The least mentioned challenge is security concerns, reported by one PhD student and one Master’s student from Yangon and Mandalay regions respectively. Generally, postgraduate students in Yangon and Mandalay Regions have few security concerns. One made the comment *“I want to suggest that more classes should be open during the whole day, not only at night”* (Personal interview, 24 November 2023). Most students want to study in the daytime because their parents and guardians can monitor the situation under the military regime during daytime better than at night. Moreover, their security concerns are linked to checks on personal information during the guest list checks during night time (i.e. who is staying at a particular address), especially in military-controlled areas, where many youth can be arrested during such checks. Virtual studies are predominantly at night, so students wish to keep their personal information confidential due to the checking of guest lists for internal migrants as well as the scheduling of virtual courses at night.

In an interview, a former fourth year student in Mathematics, Chemistry and Biology at Sagaing University of Education reported: *“I do not attend any university at present due to lack of internet connection and the political situation”* (Personal interview, 20 November, 2023). Moreover, another student, a private virtual university student in education and public health said (Personal interview, 20 November 2023): *“The specific challenges and opportunities are internet connection and the fees for the network.”* Students are eager to attend virtual education despite the difficulties they face and develop plans to cope with these challenges. Students are also facing difficulties to afford internet data due to its high costs in conflict areas and regions that have no Wi-Fi access. A current student and former assistant lecturer at Mandalay Education College suggested *“For safety, it is needed to systematically check for persons who are under State Administration council (SAC) and pretend to be the students in the virtual class”* (Personal interview, 22 November, 2023). Her suggestion is that the virtual universities should provide guidelines for attending using the students’ identity numbers. Moreover, the leaders of the virtual university should offer training on new technologies for both teachers and students in virtual education. Another student, a virtual student with an NUG institution and a fourth-year education student with a specialization in Mathematics, Physics and Biology from Yangon University of Education suggested *“Every teacher should study teaching pedagogy, IT and technological skills, and teachers should assess the students through a virtual quiz”* (Personal interview, 22 November, 2023). According to this suggestion, pedagogical and

technological skills are essential for teachers in virtual education, and the teachers should examine students’ achievements and learning outcomes with the help of technological tools.

### ***Transforming and Enhancing Opportunities amidst Challenges and Crisis***

Students’ plans for attending virtual education are derived from the priorities articulated in the survey. These include, first, the chance to continue studying in foreign countries (13%); second, to become professional and proficient teachers (31%); third, to improve their technological skills, such as using learning management systems, remote conferencing software, and understanding how to apply for scholarships to continue studying through emails (21%); and fourth, getting a degree and certificate that can open access to job opportunities (6%). 29% did not comment on future plans. These data are shown in Table 7 and Figure 2.

Table 7: Transforming/enhancing opportunities amidst challenges and crisis

No.	Items	Percent
1.	Chances to continue for studying in foreign countries	13%
2.	Become professional and proficient teachers	31%
3.	Improve their technological skills	21%
4.	Getting a degree and certificate that can give access to job opportunities	6%
5.	No comment on future plans	29%

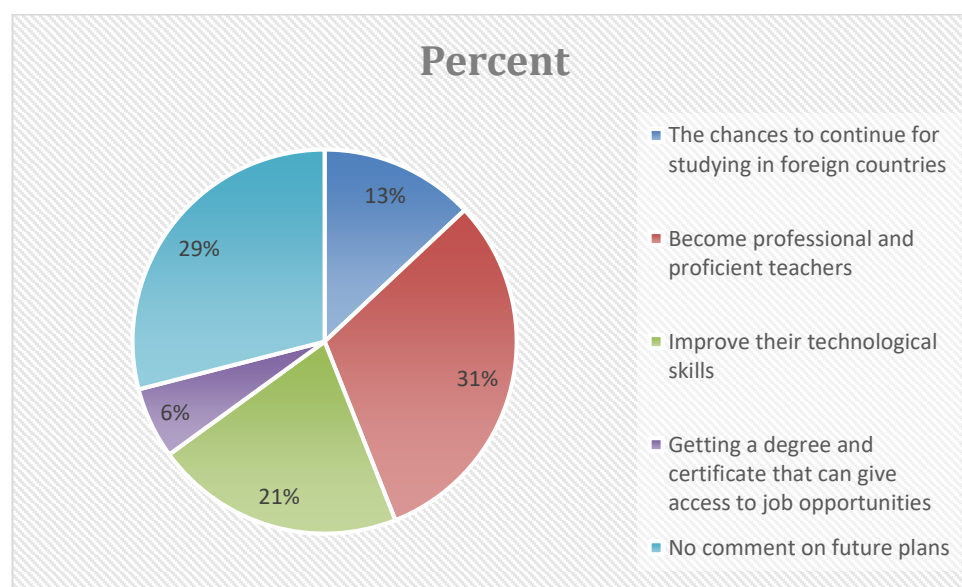


Figure 2: Transforming/enhancing opportunities amidst challenges and crisis

The students in the selected virtual universities are passionate about their professional careers as teachers and want to continue their studies. Moreover, students are proud of being CDM

activists resisting the military junta, hoping to become good teachers in Myanmar despite the serious political situation since the military coup of February, 2021.

A student reported:

*I want to study abroad and this virtual learning gives me an opportunity to prepare pedagogy, educational theory, educational psychology, and other skills that are needed to become a teacher ... I want to go to the US. I hope the National University of the Union of Myanmar (NUUM) can support me* (Personal interview, 21 November, 2023).

This implies that students feel they get guidance on how to apply for further studies at foreign universities through scholarship webinars and training or support on how to prepare or search for scholarship information at foreign universities. The students who chose education as their profession are committed to teaching, joining the CDM because they yearn for peace and democracy. They want to become good teachers for their country and are making history for their generation by joining the CDM in Myanmar.

A minority of the students (6%) prioritized getting a degree and certificate as a route to job opportunities. One said:

*As we are currently not able to attend class in person, virtual education is essential for me. I think virtual education will benefit the continuation of my education. We can even find degrees offered online...virtual learning helps me to pursue my Master's degree with scholarship* (Personal interview, 20 November, 2023).

All respondents are looking for recognition of their degrees and certificates offered by different virtual education institutions in Myanmar. This is because they have difficulties to continue their professions with these degrees and certificates, as international schools and virtual universities with a positive perspective towards the military government are afraid to hire them. They are also CDM supporters in response to the military coup. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No.13 on the right to education (1999), however, it is essential to make education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable. Thus, teachers should have the right to teach and to link with other professional organizations, even if they have affiliations with the CDM.

Among the students, a former fourth-year student with a specialization in Mathematics, Chemistry, and Ecology at Sagaing University of Education responded:

*I think virtual education has no great opportunities, and I have the concerns to join my profession with a certificate from a virtual university because the certificate of virtual education needs to be recognized by the government organization and other organizations, due to the political situation in Myanmar* (Personal interview, 21 November, 2023).

Another student, a former fourth-year student with a specialization in Mathematics, Chemistry and Biology at Sagaing University of Education pointed out: “*The specific opportunities are that students can study the lessons of recorded videos repeatedly with eagerness at convenient time*” (Personal interview, 22 November, 2023).

It can be understood that students have specific opportunities to study pedagogical skills, education theories, and other skills needed to become qualified teachers through virtual education during the current crisis in Myanmar. In the in-depth interviews, students in selected universities suggested to improve the current virtual education as follow:

Interviewee 1 (Personal interview, on 19 November 2023), a former fourth-year education student specializing in Myanmar, Physics, and Economics suggested: *“Every student should study more and more to improve their education, apply scholarships to continue further studies, and find other chances through virtual education.”* He suggested that students hope virtual universities will offer scholarship opportunities to CDM students, enabling them to continue their studies in other countries.

Interviewee 2 (Personal interview, 20 November 2023), a former fourth-year education student with a specialization in Mathematics, Physics, and Biology highlighted: *“I would like to attend face to face class with my friends in a peaceful situation. Moreover, to have the chance to attend the virtual class, I need an excellent internet connection everywhere.”* This underlines that the students yearn for peace and democracy and attend face-to-face classes and it is needed a good internet connection to study the education subjects in virtual education. So, to overcome this, the students should migrate to the places to get access to the internet to attend virtual education.

Interviewee 3 (Personal interview, 21 November 2023), a private virtual university student specializing in Educational Research for the capstone course also recommended, *“Virtual education should be accessible to all students. Every teacher should emphasize teaching methodologies, while knowing the background information of students through virtual education.”* He highlights that the students emphasize the pedagogical skills of their teachers, and would like their teachers to understand the background of their students.

Interviewee 4 (Personal interview, 21 November 2023), a former second-year student with a specialization in English, and a current education student in a selected private virtual university proposed: *“Every student should attend in-person classes after the military coup, and in virtual classes, they should be given the opportunities to choose every course and module that they are interested in.”* Based on his idea, students should have the opportunity to choose subjects of interest both in virtual and in-person classes despite the challenges they face due to the current political crisis in their regions.

Interviewee 5 (Personal interview, 23 November 2023), a former fourth-year student with a specialization in Mathematics, Chemistry, and Biology in Sagaing University of Education indicated, *“I would like to attend face to face class after the political situation.”* According to the response, the student hopes to attend on-site class after the military coup.

Interviewee 6 (Personal interview, 24 November 2023), a private virtual university student specialized in Education and Public health, stated *“Virtual education is an alternative opportunity for every student and it is recommended that students attend certificate and diploma courses linked to the professional development of every student.”* This can be interpreted to mean that virtual education should be accessible to every student as an alternative

opportunity, and that it is needed for the students to attend different professional development courses.

Interviewee 7 (Personal interview, 15 December 2023), a private virtual university student with a specialization in Human Rights Education and Inclusive Education and Leadership, suggested “*If I will be a teacher in future, one thing I would do to improve virtual education is to draw the attention and encourage eagerness of the pupils by using humor during teaching.*” According to his responses, it is also important to motivate the students by engaging their attention and commitment and by teaching with humor.

Interviewee 8 (Personal interview, 16 December 2023) a former fourth-year student specialized in Mathematics, Chemistry, and Biology at Sagaing University of Education, suggested, “*Every teacher should accept the students’ questions and explain them systematically. Qualified teachers are required to promote current education.*” This suggests that students hope to discuss with the teachers through question-and-answer methods. It is essential to have qualified teachers in both virtual and face-to-face classes for advancing current education.

To summarize, the students’ suggestions indicate that they hope to promote the standard of current education through virtual education during Myanmar’s ongoing political crisis. Moreover, it is required to systematically implement the current virtual education system to protect the personal information of teachers and students under the military junta regime.

One of the first-year students from Shan state suggested to avoid the limitation of a minimum of five students in a selected private virtual university and expressed the wish to study in courses without restricted numbers. The student (Personal interview, 23 November 2023) explained: “*Some classes which we want to attend are cancelled because of the minimum student limit.*” This indicates that students in these universities wish to study their selected course. Therefore, the leaders of virtual universities should plan and implement strategies to offer courses of all fields, taught by experts, without limiting the number of students. Moreover, it is important that every student has the right to choose the courses they are interested in.

## 5. Conclusion

The intended objectives of this research are to identify the challenges and opportunities of education students in accessing virtual education at the university, to compare the strategies used by education students regarding the accessibility of the current virtual education in relation to age, year and region, and to provide suggestions for the wider accessibility of virtual education for education university students in Myanmar.

First, the study examines if there are significant differences among education students regarding the challenges and opportunities in accessing virtual education based on age, year and region. In the sample, the experiences of students from selected virtual universities show no significant differences: they face the same challenges and issues of accessibility regardless of age, year or region.

Second, the study shows that the current virtual education uses positive strategies to cope with challenges in accessibility. The analysis of students’ responses regarding the challenges of



electricity shortages and poor internet connection reveals that they use backup power sources, such as uninterruptible power supply units or power banks, to overcome such problems. Moreover, students prepare extra computers and tablets to attend virtual classes. In-depth interviews indicate that they rely on mobile data or access public Wi-Fi networks to cope with internet disruption.

Some contributing factors related to participants’ negative experiences could also be found in similar studies in the literature. For example, Goswami et al. (2021) pointed out students miss the assistance they receive from their peers in classrooms and laboratories. However, students in the selected virtual universities believe that online education enables them to continue their studies during the military coup.

As Howland and Moore (2002) pointed out, the level and quality of communication between students and instructor is a critical issue. Petride (2002) revealed that the immediacy in responses affected learners’ experiences in online learning. Vonderwell (2003) and Song et al. (2004) also reported a lack of a sense of community in students’ online learning experiences and found that familiarity with the instructor influenced students’ learning experiences. When online learners know the online instructor, they may feel more comfortable attending the instructor’s online class. Therefore, the researcher, based on the results, found that the conditions of virtual education were more comfortable for the students than in face-to face classes.

The results suggest that virtual education has some benefits, such as time savings, increased convenience, enhanced digital skills, the ability to learn from anywhere in the world, reduced expenses, readily available learning materials, fast and easy sharing of resources, support for flexible schedules, and a variety of courses offered on one platform. However, there are also limitations, such as a lack of social and emotional skills, negative effects of excessive screen time on students, reduced personal interaction between teachers and students, and possible disturbances, such as electricity shortages and poor internet connection. Online learners need to overcome these challenges by using alternative methods to access the internet, such as mobile data or public Wi-Fi networks.

In line with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No.13 on the Right to Education (1999), this research specifically points out ‘accessibility’ as the key criteria among the 4A (Accessibility, Acceptability, Availability, Adaptability) framework. Students in selected virtual universities generally enjoy effective access consistent with the accessibility criteria, including non-discrimination, economic accessibility, and physical accessibility. These virtual universities do not discriminate against any students during class and accept all students without discrimination. Moreover, students in these universities do not pay tuition or other fees.

However, according to the results, the students’ suggestions for improving their experience with virtual education are as follows: (1) Ensure the security of personal information; (2) Avoid canceling of courses due to limiting the minimum attendance: The selected private virtual universities set a limit of a minimum of five students in every course, but the students wish to be able to attend this class even there are less students; (3) Ensure that all organizations

recognize virtual education certificates; (4) Offer Bachelors’ and Masters’ degrees in selected virtual education; (5) Provide breaks during virtual classes; (6) Update students’ technical skills, such as through the use of learning management systems (LMS) and improving presentation skills using technology; (7) Motivate students to attend and enjoy virtual education by offering job opportunities and chances to study in foreign countries; (8) Ensure a stable internet connection and free Wi-Fi, in particular for CDM students; (9) Encourage teachers to use more interactive tools during lectures and give job opportunities through other organization.

### ***Recommendations***

The following recommendations are derived from the findings of this study:

1. Instructors of virtual education should provide guidance on alternative methods of accessing the internet, such as using mobile data or accessing public Wi-Fi networks, to cope with the poor internet connectivity. Students should be encouraged to move to convenient places with accessible internet and Wi-Fi.
2. The leaders of the Ministry of Education under National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) should implement specific technology training to address security concerns regarding personal information of students and teachers, with the aim of overcoming barriers by keeping the personal data confidential in virtual education.
3. Virtual universities should motivate all students to attend virtual education, e.g. by providing job opportunities and the chance of further studies abroad.
4. Teachers should encourage students to conduct research to improve their research skills in virtual education, in line with international level.
5. Teachers in virtual universities should give individual assignments to non-active learners during group-work activities to ensure an effective teaching and learning process in virtual education.
6. A follow up study should be conducted on students at the high school and tertiary level in fields other than education, focusing on the accessibility of current virtual education. This study should use a larger sample size and include more universities and colleges in the study.
7. The leaders of the NUG should support the fees for internet data, Wi-Fi, and stipends for students and teachers joining the CDM, not only for face-to-face classes under the NUG, but also for virtual classes.
8. The Ministry of Education under the NUG should systematically implement educational and political policies for all teachers and students participating in the CDM in Myanmar.

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## **The Challenges Faced in Teaching and Learning during the Spring Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

On 1st February 2021, the military seized state power by citing unfair allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 general election. The people of Myanmar who had enjoyed the benefits of a democratic system during the five-year civilian government did not accept the military's unjust coup d'état. On 3rd February 2021, people expressed their absolute disapproval of the military's illegal usurpation of the people's power and peacefully demanded the release of the State Counselor, the President and other political leaders. Millions of people only engaged in peaceful demonstrations and demands, including international supportive activities such as those of the Milk Tea Alliance, but the army has been brutally suppressing unarmed people through violence since 9th February 2021. Government servants who do not accept this injustice have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in a revolutionary protest, and the youth, especially members of Generation Z who want justice and truth. They have only one choice to overthrow the military junta through armed revolution. This is known as the Spring Revolution of Myanmar. The five pillars of the Spring Revolution are diplomatic efforts, revolutionary forces, CDM, international fundraising and people's strikes. During the Spring Revolution, more than 200,000 students have witnessed an immense loss of their right to education; however, CDM teachers and students continue to strive for education. With the support of the Ministry of Education and the National Unity Government of Myanmar, CDM teachers and staff suffering hardship and insecurity have strived to create a learning platform for the CDM students and implement an online education system as part of revolutionary education. This research experimentally investigates the challenges of teaching and learning during the Spring Revolution through a number of case studies. The results of this study will serve as an effective example for developing aspiring educational fields in the future.

**Keywords:** Military Coup, Spring Revolution, CDM, Challenges, Generation Z

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## 1. Introduction

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021, the Myanmar military seized state power from the civilian government elected by the people of Myanmar on the grounds that the ballot was wrong. Moreover, they arrested President U Win Myint, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Ministers, Prime Ministers of Regions and State, and other political activists. All of them have been unfairly charged and imprisoned. On 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021, the Myanmar people demonstrated their absolute disapproval of the military's illegal usurpation of peoples' power and peacefully demanded to release the President, State Counselor, and other political leaders. Since 5<sup>th</sup> February, millions of people throughout Myanmar have been disciplined in expressing their wishes by shouting that they do not accept the military coup, and the unjust overthrow of the government that was elected. Although the people of Myanmar engaged in peaceful demonstrations and demands, the military has been brutally suppressing unarmed people with violence since 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021. Government officials or civil servants who do not accept the unjust coup have taken part actively in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and most Myanmar people have carried out strikes such as the three fingers strike, flower strike, Easter Egg strike, Thanakha strike, rubbish strike, sarong strike, and others. The youth, especially Generation Z, who demand justice and truth have decided to overturn the military junta. When peaceful revolution becomes impossible, violent revolution becomes inevitable. Thus, Generation Z has chosen an armed revolution, known as Myanmar Spring Revolution.

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR is not a treaty, but a declaration of the basic principles of human rights and freedom, intended to serve as a common standard of achievement for all peoples of all nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes civil and political rights, like the right to life, liberty, free speech and privacy. It also includes economic, social and cultural rights like the right to social security, health and education. Human rights are important because they are a set of principles concerned with equality and fairness and they recognize our freedom to make choices about our lives and to develop our potential as human beings. During the Spring Revolution, most students witnessed an immense loss of their right to education, nevertheless, they have endeavored to continue their education.

Most of the people and activists urged civil servants to take part in the CDM. During the three years of the spring revolution, most of the CDMers and CDM students faced challenges in their lives, like security threats, arrest by terrorist military groups, lack of income, difficulty in finding jobs, among other challenges. However, most of the CDMers oppose military administration and stand with the revolution's truth and for the country's future. In this paper, about 120 teachers and 280 students answered questions aiming to know difficulties and hardships during the revolution, and the data collected from their responses have been used in this research

### 1.1. Findings: Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and Resuming Education

The Civil Disobedience Movement is an ongoing civil resistance movement that has evolved from the early days of the Spring Revolution when the Myanmar military attempted a coup d'état on 1 February 2021. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) is one of the key pillars

of Myanmar’s Spring Revolution and is also one of the key reasons why the coup has failed. In its very initial form, it could be defined as a mass strike, where public sector workers from the lower rungs of the civil service through to the very top, including health, education, banking employees, railway workers, oil and gas workers, engineers, lawyers and judges, civil servants and members of the security services refused to work for the junta and follow any other order from them. It quickly evolved into a nationwide movement in which private sector workers withdrew their work, private businesses refused to cooperate with the junta, and consumers boycotted military-linked products and services.

It is a classic civil resistance movement in the Gandhian tradition of non-violence. The objective of this withdrawal of labor is to deny the junta any legitimacy or ability to govern, sending a strong signal that the people of Myanmar will not accept a military dictatorship. In April 2021, the State Administration Council ordered the dismissal of all CDMers at all ranks and fields of government service. Despite this withdrawal of labor under the junta, the CDMers have continued to provide health, education and other essential services for Myanmar people under the auspices of the NUG, Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), or local people’s administration teams. Furthermore, the CDM, like the broader Spring Revolution, is made up of a diverse and inclusive group of people from all regions and all walks of life (Progressive Voice, 2023, report on the CDM).

After the 2021 military coup, most government servants, including higher education teachers, basic education teachers, and students, actively participated in the CDM, strongly opposing the military coup. It is estimated that there are about 20,000 CDMers in the higher education sector and 300,000 in the basic education sector. All these CDMers remain steadfast in the spring revolution. In March 2024, the Committee Representing Pyaw Oo Hluttaw (CRPH) appointed Union Ministers, including the Education Minister.

All CDMers of the education sector have come together and supported the education revolution. On 16th April 2021, CRPH announced the NUG, and the Ministry of Education was organized under the NUG and Union Minister and Deputy Ministers were appointed. Therefore, CDM teachers, CDM students, Teachers’ Union and Students’ Unions worked to resume education for CDM students. In Myanmar, universities were closed from 1 April, 2019 onwards, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the first wave of COVID-19, the Myanmar civilian government planned to re-open universities. When the military coup occurred in 2021, most of the universities organized interim university councils for education and the administration of the universities.

## **1.2. Higher Education Before and After the Coup**

Myanmar had some of the best institutions in Southeast Asia before and shortly after independence, but the quality of education became inadequate under military rule that lasted nearly 70 years. In contrast to trends at the primary and secondary levels, Myanmar higher education institutions still face very low enrolment rates for the second year in a row, following the 2021 military coup. Today, Myanmar nationals who seek to pursue quality higher education frequently consider studying abroad. Quality higher education within Myanmar is hard to find, especially in state institutions. This means that only members of the wealthier classes are able

to access quality education, while the rest of the population has to attend institutions with low quality standards. Also academic freedom in education is limited due to the centralized education system implemented since 1962.

Notwithstanding the civilian government initiating some reforms in the education system, Myanmar universities and colleges remain funded and managed by the state, adhering to government policy. Since professors and educators are employed by the government, they need to align with the government's directive. While science subjects may not be affected, the situation is very different for the social sciences and other fields. Political and human rights lectures and discussions have often been prohibited. Another issue is mismanagement in general. For instance, professors and educators at different school levels are often assigned duties, such as taking care of campus premises and overseeing security measures, including acting as security personnel at the gates. The subjects taught and studied in Myanmar's higher education institutions matter to the country's overall national development. Vocational training and linkages to the private sector have been largely absent, and the relationship of education to material success or even financial stability is hardly evident to students. The subjects of agriculture and livestock are key to national success, given the importance of the country's agriculture-based economy. Rice milling technology, critical for improving the quality of Myanmar's rice production and its global market value, remains extremely outdated. Existing technologies are from the 1920s, and there has been no tangible innovation since then. In the academic year 2019-2020, the new subject of rice milling technology was offered at some government technological colleges, but to date no one has yet graduated in this field in Myanmar.

During the civilian government, efforts were undertaken to reform Myanmar's education system through the implementation of the National Education Strategic Plan 2016-2021. It aimed to contribute to national socio-economic development, to support the democratic and peace-building process, and to achieve Myanmar's National goal of becoming a middle class income country by 2030. The National Education Strategic Plan focused on reform in access, quality, and inclusion in preschool and kindergarten education, as well as improvements in the basic education curriculum, student assessments and examinations. To align with regional and international education standards, the civilian government, experts and scholars world actively towards education reform. In 2016, the traditional schooling was changed to the KG+ 12 system, with the help of the Japanese government and the Asia Development Bank.

Under the military administration from 1962 to 2010, there was no academic freedom in the education sector and democratic ideas, student strikes and revolutionary processes were prohibited in the curriculum. The country's higher education system did not offer programs on topics like negotiations or conflict transformations, let alone making academic contributions to support the country's peace efforts. This is true even though the nation has faced the world's longest civil war. The impact of the 2021 coup on this already deeply troubled system of higher education added to the challenges caused by a year lost to COVID-19. The coup sent Myanmar's higher education sector into total collapse. Many young people of university age who engaged in peaceful demonstrations against the military coup became soldiers in the anti-coup and anti-junta Spring Revolution. They reasoned that, as long as the country's military



gets involved in politics, students also need to involve in politics. Besides, the military has stationed forces at campuses across the nation under the pretext of ensuring security, which is a serious violation of international human rights law. Many educators and university teachers have joined university students and faced arrest or had to go into hiding due to their opposition to the military junta. Very few remain actively engaged in undertaking their normal activities on Myanmar's campuses. The result is that higher education in Myanmar has been largely suspended (Aung Tun, 2022).

### **1.3. Road to the Open University**

In September 2021, the Higher Education Sector of the Ministry of Education worked to organize universities teachers and staff to resume education for CDM students throughout Myanmar. The Ministry of Education proposed an online university model called “Open University”, which anyone could join anytime to continue their education. The Ministry of Education met and discussed several times with the 176 Interim University Council inside Myanmar about resuming education, continuous education, and the Open University. The Interim University Council, Teachers' Union and Students' Union engaged in discussion and negotiation for about eight months, from Sept 2021 to May 2022. After that, they decided to establish a single comprehensive, fully autonomous public university. In honor of the youth, students, teachers and Generation-Z involved in the Myanmar Spring Revolution, the name “Myanmar Nway-Oo University” (means as Myanmar Spring University) was chosen for the university through a voting system. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2022, the Ministry of Education officially announced the opening of Myanmar Nway-Oo University (MNOU) and invited all CDM students to join and to attend the online education.

### **1.4. Establishment of the Myanmar Nway-Oo University (MNOU)**

Myanmar Nway-Oo University was the first public university to be autonomous and comprehensive in Myanmar. On October 7, 2022, the Ministry of Education of the National Unity Government of Myanmar officially announced the opening of MNOU. On October 15, 2022, the opening ceremony of Myanmar Nway-Oo University was held, attended by the Minister of Education, Deputy Ministers of Education, representatives of the CRPH, members of the Education Administrative Committee, members of the Education Board of Ethnic Groups and Rohingya, members of the Boards of Education, members of the Universities' Councils, and other stakeholders. Myanmar Nway-Oo University was opened through the collective leadership and cooperation of 66 Interim University Councils and 37 Boards of Education of Arts and Sciences, Economic, Agriculture, Forestry, Art and Culture, Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Co-operative.

On November 18, 2022, the Temporary University Committee was established to implement administrative and management work, with its first meeting held on November 22, 2022. Myanmar Nway-Oo University has developed well-planned safety protocols for students and teachers with the help of the Ministry of Information and Technology. In the teaching and learning system, Myanmar Nway-Oo University not only focuses on the security of students, teachers and staff but also on self-based learning and student-centered learning.

In December 2022, the policy council comprised 50 members, comprising members from the Boards of Education under the Ministry of Education, representatives of MNOU departments, and a university council affiliated with MNOU, to draft the university charter. To ensure university integrity, the council held weekly meetings to negotiate the charter. With combined strength and collective leadership, the Myanmar Nway-Oo University charter was ratified through a transparent voting system on <sup>October</sup> 7, 2023.

The senate, which is organized with faculties of the university, is the highest authority of MNOU. The university practices full academic freedom and manages the Boards of Education through mutual coordination, refraining from intervening in academic curriculums, teaching, and decision-making. It has 65 undergraduate programs, 53 post-graduate programs, 1 diploma program, and 1 certificate course. In total, MNOU offers 120 programs, with administrative departments under the guidance of the University Council, including the Administration Department, Budget Department, Student Affairs Department, Internet and Technology Department, Public Relations Department, Monitoring and Evaluation Department, and International Relations Department.

From the first to the third batch of Myanmar Nway-Oo University, 8000 CDM students from various universities of Myanmar were accepted who had lost their right to education. MNOU has provided free education for many subjects and formal courses. However, only 5402 students out of 8000 could attend lessons because of difficulties and hardship, such as lack of internet access and living in conflict areas or camps. MNOU is organized into 15 faculties and offers 44 Bachelor's degrees and 20 Master's degrees to the CDM students. The faculties of MNOU are (1) Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, (2) Faculty of Earth Science, (3) Faculty of Natural Science, (4) Faculty of Literature and Linguistics, (5) Faculty of English Language, (6) Faculty of Performance Art and Visual Arts, (7) Faculty of Economics, (8) Faculty of Statistics, (9) Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, (10) Faculty of Agriculture, (11) Faculty of Cooperatives, (12) Faculty of Political Studies, (13) Faculty of Technology, (14) Faculty of Law, (15) Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup in 2021, most of the students lost access to education in Myanmar. Some students stated that they had to attend the military council-run university against their will because of their parents. However, most parents do not want to send their children to universities under the military dictatorship and instead support them to attend Myanmar Nway Oo University, established by the NUG. To meet the demand, MNOU prepared to open a new first-year intake in 2023 and planned to offer a total of 35 bachelor's degrees programs, including in arts and sciences, economics, and in agricultural science. In November 2023, MNOU called for new intake first year students and a total of 2320 students are currently enrolled in their first year of study.

In total, 531 teachers are listed, as well as 269 teachers who are assisting with teaching and learning needs, bringing the total of teachers and office staff at MNOU to 700. The teaching staff, pro-rectors, professors, associate professors, lecturers, assistant lecturers, tutors and demonstrators, are enthusiastically participating. Moreover, office staff in various positions, CDM students and alumni are also actively involved. At present, the financial needs of MNOU

Myanmar Nway-Oo University are being met through allocations of the NUG, and MNOU is trying to obtain further support from both domestic sources and foreign countries.

All teaching and office staff are working voluntarily and have given up their former positions and salaries. MNOU does not pay salaries, but tries to provide a hospitality environment through support with data, computers, and hardware and software that are needed for online teaching, as well as technical training. Moreover, MNOU provides CDM support to those in urgent need due to house fires, village burnings, arrest and deaths.

MNOU endeavors to achieve domestic and international cooperation. Recently, Chindwin Comprehensive University, Aung San Comprehensive University, Wunzin Online University, People's Revolution Force Education Sector, Kayan National Education Committee, 3 Kas Education Committee (Kawlin, Katha, Kanbaku Townships in Sagaing Region) and Loikaw University Council became affiliated with MNOU. Besides, MNOU also tries to get educational support and cooperation with Arizona State University, R2 -Myanmar Ways, University of California, and the Special Assistance In-Home Program for Adults SAIH.

With the aim of lifelong application, MNOU has opened a diploma program in Social Science in collaboration with social science disciplines. Currently, 106 students are enrolled in this program. Although more than 400 students would like to enroll in the applied diploma course, only around 100 have been accepted due to general conditions and needs. It is planned to divide the remaining students into groups and accept them in the next term. With the same aim, MNOU is offering a certificate course in Geographic Information System in collaboration with the Earth Sciences and Geosciences disciplines. Currently, there are 45 University's Councils fully affiliated with MNOU and 15 University's Councils that are cooperating as partners.

## **2. The Challenges of Teaching and Learning**

Myanmar Nway-Oo University is the only university that resumed formal education for CDM students after 2021. While preparing the lessons and lecture videos, CDM teachers are facing numerous challenges and difficulties. All CDMers have suffered from physical and mental problems and they have difficulty ensuring safety, face a lack of salary, income, material support, difficulties in accessing the internet, and mental insecurity due to the brutal actions of military dictatorship. These hardships pose the main challenges to CDM teachers in resuming and continuing education. The Administrative Department of MNOU conducted research and collected data from 120 CDM teachers and 288 students of the university. Questionnaires were answered from people of various positions in the higher education sector. The data are a solid proof of the strength of the teaching staff.

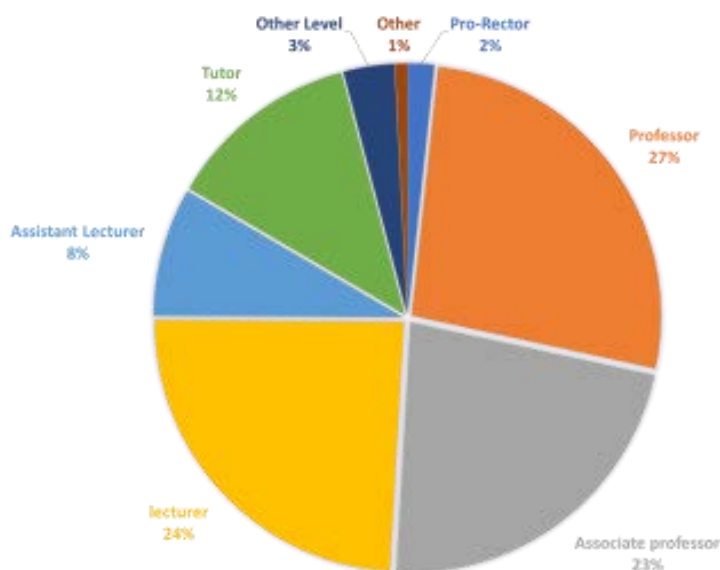


Figure 2.1: Positions of teachers who answered the research questionnaire

According to the collected data, 14 types of students were identified. Out of 288 students, 3.8% (11 Students) could not continue their education due to general difficulties and lack of internet accessibility. Since the 2021 military coup, about 3,000,000 students (basic education and higher education sectors) do not go to school or university under the control of the military junta, and they have given up their education. According to data from the Ministry of Education for 2022 and 2023, around 30,000 students have taken the Basic Education Completion Assessment Examination held by the Ministry of Education, National Unity Government. It can be estimated that around 131 out of 288 students (45.5%) are waiting to continue their education under the NUG-MOE or revolution groups, and they do not go to school or university under the control of the military junta. This data shows that most of the students are waiting and have full confidence in the Spring Revolution.

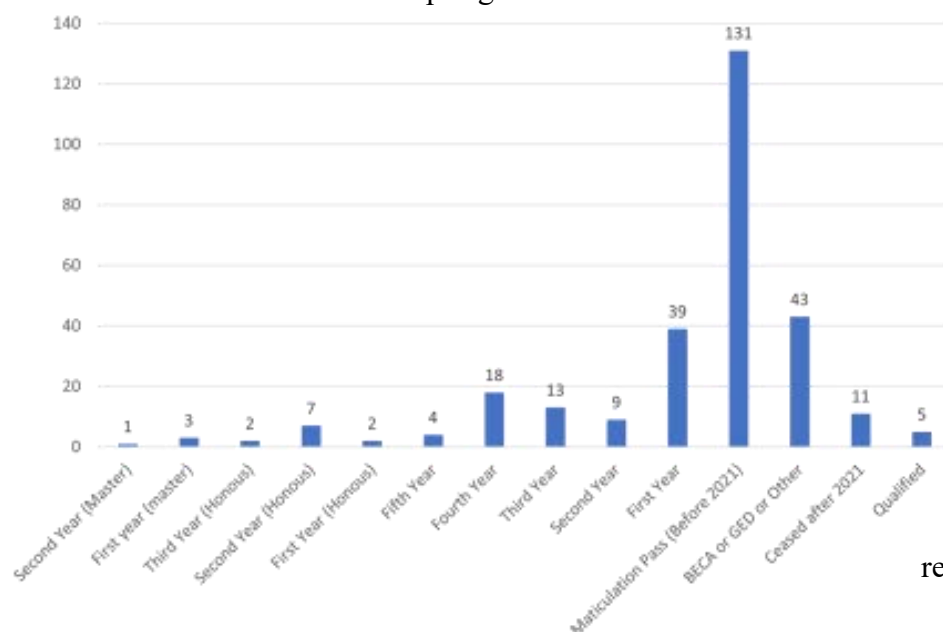


Figure 2.2: Years of students who answered the research questionnaire

## 2.1. Security Concern

Security concerns are the first and most important challenge that CDM teachers face while preparing lessons, video lectures and questions. After participating in the CDM, the terrorist military junta tried to suppress and arrest CDMers. Firstly, military authorities issued removal letters, followed by dismissal orders. They also issued warrants under 505 Section (A) and (B) against some CDM teachers, staff and students. Some teachers have moved to other places, threatened with arrest by the Myanmar military. According to the data collection, 25 percent of those who answered the questionnaires are living in different places, and 77 (64.2%) of the CDM teachers can live with great caution in the places they stayed before the 2021 coup. 82 (68.9%) of 120 teachers answered that security concerns are most difficult and challenging for them.

Like the CDM teachers, 25% of the CDM students (75 students) cannot live in their homes where they stayed before the 2021 military coup, while 75% of the CDM students (216 students) are able to live in their homes or native places. This data shows that between 25 and 30% of CDM teachers and students are living under insecure conditions, and they continue their education under dangerous circumstances because the military junta can arrest them at any time and charge them with various cases like 505 (A), (B), 52 (A) and 50.

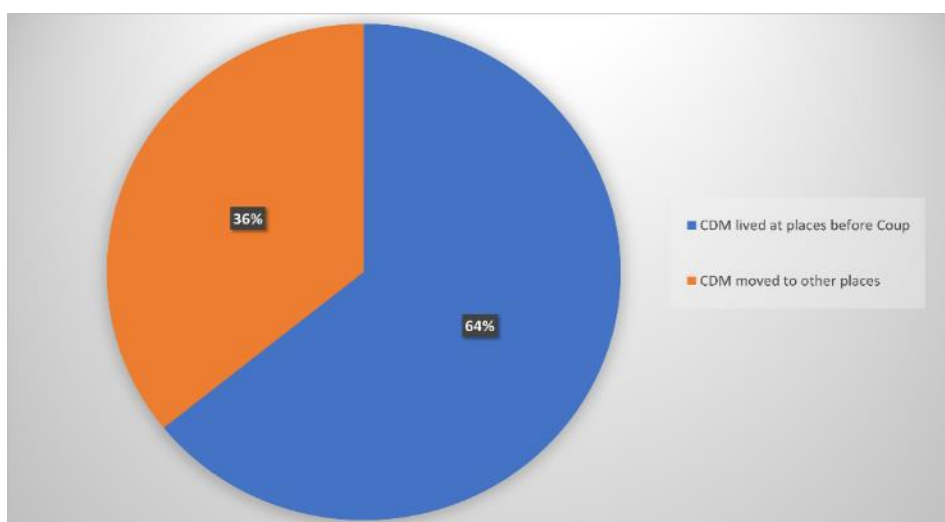


Figure 2.3: CDM teachers who live in places as before the coup or have moved to others

According to the data, most CDM teachers live in Yangon and Mandalay (Figure 2.4), which are the main areas of military junta control, providing the most challenging factors and conditions for security concerns. The military junta can easily arrest the CDM teachers, but they have no choice and find it difficult to move to safe areas, such as NUG-controlled areas or Ethnic Revolution Organization (ERO)-controlled areas, for many reasons. They are afraid to take the risk of moving, and most of the CDMers have families and children. Therefore, they cannot act alone and they always think about their family members, such as aging parents and infant children.

Another reason is that military junta can arrest their family members if they cannot arrest one of the CDM teachers. Such cases have been witnessed with some CDM since 2021, and military

junta arrested CDM family including the 3-year-old daughter of a Yangon City Development Committee servant when they could not arrest him.

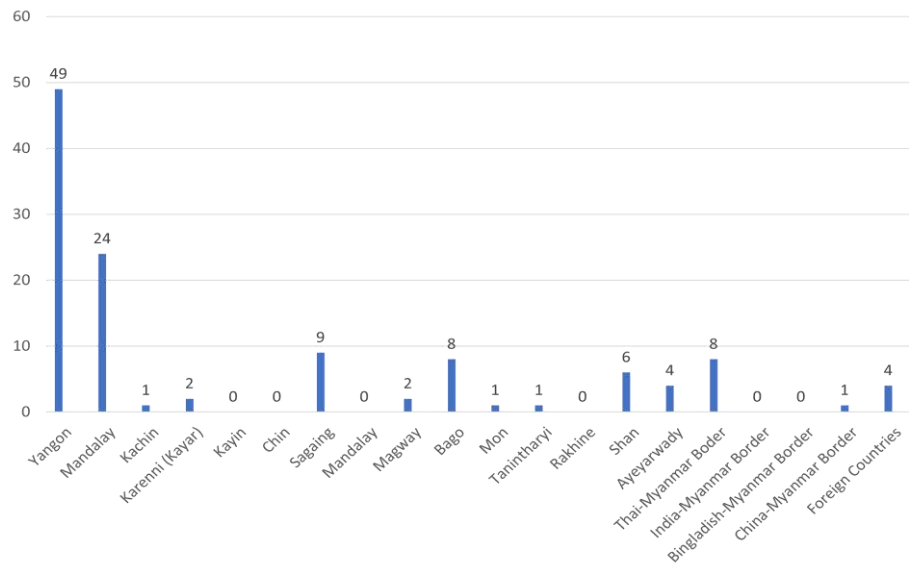


Figure 2.4: Regions where CDM teachers live

Most of the students (29.2%) who answered the questionnaire live in Yangon Region followed by Sagaing Region (13.2%). The details are shown in Figure 2.5. Most parts of Sagaing region have experienced internet shutdown by the military junta. Data show that students from Sagaing strive to continue their education and develop ways to access internet for their study.

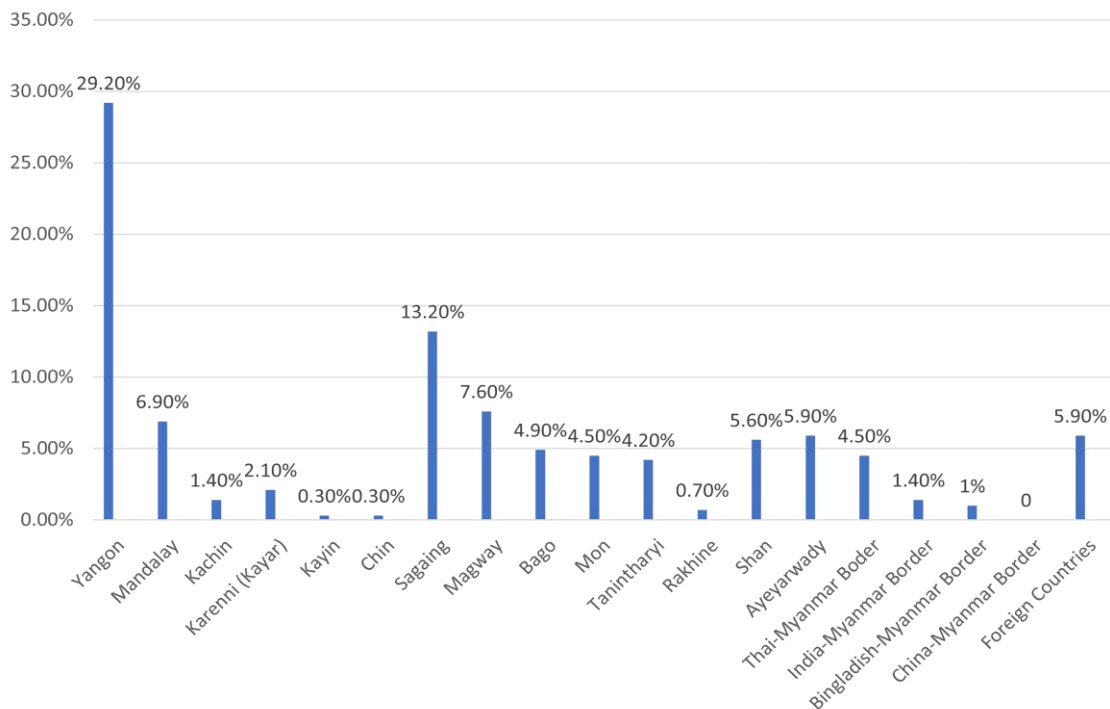


Figure.2.5: The region that CDM Students lived

Due to arrests by the military junta, most of the CDM teachers cannot live at their home or in places they lived before the coup. Only 29 teachers (24.2%) stay in their own houses, while 25 teachers (21%) live in their own houses, but often have to move to other places due to the house inspections and midnight arrests. CDM teachers frequently keep moving from place to place. 37% of teachers reported that they relocated and stayed at those places consistently. 18%, 21 out of 120 teachers, frequently moved to new locations. Forcing the CDM teachers and students to move and to fear staying in their homes is a human rights violation.

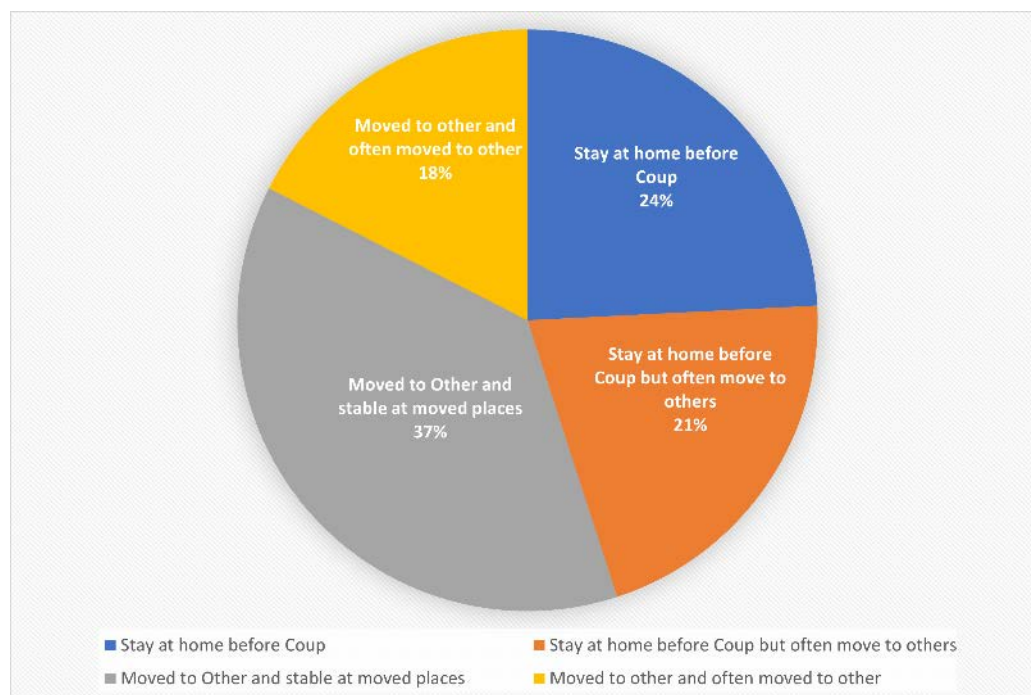


Figure 2.6: Living conditions of CDM teachers after coup

## 2.2. Salary and Income Needs

None of the CDM teachers receive a salary because they have already been dismissed by the military junta after participating in the CDM. To impart their knowledge and wisdom to the students, many teachers still decided to voluntarily prepare the lessons. As a token of appreciation, the Ministry of Education allocated funds to award CDM teachers and staff. This means that the teachers from MNOU receive only a little payment for the preparation of the video lectures for formal courses. On the other hand, they need to ensure the continuation of the education nearly unpaid. They cannot receive a salary or honorarium fees anywhere. The research data show most of the CDM teachers are involved in the movement and continuous education until they cannot no longer get any support and salaries.

According to the data, 65 teachers (54.2%) have no income at all and rely on the income of family members or savings from before the coup. Only three teachers (2.5%) have a normal income from other jobs since participating in the CDM movement. 58 teachers (48.3%) have sporadic income from jobs they found after joining the CDM movement.

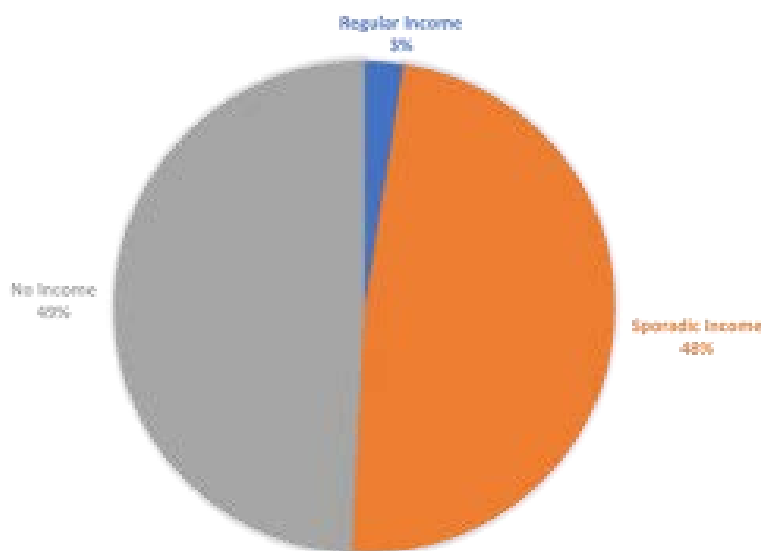


Figure 2.7: The support received by CDM teachers

### 2.3. Internet Accessibility

Internet availability is the most important precondition for online teaching and learning. After the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup, online learning became the one and only way to ensure continuing education for teachers and students. The Ministry of Education under the NUG strives to establish and develop online learning systems in both Basic Education and Higher Education for the continuous education of CDM students from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic period to the present day. Most of the teachers and students live inside Myanmar. Some places in Myanmar have faced internet shutdowns by the military State Administrative Council. Some areas like Karenni State and Sagaing Region strive to use “Starlink” for internet access.

According to research data, 40%, 40 out of 120 teachers, live in areas where the internet is unstable. Some teachers need to travel to areas far away to get internet access, sometimes inside war zones, and thus, under extremely dangerous conditions, sometimes even life-threatening. Among the students, 40.6% (117 out of 288 students) live in areas where the internet is unstable.

These data underline that half of the CDM teachers and students live in areas facing unstable internet access or internet cut offs, but many are trying hard to find ways to get internet access and continue their teaching and learning.



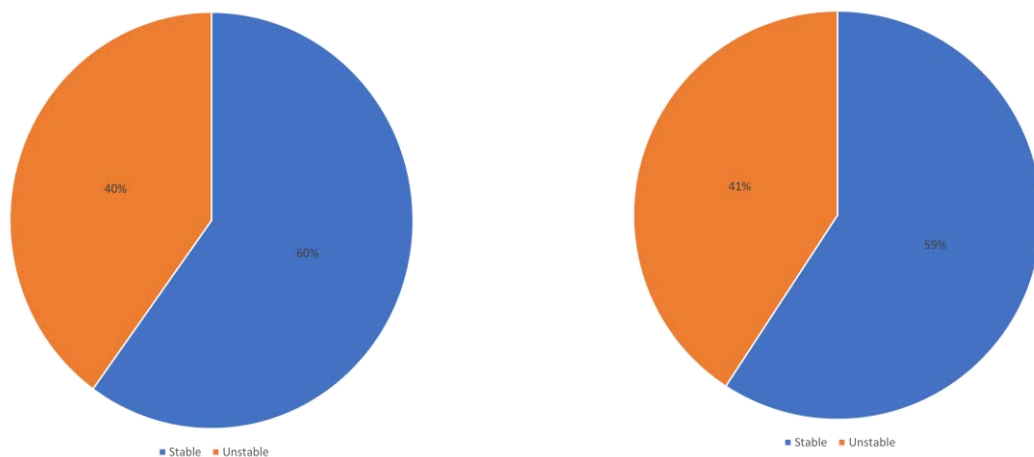


Figure 2.8: Internet conditions for CDM teachers and students

According to data, most of the teachers (75%) can use fiber Wi-Fi which provides good conditions for online teaching and learning. The data is shown in following figure.

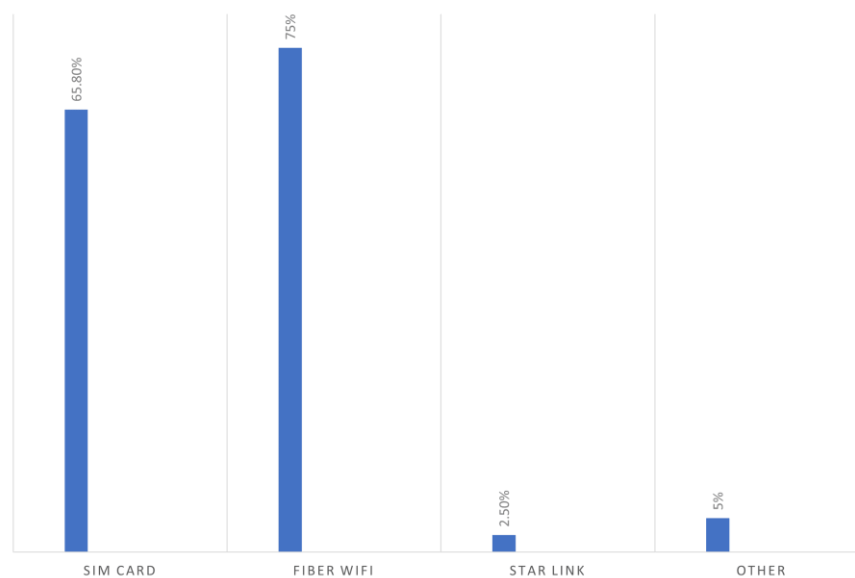


Figure.2.9: Internet resources of CDM teachers

Most of the students (66%) use SIM card data. However, the costs for data are high now, and this is one key challenge for online learning. The data is show the following figure. 3.9% of the students use Starlink, which shows that students who live in internet cut-off areas are still interested in their education.

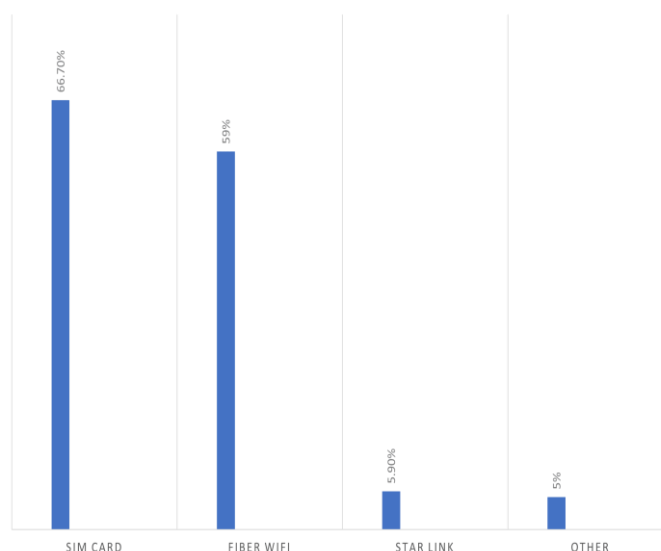


Figure 2.10: Internet resources of CDM students

## 2.4. Teaching Material Supports

Most of the CDM teachers and students are not able to buy materials that are necessary for online learning. Already under normal conditions, most of the government servants found it challenging to buy materials like laptops, MacBooks, etc. with their own salaries. They needed to save money for many years to buy such items. Under these conditions, they have no income, making it impossible for them to buy teaching material. Thus, they have to use their old devices, and if these break, it becomes difficult to continue teaching and working.

Most of the teachers have laptops for online learning, but nearly all the students have only smartphones. Yet, they are very interested in their education and participate in online learning only through their smartphones.

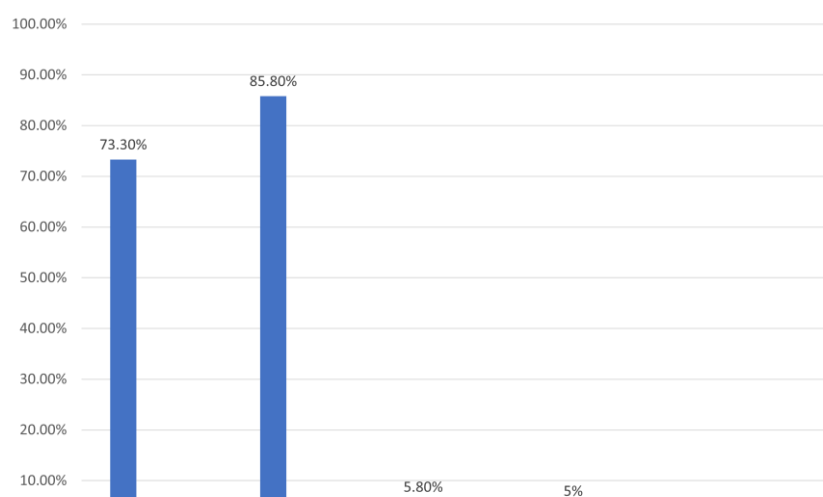


Figure 2.11: Devices used for online learning by CDM teachers

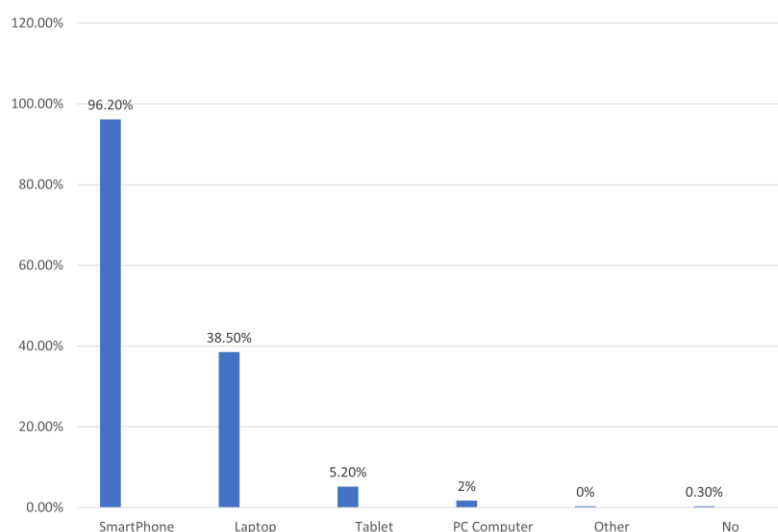


Figure 2.12: Devices used for online learning by CDM students

## 2.5. Mental Insecurity

Mental insecurity is the important factor that affects the ability of people to work. Thai condition of mental insecure is cause by fear of arrest and torture by the military junta, which can even lead to death. The constant fear of being arrested is one of the key causes for developing depression. CDM teachers that have been charged with the unjust law of the military junta face even more fear, and some teachers have committed suicide when they are no longer able to endure the pressure, e.g. related to family concerns, lack of income, and insecurity.

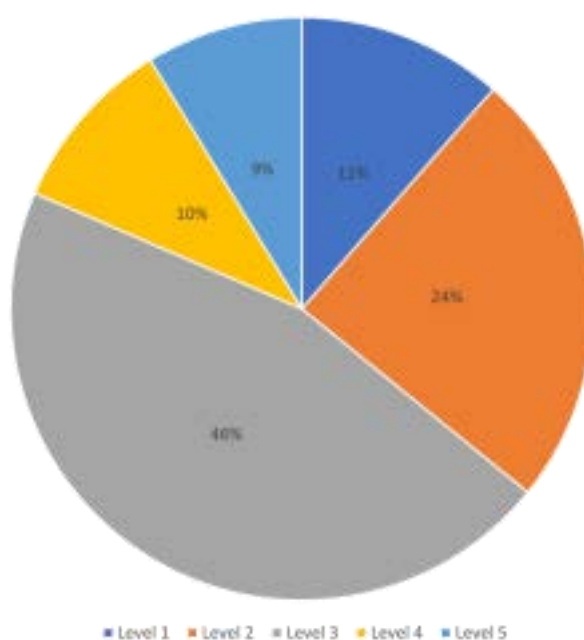


Figure 2.13: Mental security levels of teachers (Level 1 = Lowest, Level 5 = Highest)

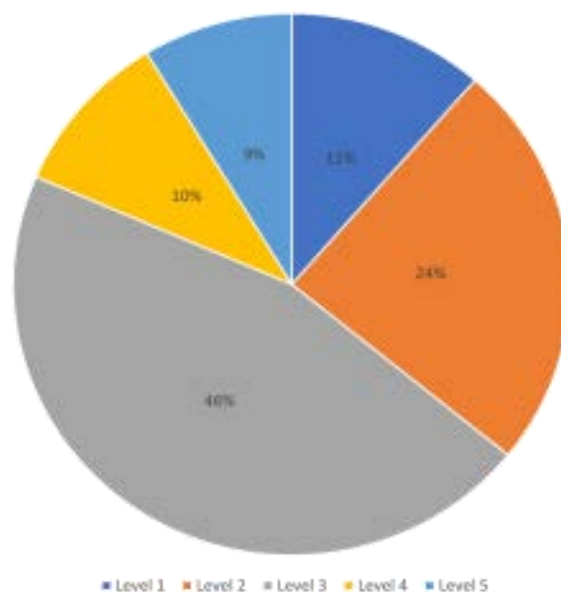


Figure 2.14: Mental security levels of students (Level 1 = Lowest, Level 5 = Highest)

## 2.6. Trust in the Revolution

Most of the students and teachers trust that the Spring Revolution of Myanmar will be successful. 77.5% of teachers and 87.8% of students have confidence in the revolution, to an extent between 75% and 100%. This shows that they are committed to the Spring Revolution and continue to engage in their revolutionary work, guided by the truth of the revolution.

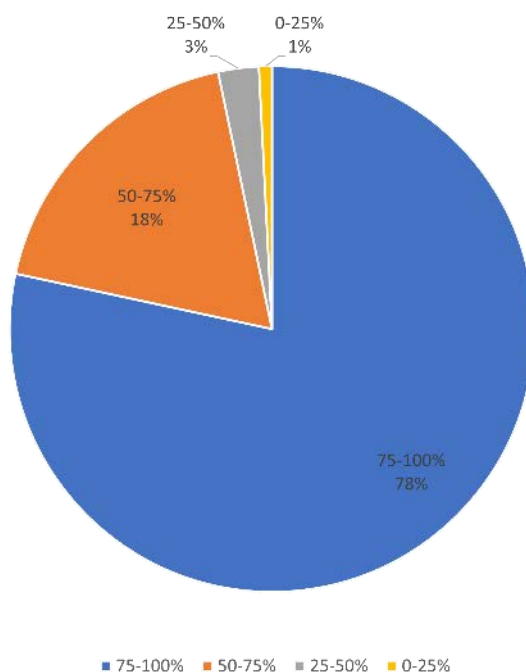


Figure 2.15: Trust percentages of CDM teachers

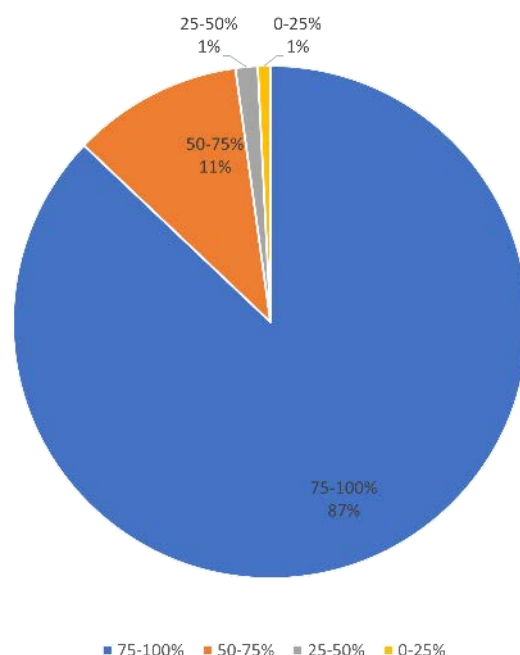


Figure 2.16: Trust percentage of CDM students

The data indicate that most of the teachers and students live in military-controlled areas, such as Yangon and Mandalay, where insecure conditions are of great concern to all of them. I would like to discuss how you would handle these insecure conditions if you had to face them. The insufficient and limited amount of domestic and international support is one of the reasons preventing CDMers from moving to other places. In addition, they cannot move to safety zones or liberated areas in Myanmar due to family concerns, costs, and lack of income. Most of the CDM teachers work for continuing education with minimal support from the Ministry of Education under the NUG, while some do not receive any support. CDM teachers and doctors are finding it hard to find jobs because the military junta has suppressed private schools and hospitals, which previously employed them. Without income for the CDMers, the situation is not tenable in the long term. As CDM teachers cannot continue their teaching, there is a possibility of disrupted education for CDM students. The NUG should develop a long-term plan to secure adequate income for the CDM teachers and doctors for their survival.

Internet accessibility is crucial for online teaching and learning systems. Most teachers and students used SIM card data and fiber Wi-Fi, but the military junta can cut, shut down and control internet usage. The use of old devices poses a long-term problem and the lack of back-up support could halt online learning.

Mental problems and insecurities have been found among both teachers and students because of the long duration of the Spring Revolution, which aims to remove the military junta. Despite numerous challenges and difficulties, they continue their efforts due to their belief in the revolution: about 80% of CDM teachers and students trust in the movement and sacrificed everything they owned. They are committed to win to eliminate the military junta and that they can establish a federal democracy in the country in the future.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research provides evidence of the difficulties and challenges faced by CDM teachers and students. CDM teachers have to work in a variety of jobs unrelated to their education, showing that there is a great need for salary or regular support for them. In addition, there is a need to help move CDMers to safe zones and to provide job opportunities. It is crucial for anyone within the country and abroad to provide as much support as possible. Support for teaching material and internet access should be arranged as a back-up plan. Also long-term plans for mental support are required. If the challenges increase, there might be more suicides which must be prevented at any case. International political and financial support will be needed for building a new federal democratic country. It can be said that the revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past, but it will finally enable a change in the fate of humankind. However, the most violent element in society is ignorance, and we, the people of Myanmar, continue fighting to free the country and to make room on earth for honest men to live in.

### Acknowledgements

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## **The Rohingya and Myanmar: Examining Conflict and Resolution Strategies through the Lens of the Assam State of North East India Detention Model**

**U Sa Jen Mog**

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### **Abstract**

Refugees are a pervasive global concern, vividly illustrated by the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group, have faced severe persecution and discrimination for decades within Myanmar, culminating in intensified violence in 2017. The crisis has garnered international condemnation due to its humanitarian toll, yet meaningful solutions remain elusive. Historically rooted in Myanmar's Rakhine State for centuries, the Rohingya have consistently been denied citizenship and basic rights by the Myanmar government, which views them as illegal immigrants despite their longstanding presence. The conflict is deeply complex, rooted in ethnic and religious tensions exacerbated by political and economic factors. There are two dominant groups in Myanmar: one is supporting the Rohingya and another opposing them. The pro-Rohingya faction argues that the Rohingyas have been in Burma since the ninth century, intermingling with various ethnicities for centuries. In contrast, the opposing faction claims that Rohingyas are a recent creation, primarily composed of illegal Bengalis from Chittagong who migrated to Burma during British colonial rule, and holds them responsible for their own crisis. Resolving the Rohingya crisis requires addressing immediate humanitarian needs. Therefore, centralized refugee camps based on the model of Assam, a northeastern state of India, could potentially contribute to a solution for the displaced Rohingya, and improve their current situation in Myanmar, as it contrasts with the notion of forcibly expelling the entire Rohingya community from Myanmar. Instead, a systematic and lawful verification process for the identification of original citizenship could be established for individuals. The data for this study was mainly obtained through secondary sources. The primary data were gathered through systematic personal interviews, i.e., face-to-face and open discussions with the participants, guided by the key research questions of this study: (i) How has the term 'Rohingya' been used historically and in contemporary contexts? (ii) What historical events have contributed to the ethnic conflict involving the Rohingya community? (iii) What alternative solutions could be considered to address the needs of Rohingya refugees while improving Myanmar's reputation?

**Keywords:** Rohingya, Muslim, Conflict, Assam, Detention Model



## Introduction

The issue of refugees is widely prevalent across the globe, with reasons varying from one country to another. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention defines a refugee as, “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” The Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar is a clear example of a humanitarian crisis. The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, have faced severe persecution and discrimination for decades. In 2017, violence escalated dramatically, with the Myanmar military conducting brutal operations that led to widespread killings, sexual violence, and the burning of villages. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, seeking safety in overcrowded refugee camps. The crisis has drawn international condemnation, but solutions remain elusive as the Rohingya continue to suffer from statelessness, a lack of basic rights, and uncertain futures. Their situation in Myanmar is deeply complex. Since pre-colonial times, the Buddhist Arakanese and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya coexisted in what is now Myanmar’s Arakan State and Bangladesh’s Chittagong Division. However, conflicts between these communities have escalated, forcing the Rohingya from their land and creating a geopolitical crisis affecting Southeast Asia. This issue has now become a global political debate, with differing views on how to resolve the crisis peacefully.

The key questions arise: who are the Rohingya, and why is there conflict? The Rohingya people originally resided in the northern region of Rakhine State, located in western Myanmar. In earlier days, Rakhine State was known as Arakan, while Myanmar was known as Burma. In 1784, the independent coastal empire of Rakhine State in Burma was conquered by the Burmese Empire, resulting in the loss of its independence. Based on conventional belief in Myanmar, the Rohingya, known as the people of Arakan, have resided in Arakan since 3000 BC. However, this assertion is weak as it lacks any substantial archaeological or historical evidence.

According to Sahana, Jahangir, and Anisujjaman (2019), the Rohingya are an ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious minority group mainly concentrated in the north-western Arakan State of Myanmar, which was renamed Rakhine State in 1989. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2008) reported that there are around 800,000 Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine, where Buddhist ethnic groups are dominant. Racially, the Rohingya are of South Asian descent and are closely associated with the ‘Chittagonian Bengalis’ of Bangladesh in terms of language and religious practices. They are devout Sunni Muslims, differing from the Buddhist majority population of Myanmar, who are of East Asian descent.

As stated by Rey Ty (2019), the history of the Rohingya in Myanmar is claimed to be relatively recent, yet substantial evidence suggests their presence in the region for centuries. The Rohingya are believed to have originated in Arakan between the 7th and 8th centuries, with Muslim settlers forming a crucial part of their community. It is also argued that the Rohingya settled in Myanmar even before the arrival of Muslims in the 9th century. Historical records indicate that Muslim settlers from the Middle East first arrived in Arakan State, established

themselves, and married local women, highlighting the diverse nature of the Rohingya population. Consequently, the term "Rohingya" refers to Middle Eastern immigrants from Chittagong, Burma, India, Bengal, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Arakan.

Similarly, as far as displacement and conflict are concerned, the northeast (NE) region of India is widely regarded as one of the most culturally diverse areas in the world, with over 200 tribes calling it home. An ethnic conflict has also persisted in this region. This conflict primarily revolves around issues such as land rights, political independence, the desire for a separate state, and secession. As a consequence, people within the majority of these states have been forced to move internally. (i) In May 2023, there was a significant increase in ethnic violence in the state of Manipur. Apart from Manipur, there are also conflicts in different forms and times in the Assam and Tripura states of NE India. Recently, violence occurred after the All-Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) organized a march called 'Tribal Solidarity March' in ten Hill Districts of Manipur on May 3, 2023. As a response, the Meitei (Manipuries) engaged in an attack on the Kukis and burned their possessions. Violence quickly extended to the districts in Manipur that are primarily controlled by the Kuki and Meitei communities. (ii) According to a report by the Asian Centre for Human Rights in 2015, Assam experienced the highest number of internally displaced persons due to conflicts in the year 2014. After visiting the impacted regions, this study concluded that Assam had more than 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2014, making it the largest number globally.

Upon deeper examination, the underlying reason for conflicts among various indigenous communities in any province is their struggle for survival. Groups like the Tripura National Volunteer in Tripura, the Kuki National Front in Manipur, the Mizo National Front in Mizoram of northeast Indian states, and the '*Shanti Bahini*' in Bangladesh emerged due to concerns over their community's survival and socio-economic inequalities. These groups were formed to address perceived threats and imbalances. Currently, with limited resources and significant population growth, provinces are forced to compete for survival.

Therefore, whether displacement is internal or external, the detention model type of camps can help authorities to control and manage the influx of large numbers of refugees or undocumented migrants, ensuring that their identities are verified and their needs are assessed. By detaining all the undocumented migrants or refugees in a regulated area, authorities can address security concerns and prevent potential infiltration by elements posing security threats. Thus, centralizing refugees in camps can also help in the organized distribution of aid and resources, ensuring that the displaced population receives food, medical care, and shelter. Needless to say, the detention camp approach cannot provide a sustainable or humane solution to the displaced Rohingya crisis, but it is considered the only way to improve the current Rohingya situation in Myanmar.

### **Literature Review**

As described by Yhome (2018), the 'Rohingya crisis' is a tragedy that has unfolded over several decades and concerns the plight of hundreds of thousands of people belonging to the Rohingya-Muslim minority community in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Myanmar does not recognize this community as its citizens, and considers them to be 'illegal immigrants' from

Bangladesh. Violence in Rakhine State has displaced several hundred thousand Rohingyas within Myanmar and driven out some 0.7 million of them to neighboring Bangladesh, after the military launched a bloody crackdown triggered by militant attacks on security posts in late August 2017.

As stated by Green (2023), the Rohingya in Myanmar are a minority Muslim group currently living under the hostile rule of a primarily Buddhist government. This is significant because a recent increase in religious and ethnic violence towards this group has produced a large number of internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing to surrounding countries like Bangladesh, creating one of the worst humanitarian crises of the decade in a region that is already facing great instability. According to Chowdhury (2006), the term “Rohingya” has its roots in the Arabic word *Rahm*, which translates to mercy in English. Arab traders arrived at “Ramree” Island in the 18th century, following the destruction of their ship. The survivors then approached the local king, seeking *Rahm*, according to a myth. The king granted them land for settlement, and as time went on, *Rahm* transformed into *Rhohang* and eventually evolved into Rohingya. Mohajan (2018) provides two additional interpretations of the term Rohingya. The initial statement suggests that this word originated from the Ruha population, who relocated from Afghanistan to Rakhine. The second explanation reveals the origin of the term Rohingya by elucidating the meaning of *Roh* as “mountain” in Sanskrit. This is why the Rakhine people are referred to as Rohingya. The region in northwest India, which was historically called Roh, became known as the home of the Rohingya people due to its mountainous landscape.

Leider (2018) points out that in the late 1950s, Muslim leaders and students from North Arakan began using the term “Rohingya” to establish a distinct ethno-religious identity for the Muslim community in the region, differentiating them from the majority Buddhist population known as Rakhine. Loscher (2009) highlight that most of the refugee crises in history are triggered by internal conflicts, where ethnic identity is a prominent element, and civilians are often used as weapons. Rohingya refugees have been living in the Rakhine or Arakan region for hundreds of years. After the independence of Burma in 1948, Arakan became part of Myanmar. In 1962, the emergence of an army coup and martial law in Myanmar brought misfortune for these people (Islam, 2018). Rahman, Mahajan and Bose (2021) describe how the Myanmar government has denied the Rohingya citizenship. Therefore, the Rohingya have been experiencing ethnic and religious persecution within Myanmar’s borders. Later on, hundreds of thousands fled to border countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The majority of Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh and settled in two officially registered refugee camps in the district of Cox’s Bazar.

Abdelkader (2013) strongly proposes that the Burmese government should ensure that the Rohingya are treated as equal citizens under international and Burmese law by adopting, implementing, and enforcing appropriate legislation. He also highlighted the positive sociological effects of challenging anti-Rohingya prejudices, thereby reducing the likelihood of ethnic and sectarian violence.

### **Research Methodology**

The main objectives of this paper are to comprehend the initial significance of the term “Rohingya,” explore the factors contributing to the disputes between Rohingya individuals and local ethnic groups, and propose potential non-violent solutions to enhance Myanmar's reputation. In order to thoroughly examine the stated objectives of the study, the following approaches have been adopted:

This study primarily obtained its data from secondary sources. The primary data were gathered from field visits through systematic personal interviews, i.e., face-to-face and open discussions with the participants. The information was obtained during the year 2023 in the areas of Cox's Bazar and Khagrachari in Bangladesh, Silchar in Assam, and Sabroom in the South Tripura District of North East India.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has the term ‘Rohingya’ been used in historical and in contemporary contexts?
2. What historical events have contributed to the ethnic conflict involving the Rohingya community?
3. What alternative solutions could be considered to address the needs of Rohingya refugees while improving Myanmar's reputation?

### **Significance of the Study**

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar remains a significant humanitarian and geopolitical issue. In recent years, the Rohingya have faced severe persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State, leading to a mass exodus to neighboring countries, especially Bangladesh. The current situation is dire, with over a million Rohingya living in overcrowded refugee camps, facing challenges such as inadequate access to healthcare, education, and basic necessities. The crisis has strained Myanmar's relations with its neighbors and the international community, prompting calls for accountability, justice, and sustainable solutions. However, the political instability in Myanmar, exacerbated by the military coup in 2021, has hindered progress towards resolving the crisis, leaving the Rohingya in a precarious and uncertain state. There are numerous studies on the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar. However, these studies do not provide a comprehensive picture of the Rohingya situation in Myanmar, because the writers have their own views, particularly in relation to ethnicity, customs, historical backdrop, socio-economic positions, and other issues. The situation remains unresolved, with continued international pressure on Myanmar to address the root causes of the crisis and ensure a safe, voluntary, and dignified solution to the problem. However, despite all these pressures, the Rohingya problem in Myanmar remains unresolved.

The main effort of this study is to illustrate the overall concept regarding the so-called Rohingya in Arakan, understand the root causes for conflicts that persist despite the long history of the Rohingya in the country, and highlight suitable suggestions for a harmonious solution. Therefore, this present research is a comprehensive attempt to extensively understand

the Rohingya conflict in Arakan State, Myanmar, and to make appropriate suggestions to improve the situation with reference to the NRC guidelines of Northeast India.

### **Rohingya and their Assertion of Identity**

The Rohingya are a group of Indo-Aryan descent without a nationality. A Rohingya activist in Bangladesh, who is also a historian, clarifies that the name ‘Rohingya’ comes from the ancient names *Rohan*, *Roham*, or *Rosham*, which were previously used to refer to the capital of the Arakan Kingdom, Mrauk-U. This capital city is now known as Mrohaung. The names have been altered to *Roshangee*, and ultimately to Rohingya. The term 'Rohingya' refers to the Muslim Arakanese people in history, and there is a Muslim village known as Rohingya *para* (hamlet) that still exists in the city of Akayab (Sittwe). Rakhine State, previously known as *Rohang*, is where the term Rohingya originated. This term has gained heavy political implications. There are now two dominant groups in Myanmar: one that supports the Rohingya and another that opposes them. The pro faction believes that the Rohingyas arrived in Burma in the ninth century and, over time, intermingled with various ethnicities such as Bengalis, Persians, Moghuls, Turks, and Pathans. This aligns with the historically diverse population of Arakan State. On the other hand, the opposing faction argues that the Rohingyas are a recent creation, primarily composed of illegal Bengalis from Chittagong who came to Burma under British colonial rule. The term Rohingya, however, has become less significant since the late 1960s because the government started using the term 'Bengali', suggesting that they are immigrants. The following are some reasons behind it:

**i. Military Coup:** The military coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win marked a significant shift. The new military regime adopted a nationalist and isolationist policy, emphasizing “Burmanization,” which aimed to promote the majority Burmese culture and religion (Buddhism) over others.

**ii. Denial of Citizenship:** The 1982 Citizenship Law further marginalized the Rohingya by excluding them from the list of recognized ethnic groups eligible for full citizenship. This law effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless, as it required proof of residency dating back to 1823, which many Rohingya could not provide due to the lack of documentation.

**iii. Propaganda and Nationalism:** The government and nationalist groups began promoting the narrative that the Rohingya were "Bengali" immigrants, labelling them as illegal and alien to Myanmar. State-controlled media and education systems propagated this view, leading to widespread public perceptions of the Rohingya as outsiders.

**iv. Military Campaigns and Violence:** Periodic military campaigns and outbreaks of communal violence exacerbated the situation, with the Rohingya being targeted and displaced. The military and extremist groups portrayed these actions as necessary for national security and protecting Buddhism.

**v. Restriction of Identity:** The term “Rohingya” was systematically erased from official documents and discourse. The government referred to them as "Bengalis" to emphasize their perceived foreign origin. The denial of the Rohingya identity was part of a broader strategy to delegitimize their historical claims and presence in Myanmar.

Further, it is also said that the Rohingyas, who are Muslims and have a different ethnicity from other ethnic groups in Myanmar, are not recognized as citizens of the country. They are referred to as “resident foreigners” and excluded from Myanmar's list of 135 official ethnic groups. Both the current and previous governments have referred to them as “Bengalis”.

Jilani (1999) highlights five important points in the historical analysis of Rohingya: The presence of Islam in Arakan was established before 788 A.D., and it is suggested that the Rohingyas have been living there since that time. The Rohingyas are not immigrants who arrived during the British Era. Historical records indicate that a Muslim-majority population initially inhabited Arakan. The Rohingya language was initially spoken and understood by both the Rohingyas and the Buddhist Arakanese people in Arakan; (ii) The Mrauk-U Dynasty, also known as the Kingdom of Arakan, was primarily ruled by a Muslim family with a slight Buddhist influence; (iii) The origin of the Buddhist Arakanese people is known as Maghs. Due to their involvement in acts of piracy and robbery against Hindus and Muslims for over two hundred years, they decided to adopt the name Rakhines to distance themselves from their harmful reputation; (iv) The British promised to establish a Rohingya state in Arakan, but they failed to fulfill this commitment; (v) During the period of parliamentary rule after independence (1948-1962), Buddhist Arakanese members of parliament consistently showed a hostile attitude towards the Rohingyas. They referred to the Rohingyas as Chittagonians and did not regard them as equals in humanity.

The historical narrative focused on the Rohingya population has faced significant backlash from Buddhist Arakanese historians and activists. Some writers claim that Bengal Muslims assimilated into the Rohingya community through intermarriage between the Chittagong people and the local Rohingyas. However, many local Arakanese people do not agree with this type of manipulated history, as there is plenty of historical evidence that the Rohingyas are immigrants from outside of Arakan or Myanmar. They believe that the naming of ‘Rohingyas’ is a recent creation, primarily composed of illegal Bengalis from Chittagong who came to Burma under British colonial rule. Additionally, they express surprise that there are numerous ethnic groups—such as the Chin, Rakhain, Man, and Sak—who are living in Myanmar and are also found in India, Bangladesh, Thailand, or China. Thus, why do the Rohingya people insist that they are unique to Myanmar and cannot be found anywhere else in the world?

### **Post-Colonial Context**

After gaining independence in 1948, the Union Citizenship Act was enacted to determine the eligibility of different ethnic groups for acquiring citizenship. According to the International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School, the Rohingya were excluded by the law. On the other hand, Rohingya individuals whose families had been living in Myanmar for at least two generations were eligible to request identity cards. In the beginning, the Rohingya people were provided with these identification cards and were even granted citizenship under provisions related to their ancestry. During that period, numerous Rohingya individuals occupied seats in parliament.

The Rakhine State, in its current form, serves as the native land for a variety of ethnic groups. It is home to two main ethnic groups, namely the Rohingya Muslims and the Rakhine

Buddhists. The identities of these groups are not rigid and have evolved over time. The Buddhist Rakhines, previously known as the Arakanese, historically resided in the Rakhine State, or Arakan, and the Kingdom of Mrauk-U. They are also found in the Chittagong and Barisal divisions of Bangladesh. Other ethnic groups like Hindus, the Chins, and the Myo also reside in Rakhine State. The Arakanese Chakma, Marmas (formerly known as Mogs or Maghs), and other groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh have been residing there since the 16th century and share cultural similarities, if not identical features, with the Rakhines in Myanmar's Rakhine State, who are primarily Buddhist. Additionally, a population of Arakanese Buddhists, known as the Mog people, reside in some parts of Tripura, India. In 1982, the military junta government in Myanmar passed a citizenship law listing 135 ethnic groups entitled to citizenship, which excluded the Rohingya, who had enjoyed citizenship rights since independence in 1948. As a result, all Rohingya legally lost their citizenship and became stateless overnight.

### **The Rohingya Crisis: Understanding the Causes and the Arakanese Perspective**

The animosity between the Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist communities in Rakhine State has become more intense in recent times. Members of an Arakanese political party, themselves Arakanese Buddhists, Arakanese individuals, and Buddhist monks, are said to have carried out violent attacks against the Rohingya and Muslim communities. Scores of people were killed and buried in mass graves. Reports say that in 2012, Rohingya were forcibly removed from their homes by central Rakhine leaders, particularly in large towns such as Sittwe and Pauktaw, as well as small villages. As a consequence, more than 120,000 Rohingya people have fled the camps by undertaking perilous sea journeys. Pro-Rohingya factions claim that the violence perpetrated by Myanmar and Arakan security forces against Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State constitutes ethnic cleansing and a crime against humanity. The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, also subsequently recommended that the Rohingya people are 'Muslims or the Muslim Community of Rakhine' or 'Bengalis'. Myanmar is actually a country that consists of multiple nations with varying religious beliefs. The majority of the Rohingya people practice Islam, with a small portion practicing Hinduism.

Either explicitly or indirectly, writers have narrated in their work that the Rohingyas settled in Myanmar during the British era. The Arakanese people firmly believe that the name Rohingya does not originate from *Rohan*, *Roham*, or *Rosham*. The term is simply used to refer to individuals who are not originally from Burma. The word is actually pronounced as '*Roang-kya*' or '*Roang-ba-kya*', signifying something or someone that has fallen from another location. However, over time, the settlers embraced the word as a way to demonstrate their roots and belonging to the country. It is well-known that Burma was once a highly profitable region for outsiders due to its fertile land, oil reserves, valuable minerals, and other natural resources. These outsiders constantly attempted to gain access to the region in order to make business profits. However, the native people of Arakan and Burma as a whole constantly opposed and fought to defend their land against foreign invaders. The Arakan people referred to individuals not belonging to their community as *Loo-hnaung*, which translates to “foreigners” or “unfamiliar individuals”. Moreover, the Arakanese held many beliefs against the outsiders

referred to as ‘Kola’ (colonial period of Indian), and among those was the saying ‘*Myak-hnaung- owangey- tah-pyak-tey, Loh-naung-owangey prey pyak-tey*’, meaning ‘allowing outsiders into a region will result in its imbalance or devastation, just as the presence of spectacle monkeys in a forest leads to its destruction.’ This was a common belief held by the people in Arakan in the past, reflecting that they were not interested in welcoming outsiders, particularly Indians, due to various factors.

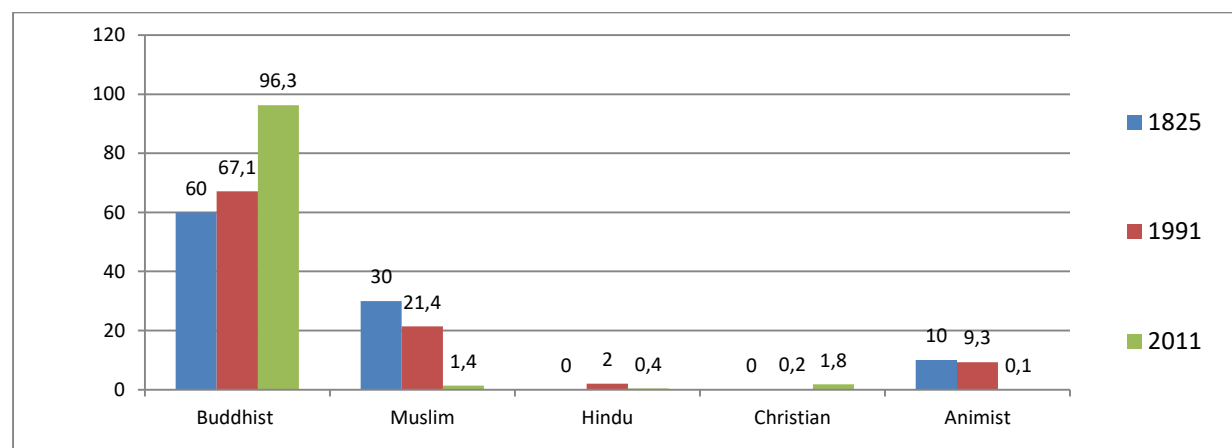
Table 1: Religious composition of the population in Rakhine State (Arakan)

Religions	1825	1991	2011
Buddhist	60	67.10	96.30
Muslim	30	21.40	01.40
Hindu	-	02.00	00.40
Christian	-	00.20	01.80
Animist	10	09.30	00.10
Total	100	100.00	100.00

Source: S.C. August 26, 1825, no. 41 & AC; Banerjee, A.C. (1825). The eastern frontier of British India, Imperial Gazetteer of India (1991), 5, 390; Department of Population, Government of Myanmar. (2011). Census report (Vol. 2).

Religious population statistics from 1825 to 2011 show that there was an increase of 36.3% in the Buddhist population in Rakhine state, while the Muslim population decreased to 28.60%. Similarly, there is a steady decreasing trend in the Hindu population (1.60%), compared to the 1991 census.

Figure 1: Graphical representation of religious demographics in Rakhine State (Arakan)



Source: Table 1

According to the 2011 census data, the percentage of the Christian religion population is increasing at a rate of 1.40%. Information reveals that in the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, more than 0.5 million Bangladeshi refugees crossed over into Rakhine State. UN records state that there are approximately 3.5 million Rakhine Muslims (Rohingyas) around the world, with around 1 million in Bangladesh, 50,000 in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and other countries, and around 0.5 million still living in Myanmar (Albert & Maizland, 2020).



### **Facts Behind the Derogatory Naming Directed Towards the People of Arakan and Their Descendants**

It is a fact that there are other communities who have been given specific labels by others to recognize them, as in the case of the ‘Rohingya.’ Among them are also the Magh or Mog, and the Kuki community. For the sake of discussion, the exact origin of the term ‘Magh’ in Bengali is uncertain and not well defined. However, it can be stated that the term is not of Burmese or Arakanese origin. Mills (1926) argues that the Maghs were descendants from the Tai people, specifically their ancestors who were part of the Tai Long group. They were forced to leave China and settle in the southern and southwestern regions. Some historians assert that the Mog or Marma individuals trace their lineage back to the ancient Indian region of Magadha, which is now the Bihar province within the Indian Territory. However, the Mog, Marma, or Mag individuals originating from Arakan in Bangladesh or Tripura state in India are descendants of Mongolian heritage and do not bear any resemblance to the people from Bihar province in India. Even if we agreed with this statement for the sake of discussion, there is no historical evidence suggesting that all Mog people from Magadha (Bihar) were completely removed from there and relocated to other areas. According to historical accounts of religion, Buddhism was introduced to Burma and other regions of South Asia during the reign of Ashoka. The spread of Buddhism was not attributed to the displaced people from Magadha, indicating that a different factor was responsible. This argument exemplifies an unrealistic and unsystematic approach to anthropological research or an unjustifiable assertion. Prof. Mongsanu Choudhury (2017) also acknowledged that the Mog people migrated to various regions of Indian states through the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the past. Therefore, the claim of a new hybrid group, which displays characteristics of both Indian and Mongolian descent, is distinct from the common purely Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman traits observed today and is not supported in this context.

Rather, the reason for giving surnames to Mog, Marma, and Kuki people was solely to identify them, based on the Indian Hindu naming convention. During the time of British rule, Burma, Bangladesh, and India were all territories under the control of the British. However, the influence of the Indian cultural system was significant due to the majority of the administrative staff being of Indian origin. The way names are structured in India is not the same as in the Arakan or Burma naming system. Burmese or Arakanese individuals rarely include titles or surnames following their given names. In Indian culture, including Bangladesh during British rule, surnames or titles are assigned based on the family’s caste, profession, or race. However, there is no implementation of a caste-based hierarchical structure in the regions of Arakan or Burma (Myanmar). To understand ‘Indianization’ or adapt to the Indian naming system, the dominant Bengalese Hindus in the British Administration implemented a surname system for the Arakanese people. This was done solely to distinguish the Arakanese people and identify their origin.

Writers such as J. M. Ghosh (1960) and V. K. Roy (2021) mainly focus on portraying the Arakanese in a negative way, occasionally even exaggerating past events without properly confirming the authenticity of the situation on the field. Therefore, it is evident that the term *Mog* is offensive and derogatory, especially when it is used by Indian individuals, particularly

those residing in the Bengal province. Bengali writers have often referred to the Arakan or Burma region as *Moger Mullok*, which translates to “the place characterized by a lack of order and rules.” It is believed that the term carries an offensive and derogatory connotation, suggesting a racial slur against the entire community, and is used in a vulgar context. The issue is entirely subjective, so there is no agreement about it. However, it is up to each community to form their own opinions about other communities, and these opinions may differ between generations and be expressed in written records. In relation to this, it is worth noting that the Arakanese or Burmese people have been referring to Indian people as *Kola* since ancient times in order to identify them. The term *Kola* refers to a collective group of Indian communities, including Bengali, Punjabi, Bihari, Uria, Marathi, and Madraji, as they share similarities with one another. The people from Arakan also have the belief that there are at least 66 (sixty-six) distinct types of *Kola* sects or communities in India. The question being discussed is whether their belief is accurate or not. Likewise, individuals from Europe, regardless of their nationality, such as English, German, French, or Russian, are commonly referred to as *Tshyea* due to their perceived similarities in appearance. Again, they are called *Taruk* for the same reason, whether Chinese or Japanese. In India, certain groups within the *Lusai* community are referred to as *Kuki* or *Sikam* but they are unaware of the reason behind this name, whereas they are popularly known as *Chin* in Myanmar. These terms are all used to recognize a specific community or group of individuals by another group of individuals. Likewise, it is possible that the Indians from Bengal referred to the Arakanese or the larger Burmese population as *Mog*. This could be because these groups share Mongolian ethnicity, facial features, and physical appearance.

Nevertheless, it is important to note how the *Marma* surname became prevalent in Bangladesh. According to existing documentary evidence, in 1969, certain leaders from the Mog community approached the Pakistan government requesting that their surname be officially recorded as *Marma* instead of *Mog*. They argued that this change would better reflect their indigenous identity and hold greater meaning. During that year, the then Pakistan government discussed the issue, and since then, many Arakanese Mog people in Bangladesh have adopted the surname *Marma*.

### **The Mog Raiders' Propaganda and its Communal Impact**

In the paper titled ‘The Magh Raiders and the Mughals in Early Seventeenth Century Bengal,’ Varun Kumar Roy (2022) clearly states that the Arakanese people, also known as the *Mog*, were responsible for engaging in piracy in the southern Bengal region. The Maghs (Arakanese) would launch these attacks from Chittagong, extending all the way to various places in Bengal, such as Bhalwa, Jessore, Hugli, Bikrampur, Sonargaon, and Dacca. They arrived in Dacca with the intention of stealing and robbing near the rivers of Khizrpur and Jatrapur. The Bengal region suffered economic losses as the Maghs benefited greatly from these raids. The locations that were raided were frequently left vacant and impoverished. The district of Bakla (Bakarganj) previously had plenty of farming but was abandoned due to the attacks. The navy of the Arakanese, with the help of the Portuguese, was more powerful than the Mughal navy.

In the Noakhali District Gazette it is also described that the Maghs are responsible for committing terrible acts of violence. There are many stories about the ferocity and brutality of the robbers, and the entire area would become fearful upon hearing the cry of the Magh, which alerted everyone to their impending arrival. To the astonishment of the villagers in their houses or at the markets, the kidnappers would capture men, women, and children, with the intention of demanding money for some and enslaving the others. They would either sell them to the Portuguese in Goa, Ceylon, or other locations, or forcefully convert them to Christianity, training them to serve as rowers for their own purposes. In certain regions of Bengal, women were occasionally traded for marriage due to the scarcity of brides during that time. These women were referred to as “*Bharer Meye*,” i.e., hired girls.

As previously mentioned, in ancient times, outsiders were never welcomed in the Arakan state, which also included the ‘Chattagram’ region. This region was annexed to the Arakan province and was highly profitable due to various commercial reasons. This may have led to constant conflicts, resentment, and unrest in the border area, involving the Burmese-Arakan people and outsiders, including the Chittagong Hill Tract, which once belonged to the Arakan territory. As a result, the Bengali intellectual group referred to the Arakan or Burman people as ‘Pirates,’ and the story of “Mog Riders” emerged in history. The indigenous people of Arakan province have always been fearful that outsiders would disrupt the social and geographical equilibrium of their region. Hence, in order to safeguard their region and out of a strong affection for their land, the people consistently rebelled against any unauthorized invaders. Consequently, this resulted in unrest, confrontations, and retaliatory actions in various riverbank locations and sea routes near the Burma or Arakan province border. During that era, it was considered acceptable to seize control of any region or engage in offensive and defensive actions in order to safeguard against invaders or conquer certain territories. Individuals known as heroes, such as ‘Patong-tong’ and ‘Mong-boli’, bravely engaged in numerous battles against external forces to defend their homeland. Those who were not part of their (Bengali) community were often labeled as pirates or terrorists. During the British era, numerous individuals were labeled as terrorists, yet for their compatriots, they were revered as heroic figures or fighters for freedom. Furthermore, some locals blame the Rohingya intellectuals (who are part of the East India Bengal sects) for dominating various fields, including society, politics, and the economy, which has contributed to unrest and conflicts in the subcontinent.

However, one may understand the fact that the derogative description of the Arakanese community and the hostile attitude towards the Arakanese or Burmese by the then Kola (outsiders) sects have, in some ways, made them responsible for the present situation the Rohingya are facing in Arakan state. Currently, the issue surrounding the *Mog* and *Marma* terminology has become increasingly complex due to the dispersion of this community across three different countries following the partition of India, Bangladesh, and the Arakan-Burma region. Originally, there was no title system for them. Over time, the term *Mog* was adopted under compulsion and incorporated by the Burmese-Arakanese community living in Bangladesh and India without any objections, possibly due to its resemblance to the Indian naming system. Therefore, it can be said that the Indians, particularly those from eastern Bengal, referred to the Burmese-Arakanese people as *Mog Pirates*, a term associated with

intense historical animosity that might have adversely impacted the Rohingya community of Myanmar.

### **The Alternative Approach for Setting up of Detention Camp**

The ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar continues to intensify with each passing day. However, it is critical to acknowledge that a significant number of individuals lack proper awareness regarding the crisis involving the Rohingya. It is understood that migration in many developing areas leads to numerous uncertainties across various aspects of society. Out of the numerous difficulties presented by migration, the issue of unauthorized immigration stands out as the most challenging. Illegal immigration can occur through both voluntary and involuntary movements of individuals from one location to another. As a developing country, the detention camp model of Assam State in northeastern India is a clear path to addressing the Rohingya refugee problem. Migration has been a longstanding occurrence in Assam, with various communities and ethnic groups arriving in the region at different times, through various means, and for diverse purposes, establishing their residences across different locations. Over time, the difficulties associated with migration have progressively grown due to the problem of unauthorized individuals entering the country. In August 2019, Assam published the National Register of Citizens (NRC) with the stated aim of distinguishing Indian citizens from undocumented immigrants living in the state. According to its terms, anyone who cannot prove that they or their ancestors entered Assam before midnight on March 24, 1971, cannot be considered a citizen. The NRC was enlisted on the basis of the following major criteria: (i) Persons whose names appear in the NRC, 1951. (ii) Persons whose names appear in any of the electoral rolls up to 24th March (midnight), 1971, (iii) Descendants of the two categories are eligible to be included in the list. As a result of removing the citizenship of illegal migrants, the idea of establishing detention centers emerged.

Currently, the state of Assam in India has established six detention centers, which have been rebranded as transit camps by the government of Assam. These facilities are located in Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Tezpur, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, and Silchar. These facilities resemble prisons, with only minor differences between them and actual jails. Individuals who are believed to be foreigners and reside without legal authorization are held in detention centers. The existing transit centers currently contain a large number of individuals believed to be foreigners, with a majority of them being from Bangladesh. Both Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims are found among the detainees. Therefore, considering the Rohingya issue, it is not appropriate to remove people suddenly from a place where they have been residing for a considerable amount of time. Nevertheless, following the procedure adopted in the Indian state of Assam, the Rohingya could be detained by transferring them to the detention centers that may be set up in Myanmar's Arakan region, instead of expelling them.

In 2014, the Assam government was directed by the center to establish a dedicated detention center for “foreigners” to separate them from inmates and those under trial in jails. At that time, the Assam government had intended to build a minimum of 10 similar facilities due to the large number of individuals who would not be included in the NRC. Assam published a National Register of Citizens in August 2019 with the purpose of distinguishing between Indian citizens

and undocumented immigrants residing in the state. More than 1.9 million individuals, comprising approximately 6% of the population in the state, were not included in the ultimate roster of citizens.

Figure 2: Process of nationality verification at various outlets in Assam



Generally, the presence of unauthorized immigrants poses a danger to the political, social, and cultural spheres of a community, potentially leading to conflicts in these areas. Assam is the first Indian state with both established and planned transit centers. The situation has been further complicated by the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA), which grants Indian citizenship to certain immigrant communities. However, this has caused concerns among Muslim immigrants, particularly the final draft of the NRC 2018, which excluded many Muslim names from the list. The new CAA 2019 has resulted in tension between the government and the citizens across India, even though the reasons for the protests vary.

The above discussion suggests the need for suitable arrangements for unauthorized immigrants at the government level. The Arakan province administrative authority could consider the ‘Assam Detention Camp’ model as a potential solution to address the Rohingya issue, which has been a widely debated topic worldwide in the recent past. Instead of forcibly evicting the entire Rohingya population from Myanmar on humanitarian grounds, the authorities could implement the Assam detention camp model and take steps to legally and systematically verify the citizenship of individuals. The documents that can be considered for verification of nationality for the Rohingya are as follows:

(i) **National Registration Cards (NRCs):** These are official identity cards issued by the Myanmar government and are considered primary proof of citizenship.



**(ii) Family Lists (Household Lists):** These lists document family members residing in a particular household and are used to establish familial ties and citizenship status.

**(iii) Birth Certificates:** Official birth certificates issued by the government can also be used to establish citizenship, especially for younger individuals who might not have NRCs.

**(iv) Land Ownership Documents:** In some cases, land ownership documents or property records can be used to establish longstanding residency and citizenship.

**(v) Other Official Records:** Any other official documents issued by the government that verify residency and citizenship status may also be considered. If any person who is unable to fulfill or show those documents, they may be placed in a detention camp.

Figure 3: Detention centers in NE India, Assam



However, the Assam detention center system has been criticized for its lack of clarity in determining citizenship status, leading to the wrongful detention of Indian citizens and violations of their rights. Detainees face harsh conditions, including overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, and limited access to legal assistance. Prolonged detention without due process is seen as a violation of human rights. The CAA further complicates the issue, arguing against discrimination against Muslims. Opposition to the Assam detention center approach is rooted in global concerns. Nevertheless, the criticisms of the Assam detention center model can be categorized as follows:

- I. Humanitarian Concerns: Detention camps are criticized for their harsh conditions and the humanitarian impact on individuals detained, many of whom are stateless or unable to prove their citizenship due to a lack of documentation.
- II. Due Process and Legal Rights: Critics argue that the detention of individuals without proper due process, including adequate legal representation and fair trials, violates fundamental rights guaranteed under Indian and international law.

- III. Discriminatory Practices: There are concerns that the identification and detention process disproportionately affects marginalized communities, including Bengali-speaking Muslims like the Rohingya and others, leading to allegations of discrimination based on ethnicity and religion.
- IV. Complexity of Citizenship Determination: Citizenship determination in Assam has been complex and contentious, with issues related to the authenticity and availability of historical documents, as well as bureaucratic errors in the NRC process, which could lead to wrongful detention.
- V. International Criticism: The approach has drawn criticism from international human rights organizations and observers who argue that it violates principles of human rights, particularly regarding the treatment of vulnerable populations such as stateless persons.

Nonetheless, it is the duty of the appropriate government to make firm decisions for an amicable solution to the refugee crisis, despite criticism from various quarters.

### **Conclusion**

The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is deeply rooted in historical, political, and ethnic complexities that have exacerbated over decades. The term “Rohingya” itself has become a contentious point, symbolizing not just an ethnic identity but also a political struggle for recognition and rights. While some argue for their historical presence dating back centuries, others dispute this narrative, viewing them as recent migrants from Bangladesh. This debate underscores the polarized perspectives within Myanmar’s society, contributing to ongoing tensions and conflicts.

Illegal migration presents a significant challenge in many developing nations. In the NE India state of Assam, detention centers have been established to segregate Indian citizens from undocumented migrants, primarily from Bangladesh, encompassing both Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims. This unauthorized population in Assam poses threats to the region's political, social, and cultural fabric. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA) has heightened tensions within the country, particularly among Muslim migrants concerned about potential exclusion. However, the government could implement viable measures to address the Rohingya crisis. Therefore, authorities in Myanmar's Arakan Province could consider a model similar to Assam's detention centers for sustainable development of the region and better cooperation with neighboring countries. This is required to ensure a safe and amicable solution for the Rohingya refugee’ crisis, who wish to remain in Myanmar by adopting the Assam detention camp model, which helps determine true citizens from undocumented migrants. This includes addressing the underlying causes of conflict and ensuring that returning individuals do not face further discrimination. While the Rohingya crisis remains complex and challenging, concerted efforts at local, regional, and international levels offer hope for a future where all people in Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity or religion, can live with dignity, security, and peace. Although the Assam model is not free from criticism, it contrasts with the notion of forcibly expelling the entire Rohingya community from Myanmar. Instead, a systematic and lawful verification process for the identification of original citizenship could be established for

individuals. Such an approach has the potential to enhance Myanmar's international standing, particularly among nations that have long criticized its treatment of the Rohingya.

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## Enduring Vulnerability: The Legal and Humanitarian Challenges Facing Stateless Rohingya Children

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### Abstract

The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group primarily residing in Rakhine State, Myanmar, have endured a long history of marginalization and persecution rooted in complex social and historical contexts. This persistent crisis has resulted in many Rohingya children being born into statelessness, depriving them of fundamental rights and increasing their vulnerability. Utilizing secondary data from a range of research and reports on the issues of statelessness and the situation of Rohingya child refugees in particular, this paper starts by tracing the origins of the Rohingya refugee crisis that ultimately led to the denial of citizenship of Rohingya children, detailing the impact it has on their rights to citizenship, healthcare, and education. It then examines international laws on citizenship, statelessness, and children's rights to outline general international obligations and investigate the effectiveness of domestic Myanmar laws in this area. Reflecting on the dangerous conditions currently faced by Rohingya children in refugee camps, the paper also evaluates the effectiveness of assistance from Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand, based on a study of these countries' national laws, and outlines critical gaps in addressing the crisis for stateless Rohingya children.

**Keywords:** Rohingya, Statelessness, Children's Rights, Citizenship, Myanmar

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## 1. Introduction

The plight of Rohingya children born in refugee camps and informal settlements highlights a severe humanitarian crisis. These children, born to stateless parents, inherit their lack of citizenship, facing a systematic denial of birth registration and, thereby, their fundamental right to a legal identity (UNHCR, 2022). The absence of a birth certificate renders these children stateless, further emphasizing their marginalization and vulnerability. Life in the refugee camps is filled with threats, including disease outbreaks, poor sanitation, food insecurity, and extreme weather (Thompson et al., 2023). These conditions create a vicious cycle of malnutrition and illness, with approximately one million children in urgent need (OCHA, 2024). Despite efforts from various humanitarian organizations, the challenges faced by Rohingya children in these camps are immense and multifaceted.

Internationally recognized as a fundamental human right, the right to citizenship is crucial for developing and protecting children (OHCHR, 2024). The international community has made significant efforts to address statelessness through various treaties, such as the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (UN, 1954) and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (UN, 1961). These treaties aim to protect the rights of stateless individuals and prevent the occurrence of statelessness. However, Myanmar, where the Rohingya originate, is not a signatory to these conventions (ISI & SNAP, 2019), complicating efforts to address the statelessness of Rohingya children.

The Rohingya children's struggle for citizenship is further exacerbated by Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which restricts citizenship to specific national groups and imposes stringent requirements for naturalization (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997). The interpretation of this law has contributed to the systemic exclusion of the Rohingya, depriving them of full citizenship rights and opportunities for education and employment. Recent efforts to abolish the 1982 Citizenship Law aim to address these injustices, but significant challenges remain.

This paper examines the international and Burmese approaches to addressing Rohingya children's citizenship in relation to the ongoing transition of statelessness from their parents to them. It highlights the urgent need for comprehensive solutions that address their right to citizenship, healthcare, and education. Through an exploration of relevant legal frameworks and human rights principles, this research reveals the alarming extent to which the rights of stateless Rohingya children are unmet and underscores the importance of ensuring their fundamental rights.

## 2. Literature Review: Key Debates and Trends in Statelessness

Citizenship is widely recognized by the international community as a fundamental human right (OHCHR, 2024), serving as the foundation for accessing numerous civil, political, and social protections within modern nation-states. Despite this recognition, statelessness remains a pressing issue affecting millions worldwide, often resulting in the systematic denial of basic rights and services. While not exhaustive, this literature review aims to outline key debates and trends in research relating to statelessness, particularly for stateless Rohingyas.

Statelessness was first formally addressed by the international community through the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (Achiron, 2014). In recent years, statelessness has gained increased attention from scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates, particularly in light of large-scale displacement crises and the growing recognition of its impact on children. Numerous scholars have explored the concept of statelessness and its implications. Kingston et al. (2010) argue that statelessness represents a "legal invisibility" that fundamentally undermines human rights protections. They contend that the lack of legal recognition and protection afforded to stateless individuals creates a vacuum in which basic human rights are routinely violated. They also emphasize that statelessness is not merely a legal technicality but a pervasive condition that impacts every aspect of an individual's life, from access to education and healthcare to the ability to work legally or own property. Mansson (2013), in “Reduction of Statelessness and Access to Nationality,” examines the historical and political factors contributing to statelessness, emphasizing the role of discriminatory nationality laws and state succession. She argues that statelessness is often a deliberate political tool used by states to exclude certain groups from citizenship and its associated rights. These works have provided a foundation for understanding the broader context in which the statelessness of Rohingya children occurs.

The serious consequences of being stateless are undeniable, particularly in light of the Rohingya people's predicament. It would be difficult to overlook the most vulnerable demographic—children. In this paper, the authors have reviewed literature related to the statelessness of Rohingya children with a focus on three key areas: first, the legal status of the group; second, the origins of the deprivation of nationality of the group; and third, the interconnection between the statelessness and the poor living conditions faced by the group.

The first aspect explored here is the legal status of Rohingya stateless children. As detailed in section 7, the legal status of Rohingya children within host countries of Rohingya refugees, e.g., Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand, is highly ambiguous and often undefined within existing citizenship frameworks. Sabuj (2024) reflects on the actual situation regarding the citizenship rights of Rohingya children born to Bangladeshi parents in refugee camps. He estimated that around 36,000 children of Bangladeshi descent are born stateless in these camps. These children are denied Bangladeshi citizenship despite the citizenship law of this country allowing children of Bangladeshi parents to acquire citizenship by descent. Dali (2018) found that Malaysia lacks a domestic legal framework governing the designation and treatment of refugees despite its openness in condemning Myanmar's policy. About Thailand, Slezak et al. (2015) argue that Thai law in itself is inadequate to ensure the full rights and protections associated with Thai citizenship for Rohingya children.

Secondly, the literature finds that the origins of the deprivation of citizenship for the Rohingya are long-standing and deep. A number of authors (see Kipgen, 2011, 2013, 2015), Holliday (2010), Mohajan (2018), Wolf (2017), and Callahan (1998), amongst others) locate the deprivation of citizenship of the Rohingya people in the historical conflicts and political dynamics of Myanmar. Specifically, and as outlined in detail in section 4, three periods were identified and analyzed from within the literature: British Colonialization (1823-1948),

Parliamentary Democracy in Myanmar (1948-1962), and Military Government in Myanmar (1962-1988). Furthermore, in his examination of the stateless status and history of the Rohingya people, the paper of Soheli (2023) explains the process by which the Rohingya were gradually stripped of their citizenship, culminating in the 1982 Citizenship Law that excluded them. Particularly for vulnerable groups like children, the study reflects the reality that Rohingya children in refugee camps have had their childhoods stolen, deprived of play, education, and a sense of safety, and even denied citizenship for those born in the camps. Based on the 1991 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the paper outlines several rights being violated in the case of these children, including the right to protection, freedom of speech, and access to education. Many Rohingya children are forced to take on adult responsibilities, sacrificing their education and dreams for the future.

Thirdly, there is a clear and profoundly concerning link between the statelessness experienced by many Rohingya children and the poor living conditions and trauma that they face, in particular psychological trauma. Parvin (2023) and Chowdhury et al. (2020) have conducted significant research in this area. Chowdhury et al. (2020) outline the challenges faced by this group on aspects related to the precarious legal status of Rohingya children who are denied citizenship in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. This lack of legal recognition further pushes Rohingya children into a state of limbo, denying them access to fundamental rights and services. Many have witnessed violence, displacement, and loss of loved ones, leading to profound mental health challenges. On the other hand, based on data collected from 13 children selected as participants, Parvin (2023) emphasized the psychological problems that can be found in Rohingya children, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms, which were all cited by the majority of respondents. They frequently suffer from flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, trauma, palpitations, sleep disturbances, and physical aches for no apparent reason. However, Chowdhury et al. (2020) recognized that the socio-economic burdens on host countries, particularly Bangladesh, are challenging to resolve. The influx of over 1 million Rohingya refugees, including a large number of children, has strained Bangladesh's limited infrastructure. This has led to tensions with local communities and concerns about the long-term viability of the refugee camps. Unaccompanied minors and children without legal guardians, who are stateless, are at high risk of being trafficked for forced labor and prostitution.

While extensive research has illustrated the legal, social, and psychological challenges facing Rohingya children, there remains a critical need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence, particularly regarding the efficacy of host countries' legal frameworks. The following sections in this paper attempt to tackle this by providing a detailed analysis and integration of existing research on the subject.

### **3. Methodology**

This study involved a detailed review of secondary documentary data through an assessment of a wide range of sources. For this paper, the authors reviewed 13 reports from UN agencies, 5 studies from NGOs, including Human Rights Watch and Concern Worldwide, 15 legal documents, including international treaties, Burmese national laws, and national laws of

Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, as well as additional documents from research journals, books, and websites. In total, 64 documents were reviewed.

The review process involved, firstly, the identification of key sources, which was based on their relevance, authority, and comprehensiveness in covering the subject matter. Publications from UN agencies were prioritized due to their official status and extensive data, and NGO reports were included to ensure a multifaceted understanding, reflecting on-the-ground realities and diverse viewpoints. Secondly, the authors conducted a screening of these documents for direct relevance to statelessness and children’s protection, and finally, a detailed review of these documents was done to extract information and insights.

Key themes from the literature were identified, drawing on the practice of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved reviewing documents to uncover recurring themes and patterns, organizing related information into broad categories, and synthesizing the findings. Specifically, the authors identified three main areas important for addressing the research questions concerning stateless Rohingya children: (i) the origin of the deprivation of nationality, (ii) the conditions, and (iii) the legal status of these children. Having established the main categories, data were sorted and organized into these groups to create the narrative of the paper. By employing this methodology, the study ensures a thorough and well-rounded exploration of the research topic.

#### **4. The Rohingya Refugee Crisis and the Situation of Stateless Rohingya Children**

In 2017, the military armed forces (MAF) of Myanmar orchestrated a brutal campaign of attack against Muslim communities in Myanmar, including the Rohingya (Klinken & Aung, 2017). It is now documented that the attacks against the Rohingya included killings, violence, and the burning of the homes of thousands of Rohingya people (Human Rights Watch, 2022). To understand the root causes of the situation, it is necessary to look into the political and social conflict grounded in the early establishment of what became modern-day Myanmar.

##### **4.1. Historical Context**

###### **4.1.1. British Colonialization (1823-1948)**

The conflict between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority has to be traced back to the British colonization in the mid-1820s. During this period, the British imposed divergent modes of rule across Myanmar. They exercised their direct rule in central Burma and indirect rule in the surrounding state, thus creating a “patchwork of governance arrangements” (Holliday, 2010). Before British rule, central Myanmar had different governance arrangements from the frontier areas. Britain claimed that these frontier areas were less advanced and needed separate administration. Unlike the Burmese, who lost their autonomy in 1885, the frontier people maintained their traditional life and leadership. Due to this policy, different ethnic groups and religions were mixed but not integrated (Holliday, 2010). This contributed to the divides along ethnic and religious lines, which have continued to characterize the country in recent years.

During World War II, while the Burma Independence Army (BIA) of the Burmese majority sided with the Japanese against the British, some minority groups, including the Rohingya,

chose to fight alongside the British. This also played a part in fueling the conflict between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority. Myanmar is a country surrounded by primarily Muslim countries - Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Historically, it is argued that these dynamics have also worsened Buddhists' belief that if any Islamic country attacks Myanmar, the Rohingya will fight against Myanmar (Mohajan, 2018). Consequently, even after independence from British rule, these factors played a role in the post-World War II discrimination against the Rohingya (Wolf, 2017).

#### ***4.1.2. Parliamentary Democracy in Myanmar (1948-1962)***

Despite independence from Britain, the political negotiations post-war continued to face significant challenges connected with demands for autonomy by different ethnic groupings (Callahan, 1998). To unify the country, the Burmese administration in the center negotiated with the frontier leaders that they would grant the frontier areas autonomy and would not intervene in their customs and religious practices (Kipgen, 2011). Although the frontier leaders were suspicious of the motives of the Burmese leaders, they signed an agreement to form the Union of Burma in 1947 with the expectation that they would still maintain their autonomy and receive equal treatment (Kipgen, 2011). The 1947 Constitution recognized special arrangements for certain ethnic groups. Following the 2008 Constitution, Myanmar has been administratively divided into seven regions, seven states, six self-administered zones, and one 'union territory' (DFAT, 2022). The Burman majority predominantly resided across the regions, while minority groups had to live in the designated states (Kipgen, 2011).

After Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Union Citizenship Act recognized that all born in the country were Myanmar's citizens from birth. Some Rohingya with multi-generational residence, with two or more generations residing in Myanmar, reportedly obtained national identity cards (Biver et al., 2014). However, in the following decade, after the establishment of a parliamentary democracy, challenges arose concerning the full incorporation of various ethnic minorities within the national framework. This stemmed partly from a preexisting reluctance among certain minority groups to join the Union of Burma. Consequently, these minority groups advocated for a federal form of government where each distinct nationality would be afforded a measure of self-governance (Callahan, 1998). Crucially, however, minority groups, including the Rohingya, never received the promised self-governance rights, including control over local governments, decision-making power, and taxes (Callahan, 1998).

#### ***4.1.3. Military Government in Myanmar (1962-1988)***

Growing economic and political instability has created opportunities for General Ne Win's military to stage a coup, strip away Burmese democracy, and exacerbate existing problems in the country (Kipgen, 2011). This change conferred upon the armed forces a broad scope of responsibilities encompassing defense matters and involvement in political and economic governance across Burma (Jones, 2013). Following its establishment, in 1982, the military government passed a new Citizenship Law, dividing people into two groups with different rights and privileges. As a result, the Rohingya were "left out," effectively being rendered stateless (Burnley, 2014). In addition to the discriminatory regulation, the military government of Myanmar launched attacks in northern Rakhine, destroying Rohingya mosques and schools. This brutality forced over 200,000 Rohingya to flee across the border to Bangladesh (Grundy-

Warr & Wong, 1997; Matthieson, 1995). Effectively, the law meant that the Rohingyas had been stripped of their citizenship and right to self-identify. The 2018 report of the Mission of the Human Rights Council suggests that the Rohingya suffered from human rights abuse, extrajudicial killings, torture, rape and sexual violence, the two-child rule, political arrests and detentions, forced eviction, forced relocation, destruction of livelihoods, and confiscations of land and resources, firing in homes and business areas, forced labor, child labor, human trafficking, herding people into fenced enclosures, destruction of mosques, and restriction on freedom of movement, assembly, association, expression, and religion (Human Rights Council, 2019).

#### **4.1.4. Current Situation of the Rohingya Crisis**

Currently, over 1.5 million Rohingya people are internally displaced, mainly in the Northwest (Rakhine State), Southeast, and Northeast (Kachin State), which has further led to a humanitarian crisis inside Myanmar (Shohel, 2023).

Since then, international actors such as the UN have been struggling to deliver aid in many areas. Since the 2021 coup, an estimated 70,000 more people have fled Myanmar as refugees to neighboring countries. Nearly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees, mainly from Rakhine, are scattered across the region. Almost 1 million are in Bangladesh, with smaller numbers in Malaysia and India. There are also over 300,000 other refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar in Thailand, Malaysia, and India (UNHCR, 2024).

Table 1: Myanmar refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024)

Location name	Population	Date
Bangladesh	978,003	31 March 2024
Malaysia	166,600	31 March 2024
India	86,100	31 March 2024
Thailand	84,000	31 March 2024
Indonesia	2,800	31 March 2024

#### **4.2. The Situation of Stateless Rohingya Children**

Children make up a significant portion of the Rohingya refugee population. According to UNICEF, in 2018, more than 16,000 Rohingya children were born in refugee camps and informal settlements in Cox’s Bazar (UNICEF, 2024). Born in families with stateless parents, these children are also deprived of their right to citizenship. The systematic denial of birth registration to Rohingya children constitutes a violation of their fundamental right to legal identity. A birth certificate is the foundation for accessing rights and protections enshrined in the legal system, and without it, these children are rendered stateless, hindering their ability to exercise fundamental freedoms like movement and education (Sabuj, 2024). This lack of legal recognition perpetuates their marginalization and exposes them to increased vulnerability.



Since reaching the camps, the Rohingya children have faced a relentless barrage of threats, including outbreaks of measles and cholera, the ever-present danger of COVID-19, dangerously poor sanitation, the constant struggle for food, the threat of extreme weather, and the terrifying possibility of fire. The risks in the camps have created a vicious cycle. These hardships weaken those already malnourished, making them even more susceptible to illness, and outbreaks further deplete their strength, increasing malnutrition rates (Shohel, 2023). In refugee camps in Bangladesh, thousands of Rohingya children have endured unimaginable hardship. These children require immunizations, vitamin supplements, and other essential medical supplies to survive, especially those who have suffered significant injuries during their traumatic journey and would require extra care (Jony et al., 2021). Despite the aid efforts, over 21,000 children under 5 are so malnourished that they require specialized treatment. Hundreds of thousands of children under 15 do not have access to essential vaccinations due to displacement, putting them at risk of preventable diseases (WHO, 2018).

Education plays a crucial role in their recovery and prospects, opening the door to potential integration or repatriation in the future (UNESCO, 2005); however, the lack of legal status can impede access to schooling and other vital services, perpetuating a cycle of deprivation and vulnerability. "The concept of human rights is inseparable from their role in international political practice" (UNFPA, 2005), meaning that education is necessary to exercise one's agency. Education helps the underprivileged escape poverty and actively engage in their communities (Concern Worldwide, 2020).

Unfortunately, the Rohingya in refugee camps, especially Rohingya children, are not given that opportunity. Studies reveal that Rohingya children in Bangladesh are suffering an educational crisis: they are not allowed to attend public schools and are only able to get minimal non-formal education from non-governmental organizations or, occasionally, from teaching initiatives organized by refugees (Palik, 2020). Based on estimates provided by UNICEF, a significant number of Rohingya children continue to lack access to education. Of the 416,000 Rohingya children (3-18 years old) in school, one-third did not have access to basic education as of 2019 (UNICEF, 2019). Without access to education, children are at risk of being exploited for child labor, trafficking, and sexual abuse. Hammadi (2020) also noted, "However, what is more important for us to see is the consequence of growing a generation without education, a generation that will not be able to speak up for themselves, speak against the violation of their rights, enjoy the benefits of an active and enlightened mind, or lift themselves out of their difficult situation."

The above problems stem from the fact that Rohingya children do not enjoy citizenship rights, regardless of whether their nationality is Burmese or any of the host countries. Therefore, for children to grow up with full awareness of their rights, issues related to their identity, especially citizenship, should be resolved within the scope of international law principles. The following section looks at the implications of the international legal architecture on the statelessness of children, a category into which many Rohingya refugee children now fall.

## **5. International Provisions on Citizenship, Statelessness, and Children’s Rights**

### **5.1. Defining Nationality and Citizenship**

A key definition of the term “nationality” derives from the judgment of the *Nottebohm* case by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as “a legal bond having as its basis a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interests, and sentiments, together with the existence of reciprocal rights and duties” (ICJ, 1955). As such, nationality infers a person's connection to a specific state (Islam, 2017) and implies a certain legal status to be recognized and enjoyed by individuals (von Rütte, 2022). Generally, a state is entitled to determine its nationals under its domestic law, with certain exceptions provided in some treaties, especially when such determination would render an individual stateless. This rule is regulated in Article 1 of the 1930 Hague Convention on Certain Questions Relating to the Conflict of Nationality Laws (League of Nations, 1930) as follows: “[...] it is for each state to determine under its own law who are the nationals. This law shall be recognized by other states in so far as it is consistent with international conventions, international custom, and principles of law generally recognized with regard to nationality.”

On the other hand, “citizenship” refers to the social and legal connection between individuals and their political community (Patrick, 1999). While nationality and citizenship can be used interchangeably, it is often argued that the term “citizenship” is domestic law-oriented and also includes historic-biological aspects rather than being strictly politico-legal like “nationality” (Weis, 1979). No matter the differences, nationality or citizenship is the primary indicator of one’s rights as an individual, as it ensures the essential condition for subsequent civil, political, and social rights such as the right to education, the right to healthcare, the right to vote, the right to employment, etc. As such, the right to nationality or citizenship is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right (OHCHR, 2023).

Given the usage of the term “citizenship” instead of “nationality” in Burmese national law and considering the social connotations of the term, for the purpose of the current research, the authors will use the term “citizenship” when investigating the transition of statelessness of Rohingya children.

### **5.2. Statelessness: The Consequences of Deprivation of Citizenship**

Article 1 of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines a stateless person as someone “who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.” This translates to a lack of citizenship and its associated rights, leaving individuals in a dangerous and often marginalized position. Two key international treaties governing statelessness were previously mentioned: the 1954 Convention, which establishes a legal framework to protect the rights of stateless persons, including access to fundamental necessities like education and employment, and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which aims to prevent statelessness from arising in the first place by urging states to adopt practices that ensure all children acquire a nationality at birth. While Myanmar is not a signatory to either convention (ISI & SNAP, 2019), the international community's efforts to address statelessness hold significant weight. The Preamble of the 1961 Convention explicitly

states the objective of “reducing statelessness by eliminating its future causes,” which may suggest a broader international consensus between the United Nations and the Contracting States of the Convention that the reduction and potential elimination of statelessness is a goal with universal application, even for states that have not formally adopted these specific treaties.

Statelessness can result from arbitrary deprivation of nationality, conflict of nationality laws, the emergence of new states and new border rules, or the inability to prove links between an individual and a state (Achiron, 2014). Specifically, regarding arbitrary deprivation of nationality, Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) explicitly states that everyone has the right to nationality and that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality. Arbitrary deprivation often relies on discriminatory grounds, which further exacerbates the plight of stateless persons. Discriminatory nationality laws and administrative practices are usually based on ethnicity, religion, or gender, further increasing exclusion and promoting systemic inequalities within societies. Various international documents have reinforced the prohibition of discriminatory deprivation of nationality, including the 1965 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (UN, 1965), which indicates in Article 5(d)(iii) that: “States Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, color, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law... [and to] the enjoyment of [...] the right to nationality.”

Furthermore, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN, 1979), which Myanmar ratified, states that:

“(a) States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality [...]

(b) States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.”

It is safe to conclude that it is in the international community’s interest to combat statelessness in adherence to the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and the protection of human rights. This requires concerted efforts at both national and international levels.

### **5.3. The Right to Citizenship of Children under International Law**

As previously established, the right to nationality is fundamental to international human rights law. Various international treaties govern children’s right to nationality, including Article 24(3) of the ICCPR: “Every child has the right to acquire a nationality.” Furthermore, it was recognized in the 1989 CRC, which Myanmar ratified (Ministry of Information of Myanmar, 2023), specifically in Articles 2, 7, and 8. In detail, Article 2 requires states to ensure all children within their jurisdiction enjoy their rights without discrimination of any kind and protect them from discrimination or punishment based on their family’s status or beliefs. Article 7 provides that every child has the right to be registered at birth, have a name, acquire a nationality, and be cared for by their parents; and Article 8 calls for states to respect and preserve a child’s identity, including nationality, name, and family relations, and provide assistance to restore these elements if they are unlawfully taken away.

Children usually acquire nationality at birth through descent (*jus sanguinis*) or being born in a particular country (*jus soli*). Unfortunately, in the case of a child being born to stateless parents, it also means the status of statelessness is transmitted to the child. Usually, *jus sanguinis* is the preferred identification of nationality; however, nationality laws of many states now grant access to nationality *jus soli*. However, not every child born in these countries' territories would be given a nationality (von Rütte, 2022). In the annual report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, presented in the twenty-fifth session of the UNHRC, the UNHRC found that some laws, although allowing nationality acquisition for children of stateless parents born on their territory, fail to recognize the possibility of a child becoming stateless due to conflict of nationality laws. Others include supplemental conditions for the acquisition of a nationality of a child who would otherwise be stateless (UNHCR, 2021). It is, however, unclear how the specific circumstances of birth would affect national laws. An example given by the UNHRC highlights such a circumstance as “where the child is born to a foreign national woman prisoner or detainee, who may not have knowledge of or access to relevant procedures to secure a nationality for her child.” Only three states have submitted data on the implementation of laws safeguarding otherwise stateless children in their territory, and other states have reported that no such statistics are available (UNHCR, 2021).

These international provisions demonstrate the international community's commitment to recognizing the absolute importance of the rights of the child. However, it is also widely recognized that many states do not adhere to international commitments (UNGA, 2019). As such, it is also essential to examine the relevant Burmese laws on citizenship. Understanding these domestic regulations will provide a comprehensive view of how citizenship is defined and regulated within Myanmar and of the deep challenges this national legal architecture creates. The following section looks at the key legal infrastructure in Myanmar of relevance to this.

## **6. The Burmese Approach to Rohingya Children's Citizenship**

### **6.1. The 1982 Citizenship Law**

Twenty years after the series of ethnicity- and religion-related violence, the 1982 Citizenship Law was enacted by the military authority of General Ne Win (Shohel, 2023). Prior to this law, the 1947 Constitution of Burma and the 1948 Union Citizenship Law included indigenous races as citizenship assessment criteria but also allowed for naturalization through residence. Foreigners were also allowed to apply for naturalization under specific conditions between 1947 and 1982. Article 5(a) of the 1948 Union Citizenship Law also allowed for *jus soli* acquisition of citizenship if a person has both parents being born in the country and four grandparents being permanent residents (Arraiza, 2017).

However, the 1982 Citizenship Law approaches the matter of citizenship in a highly ethicized manner (Arraiza, 2017). This law only recognizes the citizenship of eight national groups: Bamar, Chin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin, with very few other exceptions provided in Articles 5, 6, and 7. Others who do not belong to these groups would be categorized into another class of citizenship called the “naturalized citizens” (“*naing ngan thapyu khwint*”).

*ya thu*”) and “associate citizens” (“*eh naing ngan tha*”) (Arraiza, 2017). This categorization denies naturalized and associated citizens full participation rights as citizens, including access to higher education and jobs. Furthermore, this second group comprised people with Bengali or Pakistani heritage and Chinese settlers (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997). To qualify as an associate citizen, a person’s ancestors had to have applied for citizenship before 1982, which was unlikely for Rohingya due to isolation and poor infrastructure. Even for regular citizenship, the law required proof of birth and residence in Burma before 1948. Moreover, fluency in a national language, Burmese, was required. The policy can be interpreted as discriminatory towards the Rohingya because the mother tongue of these people is Rohingya or Ruaingga (Mohajan, 2018).

The 1982 Citizenship Law was first implemented with the “national verification” in 1989, providing citizens with color-coded cards to identify their citizenship status. In detail, pink is for full citizenship, green is for naturalized citizenship, and blue is for associate citizenship. Communities, such as the Muslims or the “Bengali,” who refused to participate in the process, arguing that they were already citizens or were entitled to identify themselves as they wished in their ID cards, were offered temporary documentation with no clear legal status, such as Temporary White Cards and Interim Cards for National Verification (Arraiza, 2017). Such temporary solutions, unfortunately, lead to many communities becoming stateless. Nonetheless, the 1982 Law still allows for the acquisition of citizenship for naturalized and associated citizens in certain cases. Children with parents consisting of one full citizen and one naturalized or associate citizen are also allowed citizenship, and third-generation naturalized and associate citizens can also have full citizenship (Sabuj, 2024). This brings up the possibility of recognized citizenship for children of stateless Rohingyas; however, in reality, this is hardly the case due to the inequitable implementation of the law.

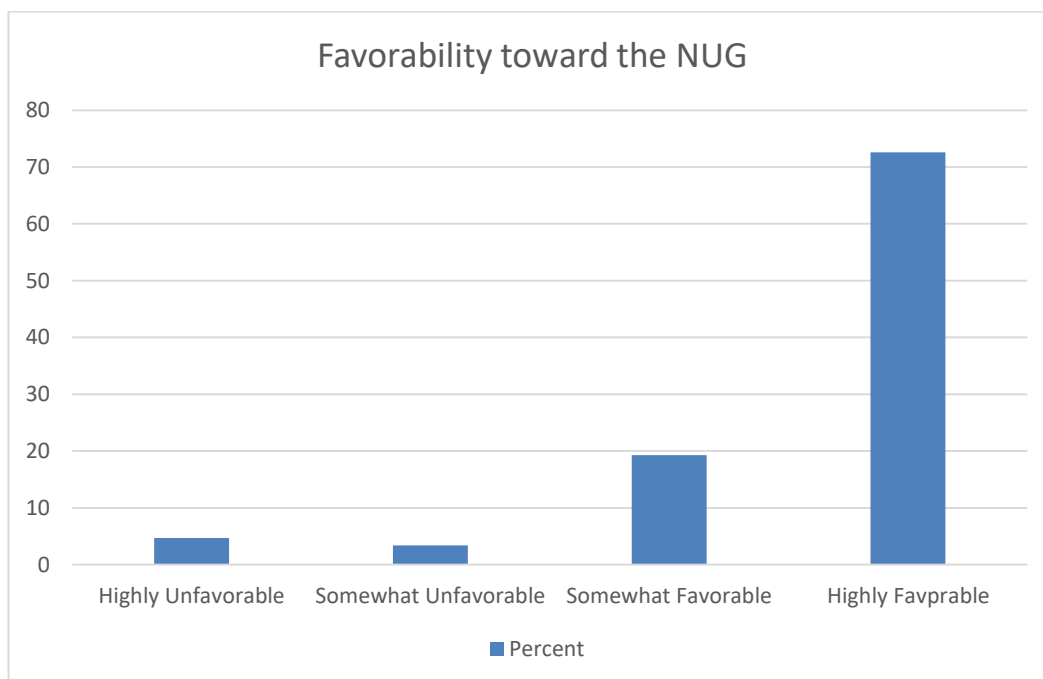
## **6.2. Newest Development: The Proposed Abolishment of the 1982 Citizenship Law**

In June 2023, the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG)—established by ousted democratically elected lawmakers and parliamentarians wishing to create an exile government—made a significant announcement regarding the country's citizenship laws by approving the replacement of Myanmar's controversial 1982 Citizenship Law. In a briefing paper submitted to the HRC, NUG suggested that the new law “protects against statelessness and bases citizenship on birth in Myanmar or birth anywhere as a child of Myanmar citizens.” The NUG is working in collaboration with a network of ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) against the MAF and State Administration Council (SAC). Even though lacking formal recognition as Myanmar’s official government, they have important political influence, with a liaison office in Washington, D.C., and a representative at the UN through Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun (Oo, 2024).

Recent commentaries suggest that the previously dominant Myanmar military junta might be on the edge of collapse (Beech, 2024). Struggling to retain its grip on power, the junta has experienced setbacks such as losing control over crucial border trading towns, which has depleted its resources. Additionally, the military has relinquished significant portions of territory (Beech, 2024). On the contrary, the NUG has been gaining considerable support in

Myanmar. The result of an online survey by Jangai Jap and Amy Liu between April and August 2023, involving 4,612 Burmese adults of diverse ethnicities in 20 countries, with nearly 47% in Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, illustrates this point.

Figure 1: The result of Jap and Liu’s survey on the extent of favorability toward the NUG (United States Institute of Peace, 2024)



This approved new Citizenship Law implies a closer step toward addressing the longstanding issues of Rohingya children’s right to citizenship. Nonetheless, this new law cannot formally take effect, given that the SAC and MAF remain in control of formal state institutions, including legislation (BTI, 2024), as well as NUG’s lack of formal recognition. Given the complex political landscape in Myanmar and the ongoing challenges faced by the NUG in consolidating its authority, Rohingya children may continue to face obstacles in accessing their rights to citizenship and relevant privileges and protections.

### **7. Assistance from Host Countries: Is it Effective in Mitigating Children’s Statelessness?**

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar has resulted in a significant humanitarian burden for its neighboring countries, primarily Bangladesh, Thailand, India, and Malaysia, which have experienced an influx of Rohingya refugees seeking safety and security. These countries have responded with varying degrees of support, often driven by humanitarian imperatives and international pressure. Despite a shared regional empathy for the plight of the Rohingya, the efforts of these bordering nations remain primarily focused on immediate humanitarian relief rather than long-term integration or resolution. Here, the authors will look into the national laws of Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as the three countries’ responsibility under international agreements, to investigate the effectiveness of reducing the transition of statelessness from parents to Rohingya children in these countries.

### 7.1. Bangladesh

Bangladesh has shown its sympathy for the status of the Rohingya, but despite the assistance, Rohingya children only receive humanitarian aid without having legal citizenship from Bangladesh. The citizenship law of Bangladesh, which includes the 1951 Citizenship Act and the 1972 Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Order, regulates that Bangladesh would confer citizenship for an individual under two circumstances: (i) a person is born to a Bangladeshi parent or (ii) that person has maintained their residence in Bangladesh since 1971. However, regarding the second circumstance, that person needs to be approved by the Bangladeshi government. While the Rohingya children may have satisfied the requirement of residence, in most cases, their application for Bangladeshi citizenship is unsuccessful and denied by the administrative authorities. Therefore, even when the Rohingya want to marry a Bangladeshi citizen, it is unlikely that the Rohingya and their child will receive Bangladeshi citizenship (Sabuj, 2024).

Because Bangladesh is not a member of the 1951 Convention, Rohingya refugees fall under the scope of the 1946 Foreigners Act. This Act does not automatically grant asylum, permanent residence, or a path to citizenship in Bangladesh. Consequently, the administrative bodies of Bangladesh have the authority to decide to grant citizenship to the Rohingya children. Notably, the Bangladeshi administration has explicitly declared that the acceptance of Rohingya refugees stemmed from humanitarian assistance and discretionary authority rather than any legal obligation arising from the Convention (Hoque, 2016). This has resulted in systemic discrimination toward the Rohingya children.

Although Bangladesh has witnessed remarkable poverty reduction and development in recent years, it is still a low-income country (World Economics, 2023). Therefore, Bangladesh is in a delicate position to cope with the situation. At present, Bangladesh has expressed its stance that it would not take any more Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh formulated a relocation plan in January 2018, proposing the transfer of a significant number of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bhasan Char Island. Specialists have designated this island as “uninhabitable” due to its vulnerability to severe weather events, particularly flooding during the monsoon season (Karin et al., 2020). Bangladesh’s stricter stance could also be illustrated through the event that more than 400 Rohingya people were stranded at sea during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karin et al., 2020). Consequently, the Rohingya children are trapped in a vicious circle of being stateless and are at higher risk of discrimination.

### 7.2. Malaysia

Being the second-largest recipient of Rohingya refugees, Malaysia also bears the burden of ensuring the fundamental rights of the Rohingya, especially the children. Unlike Bangladesh, Malaysia publicly condemned Myanmar's policy (Dali, 2018). It is established that, on average, one child is born each day to a Malaysian-born Rohingya mother. This ongoing pattern of birth within Malaysian territory by successive generations of Rohingya descent raises questions regarding their right to citizenship. Specifically, it casts doubt on whether the term “Rohingya” alone is sufficient to capture their legal status in Malaysia (Dali, 2018).

Unfortunately, Malaysia has not ratified the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Furthermore, Malaysia lacks a domestic legal framework governing the designation and treatment of refugees. (Dali, 2018). However, as a member of the CRC, Malaysia has an obligation under Article 8 of the Convention to “provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity.” Despite the regulation, the right to citizenship is a special concern for Rohingya children.

Over the past two decades, more than 100,000 Rohingya individuals have migrated to Malaysia (UNHCR, 2024). This influx has resulted in the birth of at least one, potentially two, generations within Malaysian territory (Human Rights Watch, 2000). However, as enshrined in the 2008 Constitution, Malaysian citizenship law does not grant automatic citizenship based solely on birthplace. The Constitution outlines two primary paths to citizenship acquisition—*jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*. The principle of *jus soli* is only applicable when one parent is a Malaysian citizen or permanent resident at the time of the child’s birth (Loganathan et al., 2022). This is unavailable to Rohingya children due to their parents’ lack of official documentation. *Jus sanguinis* seems like a better fit, but Malaysia lacks a legal framework to grant citizenship to children born there if their parents are stateless. The situation is further complicated because the terms ‘undocumented,’ ‘non-citizen,’ ‘migrant,’ and ‘stateless’ are sometimes used interchangeably (Loganathan et al., 2022). Pursuant to the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63, migrant workers employed in low-wage sectors are prohibited from sponsoring the entry of their family members or establishing new families within Malaysia (Immigration Act 1959/63 – Act 155, 1959). As a result, all children born to such migrant workers in Malaysia, regardless of their parents’ immigration status, would be considered irregular migrants under the Act (Human Rights Watch, 2000). This complex web of limitations leaves Rohingya children in legal limbo, denying them access to fundamental rights and exposing them to the threat of detention and deportation. Due to the limitation in obtaining citizenship, their ability to access essential services such as healthcare, education, and social protection is significantly impeded (Loganathan et al., 2022).

### 7.3. Thailand

When the crisis first broke out, Thailand did not welcome the Rohingya and considered this minority group a danger to their security. However, when the crisis got worse, Thailand called for a “help-on” policy to assist the Rohingya with humanitarian aid (Slezak et al., 2015). Although being provided with fundamental needs, the Rohingya children at the Thailand border are still at risk due to the limited rights to citizenship.

According to Thailand’s 1965 Nationality Act B.E. 2508, Section 7 *bis*. (3), a person born in its territory of alien parents shall not be able to acquire Thai nationality if either a father or a mother or both “have entered and resided in the Thai Kingdom without permission under the law on immigration.” This provision means to the Rohingya children that even when their father or mother is Thai, there is little chance that they would be allowed to register as Thai citizens. At the same time, Section 10 of this law also provided that an alien who wishes to apply for naturalization as a Thai must possess the qualifications as follows: (1) becoming *sui juris* (having total legal capacity) in accordance with Thai law and the law under which he has



nationality; (2) having good behavior; (3) having a regular occupation; (4) having a domicile in the Thai Kingdom for a consecutive period of not less than five years till the day of applying for naturalization; and (5) having knowledge of Thai language as prescribed in the regulations. These criteria set a high threshold for the Rohingya children to meet, given the fact that they have limited access to fundamental rights, including the right to education and the right to live in a safe place.

Meanwhile, although Thailand is not a member of the 1954 or the 1961 Convention (UNHCR, 2021), in 2008, the Government of Thailand amended the 2004 Civil Registration Act, establishing mandatory universal birth registration. This amendment mandates the issuance of birth certificates to all individuals born within Thailand's territory, irrespective of their parent's immigration status. While this establishes a legal recognition of birth and provides these individuals with an identity document, it is crucial to distinguish this from the acquisition of Thai citizenship. The law itself does not confer the full spectrum of rights and protections associated with Thai citizenship (Slezak et al., 2015). Furthermore, the situation for Rohingya children born at sea presents additional complexities. The legal framework surrounding such births may require further clarification to ensure a proper registration framework for establishing their legal status in Thailand (Slezak et al., 2015). Therefore, the Rohingya children at the border of Thailand are also enduring discriminatory treatment.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has uncovered several critical findings regarding the statelessness of Rohingya children. By providing a historical overview of the current situation and challenges regarding stateless Rohingya children, it traces the roots of the Rohingya refugee crisis back to the British colonial period and the subsequent political and social conflicts in Myanmar. It also analyzes the impacts of these factors on children's right to nationality. Moreover, the paper includes a comprehensive review of international provisions on citizenship, statelessness, and children's rights, highlighting the importance of nationality and citizenship as fundamental human rights. Additionally, the paper explores the Burmese approach to Rohingya children's citizenship, particularly focusing on the controversial 1982 Citizenship Law and its recently proposed abolishment. This examination sheds light on the legal challenges and discriminatory practices that have contributed to the statelessness of the Rohingya population. Furthermore, by assessing the effectiveness of assistance provided by neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand in mitigating the statelessness of Rohingya children, the paper evaluates the challenges and limitations these countries face in providing legal recognition and protection to Rohingya refugees, offering insights into the regional dynamics and international responses to this pressing humanitarian issue. Nonetheless, the research calls for further primary research to be conducted to highlight this critical issue, inspiring more in-depth studies and innovative solutions to address the complex challenges faced by stateless Rohingya children.

While efforts by host countries and UN agencies offer temporary shelter and livelihoods, the cycle of statelessness persists without assured citizenship rights and preservation of dignity. Resolving this complex issue requires Myanmar's cooperation in recognizing the Rohingya as

an ethnic group and improving relations with the Buddhist majority. Furthermore, host countries must uphold international human rights laws, ensuring fair judicial reviews and granting citizenship to stateless children. Although there are no easy solutions, improving opportunities through UNICEF and UNHCR-led initiatives and providing psychosocial support can foster a sense of belonging and hope for the future among Rohingya children. Comprehensive solutions addressing their right to citizenship, healthcare, and education are urgently needed to break the cycle of statelessness and secure a better future for these vulnerable children.

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## **Rebel Governance on the Gold Mining within the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve**

**Wai Yan Tun**<sup>113</sup>

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### **Abstract**

In 2005, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) collaborated with the energy company TOTAL to establish the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve (TNR). Located in the Tanintharyi region, the TNR shares borders with Mon State and Thailand. The Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic armed resistance group in Karen State, has contested the legitimacy of the TNR, with Brigade 4 claiming most of its area as its territory. Since 2019, a significant amount of mineral mining has occurred within the reserve area controlled by the KNU Brigade 4. Miners on-site comprise Karen ethnic groups as well as non-Karen groups, including Burmese, Tavoyan, and Mon. This research examines how KNU Brigade 4 has governed gold mining and both Karen and non-Karen communities within the mining site. I argue that KNU Brigade 4 has employed the power of exclusion to govern the mining sites, granting privileges to miners closely associated with the KNU Brigade 4 while excluding certain Karen and non-Karen communities who have raised concerns about the negative impacts of mining activities. The mainstream literature on rebel society in Myanmar has primarily focused on the interaction between rebel elites and their grassroots. Through the lens of power exclusion, exploring the interaction between KNU Brigade 4 and non-Karen groups can broaden our understanding of rebel society in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Rebel Society, Power of Exclusion, Gold Mining, Karen National Union (KNU), Tanintharyi Nature Reserve (TNR)

### **1. Introduction**

Since 2019, a noticeable scale of mineral mining has occurred within the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve (TNR). The reserve, covering 1,690 square kilometers, is located in the Tanintharyi Region, Myanmar. Moist evergreen forests cover almost all the area, and it is also home to rich biodiversity and various endangered species. The Myanmar military government's Forest Department and the Yadana gas pipeline project's operator, TOTAL Myanmar Company, jointly established the TNR in 2005 (Pollard et al., 2014). The TOTAL Myanmar Company aimed to compensate for some impacts on biodiversity and forests caused by the construction of gas pipelines and support facilities (Pollard et al., 2014). Three gas pipelines and a private access road to the metering stations of three gas companies (TOTAL, Petronas, and PTTEPI) are in the reserve area, situated close to the Thai border. The TOTAL Company described the TNR project as a part of the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program as well as the carbon capture conservation project. According to the TOTAL & EMP Myanmar

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Integrated Report 2019, the TOTAL Myanmar Company, Petronas, and PTTEPI jointly funded the project, contributing USD\$150,000 each annually. A local news report (Dawei Watch, 2020) calculated that these three companies have been funding the government with approximately six million dollars for the reserve project since 2005. The natural reserve is under the management of the Forest Department. Some organizations, like the Wildlife Conservation Society Myanmar (WCSM), which worked closely with the Forest Department for the reserve, hoped the reserve project would be a good collaboration between the public and private for the conservation (WCS Myanmar, n.d.).

In 2019, people living near the TNR noticed an obvious environmental degradation, particularly water pollution of the Zin Bar stream. The Zin Bar stream originates in the TNR area, where moist evergreen forests and a range of mountains lie. It is one of the important river basins for the Tavoy River. Some parts of the TNR area serve as the watershed for the stream. Around 4,500 locals live in Kaleinaung Town and Zin Bar Village (Department of Population, 2017). Those residents are mostly relying on the stream for clean water. In Kaleinaung Town, most people use stream water through the main water distribution system that has pipeline networks to households in three-fourths of the town area. Moreover, many locals are using water from the stream for agriculture. Some also catch fish and collect freshwater shells. In 2019, local people from Zin Bar Village and Kaleinaung Town started to notice that the stream became muddy and they began experiencing a shortage of clear water. Some people experienced skin-related health issues after using dirty water from the stream (Dawei Watch, 2021).

Regarding mineral mining and related environmental impacts in the TNR, the question arises: ‘Why and how can this happen in the Reserve?’. In fact, only authorized person(s), like staff from the gas companies and the Forest Department, can access the private road. There are a security gate and a checkpoint on the road operated by the military and the company’s security guards. Additionally, legal restrictions prohibit people from freely engaging in activities like cutting down trees and hunting in the reserve areas (Forest Law, 2018). Under these conditions, individuals or groups of people are unable to engage in mining activities without obtaining permission or agreements from key stakeholders who control the area on the ground. Some areas of the TNR, especially the north, where Mon ethnic people live, have been under the control of the New Mon State Party (MNSP). Similarly, the KNU Brigade-4 controls many areas within and near the TNR where Karen, Burmese, Dawei, and others live. The TNR, thus, is in mixed-controlled areas, shared between two different Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and the government (the military). Pollard et al. (2014) highlighted the security concerns and restrictions for the TNR staff as the KNU controls certain areas. The Forest Department (2017) also clearly stated that the KNU is still active in TNR areas.

Gold mining in the TNR area can be considered only the tip of the iceberg of the problem caused by the prolonged contestation between the Myanmar government and KNU. The involvement of the KNU on the ground, the agenda of oil and gas companies for the reserve area, and the peace process between the Myanmar government and KNU have been significantly interconnected and entangled in terms of social and political contestation. This

situation can also be understood as a close competition between the Myanmar government and KNU to forge their legitimate authority in mixed-control areas (SiuSue Mark, 2021).

During the process of decision-making for the establishment of the reserve, the key non-state stakeholders, local communities, and the KNU were excluded. Additionally, the exclusive approach to conservation in the TNR caused grievances for local groups (Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari, 2018). This situation changed after the ceasefire agreement was signed between the Myanmar government and the KNU. The KNU has been trying to return to their territories. Before the military coup, KNU leaders were involved in political dialogue at the union peace conferences to discuss and negotiate for their political goals. Some KNU leaders had a close relationship with leaders from the previous two governments (Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi). As a result, the ceasefire has significantly influenced business relations between the governments and the KNU, particularly in terms of how the KNU engages with investors in their controlled areas through the signing of business agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) (Saw Yan Naing, 2016). Nevertheless, it is neither rational nor accurate to assume that the KNU and the government worked together on every business activity because the KNU has its own political agendas, concerns, and interests. Most importantly, the KNU should not be seen as a unified non-state actor but rather as an internally diverse ethnic armed group.

Although the structure of the KNU seems to be centralized, different districts and brigades with diverse interests can enjoy their autonomy in taxation, business activities, and resource management (Jolliffe, 2016). Therefore, it is important to approach some ethnic armed groups in specific contexts and cases rather than generalizing the nature of the whole group. Brenner (2017) clearly states that non-state armed groups are heterogeneous, often internally fragmented, and typically split into rival factions. Cunningham et al. (2012) also point out that the dominant Conflict studies tend to treat non-state entities as unitary or monolithic groups, which actually are fragmented.

KNU's Mergui-Tavoy District, controlled by Brigade 4, had a very close relationship with previous governments that greenlighted KNU-organized business projects. However, the government and KNU were contesting in the case of gold mining in the TNR. The secretary of the KNU Brigade 4 publicly responded to a media interview that his armed group does not recognize the TNR and claimed that those areas are in KNU's territory. Therefore, KNU can collect tax from mining businesses. In addition, he denied that the military and KNU collaborated on gold mining (Dawei Watch, 2023). At the same time, the regional government tried to stop the gold mining in the TNR under the control of the government's Forest Department.

In this political setting, the government failed to halt mining activities. On one hand, it is evident that the government did not permit mining and made efforts to prevent it. On the other hand, KNU Brigade 4 did not deny granting permission for the mining to take place. Therefore, it is essential to approach the KNU Brigade 4 (specifically Lar Doh Soh Township authorities who are governing the TNR's gold mining area) to explore how they manage the area and gold mining. At the same time, it is vital to understand how locals (Karen and non-Karen) who suffer from water pollution respond to the management and governance of KNU. Without the

cooperation of the KNU, TNR would not be a successful reserve, but it could even spark conflicts between stakeholders involved. In addition, the KNU Brigade 4 is the key player in solving the environmental impacts caused by gold mining.

This study attempts to explore how KNU Brigade 4 has governed the TNR according to its political agenda and policy for natural resource governance. Furthermore, it tries to reflect the voices and responses of locals who suffer from the impacts of environmental degradation caused by gold mining. To analyze the KNU's resource governance and the responses of locals, the article uses the insights of local Karen CSOs and residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds through in-depth interviews and secondary data and information published by reliable sources. My findings argue that KNU Brigade 4 has employed the power of exclusion to govern the mining sites, granting privileges to miners closely associated with KNU Brigade 4 while excluding certain Karen and non-Karen communities who have raised concerns about the negative impacts of mining activities and who suffer from those impacts. Before presenting the findings, this paper will explain the sociopolitical background of the TNR involving diverse key stakeholders. Then, the resource governance of KNU Brigade 4 in the mining sites and the responses of locals will be discussed accordingly.

## 2. Literature Review

Karen CSOs worked together to speak out about the grievances of Karen communities. The Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari (CAT), formed by seven Karen CSOs in 2014, published a report in 2018: *Our Forest, Our Life: Protected Areas in Tanintharyi Region Must Respect the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. The report states that the establishment of protected areas lacked respect for indigenous people's rights. Specifically, the TNR has caused people to be unable to access their customary land, resources, and livelihood. Moreover, displaced communities who fled to the Thai-Myanmar border due to the military offensives will face difficulties in returning to their land since these areas are already occupied by protected zones. The report warns that the establishment of protected areas without respecting the indigenous people's rights and a comprehensive peace deal between KNU and the military would become a threat to the fragile peace process. It proposes a people-led conservation model with people participation rather than centralized conservation that dispossesses local communities from their land and criminalizes forest users. The report is the collective work of different Karen community-based organizations and expresses the grievances and concerns of the local communities. It has significantly contributed to enhancing our understanding of the local communities' responses to the issue.

Woods' works on the TNR help us understand the role of the Myanmar State. In his report, *Natural Resource Governance Reform and the Peace Process in Myanmar* (Wood, 2019), he argues that the natural resource governance reform in Myanmar lacked meaningful progress. The Myanmar State did not create clear policies and institutions to regulate extraction permits and did not have clear agreements on resource ownership, use, and benefit sharing. Partly because of this situation, many EAOs have been involved in the extractive industry through joint ventures with the high-ranking officials in the Tatmadaw.



In his earlier work, Woods (2011) discusses the connection between the Myanmar State and the EAOs. He uses the concept of *ceasefire capitalism* to explore how the Myanmar military strategically attempted to territorialize the area of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) (EAO's controlled areas) by working closely with Chinese investors and political elites in the KIO through the border timber trade and cash crop plantations. Woods (2011) stated that the military wisely took the role of the state to get recognition from the Chinese government for managing all of the areas, including the land of EAOs, through businesses and trade in border areas.

In 2019, Woods (2019) advanced our understanding of the EAOs' role in natural resource governance. He describes how the Myanmar State has used conservation work as counterinsurgency towards some ethnic people and EAOs. Woods focused on southern Myanmar, the Tanintharyi region, the research site in the present study. The region was a KNU-controlled area, and many local Karen people owned lands there. However, due to constant conflicts, these people lost their lands. The Myanmar government used conservation work to build its territory exclusively and launched a counterinsurgency during the ceasefire period. Woods conceptualized this situation as 'green territorialization.'

Woods, with his colleague Jared Naimark, further explores the Myanmar State's counterinsurgency through conservation (2020). The authors (2020) argue that a powerful actor (mainly the Myanmar State) can use conservation as regulations and reason to legitimize or use force to exclude particular individuals or groups. Government-led conservation is not a hard-line counterinsurgency but a soft means. Through exploring the TNR, they argued that in the Myanmar State-led conservation areas, "conservationists working to establish the park invoke and build upon racialized discourses of Karen Forest dwellers as criminals, first as dangerous rebel supporters, and now as forest destroyers" (2020).

Woods' work is a good reflection on the establishment of the TNR, highlighting the use of exclusion power by the state and the military, with the support of the private sector, in decision-making processes related to the establishment of conservation areas. However, Woods' approach treats an EAO involved in economic initiatives as a monolithic group. This perspective fails to shed light on how the KNU Brigade 4 has dealt with the gold mining activities in the TNR because it overlooks the dynamics within individual brigades. Although the article published in 2020 covers the KNU's Brigade 4, it is unclear how the KNU Brigade 4 has managed the gold mining and how the local people have responded to its management.

Indeed, not only Woods but also other scholars (e.g., Harrisson & Kyed, 2019; McCarthy & Farrelly, 2020) tend to treat non-state armed groups as unitary actors. In reality, almost all the EAOs are fragmented and internally diverse, which explains why the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K) split from the KNU and the KIO. In other words, internal contestation between members of those EAOs is significant. If we treat an EAO as a unitary actor, it contradicts the reality of their behavior and can lead to misunderstandings about the nature of an EAO. I use David Brenner's concept of rebel society, along with the concept of power exclusion, to explore how the KNU's Brigade 4 governed the gold mining in the TNR and how local communities responded to Brigade 4's management.

### 3. Methodology

Semi-structured qualitative methodology was applied for this study. In-depth interviews, life story interviews, and desk reviews from many reliable sources were included. Interviewees were relevant stakeholders, including members of CBOs/CSOs and locals with diverse ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

### 4. Green Territorialization: The Origin of Tanintharyi Nature Reserve

The Tanintharyi Nature Reserve (TNR), covering 1,690 square kilometers, is in the Tanintharyi Region, Myanmar. The TNR was established under the military regime with the cooperation of the oil and gas company, Total Myanmar, in 2005, which was the main operator of the Yadana project. Petronas Company from the Yetagun project and PTTEPI from the Zawtika project also joined and funded the TNR Project.

The establishment of the TNR has been criticized for the lack of consultation with local people who lived in the reserve areas and relied on the forest and agriculture. Before the project started, Karen ethnic people lived in the forest areas, with their livelihoods relying on agriculture and forestry products. Not only the Karen ethnic group but also Mon, Tavoyan, and Burmese people live in those areas. The area (especially where the gas pipelines and related infrastructures lie) once was under the control of the Karen National Union (KNU)'s Brigade 4. Brigade 4 had controlled the Mergui-Tavoy District (Tanintharyi region) before the Yadana project operated. Around 1995, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), changing to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), led by Commander-in-Chief Than Shwe, launched a series of offensives against the KNU in the south of Myanmar in 1997, and the KNU had to give up some territories that they controlled.

The SPDC government approved the Yadana Project, enabling the export of natural gas from Myanmar offshore to Thailand via a gas pipeline. The military launched operations against KNU to control the areas for pipeline construction and forced local communities, especially the Karen, to leave the places where they settled. The military erected several bases along the pipeline and in its vicinity. Various forms of human rights violations, including forced displacement, forced labor, and extrajudicial killings by the military, occurred during the implementation of the Yadana pipeline construction (ERI & SAIN, 1996; Aung Lwin, 2018). The construction was completed in 1998, and commercial operation started afterwards. In 2005, when the regime demarcated the TNR areas, many Mon villages near Mon State and other ethnic villages were included. Some areas of the TNR, especially the north, where Mon ethnic people live, have been under the control of the New Mon State Party (MNSP). Therefore, the TNR is in the mixed-controlled areas shared between two EAOs and the government (the military). Despite the offensives, it is not true to claim that the military has been able to fully control the TNR areas. This is because EAOs, including the KNU, have been trying to maintain control over their territories through different strategies. The establishment of the TNR can be understood through the lens of green territoriality (Wood, 2019), which explains how the state uses its power to occupy a certain area under the name of conservation. In the case of the TNR, the military regime used force to remove key stakeholders from their land and attempted to control the occupied territory as a conservation area.

#### 4.1. Ceasefire and Businesses

In 2011, a new quasi-military government, led by former general Thein Sein, was formed according to the 2008 constitution. In 2012, the KNU and the Thein Sein government signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement. Three years later, KNU signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) for further political dialogue. Despite the lack of a clear definition for territory and demarcation, the NCA implicitly recognized the territories of an EAO and opened a channel for negotiation between the military and the KNU's armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), for military activities from both sides on the ground (Jolliffe, 2016). Consequently, no armed conflicts were reported between the Myanmar armed forces (the Tatmadaw) and the KNLA in the TNR. Meanwhile, the Thein Sein government started to have several political dialogues with different EAOs to sign the NCA at the union level for further peace and state-building. These were known as the Union Peace Conferences, where EAOs could express their political goals and negotiate, compromise, and agree with other stakeholders involved in the peace process. Since then, the KNU was unlisted from the blacklist that legally named it as a terrorist group before, and some KNU leaders have become close to the government (Brenner, 2017). Moreover, KNU Liaison offices could officially open in many places, such as in the capital of the Tanintharyi region, Dawei. More importantly, KNU Brigade 4 could do business in their controlled area near the Thai border three years after the ceasefire agreement was made.

The National League for Democracy (NLD), a liberal political party led by the reformer Aung San Suu Kyi, became Myanmar's ruling party after winning an electoral victory on November 8, 2015. Naing (2016) reports that in December 2016, the NLD government officially greenlighted a KNU Brigade 4 business known as the Mae Tha Mee Khee Industrial Estate Project, initiated by a collaboration between the Nobel Prince Company, owned by the KNU, and the Power China International Group, a state-owned enterprise from China. The projects include industrial businesses and renewable energy projects, including a dam on the Tanintharyi River, and some small projects like a small port and new road in Dawei and Myeik townships. Some Karen Civil Society Organizations opposed the plan of the KNU, criticizing it as undemocratic due to a lack of transparency. Since then, people started to notice the KNU's ties with businesses. Even before the ceasefire in 2012, some leaders from KNU Brigade 4 had close ties with Thai and Burmese businessmen in the logging industry and provided security for logging activities in their controlled areas (Woods, 2021).

#### 4.2. Mining in the Contested Areas

Local people learned that there are gold mining sites upstream of the Zin Bar stream. They believe that the gold mining sites are the origin of the water pollution. Thus, some locals reported to the regional government to tackle this issue in 2020 (Dawei Watch, 2023). The NLD government attempted to stop the mining by highlighting that no one had received legal permission for gold mining in the TNR. According to Dawei Watch (2020), the police and military arrested six people for illegal mining, citing data from Kaleinaung Town Police Station. However, gold mining continued despite surprise checks and field investigations by government officers (including military personnel, police officers, forest department officers, and TNR staff). To raid the large mining area in the mixed-control zone between the

government and KNU area, the Forest Department’s officers would need to collaborate with the military and the police force for security procedures. Importantly, the military would have to inform the responsible KNLA troops about their activities in advance, in line with the ceasefire agreement’s codes of conduct (Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, 2015).

In 2020, a local news agency, Dawei Watch, published a report about mining, clearly stating that the mining area is under the control of KNU Brigade 4. The report included the response of a KNU public relations officer concerning the mining issues. He admitted that the KNU knows the mining activities and the involvement of KNU’s members in it. However, he did not clearly mention which members of the KNU were involved and how the KNU addressed the issues, aside from banning mining. He emphasized that the TNR has been their land for a long time, and TOTAL and the military started governing the reserve later after the gas pipeline construction. One officer from the Forest Department, involved in the TNR Project, openly shared that certain areas of the TNR are under the control of EAOs. As a result, their staff cannot engage in certain conservation activities, such as patrolling in these areas, without obtaining permission from the KNU (Dawei Watch, 2020). The satellite images described in the report show the changes in mining areas in terms of the sizes and surface damage, such as large pits and site clearing by cutting down trees (Dawei Watch, 2023). Some locals from Kaleinaung town who went to the mining sites for artisanal mining revealed that they had to pay some money to a Karen leader to gain permission for mining.

## **5. Rebel Governance: Resource Governance of the KNU Brigade 4**

### **5.1. KNU Governance Structure**

The KNU has its constitution, policies, laws, and regulations. Its organizational structure consists of four levels: central, district, township, and village levels. According to the KNU constitution, there are various kinds of units with different titles and responsibilities, such as committees, councils, departments, and organizations functioning differently across the KNU-controlled areas. Leaders and heads of those different KNU units are mostly elected, especially in the administration and other sectors. The KNU Congresses for the central, district, and township levels are held every four years, while the village tract plenary meetings are organized every two years. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) are the two main armed wings of the KNU, and the Karen National Police Force (KNPF) serves as a law enforcement unit. There are 14 departments, including the defense department. Some of them, such as the mining department and foreign affairs department, are formed only at the central level. The KNU also has its own judiciary system, which consists of different courts at three levels: the central, district, and township levels. The justice department is also a part of the system, handling legal activities such as reviewing, amending, and making laws. Despite those centralized structures, policies, rules, and regulations, the KNU is internally diverse and decentralized. Therefore, in the KNU Brigade 4 areas called Myeik-Dawei District, especially in the case of gold mining in the TNR area in Lar Doh Soh Township, different governance styles can be found, especially in resource governance.

## 5.2. KNU Brigade 4 Resource Governance

In the case of gold mining in the TNR, no clear resource governance system can be found. However, certainly, members of the KNU Brigade 4, from the district, township, and village tract levels, have been involved. The mining department is responsible for overseeing mining, and other departments like the Forestry Department and Finance and Revenue Department, as well as some committees such as the Economic Committee, Land Committee, and the Natural Environment and Resources Conservation Committee, share responsibilities for related and interconnected activities and cases. The most responsible position(s) or person(s) would be the chairperson and vice chairperson of the executive committee of the district. They have the authority to decide whether to permit or reject mining businesses in their areas. In addition, executive committee members from the township as well as KNU basic organizations (village and village tract) are responsible.

According to the governance structure of the KNU clearly outlined in the constitution, the mining sector is supposed to be controlled by the central mining department, and permission from the related and responsible committees and departments is required. In reality, however, it is found that each district enjoys autonomy in their own ways, which may breach the constitution or policies. For instance, Brigade 4 and district leaders can govern resources within their territory without informing the central for permission or suggestion. Another factor contributing to this autonomy at the district level is that each district is responsible for financing and supporting its forces and operations. This could be a strong reason or probably a pretext to justify greenlighting extractive businesses taxed by the district, township, or village level without following the existing constitution, laws, or regulations. Especially in the current war-torn situation, the role of armed wings is likely to be at its peak, and this situation can lead to a wartime economy where almost all resources are appropriated and utilized for military means.

However, the Brigade 4 areas have experienced fewer armed clashes between the military and the KNLA after the coup. Gold mining in the TNR areas is believed to have started in 2019, before the military coup. The military coup has likely been a contributing factor to mining in the TNR areas strengthening the role of the KNU Brigade 4. Brigade 4 can have more freedom to legitimately control the area and govern resources after the military toppled the elected governments and became busy with attempts to suppress civilian resistance.

Meanwhile, the central KNU and each brigade of the KNU could be more focused on their own territories as new political events have affected their areas, for instance, the rising numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and the formation of new People Defense Forces (PDFs) in areas under the control of the KNU brigades. Despite the political changes and the COVID-19 pandemic, Brigade 4 has been governing gold mining in the TNR areas, allowing locals and non-locals, Karen or non-Karen to do mining of various scales and methods, such as artisanal mining (small) and mining with heavy machines.

## 5.3. Policy and Transparency in the Mining Sector

The KNU Congress has not passed a mining policy. Although Karen CSOs have collectively drafted a mining policy, it remains a draft policy until Congress debates, revises, and passes it as an official policy. This situation may lead to different governance styles in the mining sector

across the KNU brigades. In addition to diverse management and governance in the mining sector, the lack of an applicable and updated mining law could also be a significant weakness. In the case of mining in the TRN, it is unclear how the mining governance of Brigade 4 works, from licensing for feasibility study, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), Environment Management Plan (EMP), mine designs, mine closure, taxation, and monitoring. The process seems to be rather informal, involving paying taxes to a designated person or group from the KNU. However, it does not mean Brigade 4 has no rules and regulations. Miners and investors must pay tax at a rate (based on the size of the mining area, scale, and machine power) set by KNU members, and they need permits and permissions and must follow the guidelines. The issue is a lack of transparency, which can make local people confused or unclear about what and how Brigade 4 leaders and related members are managing and governing mining operations. For example, no public consultations were organized in villages near mining activities, even if the mining has impacted those villages. One village near mining sites, where a majority of Karen people live alongside a few non-Karen, has been impacted by water pollution from mining. No clear grievance mechanism was found to address these issues under the governance of the KNU.

Beyond the internal politics of the KNU, mining in the TNR poses a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the Myanmar government and the military, which established the TNR under the guise of conservation in this mixed-control area.

Therefore, the gold mining case in the TNR indicates the different forms of resource governance within the KNU that do not adhere to its own rules, regulations, or constitution. This could be caused by internal contestation among leaders or members between the central level and districts or within the same district. It can also be considered that the KNU itself is decentralized, diverse, and fragmented, despite its centralized constitution and structure. Despite the KNU's internal politics, mining in the TNR poses a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the Myanmar government and the military, which established the TNR in the name of conservation in this mixed-control area.

## **6. Exclusion: the Missing Voices of Locals Impacted by the Mining**

In land-related or territorial cases, exclusion is inevitable (Hall et al., 2011). When the KNU Brigade 4 manages the areas for mining and allows mining activities, the voices of certain stakeholders—such as local people, who wish not to damage the landscape and ecosystem of the streams and forests, and residents who are afraid of the impacts of mining—have been ignored and excluded. The Brigade 4 members may or may not intentionally exclude or include key stakeholders in decision-making. However, when mining is allowed, those who have concerns about the environmental and social impacts are being excluded. This is especially true for those who have no direct relationship with KNU members, gain no benefits from the mining, but still suffer from the impacts of the mining. This section discusses how those impacted people see and respond to gold mining and the KNU, using the concept of the power of exclusion.

### **6.1. Karen People’s Responses**

The KNU is a legitimate and de facto political organization for most of the Karen people and many non-Karen people who have strong relations to and live in KNU-controlled areas. Many Karen individuals participate in the KNU as members, committee leaders, department heads, soldiers, and staff in its armed wings. Thus, the KNU is deeply rooted in the grassroots communities across its territories. Despite these relations and connections, the differences in positions and power within the organization, such as between elites and grassroots members, create differing roles, social status, responsibilities, and power differences in respective communities. Therefore, power relations play an important role when it comes to approaching a rebel society like the KNU. As an ordinary villager who is not a KNU member, it can be difficult to question or challenge activities carried out by the KNU leaders. In the gold mining case, the elites tended to use their political power to govern and manage the areas, leading to exclusion or neglect for the impacts on many grassroots individuals.

People who have faced the negative impacts of mining and are concerned about them are often afraid of raising their voices against the mining governed by KNU leaders. Their concerns include being threatened, detained, or killed if they confront these KNU members, especially after the military coup that has led to political instability and increasing armed conflicts. The KNU has soldiers as well as police. Some KNU leaders have claimed that they need to earn money to feed people who take refuge in their areas, and gold mining is a source of funds. This can be considered a justification to legitimize their actions. However, some Karen CSOs and Karen individuals want the KNU leaders involved in gold mining to be accountable for the impacts and consequences. Moreover, they have concerns that some KNU elites work collectively and closely for their own benefit and become corrupt. This is because these KNU heads manage and govern the mining less transparently, and it is not that easy to understand how the benefits have been shared and spent in line with the rules.

Some Karen locals do not have strong (political, social, or environmental) concerns but view mining as an economic opportunity. Some have been engaging as artisanal miners, workers, or running their own small businesses at mining sites. Those groups who have been benefiting from the mining and related businesses support the KNU leaders for allowing the mining. Occasionally, they are able to negotiate or bargain with KNU leaders over some rules, complaints, or taxes. Those who are involved in the mining business tend to have close connections and relationships with KNU elites, and their concerns or voices have been heard through these close ties.

### **6.2. Non-Karen People’s Responses**

Some locals are concerned about the environmental degradation caused by gold mining in upstream areas. One of the significant impacts that is directly linked to mining is water pollution in the stream. The socioeconomic and environmental impacts were severe for many residents, especially those who depended on clean water from the stream for their household use and agriculture. In fact, approximately three out of four wards of Kaleinaung Town used water from the Kaleinaung stream through the water distribution pipelines run by the water distribution committee. However, the water pollution that occurred in 2019 and later disrupted

the water distribution to houses for several days, negatively impacting the locals. Many were concerned about the water quality and access to clean and safe water, and some of those who used the polluted water faced skin problems. Water pollution has directly led to economic burdens for many residents, as they have to find alternative water access from the private sector (businesses) or elsewhere. The costs for water from businesses are higher. Local people who love the stream and its environment have voiced strong concerns about the ecological impacts.

A number of non-Karen groups who have been negatively impacted by the water pollution caused by the mining questioned the legitimacy of the KNU. From their point of view, the KNU has been engaging in illegal mining in the TNR. People who support the NLD government have doubted the KNU's legitimacy and are concerned that some KNU leaders and soldiers are closely working with military personnel from Myanmar Military for gold mining. Some made a strong accusation that the KNU has taken benefits from the ceasefire agreement to be involved in mining businesses while peace conferences for political dialogues were proceeding. Many non-Karen from Kaleingaung town who live under the direct governance of the NLD government (now under the military regime) have no direct relationships with the KNU, business ties, or social and political relationships. When those people suffered from water pollution, they asked the NLD government to take action against the KNU. However, no one publicly revealed their opinions against the KNU as they were concerned about the consequences. One reason is that many non-Karen from Kaleingaung town usually have to go to nearby Karen villages for many reasons, especially for their businesses. They are afraid of the KNU members as well as the military, who can attack them. However, many people have changed their opinions about the KNU after the military coup, as the KNU somehow helps many people from those areas.

Some non-Karen CSOs and other ethnic groups recognized the legitimacy of the KNU in governing mining activities within their territory. However, they pointed out the impacts of mining and possible interethnic conflicts. They acknowledged the right of the KNU to govern their own territory but are concerned about the consequences of the impact beyond their territory, affecting people who are not Karen and do not live under their governance. Some people felt that this was not fair. Non-Karen shared that they worry about the massive environmental degradation in the TNR, where the KNU has allowed gold mining.

Many non-Karen people from Kaleingaung Town have been working in mining sites and related businesses. Some are artisanal miners; some businesspersons invest in medium-scale mining with machines and laborers; some run a shop near or in the mining sites, such as food shops, stores, or groceries; work in logistics and transportation; or supply fuel to mining sites. Some businesses in the town buy raw gold from the artisanal miners. Those people do not have many political, social, or environmental concerns but mainly see the business aspects. Gold mining is an opportunity for them to make money easily, despite the hard work involved for some people. If they pay taxes to designated KNU officials and maintain a good relationship with them, they can enjoy their own businesses. The KNU members help protect miners and mining businesses from facing arrests by the Myanmar military. Those miners can receive information about surprise checks or field investigations by the government from KNU members or the military staff they interact with. Most of those people benefiting from mining



and related businesses view the KNU positively, while some of them have some concerns about the environmental destruction.

## 7. Conclusion

Gold mining in the TNR area can be considered only the tip of the prolonged contestation between the KNU and the government (the military regime). the key question is why and how could mining happen in the nature reserve? To deeply understand the root causes, it is necessary to explore the background and to find the link or connection between the current situation and the contributing factors from the past. The military regime used coercion to remove people settled in the areas where the TNR and gas pipeline exist today. The key stakeholders, such as local people, the KNU, and other groups, were excluded from the decision-making process regarding the establishment of these areas. The military's strategy could be seen as using conservation as counterinsurgency or green territorialization against the armed groups. The gas companies' involvement in the TNR may also be part of their CSR work for their brands. When the political situation changed, the KNU attempted to assert control over their territories. The TNR has become a mixed-control area, and political contestation began to increase after the ceasefire.

Gold mining is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the TNR, the government, and the companies involved. While the KNU publicly claimed that they do not recognize the TNR, its involvement in businesses has increased and sparked many controversies. Ceasefire-related businesses in KNU-controlled areas have also fueled the fragmentation within the KNU and mixed-control areas. Many different groups with various interests are in contestation. Some Karen and non-Karen groups work closely with KNU leaders for their own benefit and businesses, while others try to check and balance the KNU by all possible means.

Gold mining in the TNR also shows that the KNU Brigade 4 has governed and managed resources in its own ways that may not exactly follow their constitution or rules. This approach can be considered as profit-driven and highly decentralized. Nevertheless, the KNU has armed forces, its own regulations, and, to some extent, legitimacy. On the one hand, these means encourage and strengthen the KNU to control its territory and engage in contestation with others. On the other hand, those leverages of the KNU can be applied to include or exclude people. What the KNU Brigade 4 has been doing can be understood as a form of territorialization. Significantly, the KNU uses its power to exclude or include, builds its influence through resource governance, and seeks to control areas it claims as its territory. Most importantly, it is now resisting the powerful actor, the military regime.

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## **Not Your Body, Not Your Business: Decoding Efforts to Address Non-consensual Pornography in Myanmar’s Digital Space**

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### **Abstract**

Non-consensual pornography has become a growing public concern worldwide, and Myanmar is no exception. An increasing number of groups, pages, accounts, and channels have sprouted up on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and other platforms, publishing and sharing non-consensual pornography targeting hundreds of women and girls, from celebrities to ordinary women and teenage girls. However, the problem often goes unaddressed. Women and girls facing sexual violence and online harassment do not often seek help because of a culture of silence. Victims of non-consensual pornography in Myanmar also hesitate to contact the police due to the complicated process for registering complaints at police stations. The coup has exacerbated the problem. There is no effective rule of law or an independent judicial system that can protect the human rights of people in Myanmar. Moreover, women's rights and roles in Myanmar society have regressed due to the military's long history of patriarchal oppression. This research finds that institutional capacity to deal with the spread of non-consensual pornography is limited. Social media platforms have community standards but still need to improve enforcement and address some key challenges, especially related to respecting human rights. Civil society groups have raised the issue but struggle to have a significant impact. The researchers suggest that seeing this issue through the lens of human rights rather than framing it as a personal privacy or digital literacy concern can help overcome the engrained victim-blaming culture that prevents concerted action.

**Keywords:** Non-consensual Pornography, Myanmar’s Digital Space, Women’s Rights, Human Rights, Myanmar

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, non-consensual pornography has become a public concern worldwide, and public awareness of non-consensual pornography has risen due to high-profile leaks of sexual images and videos involving celebrities and public figures. Governments have enacted legislation that specifically criminalizes the non-consensual sharing of intimate or sexual photos and videos. In Southeast Asia, only the governments of the Philippines and Singapore have passed legislation that criminalizes non-consensual pornography.

Following the 2010 democratic transition in Myanmar, there has been transformative growth in internet access, from around 1% penetration in 2011 to an estimated 44% in 2023. This rapid adoption of internet infrastructure and mobile penetration in Myanmar has created new opportunities not only for public education, including sexual and reproductive education, but also for public engagement on social media platforms about sex, politics, religion, and feminism—in a country with a patriarchal society and a sexually and religiously conservative culture.

However, any positive development must be weighed against the growing problem of non-consensual pornography on social media platforms in Myanmar. Since the country's first exposure to social media, the rapid growth in internet penetration has exacerbated this issue.<sup>118</sup> A rising number of groups, pages, accounts, and channels have sprouted up on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and other platforms, publishing and sharing non-consensual pornography that targets hundreds of women and girls in Myanmar, from celebrities to ordinary teenage girls. Women and girls facing sexual violence and online harassment often do not seek help because of a culture of silence in Myanmar. They struggle to find legal support and justice in Myanmar's law enforcement and court system, which is ineffective and corrupt.<sup>119</sup> Victims of non-consensual pornography in Myanmar hesitate to go to the police due to the complicated process for registering complaints.

Since the beginning of the military coup, Myanmar has lacked the rule of law and an independent judiciary system to protect human rights. Moreover, women's rights and roles in Myanmar society have regressed due to the Myanmar military's long history of patriarchal oppression. During the military coup in Myanmar, "social punishment" pages emerged on Facebook where personal information was doxxed, and non-consensual sexual images and videos of women and girls labeled as sympathizers of the military regime were shared. Additionally, many public Telegram channels owned by pro-military supporters, pro-military social influencers, and members of ultra-nationalist groups doxxed and shared non-consensual sexual images and videos of "politically active" women and girls.

While social media companies have removed some non-consensual sexual images and videos of women and girls, hundreds of such images and videos remain on these platforms. Thus, the key question is to what extent are human rights, digital rights, and technology policy

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<sup>118</sup><https://www.consult-myanmar.com/2016/10/07/as-tech-spreads-myanmar-women-become-victims-of-revenge-porn/>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/revenge-porn-on-the-rise/>

communities making efforts to combat the issue? In addition, we should also look into the government's institutional capacity and platform practices, which may need strengthening and/or better implementation. It is urgent and important to understand the efforts being made to address non-consensual pornography in the country's digital space, especially the work of civil society against this issue, given the violence and harassment it often accompanies. This research aims to investigate the extent of these efforts in Myanmar, identify existing barriers preventing effective action, and outline some options for improvement.

## 2. A Brief Note on Method: Data Collection and Analysis

This research draws primarily on online semi-structured interviews with various experts and practitioners working on digital rights, women's rights, and gender issues. By employing a purposive sampling technique, a total of nine informants from these fields were interviewed. Additionally, secondary data sources, such as reports, social media posts, open-source news reports, and academic papers, complement the interview data. These were also purposively selected based on their relevance to the focus of the study.

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the collected data and address the research questions. This approach has allowed us to identify key themes and patterns that emerge from the data, providing insights into the efforts being made to address non-consensual pornography in digital spaces in Myanmar and the gaps for improvement.

## 3. What is Non-consensual Pornography?

The term non-consensual pornography (NCP) is mostly understood as the leaking of private images or videos by an ex-partner for revenge purposes. However, literature on the issue suggests that this portrayal is very problematic as it cannot elucidate the whole picture of the problem. NCP is also conceptualized in a broader understanding, for example, as “the habitual abuse of images by intimate partners, child sex abusers, rapists, and sex traffickers to blackmail, control, and humiliate victims; to describe the actions of hackers who break into photo storage accounts, scammers who extort victims for money, and voyeurs who covertly capture images in private and public” (Maddocks, 2018). The issue is contextualized using different terms, such as:

**Non-Consensual Pornography:** “sexually explicit images and video disclosed without consent and for no legitimate purpose” (Franks, 2017, p. 1258);

**Image-based Sexual Abuse:** “the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of private, sexual images” (McGlynn & Rackley, 2016, p. 1);

**Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence:** “a range of criminal, civil, or otherwise harmful sexually aggressive and harassing behaviors that are perpetrated with the aid or use of communication technologies” (Henry & Powell 2016, p. 1–2);

“Non-consensual dissemination of intimate information, control and manipulation of information, and exposure of intimacy” (Maddocks, 2018, p. 351).

As such, NCP should be understood as not merely the leaking of sexually explicit images and videos by ex-partners for revenge purposes. Although defining NCP can have implications for finding a policy solution, we aim to focus on the efforts to fight against the full range of NCP practices in Myanmar.

#### **4. Myanmar’s Digital Landscape and the Prevalence of Non-consensual Pornography**

The rapid rise of digital usage in Myanmar introduced new opportunities for communication and information-sharing but also brought significant challenges. For example, the country witnessed a significant rise in Facebook users in the 2010s: from 1.2 million users in 2014<sup>120</sup> to 21 million users in 2019<sup>121</sup>. Because of such rapid spread, Facebook became a critical source of news and communication for much of the population.

Social media is widely seen as playing a significant role in fueling violence in Myanmar. Both state and non-state actors have used social media for propaganda purposes, including outright calls for violence. For example, there were cases where Myanmar’s military personnel used Facebook as a tool for driving ethnic cleansing, specifically against the Rohingya people (Mozur, 2018).<sup>122</sup> Reuters has found hundreds of posts, comments, and pornographic images targeting the Rohingya and Muslims on Facebook (Reuters, 2018).<sup>123</sup> Using nationalist sentiments, non-state actors also spread disinformation against the political opposition, particularly the National League for Democracy, and the Muslim community in Myanmar (Smith & Smith, 2022).

The military coup worsened the issue. The political turmoil and government crackdowns further restricted access to information and limited freedom of expression. This environment facilitated the spread of harmful content, including non-consensual pornography, with fewer mechanisms in place to address and combat the issue effectively. A recent report shows “the overwhelming majority of abusive posts were authored by male-presenting profiles supportive of Myanmar’s military coup and targeted women who opposed the coup,” in which “language that sexualizes women is used to shame and humiliate women in an attempt to silence them. Sexualized disinformation narratives are used to undermine politically active women, consistent with narratives perpetuated by the official SAC media of pro-opposition women as morally corrupt and racially impure (Myanmar Witness, 2024).”<sup>124</sup>

#### **5. Interpreting Efforts to Fight against Non-consensual Pornography**

##### **5.1. Institutional Capacity**

There are some loopholes in Myanmar’s legal system that limit efforts to address non-consensual pornographic images and videos on social media platforms. Legal organizations

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<sup>120</sup> <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2014/01/social-digital-mobile-apac-2014/>

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/193056/facebook-user-numbers-in-asian-countries/>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.myanmarwitness.org/reports/digital-battlegrounds>

lack the knowledge on how to carry out digital investigations, and there are very limited regulations on procedures for such investigations.<sup>125</sup> In Myanmar, only the police are responsible for investigating cases related to non-consensual pornography.<sup>126</sup>

Despite some cybersecurity developments in Myanmar, the police have limited technical capacity to investigate non-consensual pornography on social media platforms.<sup>127</sup> Instead of focusing on this criminal behavior, anecdotal evidence shows that the police only monitor the individual accounts and pages of activists and journalists on social media platforms.<sup>128</sup>

Women’s organizations and legal aid networks find it difficult to provide legal support on the cases where the digital evidence collected from the victims of non-consensual pornography is weak and/or when survivors choose to be silent.<sup>129</sup>

In the Evidence Act of Myanmar, digital evidence such as images and videos can be submitted to the court. Furthermore, Article 66D of the Myanmar Telecommunication Law can be used to address non-consensual pornography.<sup>130</sup> This article states: “Anyone found guilty of extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence, or threatening any person by using any telecommunications network shall be punished with a maximum of three years in prison, a fine, or both.” However, Section 66D of the Telecommunication Law in Myanmar has been misused to silence political dissidents. Rarely, if ever, has it been seen in cases of abuse or harassment of a sexual nature.<sup>131</sup>

Since the public trust in Myanmar’s legal system has decreased significantly, no complaints are filed against the nonconsensual pornographic images and videos with the police.<sup>132</sup> This was the case even before the coup and worsened after it (Coonan, 2016; Thiha, 2021). Most legal aid organizations in Myanmar support only criminal defenses because there is always a law officer (government prosecutor) on the complainant’s side. The organization Legal Clinic Myanmar supports complainants<sup>133</sup> and their lawyers who work under government prosecutors’ supervision.<sup>134</sup> Thus, the expertise and legal knowledge of the government prosecutors are important in investigating cases of non-consensual pornography.<sup>135</sup>

According to our interview, even activists and civil society groups are not aware of laws and protection mechanisms for the victims of non-consensual pornography. Instead of protecting

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>126</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>127</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>128</sup> Interview with respondent

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<sup>131</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>132</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>133</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>134</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>135</sup> Interview with respondent



the rights of women, many laws, such as “the Race and Religion Protection Laws<sup>136</sup>”, actually contain provisions that oppress women and their personal freedom. Meanwhile, there is a rapid growth in calls for offline violence against women, including physical and sexual harassment and abuse.<sup>137</sup>

The government in recent years has paid more attention to integrating digital literacy education into classroom curricula. For example, with the help of companies such as Telenor and Facebook, digital literacy training was provided to youth.<sup>138</sup> However, these digital literacy curricula are largely focused on digital skills education.<sup>139</sup> In terms of digital literacy education in schools, Myanmar ranks the lowest among the ASEAN countries, with only a minority of young people receiving this education.<sup>140</sup>

## 5.2. Intermediaries’ Practices

Many platforms, especially Facebook, may indeed have policies in place to combat non-consensual pornography, but their effectiveness can be limited by a lack of concrete implementation plans. In some cases, the issue of non-consensual pornography may not be as prominently addressed as other forms of harmful content, i.e., hate speech and misinformation, and there may be a gap in how these policies are enforced.<sup>141</sup> Usually, the majority of attention and resources are focused on addressing issues like child pornography, which are universally condemned and subject to strict policies and enforcement across major platforms. In contrast, non-consensual pornography, while also a serious problem, may not receive as much attention or lack well-defined implementation plans. Only on a case-by-case basis do platforms seem to enforce content take-downs.<sup>142</sup>

Platform initiatives are sometimes strongly aligned with international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN). These organizations, especially Facebook, vigilantly monitor hate and violence issues, and there is a noteworthy trend of platform policies reflecting the recommendations and priorities of these international bodies. A prime illustration of this dynamic was the heightened global focus on the Rohingya crisis following the revelations by organizations highlighting Facebook's involvement in exacerbating the plight of the Rohingya

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<sup>136</sup> The Race and Religion Protection Laws are a set of four controversial laws passed in Myanmar in 2015. The laws were drafted in 2013 and pushed by the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, or *Ma Ba Tha*. The laws include The Population Control Law, The Monogamy Law, The Religious Conversion Law, and The Interfaith Marriage Law (also called the Special Marriage Law).

<sup>137</sup> Interview with respondent. Amnesty International claims that these laws play into ‘harmful stereotypes about women and minorities’.

<sup>138</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/digital-literacy-in-myanmar/>

<https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/digital-literacy-students-received-digital-literacy-training>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/digital-literacy-students-received-digital-literacy-training>

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7766/file/Digital%20Literacy%20in%20Education%20Systems%20Across%20ASEAN%20Cover.pdf>

<sup>141</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>142</sup> Interview with respondent

people.<sup>143</sup> The company conducted an independent human rights assessment after the UN’s fact-finding mission in Myanmar reported on the crisis.

### 5.3. Civil Society's Struggle against Non-consensual Pornography

Since the 1990s, the struggle for women’s rights has gained momentum in Myanmar, along with the political struggle against dictatorship. Following the political transition in 2011, the struggle further grew: there has been growing advocacy for women’s rights and violence against women, addressing issues such as women’s participation in political space, gender mainstreaming, and the condemnation of harassment and violence against women. Through various platforms, including the media, human rights activists, organizations, and political leaders spoke out against the issue of violence against women.<sup>144</sup> The global #MeToo movement was also locally manifested, pushing boundaries and shifting the discourse around sexual violence and women’s rights (Kyaw & Miedema, 2020). While these efforts have increased, they have largely focused on addressing instances of offline violence against women. Unfortunately, limited attention has been paid to online-based violence, specifically non-consensual pornography (NCP), resulting in many cases going unnoticed.

The interviews in this study find that civil society initiatives are concentrated on two main fronts, among others: community engagement and policy advocacy. Both areas particularly focus on bolstering digital literacy and enhancing digital security knowledge. However, there remains a gap in addressing digitally facilitated sexual abuse, where efforts have been notably scarce.<sup>145</sup>

In the early days, much attention was given to education, focusing on the digital landscape; there were, for example, some efforts to monitor and address the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hateful words.<sup>146</sup> In addition, civil society groups were involved in efforts to integrate digital literacy and digital security education into school curricula.<sup>147</sup> Some brought the issue of non-consensual pornography to the public, with occasional positive responses or impacts.

Along with the rising internet penetration in the country, civil society and other individuals started using digital platforms to share their experiences, seek support, and advocate for change. The digital space has become a significant avenue for civil society, survivors, and allies to disclose instances of GBV, including NCP, creating a dynamic and evolving discourse. With the rise in social media usage, more individuals are coming forward to report gender-based violence and NCP online. The localized #MeToo movement also shifted the discourse around

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>144</sup> These can be assessed, for example, in the work of gender equality networks on violence against women.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>146</sup> For example, the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) focused on digital rights and digital safety.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with respondent

sexual violence and women’s rights (Kyaw & Miedema, 2020), debunking commonly held assumptions about gender-based violence against women.

In terms of seeking support from civil society organizations for non-consensual, sexually explicit, image-based abuses, some organizations avoid supporting these cases.<sup>148</sup> After 2015, some women’s rights organizations started seeking justice and speaking out for even rape cases, by providing legal support to victims in collaboration with legal clinics in Myanmar and legal aid organizations.<sup>149</sup>

However, most of the time, survivors of non-consensual, sexually explicit, and image-based abuses are afraid to speak out and be open about their abuses. Society takes a victim-blaming approach instead of supporting action against the perpetrators and seeking justice for the survivors.<sup>150</sup> A growing number of victims of this abuse experience devastating social and psychological impacts, causing girls and women to retreat from public life.

## 6. Discussion: Grasping the (Widen) Gap

Growing concerns surrounding non-consensual pornography often go unnoticed. Institutionally, there are some laws<sup>151</sup>, which are set to protect women against violence, but they are poorly implemented.<sup>152</sup> For example, the process of reporting the GBV and NCP is long and complicated; the perceptions of judicial personnel are also questionable.<sup>153</sup> There is also “the challenge of updating the policy and legal frameworks to keep pace with technological developments”, while the capacity of the bureaucratic mechanism is limited: few have the technical capacity to deal with the growing development of the digital sector and drive policy development (MCRB, 2015).

The platforms may have their standards of conduct but still need to address some key challenges, especially in respecting human rights. In addition, there are gaps in how these are enforced and turned into sound practices.

Most people have limited knowledge of digital literacy, and there is less public awareness and education about digital literacy.<sup>154</sup> Media and information literacy programs remain inadequate and do not effectively integrate with classroom curricula.<sup>155</sup> Only a limited number of civil society groups, human rights advocates, or media organizations have an understanding of such human rights issues associated with the digital sector (MCRB, 2015). While some efforts are directed towards enhancing privacy frameworks, there is a noticeable absence of initiatives aimed at reshaping societal perspectives on the issue.

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>149</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>150</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>151</sup> Section 66D of the Telecommunications Law; Section 34D of the Electronic Transactions Law

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/our-struggle-is-not-a-myth/>

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/revenge-porn-on-the-rise/>

<sup>154</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>155</sup> Interview with respondent

Understanding NCP through the lens of "human rights" is also underrepresented, with limited involvement from women's and gender organizations in addressing the problem. The prevailing discourse on NCP primarily revolves around the 'lack of digital literacy and security knowledge.' In addressing Myanmar's gender-based sexual violence and non-consensual pornography, the victim-blaming culture is still deeply rooted in Myanmar's patriarchal society.<sup>156</sup> Therefore, women, the most non-consensual pornography victims, still choose to be silent about non-consensual pornographic images and videos or negotiate silently with those spreading NCP on social media platforms instead of complaining against non-consensual pornographic videos and images.<sup>157</sup>

Due to the culture of silence and public shaming in Myanmar, the victims of NCP do not speak out about their rights in public or negotiate silently with the abuser. This culture has also pushed the victims of rape to marry the abuser, even in rape cases.<sup>158</sup>

### **7. Moving Forward: Possible Recommendations**

The struggle against issues related to NCP is surely growing in Myanmar. Aligning efforts with the struggle for human rights and women's rights would be a good start. With this in mind, there are some possible recommendations to be considered:

First, more legal and psycho-social support should be provided for the victims of NCP in Myanmar. This could include developing systematic guidelines and complaint mechanisms for cases of NCP, with clear pathways for victims to access counselling support.

Secondly, policy and legal frameworks protecting women's rights, the right to privacy, and freedom from abuse should be updated or developed to be in line with the growing digital sector. This means that digital forms of these abuses and problems must be addressed in policy and laws.

Thirdly, the public perception and the discourse about non-consensual pornographic images and videos should be changed. In the short term, this could be done by enhancing public awareness and implementing digital literacy and security education programs. In the long term, digital security, information, and media literacy should be incorporated into the school curricula at various levels.

Fourth, advocating for the platforms to address NCP through the lens of human rights should not be overlooked. An example of the potential impact can be seen in 'Myanmar Witness,' which raised concerns related to content on Telegram, resulting in the removal of harmful and abusive material.

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<sup>156</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>157</sup> Interview with respondent

<sup>158</sup> Interview with respondent

## 8. Conclusions

Despite growing concerns, NCP has been largely overlooked in Myanmar. For example, digital rights practitioners often perceive the issue as a matter related to women's rights and feminist organizations; the same is true from the view of the latter. Thus, attention needs to be paid to this issue, with increased efforts to address the challenges involved.

The characteristics and prevalence of non-consensual pornography still need to be explored in greater detail. For example, future research should examine the motivations behind NCP and the prevalence of such cases in the context of Myanmar's ongoing civil conflict.

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## **Reporting Against the Odds: Digital Security Perceptions and Practices among Journalists Active in Myanmar**

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### **Abstract**

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar reignited a climate of pervasive fear, especially among journalists—a problem compounded by an environment where media freedom is already fragile. With digital platforms and technologies now essential to news reporting, journalists must remain vigilant of potential surveillance and control afforded through the internet. This paper examines the security practices of journalists working both within and outside Myanmar. The report finds that predominant threats and risks to journalists stem from low-tech surveillance and control. Furthermore, it proposes that a universal ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to security does not exist and that a holistic approach to security is critical. In addition to enhancing digital savviness, security training must consider the need to safeguard physical and psychological well-being, implement organizational security protocols, and, most importantly, actively involve journalists in the training design.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, Digital Security, Digital Safety, Holistic Security, Digital Risks

## Introduction

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military launched a coup against the democratically elected quasi-civilian government. A state of emergency was declared as the country entered a period of great social upheaval. Mass demonstrations erupted as civilians took to the streets to protest against the coup. Violent backlash occurred. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, as of 10 January 2024, the military had murdered 4,331 individuals considered as political opposition and arrested around 25,791 (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2024). The violence persists to this day as various armed groups, activists, and protestors continue to resist the junta control.

Within this volatile, heightened security situation, journalists continue to report. Their work is crucial, but reporting in a broken media landscape where negative news about the military comes with severe risks is not easy. In its 2023 Q4 Report, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Athan documented the arrest of 202 journalists and news workers since the 2021 coup, with 67 facing convictions (Athan, 2023). Journalists must take extreme care to protect themselves, their families, and the sources whose stories they seek to share.

With digital platforms and technologies now essential to news reporting, journalists must remain vigilant of potential surveillance and control afforded through the internet. Networked control in Myanmar is not a recent development; since its introduction in 1996, the internet has been under government control. With the recent expansion of internet usage among the general public, however, it broadens the possibility of decentralizing surveillance, moving away from a top-down model to also include threats emanating from fellow citizens.

This report examines the security practices of journalists working both within and outside Myanmar. Journalists must observe digital safety practices to continue reporting without appearing on the military’s radar. However, with military checkpoints abundant across the country, frequent night raids, and crowdsourced surveillance networks of pro-military informers present in most neighborhoods, how do journalists work in digitally secure ways in military-controlled Myanmar?

This research proposes that a universal ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to security does not exist. Security is contextual and highly dependent on locally determined social and cultural factors. Additionally, in the case of Myanmar, what secure practice means is constantly changing. A digital application that allows journalists to safely connect with a source today can be their downfall tomorrow when a soldier discovers it on their phone.

The following sections outline the research problems and practical concerns that underpin our study, setting the context with an overview of the Myanmar media landscape. We then detail our methodological approach for research conducted under heightened security conditions. The findings in the report are split into four main areas: first, we assess the general atmosphere experienced by journalists in Myanmar; second, we explore how this atmosphere shapes their perceived threats and risks; third, we examine the security practices implemented by journalists; and finally, we offer a brief evaluation of the digital security support available to them thus far. The report concludes with a reflection on the challenges of safeguarding



journalists’ safety and security in Myanmar and proposes recommendations for NGOs, international development agencies, digital security providers, and other stakeholders to enhance journalists’ digital security environment.

### Research Background

This research was initiated to understand any gaps between the present-day digital security needs of activists and journalists on the ground in Myanmar, and the training and knowledge available in the digital security curricula and training on offer. Many digital security training efforts have taken place within Myanmar. Yet, based on our observation from EngageMedia’s involvement in digital security programs, reports indicate that threats persist, resulting in journalists being detained and arrested. While awareness and knowledge of digital safety must have increased to some degree, are journalists’ needs not being met by the existing training curricula?

This report focuses on the security practices of journalists as actors doing the public work of reporting, considering them as a part of Myanmar’s pro-democracy movement. Initially, the research intended to explore the widespread reports of the military junta’s digital coup and repression tactics, and how these actions impacted journalists’ digital security and the tools they use to circumvent these challenges. However, as our research progressed, it became evident that digital threats are just one facet of a multi-layered security situation facing journalists in Myanmar.

We realized that starting with the digital landscape might not be adequate. Thus, instead of merely focusing on *material technologies*, we also paid attention to *social and bodily techniques* that journalists employ. Journalists depend not only on tools and devices but also on networks of peers, circulated rumors, and makeshift knowledge assembled through encounters with military inspections. We might call these ‘tricks of the trade’ as they are discussed and shared within the profession. This approach became particularly relevant as we observed the changing media landscape following the junta crackdown, which will be described in the section below.

In a similar vein, we steer away from an in-depth analysis of the legal frameworks. Although many studies on Myanmar have scrutinized these legal instruments, our observations suggest their deployment as political instruments is highly arbitrary—as new regulations can be introduced ad hoc, and prior regulations ignored, to justify repression. Oppressive legal measures are not always necessary for arrests, as evidenced by our interviews with journalists.<sup>159</sup>

This prevalent focus on legal analysis often reflects Western legalistic traditions, which might not fully grasp what Rebecca Tapscott (2021) termed as “institutionalized arbitrariness” observed in the Global South: the “unpredictable assertions and denials of authority that

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<sup>159</sup> See also the limited publication material by International Media Support. (2022). *Q4 and annual report on journalism and media safety in Myanmar: Judicial persecution persists, more repression ahead*.

fragment and weaken civil society and local public authorities” (Tapscott, 2021). Drawing parallels with our previous research in Indonesia (2022), we take that such a legal positivist approach may not be adequate in a non-Western context as in Myanmar (Engage Media, 2021).

Throughout this research, we adopt a cautious stance towards claims of the military junta’s high-tech “digital authoritarianism.” While not discounting the junta’s potential use of sophisticated surveillance technologies—an investigation that falls outside our research scope—and still being cognizant that the situation may change at any time, we observed that journalists frequently face low-tech surveillance and related threats.

Looking at other threats as primary and the digital as secondary is vital in reinterpreting the broader security challenges confronting Myanmar journalists, as it alters our approach to problematizing the situation. If we consider the efforts to intervene in the security situations of journalists as a part of a broader set of development interventions, our study aligns with the critiques of scholars like James Ferguson (1994), Tania Li (2011), and Evgeny Morozov (2013), who have highlighted the development field’s inclination to “render technical” in proposing solutions. This overly positivistic approach may overlook key risks by attributing issues to individual shortcomings or improper use of devices and tools. We aim to avoid this pitfall.

### **Media Landscape in Myanmar**

This subsection will briefly provide a short history of the media landscape in Myanmar, and how the 2021 coup transformed this environment. The media industry in Myanmar has endured stifling freedom since the initial military takeover in 1962, a situation that continued through the brief period of quasi-civilian governance from 2011 to 2021. Under military rule, all forms of media production, including print media, television broadcasts, radio, films, and more, faced stringent oversight by the scrutiny board.

The reorganization of the military junta after the 1988 Uprising led to an intensified prohibition and censorship of the media industry. The violent confrontation between security forces and protesters, which culminated in 3,000 deaths and prompted 10,000 individuals to flee the country, was followed by the arrest of numerous editors, journalists, and writers, alongside widespread bans on media outlets. Moreover, the military banned foreign international news agencies, a restriction that remained in place until 2007.

The imposition of these bans inadvertently catalyzed the emergence of the alternative media industry in the 1990s, including exile media stationed along the borders of Thailand-Myanmar, India-Myanmar, and Bangladesh-Myanmar (see Brooten et al., 2019). This alternative media consisted of *independent media* without specific ethnic affiliations, such as *The Irrawaddy*, and *ethnic media* that reported stories about the interests of Myanmar’s ethnic minority communities, such as the *Shan Herald Agency for News* (SHAN). Ethnic media established a strong presence in the ethnic minority-dominated borderlands, areas often under the control of ethnic armed forces, which have historically leveraged media to cultivate and express their ethnic nationalities and were not highly affected by the 1988 military reconfigurations.

Amidst a time of political change in 2012, the government lifted press censorship. This reform allowed private publishers to operate daily newspapers, including those aligned with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) (RFA, 2013). Exile media organizations re-entered the country, and media institutions underwent reform with international support (IMS, 2033). Following the NLD’s electoral victory in 2015, the government granted broadcasting licenses to private entities, including the previously banned *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB).

In 2015, the telecommunications sector’s liberalization, along with the widespread availability of affordable SIM cards, cheap imported smartphones from China, and the development of cross-border cables, sparked a significant rise in internet usage in Myanmar. This change transformed how people accessed news; online platforms, particularly Facebook and Viber, emerged as the country’s leading channels for news dissemination and messaging (see Aung & Htut, 2019). These social media platforms increasingly became new avenues for media reporting.

Despite the transition in government, the media industry continued to struggle (see Brooten et al. 2019). Larger privately owned *mainstream media* outlets have ties, whether direct or indirect, to the army’s cronies, relatives of ministers or generals, or individuals in their close circles. There is a lack of transparency surrounding ownership structures and revenue streams of these mainstream outlets. Meanwhile, smaller media houses have been forced to shut down, partly due to competition from heavily subsidized state-sponsored media and limited access to capital. Journalists also continue to face the risk of arrest or murder. For instance, two Reuters journalists were imprisoned for reporting the Rohingya genocide (Reuters, 2018); six were detained for their coverage of hardline Buddhist nationalists (The Irrawaddy, 2018); and one was murdered while reporting on illegal logging (Mongabay, 2016).

	2023		February 2021 to December 2023		
	Oct-Dec	Jan-Dec	Women	Men	Total
<i>Journalists and news workers</i>					
<i>Arrested</i>	5	13	29	173	202
<i>In detention</i>		64	6	58	64
<i>Released</i>		17	23	115	138
<i>Died</i>	1	3	-	6	6
<i>Convicted</i>	-	6	12	55	67
<i>News and other licenses</i>					
<i>News licenses canceled</i>	1	2			15

Table 1: Monitoring media repression in Myanmar. Source: Athan (2023), Q4 Report.

The 2021 military coup has once again shattered the burgeoning resurgence of the media industry in Myanmar. Since the coup, 15 news outlets have had their media licenses revoked

(RFA Burmese, 2013), while at least 202 journalists have been arrested, of whom 138 have been released while the rest remain behind bars (Athan, 2024). At the same time, state-sponsored media thrived, benefiting from substantial state subsidies. These stringent measures have allowed the military to reassert its control over the media landscape, altering it once again. In such an environment, both state-sponsored media and privately owned mainstream outlets have come under military control, limited to disseminating content approved by the authorities. To evade governmental scrutiny, many mainstream media organizations have shifted their focus away from reporting the political situation in Myanmar, opting instead to cover entertainment and lifestyle. Collectively, these media houses now operate under what we call *state-controlled media*.

Conversely, media outlets courageous enough to continue unrestrained reporting on Myanmar’s political climate have transitioned into a wide umbrella of *independent media* (non-state-controlled). The majority of these non-state-controlled media have resorted to operating clandestinely, relocating to border regions, or going into exile. Our media mapping indicates that the journalists and independent media outlets that relocated to Thailand or are at the Thai-Myanmar border predominantly hail from major cities and ethnic regions such as the Karen, Karenni, and Shan states; those moving to the Chinese-Myanmar border are mostly from Kachin state, while those at the India-Myanmar border are from Chin state.

The shift has profoundly affected their financial models, particularly commercial advertising revenues, which have significantly dwindled; this necessitated a reassessment of their business operations (Media Development Investment Fund, 2022).

<i>Media association post-2021 coup</i>	
<i>State-controlled media</i>	Legally recognized media outlets with national viewership and readership in Myanmar. This category includes state-sponsored media, mainstream media under military control, and entertainment media. Examples: <i>MRTV, Eleven Media Group</i> .
<i>National independent media</i>	Media outlets operating outside of military control that emerged in response to the military junta’s suppression. These outlets were previously considered mainstream media but went underground due to military control. With nationwide readership, they typically amass relatively larger capital. Examples: <i>Frontier Myanmar, Democratic Voice of Burma</i> .
<i>Small-scale independent media</i>	Media outlets operating with limited funding, with some employing social media platforms, such as Facebook, as their avenue of reporting. These outlets mostly emerged after the 2021 coup and were founded by individuals with prior affiliations to mainstream media. Examples: <i>People Spring, Burma Associated Press</i> .
<i>Ethnic media</i>	Media outlets serving the interests of ethnic minorities of Myanmar, such as those in the Karenni or Shan, regardless of whether they use

	Burmese or ethnic minority languages. <sup>160</sup> Examples: <i>Shan Herald Agency for News</i> , <i>Shwe Phee Myay News Agency</i> .
<i>International media</i>	Foreign media organizations based outside of Myanmar but covering news and events within the country. Examples: <i>Reuters</i> , <i>Voice of America</i> .
<i>Citizen journalism</i>	Journalists without professional affiliation. Citizen journalists work mostly with sources within the community that they themselves are part of to report about conflict or human rights violations.

Outlets with substantial resources are categorized in this report as *national independent media*. Meanwhile, the post-coup period has also seen the emergence of *small-scale independent media* houses, founded by individuals cut off from their former outlets due to bans, who sought new avenues to document the situation, especially through reporting on Facebook. Despite facing resource challenges, *ethnic media* continues to play a crucial role post-coup. All these types of media outlets increasingly relied on social media platforms to disseminate information and document human rights violations.

As the threat of military actions prevented Myanmar journalists from using their real names or reporting on-site, the post-coup period also saw the rise of *citizen journalists* who document situations on the ground (Cinemata, 2023). Our research was thus conducted against this backdrop in 2023.

### Journalist Definition and Categorization

For this report, we use a broad definition of the term journalist: any individual who is engaged in gathering and reporting information, taking photographs or video footage, editing or publishing, and presenting news that relates to the current social, cultural, and political situation in Myanmar. We categorize journalists by the tools of their trade:

<i>Journalist types</i>	
<i>Text</i>	Writing news and working from behind a desk and/or remotely. They contact their sources via phone or online messaging apps. They collect data and local information from social media platforms and monitor press releases and statements regularly.
<i>Video</i>	Capturing video footage of incidents or interviewing the victims or characters involved. They produce and edit news videos.
<i>Photo</i>	Capturing photo footage on the ground, focusing on important events or as part of unfolding news stories. They edit and publish the news photos alone or as part of news articles.
<i>Multimedia</i>	Using an array of media (text, photos, video) while covering news on the ground.

<sup>160</sup> Building on Soe Lynn Htwe (2017), state-sponsored media outlets that employ ethnic languages are excluded from this definition.

## Methodology

Employing qualitative methods, our research primarily focuses on interviews, complemented by two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). We interviewed ten journalists and five digital security trainers in the course of the research, and involved a mix of digital security trainers, journalists, and media support officers in the FGDs.

The first FGD convened six digital security trainers in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on 24 May 2023, as part of EngageMedia’s Digital Rights in the Asia-Pacific public engagement event. Except for one based in Thailand, the trainers who participated are based in Myanmar, gathered through the networks of the Myanmar Internet Project with whom EngageMedia worked previously (Engage Media, 2023). This FGD, intended to explore trainers’ assumptions and see whether there is a contrast to the on-the-ground experiences of journalists, informed our research direction, including informant selection and thematic focus. The second FGD, conducted online on 1 November 2023 with four participants, included digital security trainers, a journalist, and a media support officer. This served as a follow-up to the initial FGD. We also interviewed digital security trainers and a media support officer separately, from October to November 2023.

We interviewed eight professional journalists (affiliated with media companies) and two citizen journalists from a variety of backgrounds and in different professional and geographical settings. Seven out of ten journalists interviewed are based in Myanmar. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online using Zoom from July to November 2023 and aimed to explore journalists’ experiences and perceptions of security situations in Myanmar. We started with higher-risk journalists who are currently reporting from within Myanmar and have traveled to conflict areas such as Sagaing and Karenni for news reporting, and snowballed from there. These interviews specifically aimed to examine their experiences from the coup in February 2021 until the time the interviews were conducted. It is important to note that the situation may have changed since then.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age<sup>161</sup></i>	<i>Association</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Area of operations</i>
<i>F</i>	25-29	National media	Text	Myanmar, Yangon
<i>M</i>	25-29	International media	Multimedia	Myanmar, Yangon
<i>M</i>	30-34	Small-scale media	Multimedia	Myanmar, Karenni
<i>M</i>	35-39	Ethnic media	Text	Myanmar, Shan
<i>F</i>	35-39	National media & small-scale media	Multimedia	Myanmar, Mandalay/Yangon
<i>M</i>	25-29	International media	Video	Myanmar, Yangon
<i>M</i>	30-34	National media	Text	Thailand
<i>F</i>	30-34	International media & national media	Text	Thailand
<i>M</i>	35-39	Citizen journalism	Multimedia	India
<i>M</i>	35-39	Citizen journalism	Multimedia	Myanmar, Yangon

<sup>161</sup> To maintain confidentiality, the exact ages have been obscured.

We were unable to employ ethnographic fieldwork to immerse ourselves in the journalists’ environment due to security risks in Myanmar; we instead collaborated with Myat, a journalist with five years of experience reporting in Myanmar, who now works as a freelance media consultant for digital safety projects for media and journalists. Our research is led by Yin Maung, a former digital security trainer with experience in Myanmar’s civil society, focusing on producing resources on safe online spaces.

While these efforts aim to bridge the gap in understanding journalists’ realities in Myanmar, we are cognizant that our researchers’ “insider” status brought possible biases and limitations. Given our prior collaborations with international development agencies in Myanmar, our access to Myanmar journalists has been predominantly drawn from these networks, possibly overlooking the security situations of those beyond those circles. The journalists who opted to work for state-controlled media are also outside the scope of this research. Our research team’s language capabilities present both strengths and challenges: half of our four-member team are Burmese, while the others do not speak the language. We rely on professional translation services and the interpretative skills of our Burmese team to ensure an accurate description of the findings.

### **Research Findings**

Through an in-depth analysis of interview data and FGDs, we have outlined a structure that examines journalists’ key practices and perceptions regarding digital security. Our starting point was an exploration of journalists’ reflections on the current state of Myanmar, revealing that a pervasive state of fear significantly influences their work, affecting not only their professional activities but also their personal identities.

The following subsections will focus on three areas. First, we will examine the general state of fear, providing an overview of the current situation in Myanmar as experienced by journalists. Second, we will explore journalists’ perceived threats and risks, investigating how these fears translate into their daily habits and actions. These threats and risks are categorized into five areas: (1) identity risks; (2) travel risks; (3) low-tech and analogue inspections; (4) crowdsourced surveillance; and (5) limited support from media houses. A significant finding is the military junta’s reliance on physical inspection and human surveillance networks over the high-tech digital authoritarianism highlighted in various reports, suggesting the need to revisit our approach to security in Myanmar.

We then explore journalists’ perspectives and approaches to their security. We explore the gaps between physical and digital security by examining journalists’ tactical responses to immediate security challenges, the impossibility of migration to secure channels, and the importance of maintaining an appearance of normalcy. Following this, we briefly review various additional security practices. Finally, we discuss the existing support available to journalists in Myanmar.

### **A General State of Fear**

The interview results show the military junta’s effective use of repression and control to instill a pervasive sense of fear among journalists in Myanmar. This predominantly stems from the unpredictability of facing reprisals or arrests, whether in the course of journalists’ professional

duties or during personal time, and the potential repercussions for their families and informants due to their reporting.

Reports of journalists getting arrested and handed severe punishments have been widely acknowledged (Reuters, 2023). “*We could get arrested at any time,*” as one informant (#8) put it. Another journalist (#6) explained that every car that would drive past after 8 pm instilled fear: “*We had curfew...It was 8 pm. So whenever a car came to my street [after then], I had concerns. The only cars that drive after curfew are military.*”<sup>162</sup>

Independent national media outlet Myanmar Now (2021) reported that the “*dreaded knock on the door*” has returned, where security forces are allowed to carry out raids without warrants, which our data confirms (#6). One female journalist (#5) is forced to maintain two separate houses and socially isolates herself out of fear that informal contact with neighbors might lead to the military government discovering her status as a journalist.

Several journalists also reported fear related to the potential consequences of their activities on their family members (#3, #5), their sources, and the communities they are in contact with (#3). These fears are in line with the heightened awareness most journalists had regarding the risks of receiving telephone calls from outside Myanmar for those staying inside the country. A citizen journalist shared that local communities are threatened by the army if stories of military aggression are shared.

*When villagers inform us about the junta army's raids and killings and we post them to the media, those soldiers threaten the villagers to follow them anywhere and hurt them until the news is taken down. So, my primary concern is about my sources and people* (#9).

One journalist (#7) reported being afraid of the possible reaction of anti-coup resistance groups. Although this formed an exception within our data set, the current trend of an increasingly unified and growing resistance army suggests that more journalists and activists may reside within these liberated zones (Reuters, 2023). This situation will likely also impact how fear is experienced by journalists, as armed groups opposing the State Administration Council (SAC) military governance may react negatively to journalist reports on violent resistance actions directed towards the military.

In general, it can be concluded that journalists who reside in SAC-controlled areas live in a constant state of fear. Those residing abroad or in regions occupied by opposing ethnic armed forces groups, such as some parts of Karen state, experience less fear. Military-controlled checkpoints, situated along toll roads, borders, or intersections, are most feared, as the threat of being arrested at one of these checkpoints is perceived as high.

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<sup>162</sup> The regulations governing curfew and martial law are constantly changing. At the time of writing this report, certain areas continue to enforce curfew or martial law, while others have lifted these restrictions.



## Perceived Threats and Risks

### *Identity Risks and Doxxing*

The aftermath of the 2021 coup has made identifying oneself as a journalist—not even necessarily reporting—a significant security threat. In Myanmar, the national ID card requires individuals to declare their occupation. For our interviewees, who have been practicing journalism since the 2010s, this requirement has inadvertently flagged them as potential targets due to their listed profession.

This situation leads to increased fear of dealing with any administrative body and the threat of identity papers and/or passports losing their validity. The office of one journalist (#4) was raided, and several others (#1, #5, #6, #8) reported the presence of possible lists with their names on them. One journalist (#6) feared that being on the guest list for a press conference of the former democratic government could lead to an arrest. He also expressed his fear of getting doxxed on pro-military Telegram channels if his status as a journalist became publicly known.

### *Travel Risks*

Travel, essential to reporting, indeed poses significant risks to journalists, especially for journalists who frequent conflict zones such as Sagaing (#2). Besides airports, military checkpoints—pervasive throughout Myanmar—are especially perilous for multimedia journalists (#2, #3, #5, and #6), who carry conspicuous equipment like cameras and laptops.

Most journalists interviewed reported that bringing a laptop or a camera on trips was unwise. This makes upholding more digitally secure working practices challenging, as journalists often work with borrowed or locally sourced devices. Additionally, the fear of military personnel investigating their devices has led several journalists (#6, #1, #8) to delete from their phones virtual private networks (VPNs) and messaging apps (e.g., Signal, Telegram) that can increase their digital security.<sup>163</sup>

Journalist #6 mentions his practice of familiarizing himself with the characteristics of each checkpoint to discern varying levels of scrutiny, from those lax with security to those equipped with X-ray machines. Sometimes, however, there is a need to improvise. Journalist #2 explained how he was suddenly stopped on the road and had to hastily hide his equipment in a biscuit package and throw away the remaining items he could not hide.

Journalist #3, who cannot afford to risk data loss, monitors news about conflicts and opts for less frequented paths with minimal military presence, avoiding main roads to mitigate risk. Despite journalists' efforts to avoid checkpoints and minimize suspicion, security checks and arrests often prove arbitrary and situational. Journalist #5, for instance, was checked simply while taking a walk in her neighborhood:

*When they asked for my password to unlock it, I had to [comply]. One soldier checked my phone while the other looked around, holding his gun. Luckily, they only checked the*

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<sup>163</sup> As will be explained in the section “Low-tech and Analogue Inspections,” these measures are calculated choices made to mitigate immediate physical risks from direct confrontation with military inspections rather than digital threats like hacking.

*gallery, then asked me to open my Facebook app, which I did. It was my personal account. They scrolled through my newsfeed, checked the photos, and that was all. I was very shocked. There were protests near my neighborhood at that time; I think that's why they were patrolling, saw me, and decided to check.*

She noted that, fortunately, before the incident she had already learned from her peers the importance of removing work posts from her Facebook account—something that digital security training taught her much later. Meanwhile, for Journalist #2, the unpredictability of arrests has prompted him to brace for the possibility of a prison term. He remarks that everyone “*can also be arrested with some causes*” and that he has already expected to face at least a three-year sentence. “*At least I could be arrested with Article 505(A) and get a three-year sentence. So, I have already expected that and prepared for it.*”

However, being resigned to potential arrest is atypical among our interviewees; this may stem from his position as a co-founder of a media development organization.

### ***Low-Tech and Analogue Inspections***

Contrary to prevalent reports of the SAC’s pervasive high-tech, sophisticated “digital authoritarianism” (The Diplomat, 2022; Reuters, 2022), our findings suggest that this claim might warrant further examination. Although a report by Justice for Myanmar (2021) has revealed evidence of sophisticated technology procurement such as drones and digital intelligence tools—alongside the more low-tech scanners and data recovery software—the actual extent and deployment of these technologies remains unclear. In terms of infrastructural capacity, if there is any indication, Schia & Gjesvik (2021) suggest that the government has been lacking “[t]he very concept of critical infrastructures” and “the cybersecurity of said infrastructures.”<sup>164</sup>

Journalists, particularly multimedia journalists who are more visibly at risk due to their equipment, seem to indicate that the risks posed by SAC are relatively low-tech. They propose that the use of advanced technologies is likely restricted to specific areas or targeted at high-profile individuals—which resonates with research by Ryan and Tran (2022) and Bächtold (2023), arguing that the junta’s digital repression is largely limited to targeted repertoires.

The everyday threats the journalists encounter are thus rudimentary, often revolving around analogue methods like the manual checking of phones and the use of a list of individuals marked for detention. As Journalist #2 says:

*No one is using advanced devices like Cellebrite or software to inspect everyone's phones and devices at the airport. However, they do maintain a list of individuals they intend to apprehend at airport immigration. If they identify such a person, they would detain them and escort them to a room for interrogation and device inspection. The list of types of people that can be detained at the airport includes CDMers (Civil Disobedience Movement), medical staff [like] doctors [and] nurses, and teachers.*

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<sup>164</sup> As previously mentioned, we are cognizant that the situation may change rapidly, even within the time between the preparation of this report and its publication.

Similarly, #6 said:

*They do have the technology, they probably bought it from Israel or Iran. [...] I think they probably have the technology, but they can only station it at certain important locations. I don't think they have many technicians who can use those complex technologies. I also think they target revolutionists instead of journalists, but journalists will also get caught.”*

The use of digitally secure apps, a common practice recommended in digital security training, ironically poses a significant risk during travel. Journalists (#1, #6, and #8) report that measures like installing Signal, VPN, or using password protection and encryption are prone to being easily spotted by military personnel and may invite unwanted scrutiny. When phones are checked, the presence of protection often leads to more probing questions.<sup>165</sup> Journalist #8, who was once stopped on their way to the Thai border, observes:

*The inspector knew that Signal app is an application for secure communication. [...] There were inspectors who inspected more thoroughly if they found the Signal app. That's what I have noticed. When they found Signal app, they asked, “Are you going to Mae Sot?”<sup>166</sup> They took more time to inspect young people. Even though they let us go, they knew what we were going for. They just let us go because they didn't find anything or didn't identify us [as a wanted person].*

Contrastingly, the use of Facebook, despite often being flagged as a security risk in digital security training, is seen by some journalists as a necessity to blend in. Journalists need not only to have Facebook installed on their phone but must also have activities to craft an impression of active usage. While training usually advises against sharing personal information on Facebook—alongside skepticism toward Meta as a big tech company in general—such a situation requires journalists to share seemingly personal information that can maintain the appearance of normalcy while at the same time not exposing themselves to risk. Journalist #1, who has to “maintain all the normal data and apps on the phone to look normal,” explains: “In Myanmar, all people use Facebook. Most people our age use Facebook. If one doesn't have a Facebook account, it seems unrealistic.”

Indeed, the journalists seem to perceive the military junta's inspection methods as primarily low-tech. Their approach hinges on manual checks against warrants, officers' ability to spot “suspicious” individuals, and rudimentary digital surveillance where officers manually identify potential threats.

### **Crowdsourced Surveillance**

As such, rather than deploying sophisticated social media monitoring tools, our informants believed that the military tends to flag individuals when their accounts gain prominence (“become popular”) through political commentary on platforms like Facebook. Journalist #6 cites the case of photojournalist Sai Zaw Thaike, who was sentenced to 20 years, as an example

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<sup>165</sup> Although some digital security protocols suggest using two separate phones to aid in blending in, our informants often find it impractical to leave their primary phone behind, and not all have the means to afford a secondary device.

<sup>166</sup> A town on the border of Thailand and Myanmar.

of someone targeted for being “distinct.” The data we gathered indicate that Sai Zaw Thaike’s apprehension resulted from a combination of crowdsourced surveillance and SAC’s manual inspection. His arrest was preceded by his critical coverage of hardline Buddhist-nationalist rallies that incited the anger of those groups. His Facebook profile consequently was monitored and amplified by hardline communities, and his journalistic activities were exposed, leading to his reporting and subsequent targeting by SAC security officers.

This low-tech surveillance seems to be further evidenced by reports of the laborious attempts of manual astroturfing by SAC security forces on social media (Reuters, 2021), reliance on citizen reporting through Telegram channels to pinpoint dissidents (RFA, 2023), and the publication of a lengthy list of Facebook profiles in a state newspaper (GNLM, 2021), presented merely as tables—suggesting a basic familiarity with digital publications and mass surveillance technology. Moreover, the military does not seem to have the infrastructure to maintain electronic records of national IDs—or, at least, is still in the process of developing one (Engage Media, 2023). As will be discussed in the section “Commonly Shared Digital Security Practices,” journalists (#1, #2, and #6) have addressed the risk to their identity by obtaining alternative IDs, thereby navigating around the rudimentary security checks.

Crucial to this low-tech inspection is the human infrastructure of surveillance. The role of pro-military citizen reporting in bolstering the junta’s inspection capabilities is a constantly recurring theme among the journalists we interviewed. As Journalist #1 explains, “*We have to expect questions not only from military [checkpoints], but also from the local community.*”

Journalists #1, #2, #3, #4, and #6 all highlight the potential security risks posed by “local communities” and “neighbors” and emphasize the need to avoid appearing “suspicious.” Some, like #4, #5, and #6, conceal their journalist status even from their families to mitigate risk. Journalist #4 had to relocate from a pro-military neighborhood, while Journalist #1 consistently prepared a cover story for reporting trips, such as visiting her grandmother.

Decades of military governance fostered a nearly omnipresent network of pro-military informers (*dalan*), which has permeated every corner of Myanmar even during times of quasi-civilian rule. This pervasive surveillance network has been described by Selth (2021) as a form of “state enduring intelligence.” Furthermore, the emergence of hardline Buddhist-nationalist groups has exacerbated the risks of crowdsourced surveillance, something clearly exemplified in the arrest of Sai Zaw Thaike. The military’s advocacy for a unified Burmese identity, which is also supported by Buddhist nationalists, has been characterized as a symbiotic relationship between monks and the military (EastAsia Forum, 2023).

### **Limited Support from Media Houses**

Besides external threats, journalists face risks from their media employers, attributed to the organizations’ inadequate risk management strategies. This worrying sign, identified through interviews and corroborated in FGDs involving journalists and digital security experts, reveals the dwindling focus of media houses in supporting journalists in their digital security practices.

After the 2021 coup, numerous independent and ethnic media outlets resumed operations in exile due to being outlawed, whereas national media houses lacking sufficient capital faced

resource challenges. For instance, 30 of 32 senior executives of media organizations interviewed in the Media Development Investment Fund Report (2022) described a significant loss in revenue following the coup. Independent media had to rely on grants to cover up to 50% of the revenue shortfall in 2022.

This struggle seems to be mirrored in how these media organizations manage their daily operations. Journalists #1 and #3 underscore a predicament common among independent media houses: they often prioritize public interest but grapple with limited resources, constraining their ability to cover risky stories that might entail additional responsibilities by the organization.

Media houses often do not have clear protocols in place to address journalists' security concerns, despite imposing tight deadlines for publications. Journalist #7, detained by authorities during travel, was arrested while trying to fulfill an assignment deadline. The absence of a security protocol to disengage him from the office's communication channels endangered his entire team, given the sensitive data stored on his devices. He also admitted that he downplayed the risk. Our FGDs and interview with a media support officer who has worked with several media organizations confirmed the difficulty of establishing standard security protocols in several of those outlets.

This situation has led some journalists to take a rather fatalistic stance wherein they simply accept the risks. One journalist (#5) based in Myanmar even reported that having a low risk appetite has consequences for their careers. She frequently declines assignments she perceives as risky, such as using real names to contact informants or filming. This adversely resulted in her negative job performance. *“I don't have any salary increase as my performance is not satisfactory,”* she explained.

Salary disparity among journalists is acknowledged in our other interviews. Journalists operating within Myanmar and producing content exclusively in Burmese generally earn lower wages compared to their counterparts abroad who write in English. This issue is compounded in an industry where journalists already contend with low wages, often experiencing delayed or partial salary payments (Reporting Asean, 2023). The impact is particularly severe on small-scale media, which still struggles to develop revenue sources after the coup (Media Development Investment Fund, 2022), and ethnic media outlets, where salaries can be up to five times less than that of other media, compensated instead “by the nationalist commitment.” (Htwe, 2017)

In crises, journalists have expressed concerns about the lack of contingency plans within their media organizations. Journalist #8, employed by an international media outlet, did not receive adequate instruction and support when a lawsuit was brought against a news article they wrote. The company was still deliberating on a course of action, despite being aware of the potential risk. As they put it: *“My organization said, ‘We could wait and see,’ and I didn't believe that, so I ran away.”*

Similarly, Journalist #1 noted that her company has

*a [Messenger] group of editors and journalists. I think it shouldn't exist. Each editor and journalist can communicate directly. What if one of them gets arrested? They don't even acknowledge such a risk. So, the idea of [the company being capable of] providing digital security training is far-fetched. They don't have digital security knowledge either. Only after a journalist was put at risk did they remove that journalist from the group. This experience made them realize the risk of having such a group. Fortunately, that one journalist did not get arrested. Later, they learned that they shouldn't have such a group.*

These accounts underscore how digital security practices cannot be isolated from the broader media environment and sustainability context within which journalists work. Reflecting on the Myanmar media landscape, it is evident that media outlets are grappling with operational survival, with financial resources predominantly allocated to larger organizations. This situation points to the significance of organizational security and highlights organizational readiness and strategic response, underscoring the necessity for a more holistic approach to safeguarding journalists.

The next section shows how the tactics and viewpoints adopted by journalists result from such a distinctly heightened security scenario. These practices often emerge as temporary solutions, necessitating a collective leveraging of experiences and insights that are both proactive and responsive.

### **Practices and Perspectives on Digital Security**

The research uncovered a different perspective on digital security vis-à-vis what is commonly found among journalists working in relatively peaceful areas. Journalists operating in heightened security situations, like present-day Myanmar, view digital security in a different light due to the constant fear of confrontations with military power.

Our data highlights that journalists' views on digital security vary significantly. These differences are influenced by how journalists perceive their risks and are dependent on whether or not they have followed digital security training in the past. All journalists reported paying more attention to digital security after the 2021 military coup. This section illustrates how security practices are deeply intertwined with the unique socio-cultural context of Myanmar's journalists while examining how these practices often emerge as makeshift strategies, reflecting the impracticalities posed by many training curricula.

### **Limits of Standard Security Practices**

Digital security practices offer indispensable value to journalists, particularly in safeguarding against digital threats such as hacking, unauthorized access, and data breaches. These measures are crucial for preserving the integrity of journalistic work, protecting confidential sources, and ensuring the privacy of sensitive information.

However, it quickly became evident to us that journalists perceive the digital security training they receive as misaligned with the actual conditions they face. Our interviews and FGDs indicate that the training is often delivered using a standard template, focusing on basic digital

hygiene, avoiding phishing and hacking, and tools operations—some of which they have learned before formal training.

Journalists shared that such digital security practices mean little once they are under immediate threat of physical violence. Many (#1, #2, #6, #7, #8) regard digital security training as either too basic or not addressing actual risks. Passwords or decryption keys are useless when one is forced to enter them on the spot at military checkpoints. As one journalist who often passes through military checkpoints puts it:

*The (storage) encryption that we have been taught is not useful on the ground. It can be useful when you are at a safe house where you have good internet access. I can't say it is not useful at all, it is useful in some situations. But when you are travelling on the ground, it is not” (#2).*

This has resulted in a situation where journalists who are capable of applying digital security tools effectively refuse to use them, as they deem them useless in their particular situation. “Password protection will just make the arrested person get hit more. As you know, one cannot be stubborn and refuse to open” (#6). “I was arrested at the airport. They took my phones and computers. They asked me to open the password for the phone and laptop” (#7).

Two journalists (#2, #4) also associated the ineffectiveness of standard digital security training with the suddenness of high-risk situations. If the military is approaching and there are only a few minutes to prepare, it is too late to practice digital security. Arguably, digital security tools can still be effective, but stress management needs to be taken into account when transferring these skills to journalists. Digital security experts may need to adjust their training in the specific context of Myanmar journalists. DS Trainer #2 explains that journalists “*mainly use a physical approach,*” such as destroying USB ports without damaging the data or hiding their phones in a tactically placed rice barrel. Such a measure is faster and requires journalists to be tactful with their physical surroundings; however, these physical mitigation measures are not yet widely incorporated into digital security training.

### **Multi-platform Character of Communication**

The digital migration to completely secure channels is often recommended in digital security training. However, one notable issue experienced by journalists is the delayed response when using secure but less conventional apps like Signal. Journalists report that their colleagues and informants, despite being registered on these platforms, often respond late. Journalist #1 observes that for such individuals, regularly checking these apps is not a common practice, leading to delayed notifications—with one instance involving a month-long wait for a reply. For personal communication, journalists predominantly use Facebook, where our informants tend to carefully navigate sensitive discussions to avoid manual surveillance (on manual surveillance, see the “Perceived Threats and Risks” section).

While this tendency to rely on less secure communication platforms may be seen as neglect of digital hygiene practices, this pattern illustrates that understanding security practices involves understanding communication as a relational practice. The preference for mediums like Facebook is rooted in their relational networks; individuals gravitate towards platforms already

populated by their contacts. The idea of a complete migration to more secure apps like Signal, as often recommended in digital security training, is impractical. Such a shift would sever journalists from the relational networks essential not only in their professional lives but also personal ones.

Rather than a complete migration, journalists are tactically using different mediums for different purposes. Journalist #4 revealed that while their communication platforms with family and friends remained unchanged, they became more cautious about sharing potentially harmful information on Facebook Messenger. The main shift occurred in professional communication within their organization. They switched from Facebook Messenger and Viber to Signal and Telegram, adopting ProtonMail due to heightened awareness of digital security. There is a need to acknowledge this multi-platform character of communication practices. Their continued use of apps like Facebook is also linked to a critical need identified by most journalists: to maintain an appearance of normalcy.

### **Maintaining an Appearance of Normalcy**

Airports and military checkpoints are not the only high-risk sites for journalists; the threat of being identified through citizen-led crowdsourced surveillance also poses frequent risks, especially when one appears “suspicious.” The effort to blend in encompasses three layers: physical, digital, and emotional normalcy.

The first and most visible layer involves appearing physically inconspicuous to avoid drawing attention from the military or other citizens, as demonstrated by journalists #1 and #5 in the “Perceived Threats and Risks” section. Journalists #1 and #2 stress the importance of not fitting the stereotype of an activist, believing that the military, lacking resources for thorough inspections, relies heavily on perception and intuition—which is also confirmed by experiences of obfuscation mentioned below. As Journalist #1 explained:

*Since the military [checkpoints] inspect everyone every day, they can't thoroughly inspect everyone. So, just make sure you don't appear suspicious or significant, especially avoid looking like a “character” [journalist, resistance force] that might threaten them. Young male adults with brave looks and strong body structures are not okay. Especially with tanned skin.*

And Journalist #2 said,

*If you are part of the revolution, you shouldn't look like a [stereotypical] rebellion archetype. [...] [describing a friend who was arrested] he has long hair, sunburnt skin, and is slim. This is the archetype of a rebel.*

The notion of not appearing suspicious is distinctly influenced by gender perceptions in Myanmar, where males are more frequently associated with dissent than females. Journalist #1 points out that young women are less likely to be suspected of dissent, particularly when accompanied by men and appearing as a couple. Age is a crucial factor as well; the older one is, the less suspicious one can be. Journalist #5, a middle-aged woman in her late 30s, explains:



*As I am a woman and a mother, people don't see me as threatening. I keep alternating between living in Mandalay and Yangon. Both sets of neighbors know that I am a journalist, but I told my neighbors in Mandalay that I am no longer working as a journalist but as a translator now.*

The second layer, the digital appearance of normalcy, is crucial in interactions with military officers. In situations where journalists face manual device inspections by military officers, their digital footprint, including Facebook newsfeeds and chats on apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, comes under scrutiny. As previously discussed, the presence of secure apps like Signal or VPN often arouses increased suspicion and intense examination. Thus, journalists not only remove these apps as a precaution but also engage in digital obfuscation of familiar apps to camouflage their professional activities.

A woman journalist (#5) recounted how she disguised the purpose of her WhatsApp group as a food recipe group. This incident also demonstrates the perception that women are considered less suspicious:

*Two soldiers [were] on a motorbike, they stopped me and checked my phone. They asked me to unlock it, and notifications from a WhatsApp group appeared. They asked, “What was that?” Our group name was “Burmese Salad.” I told them it was a food recipe group. Then they didn’t look further into it and checked my gallery. Luckily, it only had photos of my kids, as it was my personal phone. If I had been carrying another phone [work phone], I would have been in trouble.*

The third and final aspect of maintaining normalcy lies in managing emotions to mirror the demeanor of ordinary citizens. This aspect is crucial, as it involves disciplining oneself to not only avoid suspicious activities, such as hesitating while covertly filming or recording, but also to maintain composure under the intense emotional pressure of military inspections. Stress management, therefore, has become a vital security practice for journalists in Myanmar. Instances like that of Journalist #2, who had to hastily dispose of materials or memory cards, illustrate the need to swiftly return to a state of calm.

Manner of speech is also critical. Journalist #6 emphasizes the importance of projecting confidence, which can be in the form of blending in as a local citizen and adopting a congenial approach towards military officers:

*In some places, if they check bags and make us walk, we also need to be extremely polite, addressing them as “big bro”... or “sir” (sayar), even if we don't mean it. We engage in small talk, asking, “How are you?” and tell them where we come from and where we are going, to get familiar with them. Then they don't check as much.*

When attempts to blend in are unsuccessful and military inspection ensues regardless, the same journalist observed that it becomes crucial to adopt a posture of pretence: appearing as though one has connections with military authorities. This approach, while risky, underscores the earlier point that, due to the lack of sophisticated inspection and surveillance techniques by the military, on-the-ground manual inspections can be circumvented by leveraging cultural sensitivities and understanding human psychology.

*Sometimes when they go around and they check [...] the important thing is that I cannot give them the impression that I am scared before they even start checking. If they detect something is wrong, then they will check. They [the checkpoint officials] are just ground personnel. So, sometimes I pretend that I am connected to this or that senior official and say that I have just come back from a meeting. Then they get scared and just say, “Yes, yes.”*

This approach should not be mistaken for a safe security measure. The journalist in question is working inside Myanmar and has been partially granted access to information, such as calls or interviews with military officers. Even with this level of access—or even with a military-recognized media license—there is no assurance that they will not face arrest by the military at any time. As such, fabricating stories can entail greater dangers if there is even a slight misstep. Similar to other tactics detailed in this report, these are makeshift tactics employed to circumvent scrutiny.

### **Commonly Shared Digital Security Protocols**

All journalists we interviewed are aware of the importance of digital security. They realize that there is a high chance of being arrested due to their digital footprint—confirming the sentiment shared by journalists surveyed by Reporting ASEAN (2022). Journalists remain afraid that their phone calls are being tapped and their whereabouts digitally surveilled. Journalists with little to no digital security knowledge before the coup have picked up skills from their peers and references online.

The military coup has impacted all the participating journalists' habits concerning telephony and online technology. The research data confirms that the higher the risk, the more inclined journalists are to invest in secure digital technology. Those living outside of Myanmar today, for instance, stated they reduced their digital security practices once abroad. DS Trainer #1 pointed out that there is a gap in tracking the adversary's capacity, particularly the military, highlighting a lack of understanding and insufficient monitoring from below.

An analysis of the interview results showed there are several commonly used security practices. Not all these practices are directly linked to digital security. Our research data clearly shows the need for a more holistic security practice wherein digital security is part of a larger set of skills and behavior patterns that can increase journalists' safety. The list below of commonly shared digital security practices reflects that notion.

- 1) **Use of obfuscation methods to cloak international calls as coming from domestic lines.** When contacting sources inside Myanmar from outside Myanmar, this method makes the call appear as a nationally received call. This is utilized to communicate with sources lacking internet access, often a result of government-imposed internet shutdowns. It should be noted that this cloaking method does not prevent possible interception, as it would still register as a regular phone call.
- 2) **Use of more secure, open-source applications and software.** Despite the risks involved in having a VPN or an application like Signal on one's phone, the use of digital security tools among journalists was high. Some are required by their office to use a VPN when

going online. The use of Facebook Messenger was deemed unsafe by nearly all journalists we spoke to, due to its direct link to their Facebook profiles, which serve as the locus of their online presence. They expressed concerns over the possibility of their digital footprints being traced via their Facebook profiles. There is also a vague, general apprehension that Meta might misuse their data—seemingly reflecting broader skepticism towards big tech companies, especially after the Amnesty International (2022) report on Facebook’s role in the Rohingya genocide.<sup>167</sup>

- 3) **Altering professional identification on ID cards.** To reduce the risk of identification as journalists, some journalists (#1, #2, and #6) have acquired means for replacement documents and opted for alternative documentation methods to circumvent military scrutiny, particularly at checkpoints.
- 4) **Local language use.** Various journalists (#4, #10) reported that the military could not follow their conversations if they used local languages. Karen State, for instance, has three distinct local languages.
- 5) **Avoidance of group chats.** Information shared in a group chat is as safe as the weakest link in that group. Journalists are aware of this, and many reported that they avoided group chats for communication and preferred point-to-point communication instead. In instances where group chats cannot be avoided, employing features such as disappearing message timers can help enhance privacy and security.
- 6) **Pseudonyms.** Most journalists do not use their real names when operating in the field. Regularly changing pseudonyms to prevent a journalist from being identifiable was often mentioned.
- 7) **Avoiding direct contact with sources by employing local fixers and engaging in collaborative reporting with journalists across national and provincial borders** (#2, #5). They accomplish this through point-to-point communication or written exchanges, where fixers or other local collaborators serve as intermediaries to lessen the chances of arousing suspicion.
- 8) **Frequent relocation.** For journalists staying inside Myanmar, remaining in the same place for long periods was identified as a high risk. Commonly used safety practices include having multiple residences (two houses) or frequently changing locations.
- 9) **Account separation.** Various journalists had separate accounts for their professional practice and personal use. This applies to SIM cards, Facebook accounts, smartphones, and internet browsers, among others. One of the separate accounts is designed to make the journalist look like a regular person. One journalist (#5) complained that they had so many accounts the passwords frequently got lost.

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<sup>167</sup> From our observations, the promotion of open-source platforms is a common theme in digital security training, which may have strongly influenced this line of thought. While open source does not guarantee greater security, it is often preferred by digital security experts, and thus there may have been a conflation of open source with security among journalists, especially when coupled with skepticism toward big tech companies.

## Unique Individual Security Protocols

Our interviews reveal a high inventiveness among journalists in trying to increase their safety. The individual practices also evidenced a more holistic perspective on digital security. The practices they shared with us are not part of standard digital security curricula and could be considered alternative practices:

- 1) **Using a hotel.** One journalist reported renting a hotel room, facilitated by their media organization, specifically for completing a sensitive, in-depth story. The reservation is made under the organization’s name to prevent the tracking of the journalist’s identity. Upon leaving the hotel room, they would erase all data from their devices.
- 2) **Resistance group escort.** To avoid military checkpoints and have safer passageways, one journalist reported travelling alongside resistance groups. Although travelling with armed forces introduces its own set of risks, this approach highlights the comparative benefit of aligning with a group over solitary travel.
- 3) **Handwritten notebooks for contacts.** One journalist did not save any contacts on their phone. Instead, they used a small notebook wherein all contact details were handwritten. Similar to the point above, this is a makeshift solution in the absence of secure storage alternatives.

## Existing Support on Security

### *Digital Security Training*

After the 2021 military coup, the perception of digital security training shifted significantly among journalists. Previously, digital security trainers needed to actively stress its importance; post-coup, journalists now have an inherent recognition of the crucial role of digital security training, reflecting the changed political and social environment.

While in-person sessions used to be the norm, security concerns post-coup rendered them unfeasible within Myanmar. Consequently, digital security training adapted, becoming predominantly online-based.

Notably, self-paced online courses are being developed by support groups, but their promotion is limited to trusted networks. Even publicized courses disseminated only basic safety information to avoid potential exploitation by the military junta.

### *Digital Security Clinic: a Responsive Approach*

Complementing digital security training, the concept of a Digital Security Clinic has emerged within support groups after the coup. This clinic provides tailored digital security consultation support utilizing various outreach and communication styles. These include a Telegram hotline-based clinic, appointment scheduling via an email-based clinic, and a Telegram chatbot-based clinic. It serves as a responsive and dynamic resource, adapting to the changing needs of individuals.

### *Informal Networks*

Some journalists (#5, #6) described digital security practices like using dual phones/SIM cards or regularly changing passwords as “common sense,” even without formal training in digital

security. Informal networks, including peers—fellow journalists and pro-democracy activists—as well as indirect experiences through stories and rumors about security threats like doxxing, significantly contribute to normalizing these practices (#1). Others, like Journalist #2, adopt these habits through experiential learning, gradually integrating digital security into their routine.

### ***Infrastructure Support***

Since the onset of the coup, support groups have played a crucial role in providing essential infrastructure support to activist and journalist networks, although limitations persist. The consistent distribution of VPN gift vouchers has offered a secure communication channel amid challenging circumstances. Furthermore, high-risk profile activists and journalists received additional assistance from support groups in the form of burner phones and eSIMs. However, it is important to note that this support has reached only a limited number of individuals, with many working journalists lacking adequate infrastructure support from their media houses.

### **Challenges**

The research findings show that many challenges remain for both professional and citizen journalists to do their work. Listed below are the main challenges identified through this research’s interaction with the field.

#### ***Lack of Resources for Digital Security***

Upholding good digital security practices requires resources, both on an individual and organizational level. Encrypted cloud services and more secure email providers are not available for free. Hardware or phones need to be purchased. Devices and applications require proper configuration to ensure security and facilitate a seamless workflow, with possible troubleshooting issues that may emerge in this process. In the absence of digital security experts who can be approached for queries, journalists struggle to meet these challenges.

Small-scale media houses rarely get funding or support specific to digital security. Those who could not attend any formal digital security training learned from their peers and networks. Journalists are almost expected to take risks. As mentioned, a low-risk appetite can affect journalists’ professional opportunities. Journalists participating in this research seem to accept the fact that their profession poses considerable risks.

#### ***Limited Protection against Low-Tech Surveillance***

Digital security practices become almost irrelevant when a journalist is under direct threat, such as entering an army checkpoint or facing an imminent house search with military vehicles approaching. Preparations make all the difference. However, once in direct physical contact with adversaries or military personnel, journalists can only do as they are instructed.

In cases of surveillance, when neighbors, friends, or family report journalists’ activities to the authorities, digital security is also of limited use. As reported by our respondents, keeping a low profile, not carrying laptops or cameras, not disclosing any work activities, and managing separate social media accounts depicting a ‘normal’ life are more efficient mitigation strategies. As previously noted, although some digital security training recommends maintaining two separate phones to facilitate blending in, our informants find it infeasible to leave their primary

phone behind, particularly when traveling, and for some, obtaining a second device is financially out of reach.

### ***Identity Papers***

Expired passports are hard to renew for journalists on the radar of military authorities. Additionally, older official documents on which a journalist's profession is exposed form a risk. Occupation records are shown on National ID cards, and being listed as a journalist adds considerable risk while traveling or during a surprise check.

### ***Mismatch between Digital Security Training Design and the Needs in the Field***

Current digital security training curricula do not meet the demands of journalists in the field. Typically, these programs concentrate on three areas: (1) encryption and device protection; (2) the complete migration to secure communication channels; and (3) individual technological diligence. Although these are important, they overlook the low-tech, physical security risks that journalists in Myanmar frequently encounter.

The playing field has changed dramatically after the military coup, and the current heightened security situation requires new training modules. Delivering updated training modules to journalists is difficult due to their uneven geographic and infrastructural distribution, compounded by the difficulties of reaching journalists in conflict zones and securing access to journalists within Myanmar. Organizing in-person training is risky, and journalists might not necessarily see the direct benefits of following digital security training.

Additionally, as discussed above, an overly positivist approach, wherein technology-oriented solutions are seen as central to increasing journalists' security, is not in line with journalists' experiences in the field. The belief that journalists should entirely migrate to secure communication channels overlooks the multi-platform nature of their communication practices. A total migration to such channels would disconnect journalists from the relational networks crucial to both their professional and personal lives.

Beyond individual technological savviness, journalists need social and mental savviness to navigate physical inspections, as well as organizational support from media houses to ensure their protection. Designing more holistic security training materials wherein both the physical and the digital aspects are addressed remains a challenge.

## **Recommendations**

### **Training Design**

Digital security training thus far has predominantly been conducted according to the expertise of the trainers. Although efforts have been made to incorporate needs assessment surveys and consultation meetings before the training sessions, the curriculum and program designs often reflect the viewpoints of the training providers. This is apparent in the languages used by both journalists and digital security trainers. A space for journalists to develop their own security needs warrants further attention. As the security needs of journalists are very personalized, they need space to play a role as co-designers in addressing these needs.

The reality of journalists is not solely determined by how they manage their digital security needs. For instance, stress management needs to be part of the digital security training curriculum. The focus should not only be on concealing sensitive data to prevent its detection during phone examinations by authorities.

Interactivity should be a fundamental component of training design. There is an untapped potential in incorporating simulations and role-play exercises that mimic emergency scenarios, like military checkpoints or sudden raids, in security training sessions. In such simulations, participants can be equipped with devices containing sample sensitive data to replicate the pressure experienced during inspections and demonstrate real-time strategies for mitigating risk. Adopting a workshop approach may prove more effective than traditional top-down training methods, focusing on interactive learning rather than merely raising awareness. Journalists are already well aware of the importance of security. The question is on how to practice it in a high-pressure setting and to facilitate broader security protocols in their organizations.

Given the constraints that may prevent journalists from attending a full series of training sessions, it may also be advantageous to explore innovative self-directed learning methods. This can be in the form of creating pop culture materials that simulate emergency situations through mediums such as interactive comic books or mobile video games. Video games for social change have witnessed a rise in popularity in recent years, as can be seen in games in the vein of *NeoCab* (2019), a narrative game about ride-hailing drivers; *CHANGE: A Homeless Survival Experience* (2020), a survival simulation of homelessness; or the forthcoming game *Taksa* by EngageMedia (forthcoming 2024), a narrative game about navigating through information muddle in an oligarchy-dominated media landscape.

Integral to these efforts is the active participation of journalists in the design, drawing upon their firsthand experiences of such high-pressure encounters. It is necessary to give journalists space to decide for themselves what aspects of security are relevant. They should lead initiatives, with trainers serving as facilitators.

## **Tools and Devices**

Facebook is a double-edged sword. While the digital security environment tends to be critical towards Facebook, the platform remains an important outlet to quickly disperse news to a large audience. The citizen journalists depend on Facebook for their reporting, as do many news outlets. Specific to the Myanmar setting, journalists also rely on a Facebook presence to provide a semblance of normalcy to curious inspectors and onlookers.

**Practices need to become established community-wide. Changing the collective behavior of groups or a community cannot be done through training alone and must adjust to realities on the ground.**

Rapid-response emergency assistance groups are already available to address cases like loss of access to accounts or devices due to hacking or arrest. However, their reach is limited. One journalist (#1) noted that this is due to those support groups relying on email as a communication channel. While we have not conducted a thorough investigation on the most

practical and secure platform for journalists, some suggested Telegram channels for emergency support groups. This warrants further research.

### **Threat Assessment**

Proper understanding of threats and risks on the ground is crucial. As mentioned in the “Low-Tech and Analogue Inspections” section, the precise scope of the military junta’s surveillance capabilities, along with the networked, crowdsourced surveillance supporting them, remains opaque. To effectively address the needs of journalists—and pro-democracy activists at large—a more thorough threat assessment is imperative. This necessitates conducting a broad survey or research that investigates the capacities of potential threat actors. This assessment should be informed by journalists’ encounters with these actors and, where feasible, ethnographic studies focusing on the “inside world” of the threat actors themselves. Future research could expand upon studies of Myanmar’s intelligence apparatus, as undertaken by Selth (2021), and draw inspiration from adjacent fields, such as Didier Fassin (2013) in his examination of the French police force and Scott Atran (2010) in his analysis of religious terrorism.

### **Broader Assumptions**

Security practices are always entangled within cultural specificities. Digital security training needs to invest in obtaining a better understanding of the reality on the ground and be cognizant that journalists’ needs are embedded within specific cultural contexts and relational networks within which both their professional and personal lives are entangled.

A more holistic approach to security, considering mental health, stress management, and physical security, is needed rather than solely regarding the practice of digital security as a technical problem that can be solved with more training.



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## ANNEX

### Digital security landscape and resource mapping

#### International organizations

- 1) Access Now
- 2) Internews
- 3) Infosec
- 4) Frontline Defenders
- 5) EngageMedia
- 6) eyeWitness
- 7) Cambridge Global Advisors

#### Local organizations

- 1) DigiSec lab
- 2) Spring Revolution Security (SRS)
  - a) Digital Security Clinic (Telegram Channel)
- 3) Exile Hub
- 4) CSO Academy
- 5) ASORCOM
- 6) Solutify Myanmar
- 7) The Fifth Pillar

#### Digital security resources

- Online Courses
  - Digital Security Myanmar
  - Digital Safety Course by DigiSec Lab
  - Digital Security (I) by CSO Academy
  - Cyber Security for Individuals by Spring University Myanmar
  - Myanmar Safety Training by Silk Road Training (more than DigiSec training)
- Manual and Content - Folder - here
  - DigiSec Directory by EngageMedia

- Digixile Resource Sheet by SRS
- Digital Radio Evening Podcast by SRS
- For Human Rights Defenders Safety Manual & Guidelines by Digiacti, NDI
- Digital Security First Aid Kit - Burmese translation by EngageMedia
- Digital security and safety resources in Burmese now available in one database by EngageMedia
- A Myanmar Protesters Toolkit by Free Expression Myanmar
- List of guides and readings from other organizations that have been localized in Burmese
- How to Bypass ‘Digital Dictatorship’ During the Myanmar Coup (MM, ENG)
- Cyber Bay Kin by Kernellix

## Voices from Exile: The Safety Needs of Myanmar Women Journalists

Yucca Wai

Joseph Andersson<sup>168</sup>

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“Sending in factual reporting is a form of political activism.”

Ronald Koven, former European representative for the World Press Freedom Committee.

### Abstract

The survival of exiled Myanmar media relies on the survival of media professionals, emphasizing the importance of protecting journalists’ rights to practice their profession securely. Journalism plays a pivotal role during times of conflict and authoritarianism, serving as a vital tool for communication, activism, and the pursuit of democratic ideals. Working conditions for Myanmar journalists significantly deteriorated following the 2021 military coup. Many of the conditions we highlight in this paper will likely be experienced by all journalists, men and women alike. Yet, women journalists have to contend with specific gendered challenges which, unless addressed, could cause an exodus of women from the profession, leading to the loss of diverse perspectives, exacerbated gender disparities, and diminished coverage of gender-related issues. While progress has been made over the last two decades for women representation in media, the challenges that women journalists face may lead to a significant backslide in gender representation if left unaddressed.

The primary objective of this research was to gather evidence on the experiences of exiled Myanmar women journalists, with a particular focus on non-dominant perspectives about their working and living conditions in the post-2021 coup landscape. When asked about safety concerns specific to women journalists, participants mentioned instances of harassment, bullying, and unequal treatment that they experienced as women within their organizations. Participants in the Focus Group Discussions mentioned a culture of emotional abuse within certain media organizations and oppressive behavior by media houses towards their women staff. Women journalists can face discouragement from pursuing opportunities and limited access to legal assistance. Coercive, unfair, and uncompromising working conditions exert additional pressure on women journalists.

**Keywords:** Exiled Myanmar Media, Women Journalists, Gendered Challenges, Post-2021 Military Coup, Journalist Safety, Labor Rights, Harassment and Bullying, Working Conditions, Gender Disparities in Media, Emotional Abuse in Media Organizations

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<sup>168</sup> Exile Hub

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*Design by* Noisy & Yucca Wai

## Note

The term “women journalists” is preferred over “female journalists” in this paper for its inclusivity and respect for individuals’ gender identity and professional achievements. It avoids potential objectification and reductionism associated with the latter term, aligning with contemporary standards of respectful and inclusive language use in recognizing diverse gender identities and expressions within the field of journalism.<sup>169</sup>

When we refer to a “journalist,” we are describing an individual whose primary profession involves gathering, researching, reporting, and presenting news and information to the public through various mediums, including, but not limited to, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and online platforms. Our definition of a “journalist” encompasses not only traditional reporters and correspondents but also media professionals like stringers and fixers.<sup>170</sup> Including these roles recognizes the collaborative nature of journalism and the vital contributions made by a diverse array of individuals who help gather and communicate news and information to the public.

This research paper was first published in January 2024. The data and context presented in this research primarily draw on information available up to 2023, providing the foundation for the insights and conclusions discussed.

## Introduction

This research was spearheaded by Exile Hub, a dedicated support system for media professionals and human rights defenders both within and beyond Myanmar’s borders to securely carry on their professions, strengthening the voices that make up Myanmar’s critical discourse. Journalism plays a pivotal role during times of conflict and authoritarianism, serving as a vital tool for communication, activism, and the pursuit of democratic ideals.

Yet, in the subsequent two and a half years since the military coup, we have seen the tragic killing of four journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023) and the incarceration of 145 others, with around 60 journalists remaining in detention (Siegel, 2023). This wave of repression effectively dismantled the once-vibrant network of developing media that had flourished over the preceding decade. In 2022, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

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<sup>169</sup> It is worth noting that some individuals and groups may also use the term “womxn” (pronounced like “women”) to be even more inclusive and gender-neutral. “Womxn” is used to encompass a broader range of gender identities and expressions beyond the traditional binary understanding of gender. However, its usage can vary and may not be universally accepted.

<sup>170</sup> In journalism, a “stringer” is a freelance or part-time correspondent who contributes stories to news organizations on a per-assignment basis. Stringers are often locals or individuals with specific expertise, offering news outlets access to unique perspectives. “Fixers” play a crucial role in assisting foreign journalists working in unfamiliar locations. Fixers, hired on a temporary basis, provide essential local knowledge, language skills, and cultural insights. They facilitate interviews, handle translation, and ensure access to relevant locations, contributing to the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of foreign correspondents’ reporting. Together, stringers and fixers contribute to well-informed and contextually accurate news stories, with stringers reporting on the ground and fixers providing essential support behind the scenes.

designated Myanmar as the eighth worst country globally in terms of impunity for crimes committed against journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022). According to the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Myanmar currently languishes at the 173rd position among the 180 nations assessed (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). These reports serve as a stark reminder of the contrast between the nation’s previous aspirations for media freedom and the reality faced by journalists in Myanmar today.

Many of the conditions we highlight in this paper will likely be experienced by all journalists, men and women alike. Yet, women journalists have to contend with specific gendered challenges which, unless addressed, could cause an exodus of women from the profession, leading to the loss of diverse perspectives, exacerbated gender disparities, and diminished coverage of gender-related issues. While progress has been made over the last two decades for women representation in media, the challenges that women journalists face after the coup may lead to a significant backslide in gender representation if left unaddressed.

This research paper places a specific focus on the conditions of women journalists for several reasons. First, we acknowledge the persistent gender disparities and unique challenges that women in journalism often encounter. It is crucial to address and understand these disparities, as these challenges can impact their career opportunities, safety, and overall well-being. Furthermore, women remain underrepresented in key decision-making roles within media organizations, resulting in a lack of diversity in news reporting and content creation. This underrepresentation limits the scope of stories and perspectives covered by the media.

Women journalists often confront gender-based violence, harassment, and threats while fulfilling their professional responsibilities. Examining the scope and characteristics of these challenges is crucial not only for the safety and well-being of women in the field but also for a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence and harassment within journalism. Our research includes diverse perspectives, contributing to the promotion of comprehensive and equitable rights for journalists. Recognizing that the challenges faced by women journalists are not confined to a specific region or context, our findings and recommendations, tailored for the community of exiled Myanmar women journalists in Thailand, also aim to contribute on a broader scale by addressing these challenges and advancing gender equality and inclusivity in the global media industry. Finally, given the media’s influential role in shaping public opinion and societal norms, addressing the conditions of women journalists becomes imperative for driving positive social change and advocating for a more equitable and gender-inclusive media landscape worldwide.

Our research focus is directed towards women journalists in exile rather than those working within Myanmar. This decision is driven by several crucial factors. First and foremost, the environment for women journalists in Myanmar is fraught with danger and extreme precarity. These perilous conditions necessitate journalists working within Myanmar to do so as covertly as possible, often demanding they refrain from identifying as journalists at all.<sup>171</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>171</sup> This is evident in the adoption of the term “CJ” (Citizen Journalist) to characterize the activities of Myanmar journalists operating in-country or along the Thai-Myanmar border. Through our interviews with representatives from various Myanmar media outlets, it became evident that the term CJ is now



our research scope focuses on women journalists in exile, who may have greater freedom to openly engage in discussions and share their experiences, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and needs.

### **Methodology**

We gathered data from a diverse range of sources through several mediums, including interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), surveys, and desk research on existing literature. Our research design responded to the principles of inclusive analysis, and we ensured to take the following considerations into account: asking questions, tracing power dynamics, recognizing intersectional identities, accounting for context, and challenging existing knowledge and conventions about labor rights and gender perspectives within the Myanmar media landscape.

The research team incorporated community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) as our chosen methodology. Exile Hub worked in partnership with exiled Myanmar women journalists in Thailand throughout the research design, data collection, data analysis, and writing of this paper. An advisory board comprising local, regional, and international members, all deeply involved in the rights of women journalists, was consulted throughout the research. This board verified the validity of our methodology and reviewed and provided feedback on our research report prior to publication.

Throughout our research, we followed the ethical guidelines established by the Murad Research Institute, known as the Murad Code. This set of principles places a strong emphasis on transparency, integrity, and ethical behavior across every stage of the research, encompassing data collection, analysis, and reporting.

### ***Focus Group Discussions***

To facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the safety challenges confronting Myanmar’s women journalists within Thailand, we organized a total of four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across two carefully selected locations: Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, which both possess a longstanding history of housing a number of exiled Myanmar media organizations. This history is interwoven with Exile Hub’s extensive engagement along the Thai-Myanmar border and is further enriched by the firsthand experiences of our team members, many of whom have strong ties to the area.

These 25 participants were categorized into three distinct target groups:

- Women journalists with no prior experience in safety training (one FGD each in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot).
- Editors-in-chief (one FGD in Chiang Mai).

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employed not only for traditional citizen journalists but also for individuals employed by media houses. Regardless of their previous employment history, the term CJ serves as a security measure, safeguarding individuals on the ground by avoiding explicit affiliation with any specific media outlet. Simultaneously, it shields media houses by redistributing responsibility in the event of unfortunate incidents involving their employees operating either in-country or along the Thai-Myanmar border.

- Experts specializing in journalist safety, encompassing professionals in psychology, law, and human rights advocacy (one FGD in Chiang Mai).

### **Survey**

The initial survey questions were drafted by Exile Hub’s research team before undergoing an extensive review process actively involving Myanmar women journalists to ensure their feedback was integrated into the survey design. The survey was then distributed to 79 exiled Myanmar women journalists living in Thailand. Respondents ranged from founders and managing directors to journalists and freelancers. The survey findings, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interview responses were analyzed to draw conclusions. Validation measures, such as data triangulation and member checking, were employed during the data analysis.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with media house owners, experts, and representatives from media development organizations. Some interviewees gave consent to be named, while others have opted to remain anonymous, and quotes throughout the paper reflect the permissions given. The findings from these interviews were synthesized with other research data that informed the paper’s recommendations and served as a basis for promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for women journalists within media organizations.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from the following ten organizations:

Democratic Voice of Burma	Internews
The Irrawaddy	Deutsche Welle Akademie
Frontier Myanmar	International Media Support
Myanmar Now	Burma News International
Mizzima	Myanmar Women in Media

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

Survey respondents ranged in age, with an average age of 30 years. 41 respondents (51.9%) said they are married, in a partnership, or relationship, and 21 respondents (26.6%) reported having children.<sup>172</sup> 47 respondents (59.5%) were employed full time, 22 (27.8%) were employed part time, and 10 (12.7%) were unemployed at the time of responding to the survey. Geographically, 50.7% of the women journalists reported residing in Tak Province, 40% in Chiang Mai Province, and the remaining participants in Mae Hong Son and Bangkok Province, respectively.

Among the 79 respondents residing in exile in Thailand, a predominant majority (84.8%) expressed that the coup in Myanmar compelled them to leave the country out of concern for

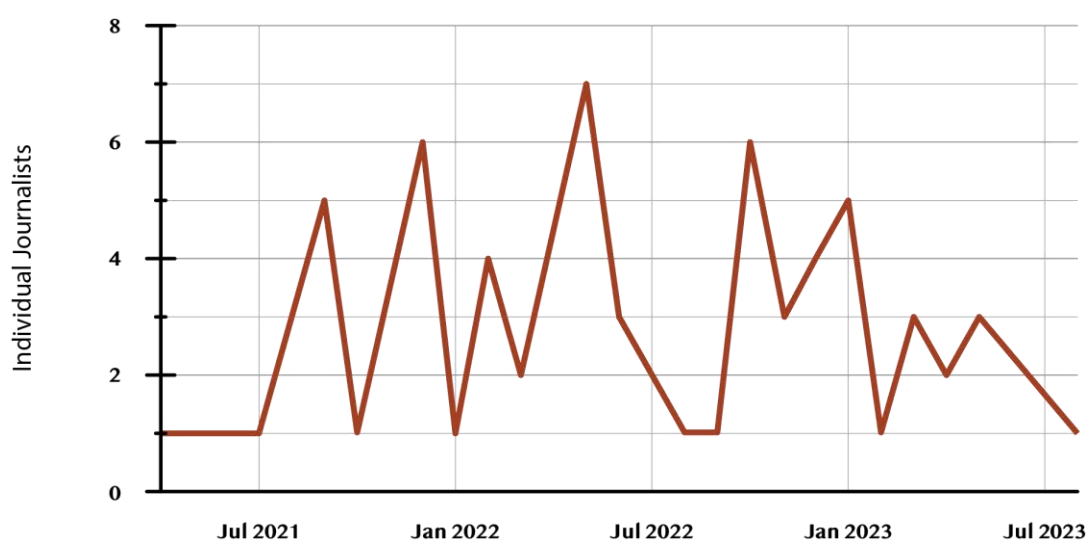
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<sup>172</sup> Alarmingly, of the 21 women journalist survey respondents who have children, 40.9% reported that their children were not currently receiving any schooling at the time of responding to the survey.

their personal safety, particularly in connection to their roles as journalists. The respondents relocated from Myanmar within the period spanning from July 2021 to July 2023, with a significant spike in exodus in December 2021, and May and October 2022. Crackdowns on journalists and airstrikes from the Tatmadaw increased throughout 2022, forcing many to flee into exile. Of the 73 women journalists who provided their year of arrival, 19 survey respondents (26%) arrived in Thailand in 2021, while over half arrived throughout 2022 (39), and 15 in 2023, all of whom finding themselves unable to return home.

Figure 1:

### *Date of Arrival in Thailand*



### *Most recent employers of the survey respondents*

NUG Radio	Than Lwin Times
Burma VJ	Delta News Agency (DNA)
Kachin News Group (KNG)	Ayeyarwaddy Times
Federal FM	Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)
Shwe Phee Myay News Agency	People's Radio Myanmar
Mizzima	BBC
The Voice Daily	Mekong News Agency
Kantarawaddy Times	Myanmar Press Agency (MPA)
DVB	Karen Information Center (KIC)
Breaking Brainwashed Media	Myanmar Now
People's Spring	Blooming Padauk
Burma Ethnic Voice Media (BEV)	PEN47
Democratic TV	Rainbow News
Radio Free Asia (RFA)	Khit Thit Media
Gender Equality Network	Border News Agency
Than Lwin Khet	Mandalay Free Press

### ***Difficulty Conducting Journalistic Work***

Survey respondents were asked what their main safety concerns were in their work as Myanmar journalists living in Thailand. 64 out of 79 journalists mentioned difficulty collecting media stories as their main concern. 62 each mentioned poor mental well-being and uncertain legal status as major factors, followed by concern for the safety of their loved ones and family (55), and lack of job security (52).

Since the coup, many journalists are operating either under a pseudonym or without any byline or accreditation at all for their work. In our survey, we found that 18 respondents (22.8%) were not credited with a byline, while 25 used a pen name in their work (31.6%). Only 16 of the women journalists surveyed (20.3%) used their real name in their work. While publishing without a byline and under pseudonyms helps ensure the safety of the journalists, such a practice has the possibility of eroding trust between individual journalists and their sources. Journalists forgoing bylines in their work face difficulties in receiving proper credit and recognition for their reporting, hindering their ability to build up their reputation and portfolio and stunting their developing career.

Journalists reporting from exile mention additional challenges such as difficulty with contacting sources, concerns about the safety of sources, and securing safe communication methods with sources. While journalists themselves may understand some basics of digital and informational security, oftentimes the sources they must communicate with on the ground do not have such experience, and thus may have compromised communication, which could endanger both the journalist and themselves. Many journalists end up compromising their digital security in order to reach their sources to report on stories on the ground. Others spend significant time and resources to equip their sources with digital safety tools, which are often not covered in their work and pay. Using unsecure methods of communication can compromise the safety of both the sources and the journalists, and journalists often weigh the ease of communication by phone and the availability of secure communications on the part of their interviewees.

*In secure interviews, it is difficult to build trust when you can't introduce yourself because you can't know the other person for sure. I have thoughts about whether my interviewee's security will be affected by the news that I have reported.* – Survey Respondent 53.

The kinds of stories that can be collected are also limited due to the conditions on the ground. Some of our participants in the focus groups and survey mentioned a desire to craft video stories or more in-depth interviews but failed to do so due to logistical constraints.

*Since I have to follow the news of my local people from outside the country, it is a challenge to communicate by phone. It has become a situation where the source can only be connected by phone call. I want to make a video report, but it is difficult to get a video interview.* – Survey Respondent 3.

Despite progress in women representation in media over the past twenty years, the unaddressed challenges encountered by women journalists might result in substantial regression in gender representation.

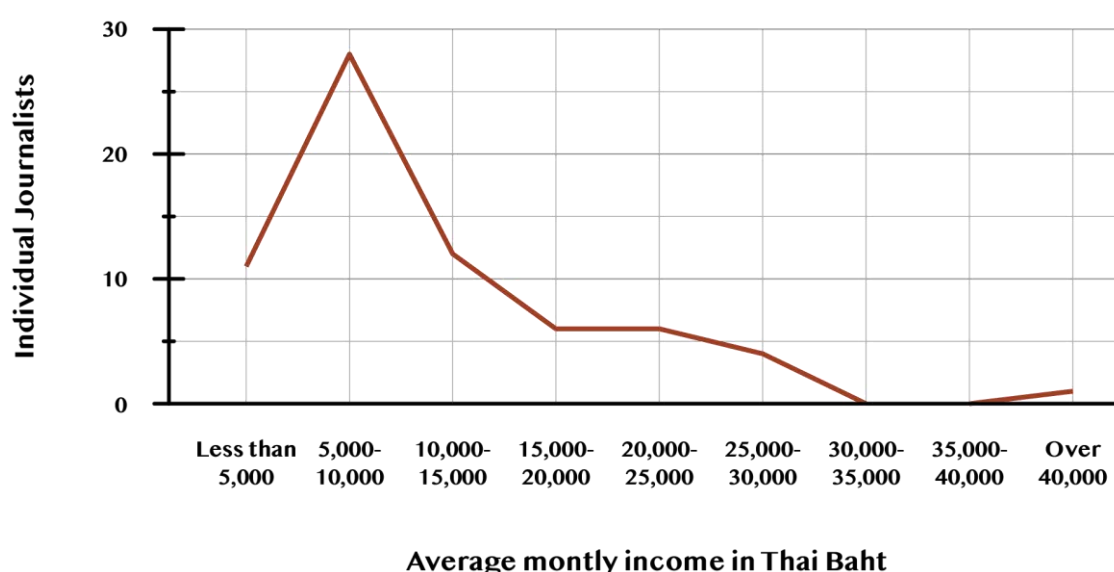
### ***Financial, Housing & Legal Insecurity***

Journalists in both Chiang Mai and Mae Sot grapple with financial instability, often working long hours in dangerous conditions for meager pay. Oftentimes, media houses lack the stable funding needed to supply their staff with a livable wage, with some smaller organizations operating entirely on short-term emergency funds since the coup. Freelancers, stringers, and citizen journalists face the additional challenge of not having any support outside of the individual stories that they can gather. Organizations that support Myanmar journalism have funds earmarked to support media outlets, but little is allocated for the needs of individual journalists.

Our survey of 79 women journalists revealed that 35.5% of respondents earned a monthly income between THB 5,000 and 10,000, and 15% reported earnings of less than THB 5,000 per month. These income levels fall well below the established minimum wage in Thailand (ASEAN Briefing, 2022), which averages THB 8,160 per month in Chiang Mai and THB 7,968 per month in Mae Sot.<sup>173</sup> However, it is worth noting that these calculations for the minimum wage are based on data for daily wage unskilled labor work. Salaries attributed to journalism work are expected to be far higher.

Figure 2:

*What is your average monthly income?*



While the salary paid to journalists is not too different from the Thai minimum wage, the cost of living for those without documentation and migrants can be significantly higher. The exchange rate disparity between the falling Myanmar Kyat and the Thai Baht puts journalists

<sup>173</sup> The established minimum wage in Thailand averages THB 340 per day in Chiang Mai province and THB 332 per day in Tak Province (where Mae Sot is located). According to our survey, the average number of working days per week for these journalists is six, spanning from Monday to Saturday. Thus, they should reasonably be compensated with a minimum wage of at least THB 8,160 per month in Chiang Mai and THB 7,968 per month in Mae Sot.

who relocate with a local Myanmar salary to Thailand at a significant disadvantage in terms of purchasing power upon arrival in Thailand. Many Myanmar exiles end up making suboptimal financial decisions due to unfamiliarity with the local landscape, increasing their cost of living. The absence of a support network of family and friends in the host country may necessitate additional spending on services or support systems.

Myanmar journalists in exile, especially those in Thailand, face legal threats both back in Myanmar and in Thailand. Of the journalists who responded to our survey, 57% did not have a visa or any other necessary legal documentation required to live in Thailand. Many (8) were here on a Migrant Worker Card (colloquially known as a Pink Card), some (2) on a 10-Year Card, others (4) on a Certificate of Identity, and still some (16) on a passport with a valid visa.<sup>174</sup> The Pink ID Card is essential for legal residence and work, the Certificate of Identity (CI) is necessary for identification and employment, and the Blue Book enables legal travel to other districts within Thailand. All these documents are crucial for an individual's safety, well-being, and ability to engage in normal activities in Thailand without the risk of legal repercussions, yet place another strain on the already meager salaries of exiled journalists.

Though conditions inside Myanmar for the safety of women journalists are much worse at present, journalists still face physical safety risks while in Thailand, especially those who are working along the Thai-Myanmar border. From the 79 women journalist survey respondents, when asked what they saw as the three most significant challenges in carrying out their journalistic work, the most frequently mentioned response was reference to their personal safety. Moving to Thailand comes with the challenge of adapting to new threats and dangers, which often lead to respondents feeling like the dangers have shifted but not lessened. Those without documentation still face the risk of being arrested and handed over to the SAC, with less familiarity in addressing the security concerns.

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<sup>174</sup> In the pursuit of legal documentation to secure a stable and lawful existence in Thailand, individuals, particularly migrant workers, seek specific documents to navigate their undocumented status. Central among these is the Pink ID Card, commonly referred to as a legal work permit, serving as an essential legal document that permits legal residence in Thailand but also facilitates lawful employment limited to menial daily wage work such as construction, domestic work, and farming. This card is paramount in mitigating the risk of arrest and deportation by Thai authorities, providing individuals the freedom to engage in various activities, such as renting housing, obtaining a driver's license, and accessing medical treatment at Thai hospitals. A Certificate of Identity (CI) issued to migrant workers is another essential document. It serves as identification for migrant workers and is required for legal employment in Thailand. Some may also acquire a “Blue Book,” which allows one to travel to other provinces outside of the province in which they registered their documentation. The Blue Book can be thought of as a residential registration document, providing legal recognition of the individual's residence in a particular province and facilitating lawful travel to other provinces in Thailand.



Figure 3: An example of a Myanmar woman wearing her many forms of documentation in order to ensure her safety. The message on her t-shirt, “Power Rangers,” symbolizes the array of differently colored legal documentation necessary for lawful residency in Thailand. Photo credit: Visual Rebellion.

Media houses, in turn, struggle to legalize their employees due to lack of experience and difficulty dealing with the logistical challenges and inexperience doing so prior to the coup. A representative from The Irrawaddy mentioned in our interview, *“I have no idea how to legalize these people. I never did it. I myself stayed semi-legal in the past. Now I am finally legal, but this has taken me decades.”* Other media houses, including Frontier, Mizzima, and DVB, mentioned various ways in which they worked on securing proper documentation for their staff but struggled with the financial burden often shouldered by these organizations without much external support.

As media houses and employers struggle to pay a livable wage to the journalists they employ, attempts are made to mitigate this by providing them with shared accommodations and, in certain instances, covering the costs of journalists’ relocations either partially or fully. 32.9% of survey respondents (26) reported that they did not feel safe in their current living arrangements. Consequently, many find themselves compelled to secure their own accommodation at personal expense, primarily due to budgetary constraints imposed by their media houses or employers. In addition to the challenges faced by journalists with families, women journalists are also sometimes expected to perform domestic tasks in safe houses, and refusal may lead to job loss. These conditions create a difficult environment for women journalists to work safely and securely, resulting in dangerous and exploitative working conditions for those in exile.

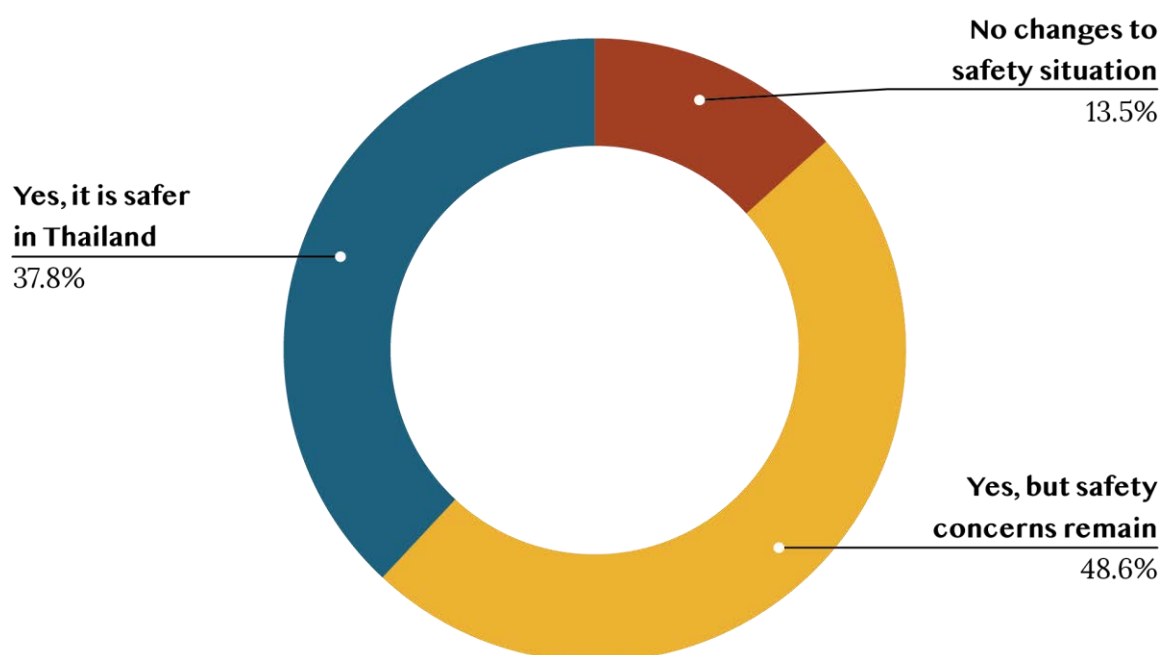


In the Focus Group Discussions, journalists compared their situation in exile with those still in Myanmar. Journalists mentioned that even though the dangers and risks of being in Myanmar were different from what they faced in Thailand, there were new challenges in exile, which they had to learn to contend with.

*What I witness is that women face more challenges outside of Myanmar. Media houses are not respecting the women journalists. The women journalists have to solve their problems independently, as no one seems willing to take responsibility for them. ... Emotional abuse is one of the issues I've encountered, which includes a significant income disparity between men and women colleagues. Media house owners sometimes act as if they are the saviors of these women journalists, discouraging them from seeking more opportunities. These women often lack access to legal assistance. Being an undocumented woman journalist in Thailand compounds their problems, as they struggle to find help, and those who brought them there evade responsibility. [As a result,] some took the risky step of resigning from their jobs. – Participant 1, FGD 3.*

Figure 4:

*Do you feel the safety risks and your overall safety situation has changed after arriving in Thailand?*



When asked about whether their safety situation has changed after moving to Thailand, 36 of the 78 responses (48.6%) stated that while their safety situation has changed, it has not improved. This shows that living in exile comes with a set of challenges, which are different but no less harrowing. Many mentioned that while it is physically dangerous to live inside Myanmar due to fear of arrest and detention, there is a level of confidence on how to stay safe



as they are in familiar territory. In Thailand, however, the women journalists highlighted their concerns over legal documentation, police extortion, discrimination for being from Myanmar, and a lack of awareness about how physically safe they really are. That being said, of the 78 respondents to this question, 28 (37.8%) explained that they feel safer in Thailand, particularly when considering their mental health (11 mentions) and physical security (9 mentions).

Senior editors and media house owners that were interviewed mentioned the worry that the low pay and lack of job and housing security will lead to an exodus of women journalists from the industry. They mention media workers switching industries to work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society organizations (CSOs) to earn more money. Reports suggest that since the 2021 military coup, approximately 80% of Myanmar journalists have left their professions, with the majority of those still employed living in exile abroad. Women journalists still face pressures and threats, both from media houses and within their circles, even when contemplating resignation. These conditions may lead to a reduction in the number of women journalists in the workforce and perpetuate exploitative contract terms for those who move to Thailand, creating a hostile, unsafe work environment for women.

### ***Gender-Based Discrimination and Bullying***

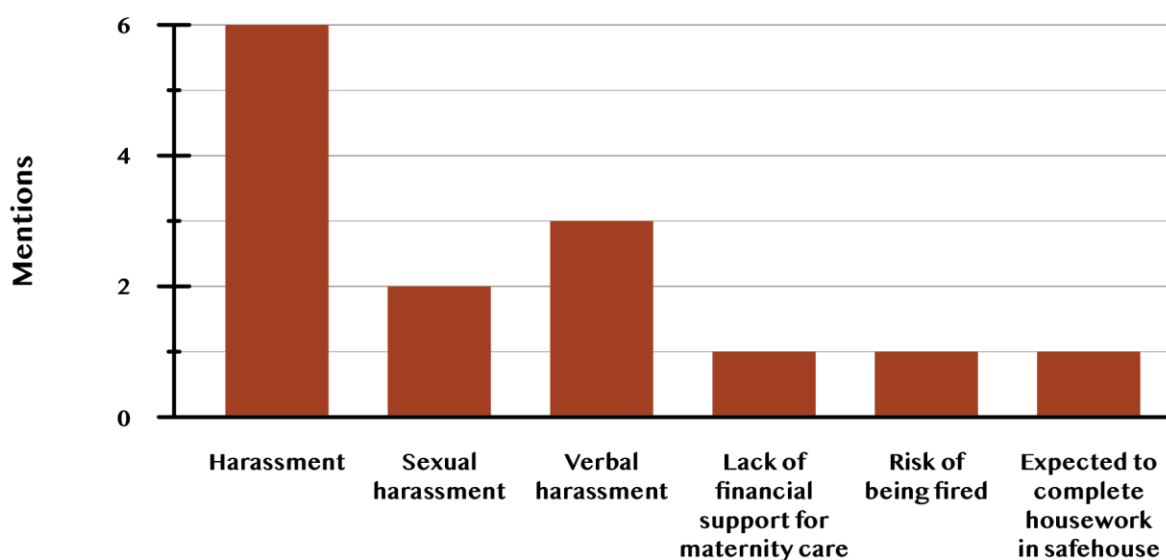
When asked about safety concerns specific to women journalists, participants mentioned instances of harassment, bullying, and unequal treatment that they experienced as women within their organizations. Participants in the Focus Group Discussions mentioned a culture of emotional abuse within certain media organizations and oppressive behavior by media houses towards their women staff. Women journalists can face discouragement from pursuing opportunities and limited access to legal assistance. Coercive, unfair, and uncompromising working conditions exert additional pressure on women journalists.

In the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants of FGDs 1, 2, and 3 (totaling 17 participants) highlighted gender-based harassment and discrimination as the predominant safety concerns confronting women journalists in comparison to their male counterparts. Specifically, six participants identified general harassment within the newsroom, with additional participants specifying sexual and verbal harassment.

It is notable that many of these conditions and practices of maltreatment existed before the coup. The 2016 Fojo Media Institute report, titled “Gender in the Media Landscape,” provided insights into this, stating that over 50% of women journalists reported experiencing verbal or sexual harassment within media organizations, with the absence of reporting mechanisms or gender committees when such incidents arose (Fojo Media Institute, 2016).

Figure 5:

## What kinds of safety risks do women journalists face that are different to their male colleagues?



Participant 3 of FGD 1 emphasized that for women journalists, safety risks permeate both their personal and professional lives. The inherent danger of being a woman, further exacerbated by being a woman journalist in exile, exposes them to harassment beyond what their male colleagues typically encounter:

*I don't distinguish safety risks between my personal life and professional life. It is already a danger to be a woman, and even more to be a woman journalist living in exile. Many people do not even dare to harass male colleagues, but when it comes to women journalists, we receive the brunt of it.* – Participant 3, FGD 1.

Our Focus Group Discussions also highlighted that women journalists were more vulnerable to job loss when raising concerns about pay or workplace issues compared to their male colleagues. Participant 6 of FGD three noted, “*If women complain about their salaries or anything that is happening inside their media houses, their contract will be terminated.*” This suggests that there might be an added risk that women journalists face when advocating for fair compensation or addressing workplace grievances, although a more detailed inquiry is required to identify the extent to which this affects them.

Alarmingly, only 16.5% of the women surveyed reported that their workplace had a workplace harassment policy, with 43% saying they are unsure about whether such a policy exists. The existence of workplace harassment policies is essential to create a safe environment for employees. They encourage reporting of harassment, deter inappropriate behavior, and safeguard individuals from further mistreatment. When asked if the women journalists' current or most recent media house has a human resources policy, 13.9% of survey respondents answered “no,” with another 43% saying they are unsure about whether such a policy exists.

While the presence of a workplace harassment policy and HR policy is important, it is even more important that employees understand the content of these policies. First, they empower employees by informing them of their rights and the procedures for addressing harassment. Second, they encourage employees to report incidents promptly, helping to prevent harassment and create a safer workplace. Third, they set clear expectations and consequences for inappropriate behavior, acting as a deterrent. Lastly, they ensure legal compliance and safeguard both employees and the organization by demonstrating a commitment to preventing harassment and addressing it appropriately when it occurs.

### ***Mental Health***

Major mental health concerns for women journalists have emerged since the onset of COVID-19 in Myanmar, well before the coup. Women carried the double burden of childcare, housework, and the mental health implications of lockdown, which affected people globally, all the while juggling responsibilities from their work. The onset of the 2021 coup and its subsequent fallout pushed many women journalists to a breaking point, resulting in dramatically poor mental health outcomes for women journalists across the board.

Before they had the chance to recover a sense of normalcy after COVID-19, many were thrust into exile and found themselves fugitives and in imminent danger. The precarity of life in exile has resulted in profound emotional and psychological impacts on the women journalists we have surveyed and interviewed. 62 out of 79 journalists surveyed reported poor mental well-being as a factor that affected their work as journalists in exile. When asked about challenges they faced during relocation, 13 out of 79 reported emotional burdens as seriously affecting them; seven reported cultural differences and discrimination as a matter of concern for them.

Participants in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) noted a significant contrast in their mental well-being between their time in Myanmar and their time in Thailand. Many emphasized the detrimental impact of sleep deprivation on their health while in Myanmar, with these issues improving upon their relocation to Thailand. When asked about changes in their safety risks and overall security situation since arriving in Thailand, 11 survey respondents expressed feeling safer, with improved mental health being the most frequently cited reason for this perception. Among these survey respondents, five specifically highlighted experiencing enhanced sleep quality. “*I have been able to enjoy peaceful, uninterrupted sleep since coming to Thailand,*” a sentiment echoed by Participant 8, who stated, “*I can rest well at night without the constant fear of nighttime raids, as was the case in Myanmar.*”

*Previously, I couldn't sleep at night. I was constantly on edge whenever I heard the sounds of cars and motorbikes, and I suffered from insomnia. There is a much greater sense of security after arriving in Thailand.* – Survey Respondent 39.

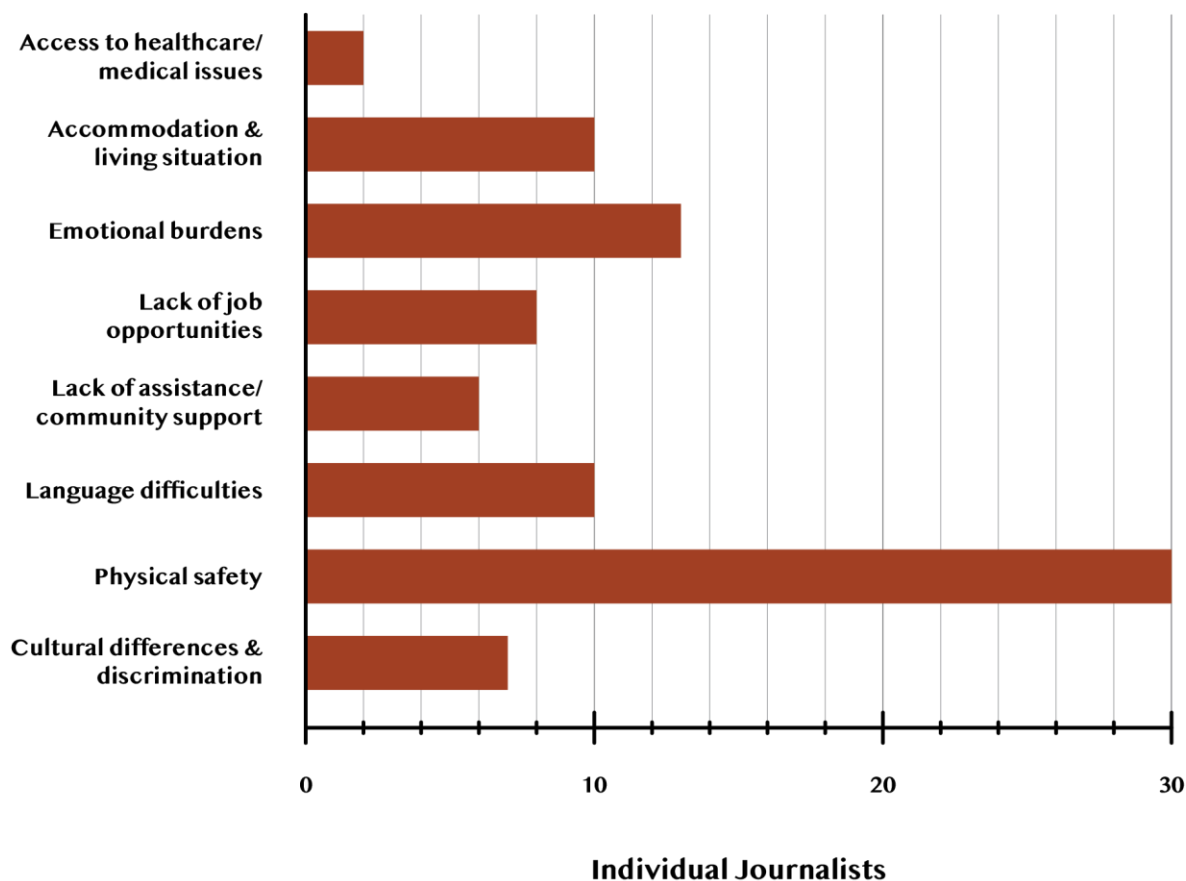
Nevertheless, the precarious nature of their current circumstances still weighs heavily on their well-being and feelings of security. When asked the same question, six other survey respondents acknowledged changes in safety risks but expressed concerns about a persistent decline in their mental health. Their anxieties primarily revolved around the fear of arrest and stress resulting from their precarious living conditions. It is likely that these anxieties began

while they were inside Myanmar, but the symptoms only became noticeable in exile after they had reached a place of relative physical safety.

It was encouraging to observe that recognition and understanding of the significance of mental health for their own well-being were widespread among the surveyed women journalists.

Figure 6:

### *What were the biggest challenges in your relocation?*



Other conditions mentioned when explaining the biggest challenges they faced during relocation to Thailand included lack of job opportunities (8), fear for physical safety (30), poor accommodation and living situation (10), lack of access to healthcare and medical issues (2), lack of assistance or community support (6), and language difficulties (10). Only by addressing the material conditions of women journalists living in exile, or those who have relocated, can we begin to improve their mental health.

*I no longer want to talk about how I feel when asked if I want mental health support... I try to talk to myself by saying that I will fight the regime until the end. I heal that way and forget about what I'm really feeling. I think that working and focusing on [journalism] work helps me forget my problems.* – Participant 5, FGD 2.

It is important to note that mental health concerns among many women journalists stem directly from their current safety and material circumstances. The lack of material and safety support

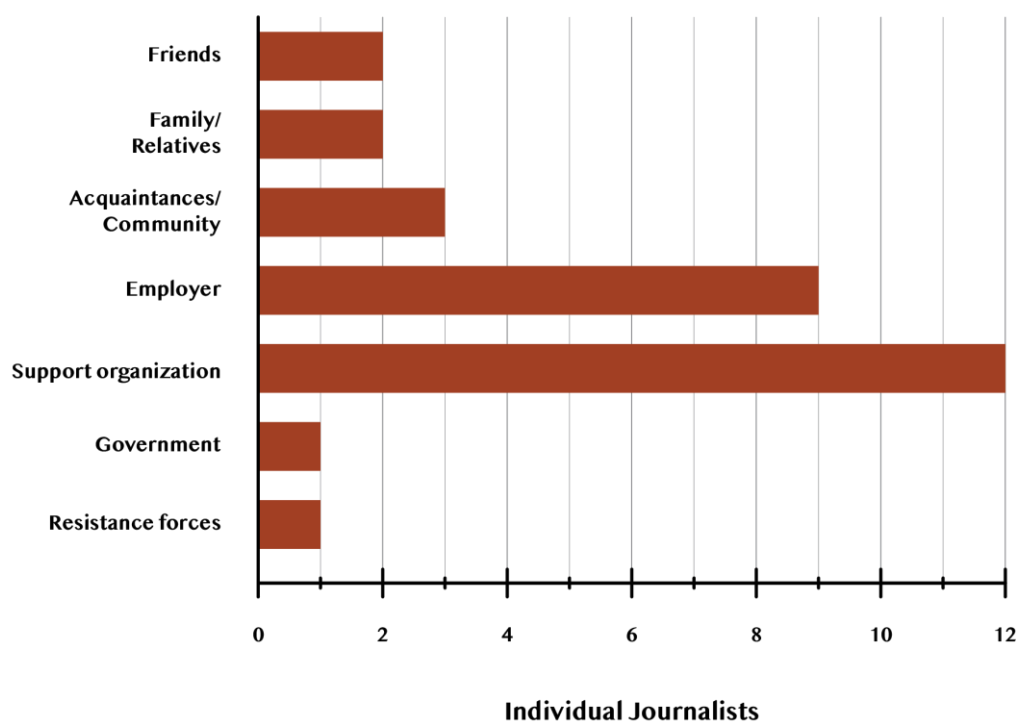
is directly contributing to heightened anxieties and poor mental health outcomes; in these instances, the mental health challenges can effectively be tackled by providing additional forms of material and safety support alongside mental health assistance. In line with this, financial assistance often takes precedence over mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) due to its immediate and urgent nature. Although most of our respondents were aware of a decline in their mental health, they sought to downplay their condition and turn to work as a means of healing and coping, making it even more important that workspaces for women journalists are free of harassment and exploitation.

### Evaluating Existing Support Mechanisms

Survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants were asked about the assistance they received during and after their relocation to Thailand. The expenses associated with relocating for our respondents were substantial, with an average reported cost of approximately THB 25,000 for moving from Myanmar to Thailand. Despite the significant cost, nearly half of the surveyed journalists (49.4%) did not receive any aid for relocation and were forced to use their own finances to cover the cost. Notably, one participant mentioned resorting to taking out a government loan of MMK 800,000 in Myanmar to finance her relocation.

Figure 7:

*If you received any relocation assistance,  
who did you receive it from?*

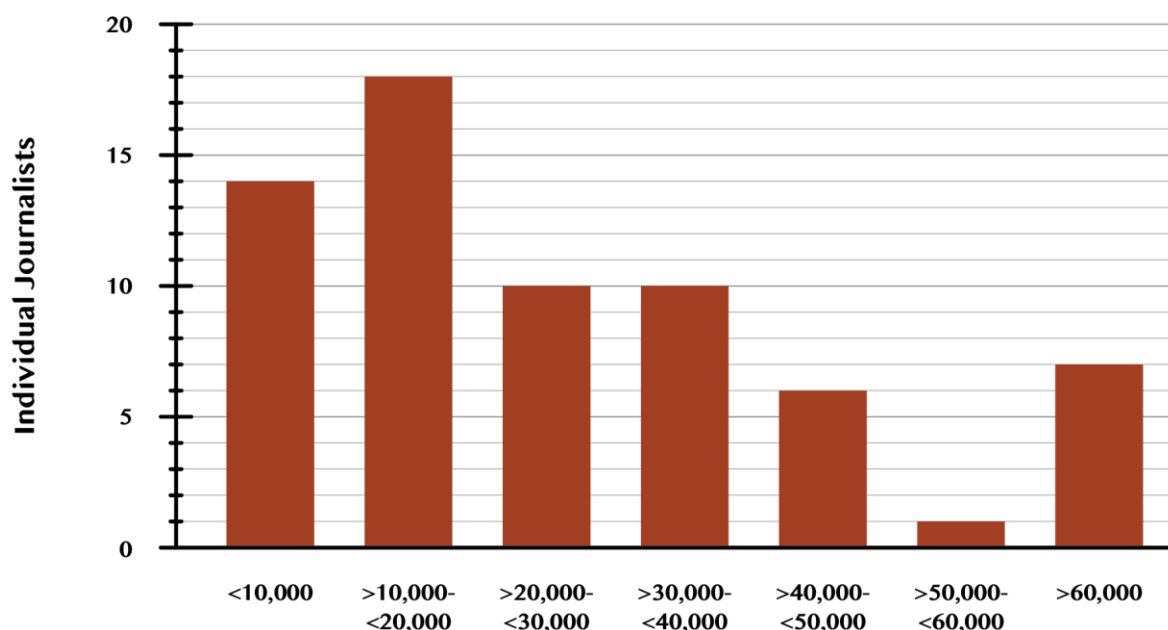


Of the journalists who did receive relocation support, only nine survey respondents received support from their employers. Those who provided support included Federal FM (2), Kachin

News Group (1), Kantarawaddy Times (1), Mizzima (4), and DVB (1). Twelve journalists received relocation assistance from media support organizations, while the rest received help from friends, family, or other acquaintances.

Figure 8:

### How much did your relocation to Thailand cost in Thai Baht?



The Focus Group Discussions also highlighted that oftentimes the assistance provided by support organizations and media houses only accounted for a portion of the travel cost or covered solely the journalist, not the additional family members relocating with them. 35.4% of journalists (28) surveyed reported possessing the necessary legal documentation to live in Thailand. When asked how much of their income is spent on visa fees per year, 10 out of 23 reported that visa or proper documentation fees account for over 30% of their annual income. This presents an unsustainable financial burden on these journalists that media houses and support organizations are often unable to alleviate. While some have received financial support from their media houses and organizations, they re-emphasized the necessity of financial assistance to obtain legal documentation, such as visas, as a top priority.

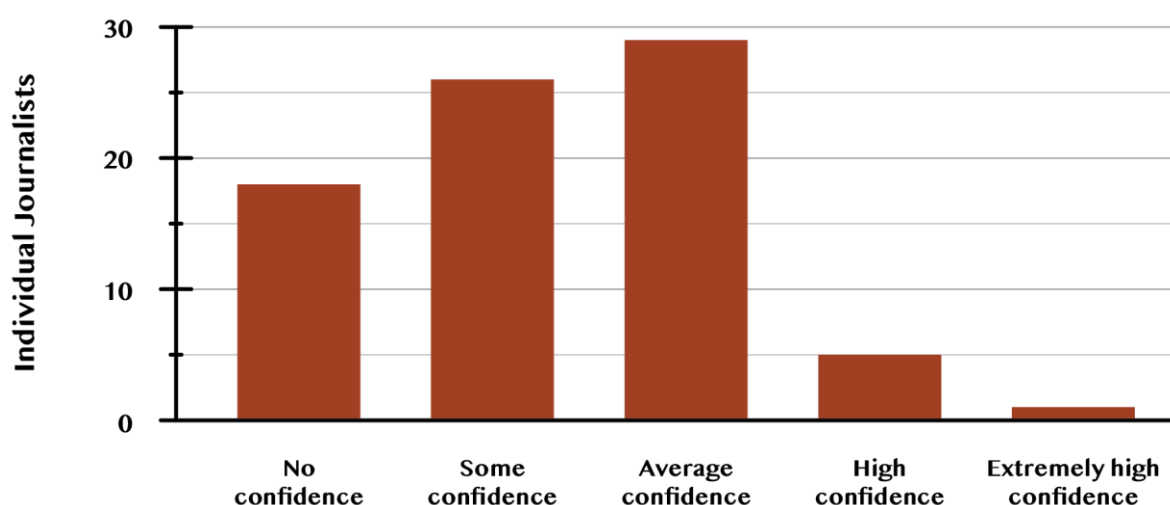
Participants of the Focus Group Discussions highlighted the importance of digital security, such as the use of secure communication methods. They expressed the need for more tangible and actionable guidance, as well as continued support after digital security training sessions. Participants emphasized the need for comprehensive safety training that included practical implementation, equipment provisioning (such as laptops and electronic devices), secure cloud storage, and licensed software applications. Practical information for direct communication methods was also highlighted as a critical requirement in the evolving landscape of data

security. Participants called for cultural and systemic shifts to create a safer and more equitable environment for women journalists, both inside Myanmar and in exile.

While 69.6% of respondents in our survey acknowledged experiencing security breaches during their work in Myanmar, the majority indicated that their security concerns persisted upon relocating to Thailand. Rather than diminishing, their apprehensions shifted; the threat of arrest in Myanmar transformed into a threat of deportation in Thailand. This underscores the notion that, despite the different perils faced by journalists in exile, the threat level remains consistent. Additionally, our research revealed that journalists exhibited a low to average level of confidence in their knowledge and skills to address the safety risks associated with being a journalist in exile. Specifically, a paltry 7.6% of survey participants expressed high or extremely high confidence in managing these risks, making it targeted efforts to enhance the security knowledge of journalists in exile imperative.

Figure 9:

*Select your level of confidence in your knowledge/skills to deal with the safety risks that come with being a journalist in exile.*



A significant finding from our survey indicated that 55.7% of respondents had not participated in any safety training tailored for journalists. Moreover, of those who did undergo safety training, a substantial 80% received it post-coup rather than prior to political upheaval. This suggests a noteworthy gap in pre-crisis preparedness, as the majority lacked exposure to safety training aimed at mitigating the risks associated with journalistic work. The disproportionate distribution of safety training after the coup underscores the need for proactive measures to ensure journalists receive comprehensive training before being exposed to heightened security threats.

A significant majority, 72.2%, of the women journalists participating in our survey indicated that their current or most recent media organization did not provide any safety training. This poses a serious concern, as it exposes journalists to heightened risks related to their work without the necessary training to mitigate these safety challenges. Furthermore, it emphasizes the crucial role that media support organizations must play in ensuring that Myanmar journalists, both in-country and in exile, have access to vital safety training and information. This responsibility becomes paramount for enhancing the safety and well-being of journalists in the face of increasing risks.

Our research found that comprehensive and holistic safety and wellbeing support is still needed for women journalists (and journalists in general) in exile. Holistic support refers to a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing various aspects of an individual's well-being. In the context of support for individuals, especially in challenging situations such as those faced by journalists, holistic support goes beyond addressing one specific issue, aiming to consider the person's overall needs—physical, emotional, social, and professional. This approach emphasizes a more thorough and inclusive way of supporting individuals to ensure their overall health, resilience, and success. The programs that exist so far, unfortunately, fall short of the standards for holistic support for journalists.

### ***Role of Media Organizations***

In conflict or wartime, journalism has historically been male-dominated, with men often taking on more prominent roles as correspondents, reporters, and photographers. The danger of this lack of equal gender representation is that it perpetuates a skewed narrative and limits the diversity of perspectives presented in the media, while the experiences, voices, and insights of women may be underrepresented or even marginalized. While there is a general acknowledgment of the importance of journalism during conflict, our interviewees yielded mixed results when questioned about the importance of gender representation in newsrooms.

Some organizations reported that the gender balance of the newsroom had begun to skew more male since the coup. A representative of Frontier Myanmar noted:

*We always look into female journalists or reporters because I think it is very important for us to have a balance in our newsroom. But since the coup, it's very much unbalanced again ... kind of male-dominant again, because some of the female [journalists] are still in Myanmar.* – Representative, Frontier Myanmar.

Other organizations such as DVB and The Irrawaddy reported around 30-40% representation of women in the newsroom. This is consistent with IWMF's 2011 Global Report on the Status of Women in News, which stated that globally, women represent 33.3% of the full-time journalism workforce across 522 companies surveyed globally (International Women's Media Foundation, 2011).

Media organizations, although able to provide basic salaries, frequently encounter challenges in meeting the additional needs of journalists residing in exile. Some organizations take on burdens for supporting their staff outside of their basic salaries, such as housing allowance, visas or alternative forms of documentation, and medical insurance. However, these come at



the expense of the media organizations themselves, and are often not accounted for by donor funding received since the coup.

Because many media organizations’ revenue models have collapsed since the coup, they have become wholly dependent on donor funding, which places significant limitations on how and where funding can be spent. The larger and more established media organizations have been able to provide salaries that at least match the Thai minimum wage, but smaller organizations with tighter budgets and resource constraints often end up paying their staff far below standard wages, compensating them otherwise with benefits such as shared food and housing expenses.

*Many [policy manuals] have had to be rewritten because the newsroom management and structure have completely changed since the coup. All the policies they had before the coup are not applicable anymore since the coup. Now, they are just so focused on survival that they have not had a chance to organize and build up these structures.* – Thin Lei Win, Co-founder of Myanmar Now & International Correspondent.

Because of the challenging conditions facing media houses in exile, many are unable to provide for the specific and individualized needs of many of their journalists. Despite these challenges, media organizations still strive to provide a safe and welcoming workplace for women journalists. The Irrawaddy reported providing three months of paid maternity leave for women journalists even under these circumstances. DVB reported providing a child-friendly play area in their office in Chiang Mai, allowing mothers to bring their children to work. “*We need to push for gender safety sensitivity not because the donors said we have to. This is a moral obligation, which comes with having responsibility. There is no excuse to overlook it.*” – Representative, The Irrawaddy.

While media houses typically provide basic safety support for their staffers, full-time staff are not the only ones producing news. Many others involved in the creation of news stories, such as fixers, stringers, and citizen journalists, do not receive any institutional support. Many of the women interviewed in our survey mentioned their concern for their colleagues or sources on the ground, who often do not receive the necessary security support or resources for their work. Therefore, further measures must be taken to ensure the safety of both journalists operating in exile and their sources inside dangerous territory, either individually or through media organizations themselves.

All the media institutions interviewed for this research commented on the instability of institutional donor funding, which could be discontinued or reassigned based on external geopolitical factors out of their control. Because media organizations from Myanmar rely so heavily on funding from international donors post-coup, journalists are highly vulnerable to drastic shifts in their employment status and physical safety when these institutions choose to enact policy changes.

### ***Role of Support Organizations***

Post-coup, media development organizations have worked together to provide holistic support to both exiled Myanmar media outlets and individual journalists. This includes a variety of support, such as newsroom development, financial and technical assistance to media houses,

emergency financial assistance, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), capacity-building training such as gender sensitivity programs, journalist safety training, media literacy campaigns, research, and advocacy. However, due to a lack of stable institutional funding, there have been cases where emergency support funds, intended to support the livelihood of individual journalists, have been appropriated to support small to medium media outlets operating on shoestring budgets. Many media development organizations, whose multi-year budgets were drawn prior to the 2021 coup, scrambled to reassign funds to support either the pressing emergency needs of individual journalists for relocation or providing necessary core funding for those who worked to evacuate their own suddenly compromised employees from inside Myanmar.

The existing level of support falls short of meeting the material requirements of Myanmar media in exile. As the geopolitical landscape further deteriorates, international funding is being redirected to other regions, spreading support organizations thinner than ever before. Independent media houses, forever dependent on donor funding, are struggling to survive. If this issue is not addressed, serious problems will arise concerning the long-term viability of these media houses and, consequently, the ability of individual journalists to effectively inform the public.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for Funders

- It is recommended that funders recognize the significance of providing **benefits and livelihood support** to journalists through both their media organizations and independent mechanisms for freelancers.
- **Making concessions for media organizations in their overheads**, particularly for services that ensure the well-being of journalists, is fundamental.
- **Flexibility in funding** is crucial to adapting to the changing situations on the ground.
- Funders should **incentivize media organizations to implement policies** that foster equality, address harassment concerns, and provide support tailored to the specific needs of women journalists.
- Funders should consider **integrating gender-specific budgeting and programming** into the allocation of funds to local partners.
- Lastly, funders should consider **supporting organizations that provide holistic support**, not only to institutions but also to individual journalists.

### Recommendations for Media Organizations

- Media organizations should take proactive measures to address the safety of journalists and focus particularly on the distinct challenges faced by women journalists. **Unfair gendered expectations** in the workplace, including gender-related biases that hinder professional growth or lead to discriminatory treatment, must be clearly defined and recognized to prevent inadvertent abuses and ensure equitable working conditions for women journalists.

- Media organizations should **regularly update personnel handbooks and policies** to align with both local and international standards.
- Essential employment documents, such as personnel manuals, contracts, and workplace etiquette guidelines, should be **available in both Burmese and English**. Ensuring that **all staff members read, comprehend, and sign** these documents is essential and will foster more complete understanding and compliance.
- Additionally, media organizations must provide ongoing support to media professionals beyond the category of journalists, particularly those working as stringers, citizen journalists (CJs), and sources on the ground, placing special emphasis on **digital and informational security**.

### Recommendations for Media Support Groups

- Historically, the trend has been to support the professional development of journalists and the institutional development of the media sector in Myanmar. However, the situation now requires detailed and comprehensive support for the livelihoods and well-being of journalists, as the factors that impact their professional outputs (i.e., displacement, precarity, lack of material resources) are often humanitarian in nature and require more concerted support than current media development institutions are ready to deliver. However, to preserve the well-being of the journalists and to support the future of the industry, **expansion of what work is considered “media development”** must be considered.
- Further **protections are needed to safeguard sources and CJs**, with increased resources directed to journalists in exile to ensure the safety of both sources and journalists on the ground.
- Media support groups should consider implementing courses or activities to integrate exiled journalists into their host communities by providing resources for **learning the local language**. There is a necessity of **understanding the local laws of the host country** and the policing system.
- Participants in our research highlighted the need for **gender-sensitive tailored safety training** to account for the unique experiences of exiled women journalists, and the need for a more inclusive approach, advocating for the **involvement of male colleagues in sexual harassment training**.
- Supporting the establishment of **independent mechanisms for assisting women journalists** outside of media organizations and providing contact details for **assistance in cases of sexual harassment** are crucial steps in enhancing the safety and well-being of individual women journalists.
- Further **audits of employers and media organizations** are needed to ensure that no gendered abuses are occurring within these groups.

### Recommendations for Further Research

While this research has provided insights into the specific challenges faced by women journalists in Myanmar, further study is essential to extrapolate these findings to the broader context of all journalists in the country. The experiences of women journalists, as highlighted

in this research, intersect with and influence the overall working conditions, safety concerns, and professional challenges encountered by journalists regardless of gender. A comprehensive understanding of the media landscape in Myanmar necessitates an exploration of the commonalities and distinctions between the experiences of male and female journalists. Additionally, considering the evolving political and social dynamics in Myanmar, ongoing research is needed to capture the fluid nature of these challenges and to inform targeted interventions that can benefit the entire journalistic community. This broader perspective is integral to developing holistic strategies that address the diverse needs of journalists in Myanmar.

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## Myanmar Secondary School EFL Teachers’ Perceptions of English Teaching Strategies during the Period of Curriculum Reform

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### Abstract

English language teaching in Myanmar has undergone substantial changes in recent years due to curriculum reforms and external socio-political events. Understanding the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Myanmar’s secondary schools is crucial for improving teaching practices amidst these transformations. This research investigates the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers regarding the employment of new teaching strategies as part of the implementation of the new national curriculum (2016–2024).

A mixed-methods approach was utilized for this research, involving 103 secondary English teachers from online federal schools in Myanmar. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were gathered via semi-structured interviews and observations. Quantitative analysis reveals teachers' adaptability and resilience, acknowledging the positive impact of curriculum changes on their teaching practices. Qualitative findings provide deeper insights into themes such as teacher collaboration, teaching methods, ongoing professional development, and technology integration. Experienced educators endorse diverse approaches and emphasize the importance of tailored support mechanisms. Despite challenges, teachers view curriculum changes as opportunities for growth and innovation. Additionally, younger educators have been observed to actively incorporate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in their teaching practices. Gender, experience, and teaching qualifications significantly influence perceptions, underscoring the need for personalized support systems.

Collaborative environments, comprehensive professional development, resource management, and effective technology integration are identified as crucial for optimizing teaching practices amidst curriculum transformations. Recommendations include ongoing evaluation and adaptation of teaching methods to align with evolving curriculum objectives and student needs, ultimately benefiting students, teachers, and school communities. This research contributes valuable insights to the dynamic landscape of English language teaching in Myanmar, offering practical guidance for educators and policymakers navigating curriculum reforms and promoting effective teaching strategies.

**Keywords:** Perspectives, Teaching Strategies, Curriculum Change

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<sup>175</sup> Brilliant Tomorrow Learning Center

## 1. Introduction

English is widely spoken around the world today (Mappinasse & Bin Sihes, 2014), and Myanmar has experienced significant changes in English language teaching, particularly following the introduction of a new curriculum in 2016 and subsequent political events, such as the 2021 military coup. Despite being considered a foreign language in Myanmar (Fen, 2005), English has become a mandatory subject in all schools. Curriculum changes are vital in education reform, offering teachers opportunities for creativity (Zhao & Watterston, 2021) and fostering societal shifts (Kalimapos, 2022). Additionally, such changes empower educators to lead transformations (Jenkins, 2020), influencing teaching methodologies.

However, implementing the new curriculum has posed challenges for Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers. Local educators have struggled with the updated content, necessitating training to enhance their understanding of the new curriculum. Many teachers actively participated in government-led training sessions, but the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 resulted in nationwide school closures, disrupting teaching. The situation was further complicated by the 2021 military coup, prompting many educators to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Most of the teachers participating in the CDM have turned to online teaching, collaborating with federal schools. CDM educators have been teaching at online federal schools in Myanmar amidst threats from the military junta. The transition to online teaching has compelled them to modify their teaching strategies, leading to numerous technical challenges. Despite the hurdles, some educators also continue in-person teaching in ethnic regions.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the Myanmar secondary EFL teachers' perceptions of English teaching strategies during the current curriculum change.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To examine the Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching strategies during the curriculum change.
- 2) To explore whether there are differences or similarities in their perception of teaching strategies in terms of experience and qualification.
- 3) To find out the impact of the new curriculum on the implementation of teaching strategies.
- 4) To give suggestions and discussions based on the research of the study.

Research questions are,

- 1) What are the teachers' perceptions of English teaching strategies during curriculum change?
- 2) What are the differences among Myanmar Secondary EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching strategies during the curriculum change in terms of experience and qualification?
- 3) What is the impact of the new curriculum on the implementation of teaching strategies, positive or negative?
- 4) How do technology and teacher collaboration influence the implementation of teaching strategies during the curriculum change?

The participants of this study consisted of 103 secondary school English language teachers from 27 online federal schools in Myanmar.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the theoretical background and some related studies of the current research. The theoretical review covers curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, approaches, and methods for teaching English. Then, some of the studies related to Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions of English teaching strategies during the current curriculum change are presented.

### **2.1. Curriculum Implementation of English Language Teaching in Myanmar**

A high-quality basic education curriculum serves as a crucial foundation for Myanmar's socio-economic development and is essential for enhancing student learning outcomes. The curriculum acts as a guiding framework for teachers (Ministry of Education, 2015). Since 2016, Myanmar's Ministry of Education (MoE) has been implementing a new basic education curriculum aligned with the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) for the period from 2016 to 2021. The revised structure follows a KG+12 model, comprising kindergarten, five years of primary schooling, four years of lower secondary education, and three years of upper secondary education (Tun, 2023). English language education in Myanmar has undergone significant changes influenced by historical and political contexts. From the colonial era onward, the status of the English language and educational policies have experienced frequent shifts (Tin, 2024). The implementation of the English language curriculum reflects various educational policies and practices. Designed to accommodate students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, the curriculum recognizes that English often serves as a third language for students, following their ethnic language and the official Myanmar language. Recent developments in textbooks and teaching materials emphasize more communicative and interactive approaches (Tun, 2023). However, teachers encounter challenges when implementing the new curriculum. These include adapting to the language used in updated textbooks, integrating recommended instructional methods into existing teaching practices, and effectively managing time. The diverse and multilingual student population further complicates matters, necessitating a curriculum that considers varying linguistic abilities (Tun, 2023). Despite these obstacles, Myanmar's efforts to enhance English language education demonstrate a commitment to preparing students for global communication.

### **2.2. Teaching Strategies**

A teaching strategy can be defined as a thoughtfully designed plan or set of activities aimed at achieving specific educational objectives. These strategies are carefully chosen by educators to engage students, promote learning, and foster skill development (Richards, Jack & Rodgers 1986). In addition, teaching strategies encompass various roles taken by educators or teaching tools to facilitate learning. These roles can include direct instruction by teachers, utilization of educational devices (such as computers, programmed texts, or television sets), and other methods that enhance the learning experience (Klein, 1991). Teaching strategies encompass the approaches that teachers employ for specific lessons and are tailored to achieve objectives.

It is essential to recognize which teaching strategy works effectively in relation to the materials and contexts. Flexibility and adaptability in selecting strategies are key to successful teaching (Killen, 1996).

## **2.3. Approaches and Methods for Teaching English**

Anthony (1963; as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001), an American applied linguist, proposed a framework to distinguish between different levels of language teaching. This scheme involves three hierarchical levels: approach, method, and technique. An approach is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning.

### **2.3.1. Approaches**

In language teaching, an approach refers to a theoretical stance and a set of beliefs about language, language learning, and how these concepts apply in educational contexts. To put it simply, it is the overarching philosophy that guides language instruction. Here are some examples of language teaching approaches:

#### **(i) Communicative Language Teaching**

This approach gained prominence in the late 1960s and has since influenced language education practices significantly. Little Wood (1981, as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2007) states, "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language." (p. 155). The communicative approach was developed by applied linguists as a response to the Grammar Translation method. Unlike the Grammar Translation method, which focuses on grammar forms and structures, the communicative approach prioritizes functional language use, that is, using language for real communicative purposes rather than the function. According to Wilkins (1976, as cited in Harmer, 2008, p. 121), "Communication required that students performed certain functions as well, such as promising, inviting, and declining invitation within a social context."

#### **(ii) Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBE)**

CBE is “an approach to teaching that focuses on teaching the skills and behaviors needed to perform competencies” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 104). Competency-Based Education (CBE) is an educational approach that focuses on developing specific competencies or skills in learners. For Mrowicki (1986), “Competencies consist of a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity” (p. 2). Ultimately, competency centers around the practical ability to perform tasks, leaving little space for theoretical aspects. Richards and Rogers (2001) emphasize that Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) primarily focuses on learning outcomes rather than the learning process itself.

#### **(iii) Content-Based Instruction**

This method recognizes that people learn a second language more effectively when they use it as a tool for acquiring information, rather than treating language learning as an isolated goal (Krahnke, 1987, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 204).



#### **(iv) Lexical Approach**

The Lexical Approach, introduced by Lewis in the early 1990s, emphasizes that a significant part of language learning involves understanding and producing lexical phrases as chunks. Lewis (1997) is based on the assertion that 'language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multiword prefabricated chunks' (Lewis 1997, as cited in Harmer, 2008, p. 74).

#### **2.3.2. Methods**

Methods refer to a set of classroom specifications designed to achieve specific linguistic objectives. Examples of different methods include (1) the Grammar Translation Method, (2) the Direct Method, (3) the Audio-lingual Method, (4) the Communicative Method, (5) the Counseling-Learning, (6) the Cooperative Language Learning Method, (7) the Task-based Language Teaching Method, (8) the Deductive Method, and (9) the Inductive Method.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study to investigate the perceptions of Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers regarding English teaching strategies implementing the new curriculum. The chapter covers the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods.

#### **3.1. Methods**

This study was conducted by means of a mixed-method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data (Creswell, 2014). By utilizing both types of data collection, the participants had the opportunity to provide both open-ended and closed-ended responses.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The participants of this study were 103 secondary English teachers who have been teaching at online federal schools in Myanmar. In the quantitative phase, all teachers answered the survey questionnaire. In the qualitative phase, 11 teachers were selected from the 103 participants participating in the first phase for the semi-structured interview.

Most teachers in Myanmar were not used to being observed by researchers or being asked to discuss their teaching (Borg et al., 2018). This new experience may be challenging for them, especially for teachers with less experience (Louws et al., 2017). The background information of the teachers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the data on teaching experience categorized by gender and educational background. It includes tenure levels (from less than 1 year to over 10 years), gender (female, male, and prefer not to say), and educational attainment (doctor, master, bachelor, and diploma/other). For example, there are 52 females and 6 males with over 10 years of teaching experience, most of whom hold bachelor's degrees. Additionally, 23 individuals have 6 to 10 years of teaching experience, with 20 being female and mostly holding bachelor's degrees. Across genders, there is a significant number of individuals with 1 to 5 years of teaching

experience, many of whom also hold bachelor’s degrees. Overall, the data represents 103 individuals with diverse teaching backgrounds.

Table 1: Participants’ Demographic Information

Teaching Experience	Gender	Educational Background				Total
		Doctor	Master	Bachelor	Diploma and other	
10 years and above	Female	3	12	30	7	52
	Male		2	3	1	6
Total		3	14	33	8	58
between 6 and 10	Female		9	11		20
	Male			2		2
	Prefer not to say			1		1
Total			9	14		23
between 1 and 5	Female		5	6	4	15
	Male			4	1	5
	Prefer not to say			2		2
between 1 and 5 Total			5	12	5	22
Total		3	28	59	13	103

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were collected from December 2023 to February 2024, and the data were collected through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations.

#### Quantitative Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was developed using Google Forms to collect quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of English teaching strategies during the implementation of the curriculum change. The questionnaire, assessing various aspects of teaching strategies, was distributed electronically to all 103 teachers, with clear instructions provided for completion. Design of Questionnaires. The questionnaire utilized a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 in scale as follows;

- 1 (strongly disagree)
- 2 (disagree)
- 3 (neutral/undecided)
- 4 (agree)
- 5 (strongly agree)

#### Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 11 teachers selected from the initial sample. The interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and contained open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences in depth. The interviews were conducted via Zoom meeting. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to provide detailed

responses. The conversations were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

During my two-month observation at online federal schools, I focused on two main aspects: teaching strategies and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Additionally, I observed teacher collaboration to understand how educators work together to enhance their teaching practices.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

After collecting data, the analysis was carried out. Quantitative data collected from the structured questionnaire were analyzed using Excel spreadsheets, with the AVERAGE function used to compute the average response for each Likert-scale item. The Likert scale was interpreted as ranging from 1 to 1.9 (disagree), from 2 to 3.3 (neutral), and from 3.4 to 5 (agree). Table 2 presents the average response for each Likert-scale item across all participants. Responses are categorized as disagree, neutral, or agree based on the interpreted ranges of the Likert scale. The average response for each Likert-scale item is provided for different subgroups, allowing for comparison and identification of potential patterns or trends based on participants' characteristics. The semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings, offering deeper insights into teachers' perspectives and practices regarding English teaching strategies during the curriculum change. The recorded interviews were transcribed first and then analyzed by categorizing the emerging themes.

Observation data were transcribed and coded to identify key themes and patterns in teaching strategies, ICT use, and teacher collaboration. The data were categorized into themes such as teaching strategies (e.g., task-based learning, content-based instruction), ICT integration (e.g., PowerPoint, YouTube videos), and teacher collaboration practices. The findings from observations were compared with questionnaire and interview data to highlight discrepancies and correlations, providing a comprehensive understanding of the teaching practices in the context of the new curriculum implementation.

## **4. Findings**

In this chapter, the findings of the study obtained from the data analysis are presented, with the quantitative and qualitative findings provided separately.

### **4.1. Quantitative Findings**

#### ***4.1.1. Secondary English Teachers in Myanmar: Embracing Curriculum Changes with Adaptability and Positivity***

The quantitative data provide insight into the perspectives of secondary school English teachers in Myanmar regarding their perceptions of teaching strategies during curriculum changes. Table 2 highlights a widespread consensus among teachers about their familiarity with and active use of various teaching methods within the current educational context. This showcases their adaptability and proactive engagement with evolving pedagogical demands.

Despite occasional uncertainty expressed in specific responses, teachers generally exhibit resilience and positivity when facing challenges, deriving satisfaction and intellectual stimulation from adapting to the new curriculum. Importantly, the findings underscore the perceived benefits of curriculum change, including personal and professional growth opportunities, collaborative learning environments, and innovative teaching methodologies. Overall, this emphasizes the proactive approach and collaborative efforts of teachers in effectively navigating educational transitions in Myanmar. Table 2 shows the perspectives of teachers on teaching strategies employed and the curriculum change.

Table 2: Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Strategies and Curriculum Change

No	Statement	Average	Classification
1	I'm familiar with some teaching strategies for teaching English in Myanmar.	3.9	Agree
2	In the current curriculum change, I often use some different teaching strategies.	4.1	Agree
3	I don't have many teaching strategies in the current curriculum change.	2.7	Neutral/Undecided
4	I like working with challenging situations (current situation).	4.2	Agree
5	The curriculum change helps me learn teaching strategies easier.	4.2	Agree
6	The curriculum change helps me acquire knowledge through working in a team.	4.2	Agree
7	The curriculum change helps me understand the teaching strategies.	4.2	Agree
8	This curriculum change enables me to participate in sharing information, making decisions, and solving problems.	4.1	Agree
9	I prepare only one teaching strategy for my class.	2.1	Neutral/Undecided
10	I prepare many teaching strategies for my class.	3.9	Agree
11	I feel happy to face the curriculum change in Myanmar.	4.4	Agree
12	The curriculum change can improve my attitude towards work.	4.4	Agree
13	I don't like the curriculum change in this current situation.	2.1	Neutral/Undecided
14	This situation trains me how to be a good teacher.	4.4	Agree
15	I feel intellectually challenged by this situation.	4.1	Agree

16	I feel unprepared for the current curriculum change.	2.4	Neutral/Undecided
17	I cannot adapt my teaching strategy to the current situation.	2.2	Neutral/Undecided
18	Students feel happy to follow the teaching strategy that I apply in the current situation.	4.1	Agree
19	Students face many obstacles in learning during the current situation in Myanmar.	4.2	Agree
20	I don't like teaching in this challenging situation.	2.4	Neutral/Undecided
21	I receive sufficient support from my colleagues in implementing the new curriculum.	3.6	Agree
22	I believe that incorporating student feedback is essential for refining my teaching strategies.	4.2	Agree
23	The current curriculum change has positively impacted the overall classroom learning environment.	4.1	Agree
24	I feel confident in assessing students' progress within the context of the new curriculum.	4.2	Agree
25	Professional development opportunities related to the curriculum change have been beneficial for my teaching practices.	4.4	Agree

As seen in table 2, English teachers with varied experience and qualifications in Myanmar generally hold positive perceptions of teaching strategies during curriculum transitions. Experienced teachers, with over ten years of experience, show high levels of agreement with using various teaching methodologies, viewing curriculum changes as opportunities for personal and professional growth. They emphasize the importance of collaboration and professional development in successfully adapting to new curricula.

Mid-career teachers, with 6 to 10 years of experience, similarly agree with the use of diverse teaching strategies, although some express neutrality on specific aspects, indicating areas needing further exploration or support. Early-career teachers, with 1-5 years of experience, demonstrate a favorable outlook towards educational changes, though they too express some uncertainty in specific areas, suggesting the need for additional support. Despite these uncertainties, teachers across all experience levels view curriculum changes as catalysts for enhancing creativity and innovation in teaching.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for targeted support and continuous professional development to address specific uncertainties and improve the adaptation process, thereby fostering effective teaching practices and positive outcomes in Myanmar's evolving educational landscape.

## 4.2. Qualitative Findings

### 4.2.1. Exploring Pedagogical Diversity in the Previous Myanmar English Curriculum: An Educator Perspective

In exploring pedagogical diversity among English teachers when utilizing the old curriculum, it was found that teachers applied different methods both in frequency and in manner. Most of the teachers stated that they employed one to two methods, while only three used one teaching method. Nine different teaching methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method, Audio-Lingual Method, teacher-centered approach(es), exam-focused methods, rote learning, parrot learning, memorization, drillings, demonstration methods, and conventional methods, were observed. The Grammar Translation Method was mostly applied, as six teachers employed it, as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 3: Teaching Methods Used by EFL Teachers in the Old Curriculum

Teaching Methods	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	Total
Grammar Translation Method	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓			6
Audio-Lingual Method	✓											1
Teacher-centered approach			✓	✓							✓	3
Exam-focused methods	✓		✓								✓	3
Rote learning					✓		✓					2
Parrot learning					✓						✓	2
Drillings								✓				1
Demonstration methods						✓						1
Conventional methods							✓					1
<b>Total</b>	3	1	2	2	3	1	2	2	1	0	3	20

Teachers also shared their reasons for employing particular teaching strategies. Teachers 1 and 2 cited exam preparation as a key reason for using the Grammar Translation Method, emphasizing its focus on grammar and translation exercises, as seen in Extracts 1 and 2.

#### Extract 1:

*Grammar Translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method were especially used in teaching English of the old curriculum because it is exam-oriented, and it emphasizes reading and writing more than listening and speaking (Teacher 1).*

#### Extract 2:

*In the context of the old curriculum, I employed the Grammar Translation Method due to its focus on exam preparation. This approach emphasized understanding grammar rules*

*and practicing translation exercises. It allowed students to develop their writing and translation skills effectively (Teacher 2).*

Teachers 3, 4, and 5 highlighted the curriculum's emphasis and students' learning styles as reasons for using teacher-centered approaches and traditional methods such as parrot learning and the Grammar Translation Method, as illustrated in Extracts 3 to 5.

**Extract 3:**

*In the context of the old English curriculum, I employed a teacher-centered approach, considered individual learning styles, and emphasized exam-focused methods (Teacher 3).*

**Extract 4:**

*In the context of the old curriculum, I employed teacher-centered approaches and the Grammar Translation Method. These methods were chosen because the curriculum emphasized the development of writing and grammar skills (Teacher 4).*

**Extract 5:**

*In the context of the old curriculum, I utilized traditional methods such as parrot learning and the Grammar Translation Method. These approaches were chosen because the curriculum emphasized reading comprehension and proficiency in grammar writing (Teacher 5).*

**Additional Teacher Insights:**

**Extract 6:**

*In my teaching approach, I employed storytelling, demonstration methods, and interactive question-and-answer techniques (Teacher 6).*

**Extract 7:**

*In my teaching approach, I employed conventional methods and rote learning (Teacher 7).*

**Extract 8:**

*In teaching old curriculum English, I typically used the Grammar Translation method. For most of my teaching time, I focused on grammar rules and translation exercises. When teaching unfamiliar words and practicing patterns, I used the drilling method (Teacher 8).*

**Extract 9:**

*As the old curriculum in Myanmar education was heavily focused on rote memorization and teacher-led instruction, I used the teacher-led discussion teaching method as an English teacher. The disadvantage of the old curriculum is that it can't promote the critical thinking skills of students and prepare students for real-world challenges. Teaching strategies in the old curriculum were typically lecture-based, with teachers delivering*

*information to students who were expected to memorize it for exams. Students only emphasized getting high marks or passing exams. This approach did not encourage active participation or engagement from students (Teacher 9).*

**Extract 11:**

*I adopted the teacher-centered approach due to the large number of students in my class and time constraints. Unfortunately, student cooperation has been lacking, and their assessments primarily focus on exams (Teacher 11).*

During the previous curriculum in Myanmar’s educational system, English language instruction encompassed a range of teaching approaches employed by educators. The Grammar Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method were predominantly utilized, aligning with the exam-oriented nature of the curriculum. Teachers emphasized these methods in cultivating students’ writing and translation abilities, crucial for success in assessments.

Additionally, teacher-centered approaches allowed instructors to tailor their teaching to individual learning styles while emphasizing exam readiness. Traditional techniques, such as parrot learning, also played a role in developing reading comprehension and grammar writing skills. However, some educators opted for more interactive methods like storytelling, demonstrations, and interactive Q&A sessions to engage students and enhance comprehension. Conversely, others adhered to conventional approaches and rote learning for knowledge transfer. Despite the diverse teaching strategies employed by educators, challenges related to student cooperation and exam-centric assessments remained common. Overall, educators navigated these challenges while imparting essential language skills to their students within the constraints of the old curriculum.

**4.2.2. Exploring Innovative Teaching Strategies in Myanmar’s Recently Introduced English Curriculum**

In the new curriculum, a variety of teaching methods are adopted by English teachers to promote effective learning experiences. Task-Based Learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and the Flipped Learning Model are among the key strategies implemented. Additionally, there is a focus on vocabulary and grammar, comprehension, writing and speaking application, as well as cognitive integration. Student-centered learning approaches are prevalent, along with group activities and project-based learning. Traditional approaches, technology integration, and interactive methods such as role play and discussions are also utilized to enhance the learning process.



Table 4: Teaching Methods Employed by Myanmar EFL Teachers in New Curriculum

Teaching Methods	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	Total
Task-Based Learning	✓											1
Content and Language Integrated Learning	✓											1
Communicative Language Teaching	✓											1
Flipped Learning Model	✓											1
Vocabulary and Grammar Focus		✓										1
Comprehension		✓										1
Writing and Speaking Application		✓										1
Cognitive Integration		✓										1
Student-Centered Learning			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			6
Group Activities/Project-Based Learning			✓					✓				2
Traditional Approach								✓		✓	✓	3
Technology Integration								✓				1
Role Play and Interactive Tasks								✓				1
Discussion Method											✓	1
Total	4	4	2	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	2	22

Teachers in the new English curriculum adopt various teaching strategies to cater to the diverse needs of students.

*In the new English curriculum, I mostly used these strategies: Task-Based Learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, and the Flipped Learning Model. The new curriculum is focusing on five Cs: Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Citizenship (Teacher 1).*

*In my teaching approach, I employed three stages: Key (focusing on vocabulary and grammar), Comprehension, Application (writing and speaking). Additionally, cognitive aspects are integrated into the process (Teacher 2).*

*In my teaching approach, I emphasized student-centered learning, engaged students in group activities, facilitated project-based learning, conducted assessments, and monitored class performance (Teacher 3).*

*In my teaching approach, I focused on child-centered learning, allocating 30% of my teaching efforts to teachers and dedicating 70% to students (Teacher 4).*

*The new English curriculum focuses on language teaching and the development of the four language skills. However, it presents several challenges for both teachers and students.*

*Teachers, especially, experience increased stress, particularly in the area of speaking instruction. In my teaching approach, I prioritize student-centered learning (Teacher 5).*

*In my teaching approach, I actively engaged students through question-and-answer sessions, and I also assigned projects to enhance their learning experience (Teacher 6).*

*In my teaching approach, I prioritized student-centered learning and implemented flip learning. Additionally, I created presentations to enhance my students' learning experience (Teacher 7).*

*In teaching the new English curriculum, I also use the traditional approach. Moreover, I emphasize the use of role play discussion and interactive tasks. Outside of the class, I use technology to deliver instruction. I usually encourage collaboration among students through group activities like projects (Teacher 8).*

*The new curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning and critical thinking skills. It aims to promote creativity, problem-solving, and independent thinking among students. The new curriculum also includes more practical training, which is intended to better prepare the students for real life (Teacher 9).*

*In my teaching approach, I utilized Google Sheets without adhering to any specific method (Teacher 10).*

*As an online educator, I employ the discussion method for teaching. To enhance interactivity, I utilize question-and-answer sessions, videos, and slides (Teacher 11).*

These diverse teaching approaches collectively showcase educators' adaptability and commitment to creating dynamic learning environments that align with the goals of the new curriculum. Teachers have embraced innovative strategies such as Task-Based Learning, CLIL, CLT, and the Flipped Learning Model to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. The emphasis on student-centered learning, interactive tasks, and technology integration reflects a shift towards more modern, effective teaching practices designed to prepare students for real-world challenges. Despite challenges, particularly in speaking instruction, teachers are finding ways to foster critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration among their students.

#### ***4.2.3. Evaluating Educators' Familiarity with and Implementation of Teaching Strategies in Myanmar's Educational Context***

The educators' responses are categorized by their level of familiarity and the implementation of teaching strategies endorsed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) or curriculum designers. A clear figure is provided to differentiate between those who are well-versed in the strategies and those who are not.

Table 5: Educators' Profile and Familiarity with Teaching Strategies

Teacher	Experience	Qualification	Gender	Training from MOE
Teacher-1	10 years above	M.Ed.	Female	✓
Teacher-2	10 years above	Master	Male	✗
Teacher-3	6 to 10 years	Bachelor	Female	✗
Teacher-4	10 years above	Bachelor	Female	✓
Teacher-5	6 to 10 years	Bachelor	Female	✗
Teacher-6	6 to 10 years	Bachelor	Female	✗
Teacher-7	10 years above	Ph.D.	Female	✓
Teacher-8	10 years above	Bachelor	Female	✓
Teacher-9	10 years above	B.Ed.	Female	✓
Teacher-10	1 to 5 years	Bachelor	Female	✗
Teacher-11	1 to 5 years	B.Ed.	Male	✓

#### ***4.2.4. Familiarity with Teaching Strategies***

In terms of familiarity with teaching strategies, there were two groups of teachers: those who received the training and those who did not, as shown in Table 5. Educators with more experience, particularly those with 10 years or more, are more likely to have received training from the MOE. Higher qualifications, such as a Master's degree or Ph.D., also correlate with a higher likelihood of MOE training, although there are exceptions.

Some educators demonstrate familiarity with recommended teaching strategies, citing guidance from curriculum documents, teacher guides, Bloom's Taxonomy, and the child-centered approach. For example, Teacher 1 mentions utilizing curriculum documents and teacher guides, while Teacher 7 and Teacher 9 specifically mention guidance on Bloom's Taxonomy and the child-centered approach from the MOE. Others express a lack of familiarity or access to such resources, as highlighted by Teachers 2, 3, 5, 6 and 10.

Despite differences in training and familiarity with teaching strategies, educators universally acknowledge the existence of MOE-recommended strategies. Teacher 8 affirms the presence of teaching strategies suggested by the MOE, while Teacher 11 mentions utilizing educational materials from the MOE and various online teaching tools and applications.

These findings underscore the importance of providing comprehensive support mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation of recommended strategies across different educational settings. Initiatives aimed at providing training and resources can narrow this gap and enhance the overall teaching quality within Myanmar's educational system.

#### ***4.2.5. Insights from Educators in Myanmar Highlight the Enhancement of Teaching Practices through Collaborative Efforts***

In the dynamic landscape of education in Myanmar, the role of collaborative efforts among educators stands out as a key driver of advancement in teaching practices. Through the

insightful narratives provided by educators, we gain a deeper understanding of the profound impact of collaboration on the enhancement of teaching methodologies. In this section, we explore their experiences with diverse forms of collaboration, the benefits it brings, and the challenges encountered along the way.

*Insights from educators in Myanmar highlight the enhancement of teaching practices through collaborative efforts (Teacher 1).*

*When engaging in conversations with my colleagues, we occasionally face small obstacles during our discussions (Teacher 2).*

*Frequent discussions with my colleagues provide valuable opportunities for additional practice (Teacher 3).*

*I engage in social gatherings with my colleagues, where we exchange and discuss our lessons (Teacher 4).*

*I haven't actively participated in sharing at my current teaching school. (Teacher 5)*

*I engage in collaborative efforts and share information both through social media platforms and in person (Teacher 6).*

*I believe that individual achievement is not solely possible. Therefore, I seek assistance when needed and offer help when I can. Additionally, I provide advice when asked by fellow teachers, and I engage in weekly discussions with my colleagues (Teacher 7).*

*Yes, I collaborate with other teachers to share teaching strategies for the new curriculum in English. We sometimes make CPD for our teaching; at that time, we mainly discuss teaching strategies (Teacher 8).*

*In my conversations with colleagues, we explored strategies to develop higher-level thinking skills (Teacher 9).*

*During my conversation with an experienced teacher, I inquired about something I couldn't understand (Teacher 10).*

*During my discussions with colleagues, I often inquire about the new curriculum (Teacher 11).*

In conclusion, the narratives shared by educators in Myanmar underscore the transformative power of collaboration in enhancing teaching practices. From engaging in discussions with colleagues to participating in social gatherings and leveraging digital platforms, educators demonstrate a collective commitment to professional growth and improvement. Despite facing challenges such as time constraints and varying levels of participation, their dedication to collaboration remains unwavering. Moving forward, fostering a culture of collaboration and providing support mechanisms for educators to engage in meaningful exchanges will be crucial in further advancing teaching practices and ultimately enriching the educational experience for students across Myanmar.

#### **4.2.6. Effective Technology Integration in Myanmar Educators’ Teaching Strategies**

In today’s educational context, the integration of technology plays a crucial role in enhancing teaching and student learning outcomes. In the case of teachers under study, educators are actively utilizing a variety of technological tools and platforms to enhance language instruction. This integration not only promotes student engagement but also provides multiple effective teaching approaches.

Teachers’ perceptions of integrating technology varied, as evidenced by their statements:

- Teacher 1 highlighted the importance of technology in education and mentioned using multimedia resources, online platforms for practice, and virtual communication tools in their language classrooms.
- Teacher 2 employed a cognitive approach in teaching and utilized PowerPoint and Canva to engage students.
- Teacher 3 incorporated YouTube videos, additional knowledge beyond textbooks, and other learning apps and quiz applications in their teaching.
- Teacher 6 integrated a game website and assigned presentation tasks to students.

In Myanmar, educators effectively integrate technology to enhance language instruction. Teachers utilize various tools such as multimedia resources, online platforms, and virtual communication. Specific methods include using PowerPoint and Canva for presentations, incorporating YouTube videos and interactive apps, and employing online dictionaries and game websites. Additionally, educators use Microsoft Teams for breakout rooms, Google Slides, and a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods to address online learning challenges.

This technological integration promotes student engagement, diverse teaching approaches, and improved learning outcomes. It enables teachers to create dynamic learning environments that cater to different learning styles and preferences, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for students in Myanmar.

#### **4.3. Findings from Observation**

During my two-month observation at online federal schools, I focused on two main aspects: teaching strategies and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Additionally, I observed teacher collaboration to understand how educators work together to enhance their teaching practices. I observed a total of 10 teachers across 2 sessions.

##### **4.3.1. Teaching Strategies**

The table below summarizes the teaching strategies observed during the sessions, along with the respective teachers.

Table 6: Teaching Strategies Observed in Online Federal Schools

Teacher	Experience	Teaching Strategy 1	Teaching Strategy 2	Teaching Strategy 3	Teaching Strategy 4	Technique
T1	10 years+	Task-Based Learning	Interactive Discussions	Multimedia Integration		Interactive, Group Activities
T2	10 years+	Content-Based Instruction	PowerPoint & Canva			Multimedia Presentations
T3	6-10 years	Communicative Approach	YouTube Videos	Learning Apps		Video Integration, App Utilization
T4	10 years+	Student-Centered Learning	Group Projects	Role Play		Interactive, Project-Based
T5	6-10 years	Student-Centered Learning	Critical Thinking Tasks			Inquiry-Based Learning
T6	6-10 years	Game-Based Learning	Presentation Assignments			Gamification, Presentation Tasks
T7	10 years+	Project-Based Learning	Flipped Classroom	Cognitive Integration		Cognitive, Interactive
T8	10 years+	Traditional Methods	Role Play	Technology Integration		Role-Play, Tech Integration
T9	10 years+	Problem-Based Learning	Online Resources	Collaborative Learning		Collaborative, Problem-Based
T10	1-5 years	Synchronous & Asynchronous	Multimedia Tools	Google Classroom		Blended Learning

Experienced educators demonstrated excellent skills in lesson planning, resulting in well-structured classes with clear objectives and thorough preparation. Their meticulous planning contributed to effective classroom management and consistent content delivery. These teachers employed various instructional techniques, including interactive methods, group activities, and personalized instruction tailored to individual student needs. However, despite their diverse approaches, many experienced teachers heavily emphasized exam preparation, relying on methods like the Grammar Translation Method and rote learning. They often avoided modern tools such as PowerPoint presentations or online aids, potentially missing out on the benefits of technology in education.

Younger educators demonstrated a strong inclination toward incorporating technology into their teaching. They frequently utilized tools like PowerPoint presentations, audio clips for listening exercises, and various online resources to enhance their lessons. This integration not only increased student engagement but also aligns with modern educational practices. Younger teachers brought fresh perspectives and were open to experimenting with innovative methods, such as game-based learning and interactive apps, which had the potential to significantly improve student outcomes. However, due to their limited teaching experience, younger

teachers often prioritized content delivery and exam preparation over a diverse range of teaching techniques. Their methods were less varied compared to their more seasoned counterparts. Despite their embrace of technology, younger teachers still heavily relied on traditional approaches like the Grammar Translation Method, which might not fully harness the benefits of more creative teaching strategies.

#### **4.3.2. Teacher Collaboration**

Observations of collaboration practices in educational settings reveal distinct patterns between experienced and younger teachers. Seasoned educators often take the lead, generously sharing their extensive knowledge and well-refined techniques with their less-experienced colleagues. These collaborative sessions involve structured exchanges of lesson plans, effective classroom management strategies, and best practices for exam preparation. In contrast, younger teachers actively participate in these collaborative efforts, bringing fresh perspectives and a willingness to explore new technologies and teaching methods. They frequently seek advice and guidance from their more seasoned peers, particularly regarding classroom management and lesson planning. Discussions during collaborative sessions often revolve around integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching. Younger teachers, already familiar with modern tools, demonstrate their use to experienced colleagues, gradually shifting towards technology-enhanced learning environments. These collaborative interactions serve as valuable professional development opportunities, fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation among educators. Both experienced and younger teachers benefit from the exchange of ideas and mutual support. The observations underscore a generational divide in teaching practices, especially concerning ICT adoption and teaching methodologies. While experienced teachers excel in lesson planning and diverse teaching techniques, they tend to lean towards traditional methods and exam-focused approaches. Conversely, younger teachers embrace technology but may exhibit a narrower focus on content and exams, with less variation in teaching methods. Teacher collaboration emerges as a critical factor in bridging this gap. Experienced teachers share their expertise, while younger teachers introduce innovative tools and methods. This collaborative dynamic creates a fertile environment for professional growth, ultimately benefiting both students and educators.

### **5. Discussion and Recommendation**

This study was conducted to investigate Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers' perceptions of English teaching strategies during the current curriculum change. A total number of 103 secondary English teachers who have been teaching at online federal schools in Myanmar were surveyed. The quantitative findings provide valuable insights into English teachers' perspectives on teaching strategies during curriculum changes in Myanmar. Regardless of their experience level, educators agree that curriculum changes positively impact teaching practices. While there are variations in responses regarding specific aspects such as student feedback incorporation and adaptation to challenges, an overall sense of adaptability and resilience prevails.

Experienced teachers, particularly those with over 10 years of experience, strongly endorse various teaching strategies. Their positive outlook reflects a deep understanding of the

importance of collaboration and professional development in successfully navigating curriculum changes. However, even among experienced teachers, there are areas of uncertainty or neutrality, indicating the need for further exploration and clarification during curriculum implementation.

Similarly, teachers with 6 to 10 years and 1 to 5 years of experience also view teaching strategies positively during curriculum changes. Despite acknowledging challenges, they exhibit resilience and perceive change as an opportunity for growth.

Collaboration and professional development emerge as integral components for successfully navigating curriculum changes across all experience levels. Teachers value the incorporation of student feedback, participation in training, and support from colleagues, highlighting the importance of collective efforts in enhancing teaching practices. These insights can inform curriculum development and professional growth initiatives, ultimately benefiting students, teachers, and school communities.

Furthermore, the study revealed a diverse array of teaching strategies employed by EFL teachers during both the previous and new curriculum periods. Under the previous curriculum, traditional methods like the Grammar Translation Method and Audio-Lingual Method prevailed, reflecting an exam-focused approach. However, with the transition to the new curriculum, educators enthusiastically embraced innovative approaches such as Task-Based Learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and technology-enhanced instruction. This shift signifies a move toward student-centered pedagogy, fostering critical thinking and practical language application.

Gender, experience, and qualifications influenced teachers' perceptions of teaching strategies to some extent. While some teachers demonstrated familiarity with recommended strategies from the Ministry of Education (MOE) or curriculum designers, others expressed varying levels of unfamiliarity or limited access to such resources. Notably, experienced teachers proactively sought professional development opportunities, while gender and qualifications had less pronounced effects on teaching strategy perceptions.

The impact of the new curriculum on teaching strategy implementation was multifaceted. Educators encountered challenges in aligning existing practices with new strategies, addressing resource constraints, and overcoming obstacles to student engagement in online learning environments. However, teachers also reported positive experiences, including enhanced collaboration, creativity, and adaptability in response to curriculum changes.

Drawing from the research findings, several recommendations can be proposed to assist EFL teachers in navigating curriculum transitions and optimizing their teaching strategies. These recommendations encompass comprehensive support mechanisms for professional development, fostering collaboration among educators, addressing resource limitations, and effectively integrating technology into teaching practices. Additionally, continuous evaluation and adaptation of teaching approaches are crucial to aligning with evolving curriculum goals and student requirements.



## 5.1. Conclusion

This research highlights the perceptions of Myanmar’s secondary school EFL teachers as they navigate the challenges brought about by recent curriculum changes. Teachers across various experience levels have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience, viewing these shifts as opportunities for growth. However, assessing these pedagogical changes is complex. The new curriculum has introduced its own set of challenges, further intensified by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup, both of which necessitated a rapid shift to online teaching.

Experienced teachers, particularly those with over a decade of experience, have strongly endorsed diverse teaching strategies. Their emphasis on collaboration and professional development highlights the critical role these elements play in successfully adapting to curriculum changes. Teachers with fewer years of experience also maintain a positive perspective, despite the obstacles they have encountered. Their openness to change reflects a commitment to ongoing personal and professional development.

Collaboration and professional development have emerged as vital components in managing curriculum transitions, especially in the context of Myanmar’s broader socio-political landscape. Teachers have underscored the importance of incorporating student feedback, engaging in training, and receiving support from their peers. This collective effort is essential for enhancing teaching practices during a period marked by significant upheaval.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need for robust support systems, collaborative environments, effective resource management, and the thoughtful integration of technology. Continuous evaluation and the ability to adapt teaching methods are not only necessary to meet the demands of an evolving curriculum but are also critical in addressing the unique challenges posed by the ongoing disruptions in Myanmar’s educational context. The insights gained from this research provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers striving to align teaching practices with the dynamic needs of both the curriculum and the broader educational environment in Myanmar.

## 5.2. Limitations and Future Studies

While this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of Myanmar secondary school EFL teachers regarding English teaching strategies during curriculum changes, there are some limitations. Firstly, the sample is limited to secondary English teachers from online federal schools in Myanmar, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts within the country. Additionally, the small qualitative sample size (eleven teachers) selected for semi-structured interviews might not fully represent the diversity of experiences among educators. Relying on self-reported data through surveys and interviews introduces potential response bias. The study’s focus on teachers’ perceptions may overlook other factors influencing teaching effectiveness, such as resource availability and classroom dynamics. Lastly, the findings may not apply universally to different educational settings or countries due to the specific sample and context. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by EFL teachers during curriculum changes.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

1. I'm familiar with some teaching strategies for teaching English in Myanmar.
2. In the current curriculum change, I often use different teaching strategies.
3. I don't have many teaching strategies in the current curriculum change.
4. I like working with challenging situations (current situation).
5. The curriculum change helps me learn teaching strategies easier.
6. The curriculum change helps me acquire knowledge through working in a team.
7. The curriculum change helps me understand the teaching strategies.
8. The curriculum change enables me to participate in sharing information, making decisions, and solving problems.
9. I prepare many teaching strategies for my class.
10. I feel happy to face the curriculum change in Myanmar.
11. The curriculum change can improve my attitude towards work.
12. I don't like the curriculum change in this current situation.
13. This situation trains me how to be a good teacher.
14. I feel intellectually challenged by this situation.
15. I feel unprepared for the current curriculum change.
16. I cannot adapt my teaching strategies to the current situation.
17. Students feel happy to follow the teaching strategy that I apply in the current situation.
18. Students face many obstacles in learning during the current situation in Myanmar.
19. I don't like teaching in this challenging situation.
20. I receive sufficient support from my colleagues in implementing the new curriculum.
21. I believe that incorporating student feedback is essential for refining my teaching strategies.
22. The current curriculum change has positively impacted the overall classroom learning environment.
23. I feel confident in assessing students' progress within the context of the new curriculum.
24. Professional development opportunities related to the curriculum change have been beneficial for my teaching practices.

## Appendix B

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What teaching strategies did you use in teaching English of the Old Curriculum?
2. What teaching strategies do you use in teaching English of the New Curriculum?
3. Are there any teaching strategies suggested by the Moe or Curriculum Designers?

4. What difficulties do you face in utilizing teaching strategies in teaching English with the new textbook?
5. What role do technology and digital resources play in your implementation of current teaching strategies? (or) How do you integrate technology into your current teaching strategies?
6. Do you collaborate with other teachers or colleagues to share teaching strategies for the new curriculum in English? How do you share or collaborate with them?
7. Did you receive any training or professional development opportunities to support your implementation of new teaching strategies in response to curriculum changes?
8. How do you assess the effectiveness of the teaching strategies you currently apply in your English language teaching?

## The Impact of Militarized Masculinity on the Pro-Democracy Movement

Zin Mar Phy<sup>176</sup>

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the relationship between militarized masculinity in digital spaces and online behaviors within the resistance groups in Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. In response to the coup, various resistance groups and pro-democracy movements used digital platforms as a tool for organizing peaceful protests, disseminating information, communicating in the field, and mobilizing support and fundraising from domestic and international sources. But there were negative aspects to the use of digital tools as well, as they came to be a site of harassment and violence reflecting offline realities. Through comprehensive media monitoring, analysis of online content, and interviews with local resistance groups and gender experts, the study examines the concept of ‘militarized masculinity’ and how it influences online behaviors and narratives on the resistance side. With the rise of digital media and online activism, militarized masculinity has found new expressions within digital spaces, shaping narratives, images, and discourses surrounding the country's tumultuous political landscape. Using concepts common to gender, militarism, and digital media studies, this paper investigates the manifestations, implications, and consequences of militarized masculinity on activism and resistance efforts, as well as implications for social and political change. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between gender, power, and digital media in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy and human rights.

**Keywords:** Gender-based Violence, Militarism, Masculinity, Gender Empowerment, Women and War

### Executive Summary

This research paper explores the relationship between militarized masculinity within digital spaces and the online behaviors of newly emerged resistance groups in Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Militarized masculinity is often associated with the notions of dominance, power, and control that saturate propaganda and information flows during times of conflict. In Myanmar, in response to the military junta's brutal crackdown and oppression, various resistance groups and pro-democracy movements used digital platforms as a crucial tactic for organizing peaceful protests, disseminating information, and communicating with and mobilizing support from domestic and international contacts. Through comprehensive media monitoring, analysis of online content, interviews with local

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resistance groups and gender experts, and a literature review of various scholars, this study examines how militarized masculinity influences online behavior in the narratives of these resistance groups. With the rise of digital media and online activism, militarized masculinity has found new expression within digital spaces, shaping narratives, images, and discourse surrounding the country's tumultuous political landscape. Based on the theories of gender, militarism, and digital media studies, this paper investigates the manifestations, implications, and consequences of militarized masculinity in online discourse, activism, and resistance efforts, as well as implications for social and political change. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between gender, power, and digital media in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy and human rights.

The analysis centers on findings derived from a comprehensive monitoring of a total of 16,457 Facebook posts (from individuals and group pages) and insights from in-depth interviews conducted with various PDF leaders and gender experts. The findings reveal that the majority of interviewees regarded "gender issues" as less important than military affairs in the current situation. The majority of interviewees and profiles analyzed who contributed to gender-friendly discourse are also found to engage in militarized masculine behaviors. This indicates that the majority of PDF members monitored in this study are found to be engaged in such behaviors directly and indirectly, with even women PDF members involved, though to a lesser extent. The findings clearly indicate the presence of militarized masculinity behaviors targeting women supporters of the State Administration Council (SAC) regime, albeit in varying levels and forms. While the SAC demonstrates systematic militarized masculinity targeting activist women and other gender identities, the behaviors exhibited by PDF supporters appear to be more individual-dependent. Additionally, the percentage of these behaviors is notably low, accounting for only 1% of the total monitored posts related to gender-insensitive discourses, whereas militarized masculinity behaviors dominate a larger share.

In addition to our analysis of militarized masculinity, the study also identifies strategies employed by some resistance groups to promote gender-inclusive activism and challenge the dominant narratives of masculinity within their individual battalions. These strategies include developing a gender policy and military code of conduct to protect women and prevent sexual violence against women in conflict. The strategies within individual groups include creating inclusive spaces and amplifying the voices of women and other marginalized groups, including gender minorities. Moreover, this research study highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the gendered dimensions of digital resistance in Myanmar by acknowledging the influences and negative consequences of militarized masculinity and online behavior against women and other gender identities.

In conclusion, this study is crucial to challenging and demolishing the norms and values associated with militarized masculinity, advocating for more inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to more inclusive and equitable forms of gender expression, and building sustainable peace, social harmony, and justice in Myanmar.

## Background

The military coup in Myanmar in 2021 unraveled years of progress in the transition to democracy by tumbling the country into a renewed era of authoritarian rule. The coup by General Min Aung Hlaing was claimed to be in response to alleged electoral fraud in the November 2020 election, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide victory. However, the coup is broadly understood as the military attempting to maintain its grip on power.

Following the coup, the world saw widespread peaceful protests of people from all backgrounds throughout the country, led by youth and civilians from all sectors. In the immediate aftermath of the coup and the violent crackdown by the military regime, peaceful protests were joined by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), with civil servants from many sectors refusing to work. Despite the torture, arbitrary arrest, seized property, and killings carried out day and night, civilians from across the country took to the streets to demand the restoration of civilian rule and the release of detained leaders, political prisoners, and activists. The brutal crackdown, deploying security forces, arresting thousands of activists, executing prominent leaders, imposing curfews and restrictions, internet and media blackouts, and all forms of atrocities committed by the military regime forced hundreds and thousands of young activists to leave their homes and family to take up arms by joining the local resistance groups known as People’s Defense Forces (PDFs).

In the three years since the military coup, Myanmar has experienced profound humanitarian, political, and economic instability and the destruction of civil liberties as the military regime consolidated its power and intensified its repression against the activists and resistance groups. Human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and torture, became widespread. According to Assistance for All Political Prisoners (AAPP), 4,800 people have been killed, 26,462 arrested, and 20,290 detained as of 29 March 2024 (AAPP, 2024). According to reports, research groups, and news coverage, there have been 1,652 airstrikes across Myanmar since the coup d’état (RFA, 2023). The military junta's ruthless suppression of civil liberties has resulted in a climate of fear and instability that has driven thousands of people into hiding and exile amid tensions and conflict.

As Myanmar enters its fourth year of struggle against the military coup, the regime's efforts to silence opposition and resistance have failed, and the fight for democracy and freedom persists. The resilience and determination of the Myanmar people remain solid, with the hope for a peaceful, democratic country with a shared commitment to human rights and justice for all. Thus, despite the day-to-day loss of lives, violent crackdowns, internet shutdowns, constant surveillance, and oppression, the CDMers, Civil Society groups, student activists, Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), and PDFs continued to mobilize against the military junta, with resistance coming from multifaceted actions on the streets, from the armed resistance-controlled areas, or from those in exile.

## **1. The Emergence of the People Resistance Group (PDF)**

As the military crackdown intensified and civilian casualties rose, with raids of people's houses, arresting activists day and night, thousands of people fled to various parts of the country to organize themselves into local defense groups to protect and resist the military junta troops. The author Ye Myo Hein reported in a United States Institute of Peace publication that as of 2022, 300 People Defence Force battalions have been established, and NUG estimated that there were 401 local defense forces in place as of April 2022 (Hein, 2022). The people's defense forces comprise ordinary citizens, students, workers, doctors, civil servants, schoolteachers, activists, and community members. The newly emerging members of the People Defence Force (PDF) received military training from well-trained officers from the existing ethnic armed organizations. Despite the limited resources, particularly in finances and weaponry, these local PDFs use various means of handmade weapons and ammunition to fight against the military troops, proving their resilience in a highly volatile and dangerous environment.

Along with the emergence of local PDFs, the military junta has declared these groups as "terrorists" and "illegal" (The Irrawaddy, 2021), so that anyone who supports them can be subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, extrajudicial killing, and the seizure of property. The junta has also launched targeted and widespread crackdowns on these local PDF groups or anyone who is perceived to be supporting them. Despite the attacks and repression, the PDFs continue to operate in collaboration with various ethnic armed groups, with complete determination to defend their communities, eliminate the junta and its authoritarian systems, and restore democracy and human rights in the country.

Since 2021, both newly emerged resistance groups and existing groups have used social media and the internet to amplify their voices, organize and disseminate information, mobilize supporters, and advocate for international stakeholders. From the time when the military regime imposed a ban on many mainstream media groups (RSF, 2022) following the coup and the increased censorship and restrictions, these resistance groups exhibited remarkable adaptability and creativity using social media and online platforms as one of the main channels for sharing narratives and strategies, coordinating protests, exchanging vital and confidential information, documenting human rights violations, including conflict-related sexual violence, and raising awareness both domestically and internationally.

In the wake of the Spring Revolution and the emergence of local defense forces, the digital space has emerged as a significant part of the resistance against the coup. With this, however, has appeared the rise of militarized masculinity online.

## **2. What is Militarized Masculinity?**

According to feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, "Militarized masculinity" refers to "the culturally dominant, socially constructed image of 'what it means to be a man' within military institutions, a definition that glorifies strength, aggression, and violence" (Enloe, 2000). Enloe also emphasizes how militarism reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and shapes the behavior and identities of individuals within the military. Out of many adverse consequences, conflict can also lead to the amplification of militarized forms of masculinity, thereby exacerbating the negative consequences associated with such norms and identities. Nath (2022)



analyzed and outlined "how masculine social norms have been normalized through militarism and militarized masculinity in international politics." Lopes (2012) outlined militarized masculinity as "a blend of characteristics and mindsets that are excessively masculine, dominant and are predominantly linked with military personnel." The process of militarization frequently influences the masculinity of male soldiers and their conduct, resulting in the development of a distinct identity known as "militarized masculinity." Additionally, Lwambo (2011) expanded on Lopes' (2012) concept of militarized masculinity, arguing that militarization influences not only the masculinity of military personnel but also that of civilian men living in conflict-affected areas. Lwambo highlighted how violence, trauma, and forced migration shape men's perceptions of manhood, blurring the lines between military and civilian contexts. As a result, the adverse effects of hypermasculine norms and identities extend beyond soldiers and into civilian populations, reflecting the broader impact of conflict on gender dynamics within affected communities.

What are the root causes of militarized masculinity? Combier and Genatio (2022), alongside other scholars, Vess, Barker, Naraghi-Anderlini, and Hassink (2013), emphasize the importance of economic frustration, loss of identity, and early exposure or recruitment into armed groups as root causes, which transform harmful and inequitable norms and weaken the possibility of long-lasting peace and stability. Such armed groups could also use the ideologies resulting from militarized masculinity to justify the violence they have committed, for instance, for political reasons or community defense. Similarly, Eichler (2014) and Mechanic (2004) argue that "militarized masculinity is central to the perpetuation of violence in international relations." Militarized conceptions of masculinity are associated with the use of force and violence, and with obtaining status through this violence. Thus, in a conflict setting, the widespread militarized masculinity in the armed groups is crucial to understanding how these practices incite gender-based violence against women during and after the conflict scenario.

As a consequence of militarized masculinity, harmful gender stereotypes can spread and reinforce patriarchal power structures, which can contribute to the normalization of violence. The use and practice of militarized masculinity can lead to more conflict, social inequality, gender injustice, marginalization of women and other minority gender identities, and discrimination that can have adverse effects on individuals, families, communities, and the whole society at large. Thus, militarized masculinity in practice represents a significant and extensive social phenomenon with more implications for gender, power, and violence.

### **3. Militarized Masculinity in Digital Space in the Myanmar Context**

Drawing inspiration from historical movements such as the 1988 nationwide uprising and the Saffron Revolution of 2007, protesters have employed various tactics, including sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, and creative protest art, to voice their demands for democracy and human rights. The Spring Revolution has demonstrated its adaptive and innovative approach to activism through mass street protests and the civil disobedience campaigns. Despite the involvement and participation of all genders in this Spring Revolution, including local resistance groups, the roles of women and other gender minorities are still underrecognized. Young women and LGBTIQ+ joined the armed resistance movement alongside male counterparts at the same level

of sacrifice and courage. Nevertheless, the portrayal of male activists and resistance soldiers is much more heroic, while women are depicted more in supporting roles. Even though women and other gender identities are serving in various roles in this movement, the majority of the images, footage, and stories of defiance against the military junta are outlined within the narrative of masculine bravery together with victory. This kind of narrative not only reinforces existing power dynamics and the patriarchal system but also constructs more marginalization, excluding voices, underrecognizing roles, and encouraging normative traditional gender norms.

Challenges arise from the rigid gender norms perpetuated by militarized masculinity, hindering the full participation of diverse voices in the resistance movement. Women, in particular, face discrimination and marginalization within digital spaces, as their contributions and perspectives are often overlooked or dismissed. Additionally, the glorification of violence and aggression in online discourse can exacerbate existing tensions and hinder efforts toward dialogue and reconciliation. Thus, while militarized masculinity bolsters perceptions of strength and resilience within the Spring Revolution, it also poses significant challenges and risks to the pursuit of democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study combines various methods, including qualitative analysis and media monitoring with semi-structured interviews with leaders of local resistance groups, such as the People Defense Force (PDF) and activists. The study began with a literature review. In terms of media monitoring, the research mainly monitored social media, especially Facebook, which is one of the main social media platforms where the majority of Myanmar people access information and where the main stakeholders of the Spring Revolution share information throughout the movement.

A comprehensive analysis of online content, social media posts, and written statements has been examined to explore how militarized masculinity is constructed and represented within the narratives of resistance groups. This qualitative research systematically examined media from PDF social media pages (individual and group pages), digital media, online forums, and digital publications. Following the media monitoring and analysis, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with local resistance groups. These interviews with individual leaders provide insights into their experience, digital engagement, gender dynamics within their groups, and the influence of militarized masculinity on their behaviors and strategies related to gender and activism.

#### **1. Sample, Sampling, and Procedure**

The sample included media monitoring of 20 Facebook Group pages and 30 individual pages and their interventions using digital platforms since 2021. The research team identified a mix of individuals and groups to ensure the diversity of backgrounds, areas, positions, and genders. The team examined 16,457 Facebook posts of their activity, written pieces, and shared posts and comments to learn more about their perceptions. Then, 10 participants were identified for in-depth interviews. As for sampling methods, the research team used purposive and snowball

sampling for this study. Despite the intense fighting, particularly after the 27-10 offensive began, the research team had to postpone some of the interviews with leaders from the resistance groups, and resume them when the interviewees were again ready. Burmese was the primary language used during the entire interview process. After the interviews were completed, the researchers transcribed and coded data under various categories and themes for the analysis and writing process.

## **2. Challenges and Limitations**

Security and internet accessibility presented significant challenges in conducting this research. Due to security concerns, the majority of PDF members frequently change their names or accounts and maintain a low profile online. As a result, this research encountered limitations in identifying members and their associated groups, as well as challenges in selecting participants from different levels and areas, focusing on those more active in internet access.

Furthermore, the research was constrained by the fact that the majority of selected individual members' accounts were only identified as active in late 2022. Therefore, the study could not cover their behaviors in 2021, and some of their shared posts were unavailable for review at the time of observation.

Another challenge arose from the limitation in tracing all online messages, focusing primarily on posts made on members' main profiles. Facebook users have control over their audience, restricting access to messages and posts limited to friends only. Consequently, the observation mainly focused on the most public posts on members' main profiles, potentially overlooking their overall behaviors in daily communications.

## **Findings on the Behavior of PDFs in Digital Spaces**

### **1. Accessibility and the Use of Digital Platforms among Individuals and Groups**

According to findings derived from the monitoring of 20 groups and 30 individual pages, it is evident that PDFs primarily use Facebook as a platform for their activities on fundraising initiatives and dissemination of military news. However, the groups highlighted the limited internet access available to them. The interviewees and individuals' posts stressed that the accessibility of internet resources among People's Defense Forces (PDFs) varies due to factors such as the geographical locations where military operations are concentrated, the roles and positions held by PDF members, and the specific disciplinary measures imposed by leadership against soldiers—particularly on the frontlines—and the military training within the groups.

The battalions based in areas close to border cities demonstrate consistent and reliable access to internet resources—but this is still a limited number among overall PDF groups. Conversely, the majority of PDF units stationed at the frontlines or in remote areas, distant from urban centers or border regions, encounter challenges in accessing internet connectivity and telephone lines. The interviews from various PDF groups indicate the considerable time required to locate suitable locations for internet access, often necessitating journeys to mountains or higher-up places. However, individuals tasked with fundraising and managing information and communication about military affairs typically possess internet access, using

online platforms for campaign initiatives and fundraising efforts to procure military support and disseminate updates on day-to-day military operations. In fact, it should be noted that the limitations of both group and individual members' internet accessibility hinder the comprehensive observation of their actual behaviors to a considerable extent.

## **2. Examining Gendered Narratives on Online Behaviors**

This analysis centers on the findings derived from the comprehensive monitoring of Facebook posts, totaling 16,457, among which 326 posts are identified as gender-related. It consists of observations from individuals and groups, including insights from in-depth interviews conducted with PDF leaders and with gender experts. The observation emphasizes the integration of gender and gender sensitivities into all online discourses and information shared and posted on their timelines.

Notably, approximately 71% of their total posts over three years predominantly revolve around fundraising for military support and sharing updates regarding combat activities. For instance, one of the prominent PDF groups did a one-hundred-million-dollar Kyat campaign on its Facebook page, while others engaged in similar activities on a smaller scale, with approximately 100 to 300 million Kyat campaigns, among other contributions. These findings undeniably illustrate how they influence their social media audience from Myanmar. The analysis revealed that only 2% of the total monitored Facebook posts were observed engaging in gender-related discourse. This is a mere 2% of posts. Of this 2%, half were gender-abusive posts, predominantly from individual members. This highlights critical concerns that require immediate attention, particularly given the role of these individuals as armed resistance members against the military dictatorship, a role for which they receive broad public acceptance and respect. In addition, this portion emerges in the context of limited internet accessibility. On the contrary, this percentage also indicates a notable absence of gender inclusion within the online discourse among individual members and groups. Moreover, considering the significant influence of these groups on a broader audience of Burmese society, addressing these concerns becomes imperative.

The observation identifies two primary findings. The first manifests positive behaviors characterized by gender-friendly content, including promoting women's rights and LGBT rights and resisting gender discrimination and societal norms. The second identifies negative behaviors evidenced by gender discrimination, stereotypes, and sexist posts.

### ***Positive Behaviors***

*Recognition of diversity* is emphasized in some posts by individual members regardless of their gender identities. The majority of the individual members have contributed at least once to promoting respect for diversity in areas such as race, ethnicity, and religion. However, the frequency remains relatively low in comparison to the total number of monitored posts. One female PDF member included, *"Please do not listen to divisive and abusive words against religion and ethnicities,"* in her post on 10 June 2023, while one male PDF from the Karen area stated, *"What we want is democracy and anti-dictatorship in the country. There is no bias towards any specific party or ethnic group..."* in one of his posts in 2023. A young female PDF from the Sagaing area in November 2023 posted, *"Youth have great ideas. They respect and*

*value diversity. They commit to fighting the dictatorship until the end.*” Although the study provides limited information on their interpretations of “democracy,” “diversity,” and “equality” in detail, the observation acknowledges these discourses as positive contributions to the concept of gender equality.

*Advocating for justice and resistance against dictatorial behaviors* is prevalent among some of the individual members' posts. One male PDF leader demonstrated his commitment to combatting dictatorship practices, extending his opposition beyond the current Myanmar military junta to encompass any entity engaging in such behavior. In a post from 2023, he asserted, *“I am dedicated to combating all forms of dictatorship and all instances of oppression.”* Similarly, a female PDF member from the Karenni area emphasized her commitment to participating in the ongoing Spring Revolution, stating, *“I have chosen to join this armed revolution to combat not only this military dictatorship but also any other forms of dictatorship.”* Additionally, certain posts observed in this study expressed concern among some PDFs regarding the recurrence of military dictatorship practices. In October 2023, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area cautioned his peers through a post, advising, *“We must avoid adopting dictatorial practices while fighting against them.”* These discourses come from both male and female PDF members, but are still limited in frequency.

*Supporting women's participation in the revolution* is highlighted in select posts, although within a very limited subset comprising approximately 1% of gender-friendly content. This inclusion is demonstrated through the sharing of interviews and articles featuring PDF women, as well as photos of women protesters, often accompanied by positive reactions. For instance, one PDF leader from the Sagaing area expressed his respect for a female activist who led a motorbike protest in May 2023, stating, *“I respect you, sister... take care of yourself for everything.”* However, some posts aimed at promoting women's participation inadvertently undermine those who choose to refrain from engaging in the revolution actively. This is exemplified by discourse such as, *“(this is) for women who do not understand well about the revolution,”* posted by a male PDF member from the Sagaing area. Nevertheless, several groups and individuals actively encourage women's participation in the armed struggle by sharing photographs and videos of women's activities within the PDF. Notably, three PDF groups demonstrate active support for women within the organization by presenting the voices and activities of women within their battalions on their pages, with two of these groups even having specific women's battalions. Among these three groups, one PDF group, currently based in Karen territory, devotes approximately 10% of its group's page posts to promoting women within the PDF.

Moreover, a top PDF leader emphasized his group's commitment to women's participation in the revolution during his remarks at the anniversary celebration of one of his women battalions in October 2023, stating,

*The inclusion of women's participation in politics and revolution reflects a higher standard of political culture... In light of the violence, oppression, and discrimination endured by women, we must continue to advocate for their participation in political dialogues, consultations, and policymaking processes toward the future establishment of a federal system.*

Another significant discourse emerged from the same group, emphasizing that

*Recognizing the lessons learned from past political and social justice movements, it is evident that success is unattainable without the active participation of women. In honoring the countless women of Myanmar who have sacrificed their lives, blood, and dedication to the cause of current political change, we urge everyone to change behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and practices that perpetuate oppression that endanger the lives of women.*

This statement was issued on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2023. However, these positive discourses for women's participation remain a significantly limited number when compared to the overall discourse—comprising fewer than 50 posts out of 16,457—observed among their Facebook posts.

*Promoting gender equality and advocating for the rights of marginalized groups* are themes identified in a critically limited number of posts. This observation primarily focuses on terms that explicitly refer to "gender equality" and the names of marginalized groups, such as "gender equality," "other gender identities," "sex worker," and "disability." These initiatives primarily originated from a small number of individual members and a few group pages. Notably, among the groups analyzed in this study, three PDF groups based in the Karen, Karenni, and Sagaing regions were actively engaged in disseminating information about promoting gender equality, particularly aimed at challenging traditional norms and stereotypes. In the narrative produced in January 2023, a woman PDF stated, *"Leave all the stereotypes against women behind. Revolution is to resist not only the military junta but also the whole system."* While most posts observed promoted gender equality, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues was notably absent.

Nevertheless, some posts acknowledged the participation of LGBTQ+ individuals in various roles within the revolution. For instance, a male PDF member from the Sagaing area demonstrated recognition of LGBTQ+ participation during protests by sharing images with positive captions in a post from September 2021, stating, *"We should not be conservative anymore, and we need to accept and recognize, particularly LGBT. They are sacrificing their lives for this revolution. Proud of you, all LGBT."* Additionally, one PDF group produced a narrative highlighting the experience of a woman who identified as LGBT serving as a military trainer within the group, which was shared on its page. However, among the 20 groups monitored in this study, only one group was found to actively promote the voices of LGBT individuals on their Facebook pages by explicitly using the term "LGBT or other identities."

Interestingly, among over 16,000 posts, a post emerged emphasizing the rights of sex workers, which was underscored by a female PDF member in her post in August 2022. She stated in her post, *"In this revolution, we need to be vocal for the basic human rights of sex workers. They are also human beings, and we must fight for them to be entitled to full rights."* While several groups mentioned "diversity," this particular post was one of few which clearly added what was meant by "diversity," a distinction not observed elsewhere during this study. Similarly, one PDF group in the Karen area disseminated a post honoring the participation of a PDF man with a disability in the revolution, stating, *"Disability with the movement but possessing other*

*abilities for revolution*," thereby highlighting the contribution of a disabled PDF soldier to the revolution.

*Challenging gender norms and stereotypes* is also observed in some of the individual members' posts, albeit with a limited number. This analysis primarily emphasizes all discourses that resist the traditional norms and gender roles discriminately assigned to gender identities. For instance, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area shared photos of himself and his members acting soft and shy, with the caption "*Here are good men who are soft, kind, and gentle*," posted in June 2023. While this post was closely analyzed for potential mockery of other gender identities, it was identified as a positive discourse based on the reactions and responses to the comments. Similarly, a female PDF leader from the Sagaing area shared a photo of a male PDF leader cooking for the members on her account page in November 2023. This post is recognized as a positive discourse challenging gender norms and stereotypes, as evidenced by the photo caption stating, "*Regardless of being busy, whenever you arrive back home late or tired, wish you could cook special food for the members*." Traditionally in Myanmar, women are typically assigned the responsibility of cooking when both men and women are present in the same place. Additionally, women's longyi (sarong) is culturally and traditionally regarded as subordinate, especially for men to touch or use. However, one male PDF leader challenged these norms by participating in protests where women used their longyi as protest flags. He posted, "*Bring your longyi tomorrow*," referring to preparations for a protest by sharing news about International Women's Day in 2022. Furthermore, the same PDF leader shared a photo of himself using pads for his wounds, stating, "*Pad, which is monthly used for women and daily used for revolutionists*," in his post in July 2021. Women's monthly pads are traditionally considered taboo, particularly for men to use them publicly. In another example, a female PDF member from the Karenni area shared a photo of herself sitting on the roof while setting up the bamboo house in April 2023. Typically, men undertake the role of building the roof in Myanmar society, except for some exceptional cases. Additionally, there are posts highlighting men's responsibilities in women's rights development, which are typically identified as women's duties in society. A male PDF leader emphasized in his post in October 2023, "*For women to be entitled to their full rights, it is not only women themselves who are responsible for it but also we, men, must make efforts*." The discourses mentioned here serve as examples, but it is crucial to note that the numbers are significantly low compared to the total number of posts.

*Awareness-raising on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence Against Women (VAW)* are primarily observed on the Facebook page of a women's battalion in the Sagaing area, with only a small number of individuals, both men and women within the PDF, actively advocating to stop sexual violence against women. These advocacy efforts were particularly prominent during a 16-day campaign period from November to December. One women's battalion in the Sagaing area consistently disseminated information during this campaign with the messages of "*End Impunity, end Violence against Women*," and "*Stop sexual violence, eliminate the rapist military*." Outside of this women's battalion, other PDF groups and individuals observed in this study seldom emphasized advocacy against violence against women, with only a few exceptions. For example, one male PDF leader in Sagaing emphasized in a post in 2023 that the revolution area should not be associated with sexual exploitation, stating, "*This revolution*

*area is not a place for sexual activities with women.*" Additionally, another male leader highlighted his group's principle against rape during a video interview in 2023, stating, "*In our principles, members must refrain from fighting each other and committing rape against civilians.*" Furthermore, a female PDF member urged both men and women Facebook users to share a photo message condemning rape, featuring an animation depicting a member of the security forces committing sexual violence against a woman. Additionally, a PDF group page disseminated its military rules in a post in November 2023, which included directives to avoid physical, mental, and sexual violence, as well as threats. A few male PDF members and group pages also shared the National Unity Government's (NUG) military ethics for PDF members to adhere to, which included provisions to prevent sexual violence and violence against women and other gender identities, as well as providing special protection to vulnerable civilians.

Overall, these positive online behaviors is primarily observed within a limited subset of individuals and groups, with particular emphasis on three groups—one located in the Karenni area, another in Karen, and a third in Sagaing. Conversely, there is noticeably less documentation regarding gender-friendly discourse among the remaining groups. Furthermore, active emphasis on LGBT rights and their participation in the armed revolution was found in only one PDF group, while explicit advocacy for "*the basic human rights of sex workers*" was addressed in just one post by a female PDF member.

### ***Negative Behaviors***

*Gender exclusion* stands out as one of the significant findings of this study. A mere 2% of discourses, with 1% comprising gender-friendly posts and the remainder characterized by negative gender-related behaviors, offer only a superficial glimpse of potentially more positive discourses of PDFs on digital space. However, this observation also highlights a significant deficiency in gender sensitivity within the online discourses. Furthermore, this limitation hinders the study's ability to thoroughly explore PDF groups' and individuals' nuanced perspectives on concepts such as "justice," "equality," and "democracy." The overwhelming majority, comprising 71% of total posts, focused on military updates and campaigns for military supplies, serves as compelling evidence of the PDF's resolute opposition against the military junta. Conversely, the minimal presence of gender-friendly discourse, comprising less than 1%, constrains the identification of the PDF's broader revolution against systems that perpetuate oppressive, abusive, and unjust acts.

*Sexism and sexual harassment* are prevalent within gender-related negative discourses, particularly targeting female supporters of the SAC and women who abstain from involvement in the revolution. The number has exceeded 100 posts out of 158 instances of negative behaviors pertaining to gender sensitivity. This figure also includes the use of inappropriate and disrespectful language, including derogatory terms related to their gender or sexuality, such as "whores." Such expressions typically stem from feelings of anger and disappointment toward individuals regarding the revolution and related social topics. These existing discourses are observed among male and female PDF members, with few exceptions among individual members. Half of these discourses often manifest in overtly sexist and abusive language. The primary targets of such discourses are wives of SAC soldiers, female supporters of the SAC, and women not participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Examples include



the dissemination of make-up images depicting women engaging in sexual activities with SAC members and the rephrasing of original statements using sexist language. A male PDF leader also shared an MTV song where the images of Daw Thet Thet Khaine, who used to be an NLD parliament member but openly changed her side to support the military junta after the coup, appeared like she was having sex or being together with SAC leaders. Such discourses are mainly exhibited by male PDF leaders, but a few young female members also engage in such conduct. Notably, the official Facebook pages of the PDF groups generally refrain from posting sexist content, with one group being an exception. One PDF group based in the Karen area shared three posts identified as containing sexist discourses on their official channel. One of these posts suggested that wives of SAC captains should support the revolution by engaging in sexual affairs with other men behind their husbands' backs. Overall, these sexist discourses primarily target women and vary in their nature and focus. However, one instance involved the sexual harassment of a SAC male leader, wherein his image was digitally altered to depict him without pants, as shared by a young female PDF member on her social media account in July 2022.

*Doxing* has been identified in the online discourses of the PDF, but in the very limited occurrence of three posts. These discourses originated from one female and one male member of the PDF, respectively. The targets of these posts included family members of SAC informants, commonly referred to as "Da Lan," as well as female SAC supporters and women not associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). One female PDF member reshared a post in February 2021 about a female SAC supporter, accompanied by a caption "*If HD comes up*," which was linked to a sex video of the mentioned woman. In the same month and year, a male PDF leader also shared a post regarding a non-CDM woman allegedly engaged in a workplace affair with her boss. This post included captured CCTV images. Additionally, the same male PDF leader shared another post disclosing the address of the wife of a SAC informant who ran a beauty salon in Yangon. It is noteworthy that these actions primarily occurred in early 2021. Furthermore, a significant portion of individual PDF members exhibited no activity, and some even displayed inactive accounts in 2021 and 2022. This circumstance may be attributed to members changing their Facebook accounts after affiliating with the PDF, resulting in some PDF members having two accounts with different names.

*Gender stereotypes and discrimination* have emerged as significant discourses observed during this study. Interestingly, these behaviors are demonstrated by the same PDF members who also participated in promoting gender-friendly discourses. This includes a woman PDF leader who actively shared posts promoting women's rights and gender equality. The discourses include terms and language used to subordinate women's roles and other gender identities. Some PDF members exhibited a stereotypical mindset rooted in their daily practices. For instance, a male PDF leader from the Sagaing area expressed his feeling of missing home by stating, "*I cried as if I were not a man whenever I think of the time I could go back home*," implying that crying is not acceptable for a man. Similarly, another PDF male leader stressed in his reply under his post, "*I am an old man without a brain, and I am a man with a women's mindset*" in May 2023, reinforcing gender stereotypes against women by suggesting they are naturally weak or lacking some mental capacity. The acceptance of stereotypes about women's characteristics was also observed among female PDF members. One woman PDF member shared her old photo

wearing a longyi and long hair, stating, *"I had been feminine once like this."* Additionally, some PDF members exhibited negative perceptions of other gender identities, particularly gay men. One female PDF member derogatorily commented, *"You look like a gay,"* suggesting weakness, and questioned their ability to defend themselves, referencing a shared post from an unavailable observation period. Moreover, some PDF members engaged in posts that reinforce violence against women. One female PDF member reshared a ‘funny’ video with her joking reaction. In this video, a woman hits her husband several times, and when the husband responds mildly, she pretends to be hurt and requests help for domestic violence.

### 3. Impacts of PDFs' Online Behaviors

One prominent male PDF leader emphasized during his interview for this study,

*Once military leaders become popular, power comes along with it. Unlike civilian social influencers, the discourse of military leaders carries the weight of orders. Whether expressed online or on the ground, their discourse holds even greater danger. The discourse or behavior of these leaders influences the actions of all other members.*

All ten interviewees, including PDF leaders and gender experts, acknowledged the importance of online platforms for disseminating information on ground situations and raising awareness among the public and the international community. Despite some positive behaviors regarding gender issues, the majority of interviewees pointed out the deep-rooted existence of masculinity behaviors among PDF members and groups in the digital space, raising concerns not only for the current Spring Revolution but also for the future of federal democratic change. Furthermore, several male PDF leaders shared their observations of negative behaviors related to gender on online platforms. Additionally, two female gender experts emphasized their own experiences of sexual and other harassment through Facebook Messenger, which they identified as being perpetrated by PDF members and their supporters.

One male PDF leader interviewed emphasized, *"It is a sign of the impossibility of fully building a peaceful society. Consequently, it can also affect the unity among different identities fighting together against the military dictatorship."*

Several interviewees agreed on the prevalence of patriarchal practices within the PDF members and expressed concerns about the connection between masculinity behaviors and militarism. One interviewee said, *"If militarism becomes powerful, patriarchy will automatically become stronger. Militarism, patriarchy, and capitalism are like the legs of a stove. If one is strong, the rest will be strong."*

Hence, some interviewees emphasized the crucial need to combat the practices of patriarchy alongside opposing the military dictatorship. One gender expert underscored,

*The military is inherently structured on patriarchy, and we are all acutely aware of its patriarchal practices. However, suppose we, who are fighting against such a group, cannot break free from those practices ourselves. In that case, I believe the military dictatorship will persist even after this junta is removed.*

Furthermore, one interviewee remarked, *"Even within the military sector... If they are not good at public relations or fail to understand the effective use of the internet, there will be less public support as well,"* emphasizing the importance for PDF members to exercise caution with their online behavior.

#### **4. Accountability**

##### ***General Understanding of Gender Equality within PDFs***

The findings of the in-depth interviews underscored the accountability of the PDF groups and highlighted the crucial role of their military leaders in addressing gender-insensitive behaviors within the movement's digital platforms. Indeed, some interviewees emphasized the significance of understanding gender among PDF leadership. One male PDF leader stated, *"What kind of training are their leaders providing? How do they train? What do they teach their members about what is considered as a standard value? All of these are important."*

However, all interviewees have a common agreement that there is a notable lack of understanding regarding gender among both the leadership and members of PDF movements. Two distinct situations were observed: some PDF groups highlighted that their leadership has a basic understanding of gender, while others demonstrated a lack of comprehension and practice of gender equality as a core value within their groups, despite their claims to the contrary. One PDF male leader highlighted the challenges in training their members on gender equality despite their commitment to do so within the groups. He stated,

*When we provided gender training to the members, some perceived it as extraneous and unnecessary at present. Additionally, not many members joined our group because they believe in our PSEA's zero-tolerance policy (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuses). Rather, they joined solely to fight against the military junta.*

On the contrary, one PDF male leader openly admitted his limited understanding of gender by stating, *"Regarding gender, we do not allow women in our group. Women need special facilities such as bathing, toilets, and security, which might limit the freedom of movement of male soldiers."* He also added, *"This does not mean we neglect women in this revolution. Women are leading in other sectors already. They are in their place,"* implying that men are inherently stronger and do not have as many responsibilities to consider.

One gender expert pointed out the PDF's lack of significant participation in promoting women's rights and gender equality, while also acknowledging their collaboration in other women's groups' campaigns and movements. Several interviewees highlighted that the level of understanding of gender among PDF members varies based on their backgrounds. A gender expert remarked, *"There is a difference in understanding of gender between the PDF members who come from traditional thinking and the younger generation of this era. The younger people mostly have very open minds."*

##### ***Policy Commitment and Implementation***

According to interviews with all PDF groups and monitoring of posts on their Facebook groups, no group has demonstrated a specific gender policy or regulations aimed at limiting the gender insensitive behaviors of their members in the digital space. However, one PDF

group has shown its commitment by implementing a protocol on the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuses, which includes detailed acts of sexual harassment, such as verbal and physical behaviors. Additionally, this group mandates gender courses as part of its military training.

Another PDF group based in Karenni State mentioned that its manual includes some gender-related aspects but does not constitute a specific policy. As for some PDF groups undergoing changes in leadership or collaborating with others, they primarily rely on the Code of Conduct of the National Unity Government (NUG), which includes ethical guidelines for soldiers to prevent violence against women and sexual violence. However, the majority of interviewees highlighted the insufficient awareness among PDF members about their adopted Code of Conduct and military ethics regarding women and other gender identities.

The findings revealed that no PDF groups monitored during this study have specific regulations or limitations on the use of digital platforms, except for military regulations pertaining to disseminating military news and information. One male PDF leader emphasized,

*Regarding their opinions and emotions related to other social issues, we cannot limit them from posting on Facebook. Only when there is a discourse that is inappropriate or has a significant impact, we have to discuss with them to foster understanding as a social bond.*

However, the leader did not provide clarification on what he meant by "inappropriate" or "significant impact" during the interview. Another PDF leader also mentioned that they do not have specific rules or regulations but only provide informal verbal guidance to members regarding social communication. One leader stated, *"We do not control the youth's freedom. Nevertheless, we usually remind them they would understand more when they have daughters."* However, he added that his group does not allow any act of doxing or personal attacks.

Notably, the majority of PDF leaders interviewed in this study claimed they could not prioritize awareness among their members regarding gender issues during the current situation. One group leader explicitly stated, *"We do not have gender training in our group; since we are busy with other matters, we cannot allocate time for it."*

## Conclusion

Overall, the role of social media, particularly Facebook, emerges as one of the most effective platforms through which PDFs are conducting fundraising for the revolution, disseminating information to the public, and gaining support from people. One PDF leader states, *"Social media becomes a very important element. The inputs of people who have broader followers on Facebook are important."* It is crucial for the PDFs, who are perceived as the leaders of the revolution by the majority of people in Myanmar, to be mindful of their behaviors on Facebook.

However, the findings clearly indicate the presence of militarized masculinity behaviors targeting SAC women supporters, albeit with varying levels and forms compared to SAC actions. While the SAC demonstrates systematic militarized masculinity acts targeting the activist women and other gender identities, the behaviors exhibited by the PDFs appear to be

more dependent on individuals. Positive gender discourses are limited, accounting for only 1% of the total monitored posts related to gender discourses, whereas militarized masculinity behaviors dominate a larger share.

This highlights the significant prevalence of various forms of militarized masculinity behaviors, considering that more than 70% of their posts are influenced by military-related information. The interview findings further support this, as the majority of interviewees regarded "gender issues" as less important than military affairs in the current situation. The majority of members who contributed to gender-friendly discourse are also found to engage in militarized masculinity behaviors. This indicates that the majority of PDF members monitored in this study are engaged in such behaviors directly and indirectly, with even women PDF members involved, albeit to a lesser extent. This apparently contradictory behavior could be worthy of further study.

Furthermore, the majority of PDF leaders interviewed could not clarify their understanding of gender, and they also lack specific policies or regulations, as well as awareness of existing policies among their members. This raises critical concerns regarding the protection of women from online abuse and violence in practice. It also has a detrimental impact on the revolution they are fighting for. One gender expert highlighted that

*PDFs should move to the next step of changing political ideology from merely being content with clearing the Myanmar soldiers. As long as they cannot progress to the next step, we will not break out of the cycle of violence. The extent of violence also depends on the depth of their political thinking.*

Considering the significant role of online platforms in this revolution, the presence of militarized masculinity among PDF members should be promptly addressed and taken into account.

## **Recommendations**

### **National Unity Government (NUG) should:**

**Strengthening the Chain of Command:** It is imperative to ensure that PDF members and groups collaborating with or under the Chain of Command of the Minister of Defense (MOD) adhere to the military code of conduct and its ethics.

**Include Gender Topics in Military Training:** Gender equality concepts must be integrated into PDF military training as mandatory components of its values. Soldiers opposing the military dictatorship should refrain from all acts and behaviors that discriminate against gender identities, as the Junta did. Additionally, systematic gender awareness training should be provided to all military members.

**Develop Rules of Military Ethics for the Digital Space:** Specific rules or regulations should be developed to prevent online abuses and the manifestation of militarized masculinity behaviors in digital spaces. This includes establishing a reporting system to address such issues.

**People Defence Forces (PDF) should:**

**Include Gender Topics in Military Training:** Gender equality concepts must be integrated into PDF military training as mandatory components of its values. Soldiers opposing the military dictatorship should refrain from all acts and behaviors that discriminate against gender identities, as the Junta did. Additionally, systematic gender awareness training should be provided to all military members.

**Develop Rules of Military Ethics for the Digital Space:** Specific rules or regulations should be developed to prevent online abuses and the manifestation of militarized masculinity behaviors in digital spaces. This includes establishing a reporting system to address such issues.

**Collaboration with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):** It is important to recognize resource and technical support challenges faced by PDFs, CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs), which represent valuable resources for raising awareness among members and developing gender-related rules and regulations.

**CBOs, CSOs should:**

**Extend Engagement with PDFs:** CSOs should actively engage in raising awareness among PDFs to ensure the protection and prevention of gender-based violence and its consequences, both within PDF areas and in reducing online militarized masculinity. This involves providing necessary technical support and conducting awareness programs among members.

**The international community should:**

**Support awareness raising among PDFs:** Awareness raising among PDFs plays a crucial role to address gender-based violence and reduce online militarized masculinity. Collaboration with CSOs can serve as another avenue for empowering and raising awareness among PDF members. This needs international funding support.

**Consistent Engagement:** Gender awareness is an ongoing process and requires long-term and consistent support. Therefore, the support provided should be sustained and continuous.

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