

Policy brief

March 2025



# Impact of displacement on gender norms: experiences of women refugees of Myanmar

Henri Myrntinen, Lal Rin Sangi, Phyo Nay Chi, and Kyaw Lwin

## Executive summary

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has sharply escalated armed conflict and driven large scale internal and external displacement. While the risks faced by women and girls in situations of conflict and displacement are well documented, there has been less analysis of how these effects vary by age, location, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, or other factors. This research, conducted in Thailand and Mizoram State, India, examines these nuances, identifying unmet needs across all refugee groups, with distinct challenges for specific demographics. This includes Myanmar refugees in general, women and girls more broadly, and other demographics. Furthermore, it explores the prevailing sense amongst respondents that despite an improvement in women's participation and gender equality in the wake of the coup, especially in the resistance to the military, deeply embedded patriarchal, heteronormative, and age-based norms and practices continue to impede progress.

## Key findings

- There are few formal support systems available to Myanmar refugees. Instead, they rely on local government, civil society organisations (CSOs), diaspora groups, ethnic health providers, and women's organisations<sup>1</sup> for support. A more diverse support ecosystem on the Thai-Myanmar border has been heavily hit by recent US aid cuts.
- Unmet needs persist across all contexts, although this varies by location and demographics. Common gaps include the need to address sexual harassment and gender based violence (GBV); mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS); livelihoods and protection from labour exploitation; educational access; and support for women with caring responsibilities.
- Women are stepping in through informal support networks to fill the gaps; this includes organising food aid and language classes, as well as mutual support for refugees of diverse sexual

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'ethnic health organisation' and 'ethnic women's organisation' refer to organisations that have been established over the decades in ethnic minority areas of Myanmar, especially in the border areas.

orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

- Geography and social capital shape access to services and women's social and political participation. The greatest barriers are seen in Mizoram and Mae Hong Son, driven by geographical challenges and a smaller presence of aid organisations and diaspora CSOs.
  - Economic survival and the burdening of women with care responsibilities often leaves little space for political engagement, despite a sense that women are able to participate more in the wake of the 'Spring Revolution,' (as the resistance to the 2021 coup is generally referred to).
  - Language barriers and legal insecurity fuel isolation and anxiety. This includes the fear of deportation due to a lack of legal documentation. These factors can drive women's isolation from host communities and services and contribute to a reliance on potentially exploitative informal support networks. Elderly women refugees were especially impacted by loneliness.
  - Shifts in gender discourse are real but harmful norms persist. While respondents described a 'sea change' in attitudes and rhetoric towards women's and diverse SOGIESC rights since the Spring Revolution, harmful patriarchal, heteronormative, and age-based dynamics continue, including within opposition movements.
  - Respondents of diverse SOGIESC continued to face discrimination within the Myanmar refugee community, particularly outside of the Thai urban areas. Nearly all respondents in this category had experienced gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, or abuse before and after fleeing Myanmar, including in opposition-controlled areas and camps.
  - Myanmar's resistance movement offers a unique possibility for studying gender equality within the context of conflict and displacement. Unlike many other contexts, large parts of the opposition against the military junta have publicly embraced women's rights – and to a lesser extent, diverse SOGIESC rights – as part of their political agenda, even if this is not always realised in practice.<sup>2</sup>
- ## Policy and programming implications
- While women and girls collectively face certain gendered risks and forms of discrimination that need to be addressed, there is also a need for more nuanced analysis to determine more targeted needs based on more detailed analyses of the intersections of gender with location, age, socio-economic class, disability, sexual orientation, marital/family status, and other factors.
  - More support is needed for Myanmar women at all levels, but targeted support is needed among key demographics. For example, elderly women and women with disabilities face greater mobility and social isolation issues, and often medical needs; widows and female-headed households (FHH) often live in greater economic precarity and thus also have fewer possibilities and less time to participate politically; and women of diverse SOGIESC face specific forms of gender-based discrimination and higher risks of sexual abuse.
  - Myanmar women/diverse SOGIESC activists and organisations are in urgent need of external financial support in their work for gender equality. However, broader and more dedicated political support is also required for their work from within the opposition movements, including from male political leaders, who should commit to implementing gender-transformative agendas that address gendered power dynamics in their own structures and in their communities.
  - Donors should explore ways of giving more financial, material, and capacity-building support to existing informal networks of refugee women at the community level. This should be as flexible as possible, reducing often onerous application and reporting processes or requirements for formal registration.
  - External, host community, and Myanmar diaspora actors should foster more communication between host communities and refugees, and between refugees themselves by creating meeting spaces, including for refugees facing loneliness issues. This can help reduce barriers between communities and reduce isolation, but also pre-emptively help reduce tensions and potential conflicts.
  - Increase support to ensure political spaces and processes are women/diverse SOGIESC friendly, such as by ensuring childcare support

---

2 Khin Khin Mra and Hedström (2024); Marlar et al. (2023).

for participants, financial support for women's participation, and fostering a more participatory culture<sup>3</sup> and the enforcement of non-discriminatory behaviour.

## Methodology

Women and girls face particular risks in conflict and humanitarian crises. Whilst there is an increasing acknowledgement of this, there is still a lack of research into the issues women may face in displacement settings based on factors such as age, marital status, education, socio-economic class, disability, or sexual orientation and gender identity. Intersectional approaches are necessary to more closely examine how different social identity markers combine to create barriers, vulnerabilities, as well as opportunities for women fleeing armed conflict.<sup>4</sup>

To address this research gap, the authors conducted 65 in-person and online interviews and 10 focus group discussions with women who had fled from Myanmar to Thailand and Mizoram after the military coup d'état in 2021. We collected data at multiple sites in both countries (see boxes on next page) with women of different ethnic backgrounds, ages, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, as well as women living with, or caring for persons with, disabilities or chronic illnesses.

## Myanmar in context

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar Armed Forces staged a coup d'état establishing the State Administration Council (SAC) and arresting the elected leadership of the country. The coup was initially met by peaceful protests, but after a brutal crackdown by the security forces, it evolved into a full-scale armed conflict. This conflict involves both established Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), some of which have been engaged in conflict with the central government for decades, and newly established groups in a struggle against the SAC. Non-violent protests and other forms of unarmed opposition, such as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) by state employees and strikes included a disproportionate number of women, especially younger women. Following

a brutal crackdown, the opposition took up arms and the resistance became more militarised and masculinised, although many women also took up arms or provided support to the armed resistance in other ways.

Although there had been slow progress at the national level on increasing women's participation prior to the coup, political life often tended to be dominated by older, ethnic majority, male elites, and discriminatory laws and attitudes towards persons of diverse SOGIESC persisted. Nonetheless, in the decade before the coup, an increasingly vibrant civil society pressed for more gender equality. These demands were picked up by the opposition after the coup, even if reflected mostly in rhetoric, without significant changes on the ground.

The escalating armed conflict has also been marked by gendered harms – such as gender-based violence (GBV), forced recruitment, early and forced marriage – especially against women, girls, and gender diverse persons, but also against men and boys. As outlined in numerous credible reports, most of the conflict-related sexual violence, forced recruitment, as well as violence against the civilian population more broadly has been perpetrated by SAC forces and their militia allies.<sup>5</sup>

The fighting has displaced over three million people internally, and has propelled tens of thousands of refugees into Thailand and Mizoram in India.<sup>6</sup> The newly displaced join the waves of migrants and refugees who left Myanmar in preceding decades. In 2024, displacement internally and abroad was further accelerated by the enforcement of a dormant conscription law by the SAC, allowing for mandatory recruitment of both men and women. Study respondents expressed increased fear that Indian and Thai authorities would accede to the law's provisions and require refugees to return to Myanmar.

## Research findings: Limited livelihoods and support systems in place

For the majority of respondents, economic survival was their overriding concern. Only a small minority

3 See for example UN Women (2024) and <https://beyondconsultations.org/>.

4 Intersectionality was coined by African-American feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) as “a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color”. It has since been used more widely as a way to define how expectations connected to gender interact with other societal markers.

5 See for example UN Human Rights Council (2024).

6 Please note that while we use the term 'refugee' here for the sake of simplicity, neither India nor Thailand are States Parties to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

- those with prior savings, education, or strong social networks, had been able to find secure work.

In **Mizoram**, research was conducted in twelve camps, all of which are a considerable distance from the state's main towns. Mizoram is primarily a destination for displaced persons from Chin State in Myanmar and ethnic Chin from Myanmar's Sagaing Region, due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border religious, ethno-linguistic, and historical ties. Nonetheless, despite the ethno-linguistic ties, many of the Chin refugees participating in the research faced considerable language barriers. The refugees who have settled in the camps tend to be socio-economically less privileged, while those with more financial resources are more likely to settle in towns such as Aizawl or elsewhere in India, such as New Delhi or Kolkata. An estimated 34,000 – 50,000 Myanmar refugees are currently in the state, with most of them arriving in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, though the state is also home to previously displaced Chin communities.

**Mae Hong Son Province** is in north-western Thailand, and borders Karenni, Karen, and Shan States on the Myanmar side. Since the 1980s, the province has hosted displaced persons fleeing conflict in Myanmar in 'temporary shelter areas'. This research was conducted in the area of the Ban Mai Nai Soi camp, which hosts over 10,000 refugees, (most of who are Karenni), some of whom have fled in past decades and others who have arrived since 2021. Many of the new arrivals have settled in the vicinity of the camp rather than in the camp itself.

**Chiang Mai** is the largest city in northern Thailand. An educational and economic hub, the city has long had cross-border ties to eastern Myanmar, and hosts a large Myanmar diaspora community, including labour migrants, students and activists. Several exiled Myanmar political and civil society organisations are operating in the city, alongside international organisations working on Myanmar.

**Mae Sot, Tak Province**, a city bordering Myawaddy in Karen State, has grown into a major cross-border trade hub and a magnet for migrant labourers from Myanmar, many of whom work in the agricultural and manufacturing industries. Post-coup, the city has become a central entry point for those fleeing to Thailand from south-eastern Myanmar, and has a vibrant Myanmar community, including Myanmar civil society organisations. It also serves as one of the centres of Myanmar exile politics. Several large 'temporary shelter areas' are located close

The others had to navigate very limited labour markets, where men had more opportunities and women were routinely paid less for the same work. In Thailand, language barriers meant that many were dependent on Myanmar diaspora employers who had settled in the country earlier. While this facilitated some access into the labour market, these relationships were often exploitative. In the camps in Mizoram, subsistence farming was the primary mode of economic survival, but, while some were able to sell their produce at local markets, they were often blocked by restrictions set up by host communities to avoid competition from the refugees.

In all four research locations, access to services and support for Myanmar refugees is limited, although there are more services available on the Thai-Myanmar border than in Mizoram. Many of these services, however, have been extremely impacted by the large-scale cuts to US aid in early 2025. In Mizoram, the local state government has opened refugee access to schools and some social services, but the considerable distance of these services to the refugee camps is a major barrier. Support is primarily provided by local CSOs and faith-based organisations with minimal resources. In Mae Hong Son, temporary shelter areas are well-established with support systems in place, but these are often inaccessible to later arrivals who have settled outside of the camp due to a lack of documentation. Other medical and social services were often at a distance from where they lived; elderly women and women living with disabilities and chronic illnesses faced particular mobility barriers in accessing them. In Mae Sot and Chiang Mai especially, there are broader support service networks and more formal Thai support infrastructure, including some specifically geared towards Myanmar women. However, access to Thai services typically requires financial resources and proper identification, which many respondents lacked.

Whilst some younger urban women did not have any direct dependants, many of the older respondents (and almost all in Mizoram and Mae Hong Son) were part of broader networks of economic co-dependency, with other extended family members being reliant on them and/or them being reliant on others. Almost all women with dependants, particularly women heads of households and widows, consistently highlighted the exhausting toll of balancing their family's economic survival with unpaid care work. This double burden left them with depleted time and energy, and was seen as a major impediment to their ability to actively engage politically.

## Critical gaps in services and support needs

A lack of educational opportunities was a pressing concern especially for young women, many of whom had already lost several years of education due to Covid-19 school closures and the aftermath of the coup, and now had limited opportunities and additional language barriers. A number of older women respondents reported needing vocational training support to transition into new livelihoods and retrain in other professions in Thailand and India, now that work they had been doing in Myanmar had been disrupted. Language barriers, however, remain a major issue in both Thailand and India, isolating refugee women from host communities and increasing isolation and reliance on others in the Myanmar diaspora.

The greatest unmet needs identified by respondents were support to livelihoods, educational opportunities, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services, all of which were lacking. Respondents also highlighted the need for greater targeted assistance for women carers responsible for supporting those with disabilities and chronic illnesses. GBV prevention and response services were notably absent in Mizoram; where (especially older) respondents stated that this was not an issue in the camps. Further research, however, revealed that GBV cases did occur, with major barriers to reporting including cultural norms, lack of services and fear of retaliation in case of reporting. In Mae Hong Son, awareness levels on GBV were higher, likely due to the sustained efforts of Karenni women's organisations. In the more urban settings of Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, the more prevalent issue was workplace sexual harassment. A number of former women combatants also reported experiencing sexual harassment during their time in the opposition armed groups and threats against those seeking to report it. Furthermore, almost all individuals of diverse SOGIESC interviewed had experienced gender-based discrimination

and sexual harassment and/or abuse prior to their displacement from Myanmar.

## Emerging informal support systems

In the absence of formal external support services, Myanmar refugee women have self-organised, developing mutual aid groups, Burmese-language education for their children, and civic education classes led by former civil servants who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Individuals of diverse SOGIESC in Thailand have created loose networks of support for their peers and themselves. Especially in the camps in Mizoram, faith-based informal support networks, such as Christian prayer groups, have provided important spaces for women to find emotional support and personal solace, a sense of community, and support to the most vulnerable refugees.

These informal support groups range from fully independent ad hoc grassroots initiatives to those which are linked to existing Myanmar diaspora organisations. An exception to the overall trend of a lack of connection between host communities and refugees were Myanmar refugees of diverse SOGIESC in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. These groups have in part built strong relationships with Thai SOGIESC rights organisations, co-organising Pride events in both cities. As several of our respondents noted, this was in part because individuals of diverse SOGIESC felt more at ease being 'out' amongst Thai peers than with fellow Myanmar refugees.

## Shifting gender norms: real change or rhetoric?

The question of whether the Spring Revolution had brought about changes in gender norms elicited often slightly contradictory answers. Many respondents described meaningful signs of progress, reporting a perceived positive change in gendered power dynamics, increased women's political participation, and, to a lesser degree, broader acceptance of diverse SOGIESC rights post-coup. This was evidenced by a greater understanding among women of their rights and women's active participation in the opposition to the SAC, both armed and unarmed, along with limited acceptance of diverse SOGIESC identities, particularly in urban Thai settings.

In direct contrast to these more positive statements, however, many respondents noted the persistence of – as well as sometimes their own adherence to – harmful patriarchal, age-based, and

heteronormative attitudes and practices. These norms continue to limit the space available for the full and meaningful participation of all women and gender diverse persons. As noted above, women continue to be impacted by gendered vulnerabilities and the double burdens of economic and care responsibilities, despite pledges of improvement by opposition leaders. Many women, especially less educated, younger, or older women, described feeling unqualified or unwelcome to speak out on political issues, either due to internalised discriminatory norms where they perceived themselves as 'too uneducated', 'too young' or 'too old' to participate and voice opinions.

## **SOGIESC rights and persisting GBV**

While some individuals of diverse SOGIESC have found solidarity and visibility, particularly in Thai urban areas where they had found spaces of acceptance, others have continued to face systemic erasure and increased daily risks. The acceptance of SOGIESC rights was lowest in Mizoram, where gender norms are shaped by patriarchal traditions and Christianity, and to a lesser degree in Mae Hong Son, where many in the Karenni community are also Christians. While refugees of diverse SOGIESC in Mizoram tended to hide their identities, some were openly visible in Mae Hong Son, but faced discrimination and harassment from other refugees.

The reports of sexual harassment, exploitation, abuse, and retaliation against whistle-blowers within opposition camps and broader resistance movements unfortunately echo similar reports. These cases require preventative and responsive action from the respective organisations; the imperative to do so should be even greater given that gender equality and women's rights are, on paper at least, a central goal of these movements.

## References

Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1991). 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43, pp. 1241–1299.

Khin Khin Mra and Hedström, Jenny (2024). "'This Bra Protects Me Better than the Military': Bodies and Protests in the Myanmar Spring Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 54 (5), pp. 759-780. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2344117>.

Marlar; Chambers, Justine; and Elena (2023). 'Our Htamein, Our Flag, Our Victory: The Role of Young Women in Myanmar's Spring Revolution', *Journal of Burma Studies*, 27 (1), pp. 65-99. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2023.0002>.

UN Human Rights Council (2024). 'Courage amid crisis: gendered impacts of the coup and the pursuit of gender equality in Myanmar: Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar' (1 July 2024). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session56/a-hrc-56-crp-8.pdf>.

UN Women (2024). 'Advancing Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace and Security: Evidence and Ideas for Practice in Myanmar'. Available at: [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/mn-c748-myanmar-wps-brief\\_march2024\\_eng.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/mn-c748-myanmar-wps-brief_march2024_eng.pdf).

## About the authors

**Henri Myrntinen** is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Bremen, Germany. He has been researching and working on gender, peace, and security issues for over two decades with various peacebuilding organisations and international agencies, as well as research institutions. He has published extensively and holds a Ph.D. in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

**Lal Rin Sangi** is a researcher and women's rights activist from Mizoram, India, and is the co-founder of the community-based women's rights organisation The Ladies. She has been working extensively with the Chin refugee community in Mizoram.

**Phyoe Nay Chi** is a Myanmar researcher and activist currently residing in Thailand, and is actively working with the refugee community there. She has conducted research on gender and minority rights issues for several national and international NGOs as well as international agencies. She holds a Master's degree from Mahidol University, Thailand.

**Kyaw Lwin** is a legal scholar and advocate working on human rights and peace studies. He has studied at Chiang Mai University and Mahidol University focusing on public policy and human rights, respectively. He has also various leadership roles, including co-founding organizations such as the legal aid organisation Mhyata Lan Nyun, which provides legal aid to women, children, and vulnerable communities. Kyaw is also a past Director of the Research Centre at Irrawaddy Law School. He has published research on gender-based violence and legal reforms during Myanmar's ongoing conflict situations and shared these at numerous international forums.

## Contacts

Contact for this research:  
**Henri Myrntinen**  
University of Bremen  
[myrntine@uni-bremen.de](mailto:myrntine@uni-bremen.de)

Contact for XCEPT:  
[info@xcept-research.org](mailto:info@xcept-research.org).

## About XCEPT

The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace. The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

[www.xcept-research.org](http://www.xcept-research.org).

