

ETHNOGRAPHY THRICE UNDER FIRE

Myanmar's At-Risk Researchers of At-Risk
Communities in At-Risk Environments



Edited by
**Gustaaf Houtman, Elliot Lodge,
and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**



The Regional Center for Social Science
and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University



IDRC · CRDI

International Development Research Centre
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of At-Risk Communities
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DEDICATION

*To the courage and resilience of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement:
teachers, doctors, civil servants, and countless others
who have chosen conscience over security,
and to all researchers and communities documenting resistance
in the shadow of tyranny.*

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For many years prior to the 2021 military coup, Ajarn Chayan frequently traveled to Myanmar—particularly to the University of Mandalay—to lead academic research trainings. Alongside the editors of this volume, he actively engaged with the projects of local researchers, striving to support their efforts to critically understand the rapid changes unfolding in the country. After the coup made such visits impossible, Ajarn Chayan and the RCSD team shifted their focus to building a supportive academic space in Chiang Mai for scholars at risk. We developed alternative research and educational pathways that have enabled Myanmar academics to continue developing themselves professionally despite the deepening crisis. One such initiative, supporting grounded ethnographies on resistance and resilience by academics affiliated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), has ultimately led to the publication of this volume.

This project has drawn on the rich expertise of scholars from both Myanmar and the region. While we cannot name everyone who contributed, we would like to especially thank Dr. Kyaw for his consistent and insightful mentorship of the ten scholars whose work comprises this volume. Dr. Nyi Nyi Kyaw was also a regular contributor and an invaluable source of knowledge. Dr. Aung Naing provided technical research guidance on several occasions, supporting the scholars throughout their work.

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Above all, we offer our deepest respect and gratitude to those who have sacrificed so much over the past four and a half years of Myanmar’s ongoing tragedy. The victims of war, violence, and oppression at the hands of the nation’s military are too numerous and their suffering too immense to fully comprehend. Among them are countless civil servants and professionals who, before the coup, lived with status, respect, and relative comfort due to their expertise. Many of these individuals chose to give up that comfort—losing jobs, homes, communities, and a sense of normalcy—in pursuit of a better, more inclusive Myanmar. They envision a future in which the people will determine their own destiny and never again fall prey to authoritarian rule.

The ten scholars featured in this volume are among those who made that choice. We hope this book amplifies their voices and helps ensure they remain part of the conversation about shaping a new Myanmar.

ACRONYMS

| | |
|--------|--|
| AA | Arakan Army |
| AAPP | Assistance Association for Political Prisoners |
| BSPP | Burmese Socialist Programme Party |
| CDM | Civil Disobedience Movement |
| CI | Certificate of Identity |
| CRPH | Committee Representing <i>Pyidaungsu Hluttaw</i> |
| EAO | ethnic armed organization |
| ERO | ethnic revolutionary/resistance organization |
| GED | General Educational Development |
| IGCSE | International General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| IDP(s) | internally displaced person(s) |
| KIA | Kachin Independence Army |
| KNU | Karen National Union |
| LDF | Local Defense Force |
| MAI | Minority Affairs Institute |
| NGO | non-governmental organization |
| NLD | National League for Democracy |
| NMF | New Myanmar Foundation |
| NUCC | National Unity Consultative Council |
| NUG | National Unity Government of Myanmar |
| OIA | Overseas Irrawaddy Association |
| PAF | People's Administration Force |
| PAT | People's Administration Team |
| PAR | participatory action research |
| PDF | People's Defense Force |
| PDT | People's Defense Team |
| RCSD | Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development |
| SAC | State Administration Council |
| SDB | Spring Development Bank |
| SLORC | State Law and Order Restoration Council |
| SRIRN | Spring Revolution Inter-Religious Network |
| SRMMN | Spring Revolution Myanmar Muslim Network |
| TUF | thrice under fire |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| USDP | Union Solidarity and Development Party |

GLOSSARY

| | |
|--|---|
| Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) | Ongoing civil resistance movement against the 2021 military coup. Initially a mass strike of public sector workers who refused to work under the junta, the objective of the CDM is to deny the junta legitimacy and ability to govern, and to send a strong signal that the people of Myanmar will not accept a military dictatorship. |
| CDMers | Participants of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) |
| National League for Democracy (NLD) | Liberal, democratic political party founded in 1988 and led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The military regime detained party leaders in February 2021 and dissolved the party in 2023, although it remains a powerful political force. |
| National Unity Government (NUG) | Myanmar government-in-exile comprised of elected lawmakers and members of parliament ousted as part of the 2021 military coup. |
| People’s Defense Force (PDF) | Armed resistance wing of the NUG against the Myanmar military. The military junta designated the PDF as a terrorist organization in May 2021. Four months later, the PDF announced armed operations against the junta. |
| Section 505(a) | Broadly worded section of Myanmar’s Penal Code criminalizing speech or acts perceived as challenging military authority. Violations carry up to three years in prison. |
| Spring Revolution | Decentralized resistance movement initiated following the 2021 coup that seeks to unite citizens in rejection of military rule and calls for return to democratic governance. |
| State Administration Council (SAC) | Military junta governing Myanmar following the 2021 coup. The legitimacy of the SAC is contested by the NUG. The SAC was officially dissolved in July 2025 ahead of elections scheduled for December 2025. |

BURMESE TERMS

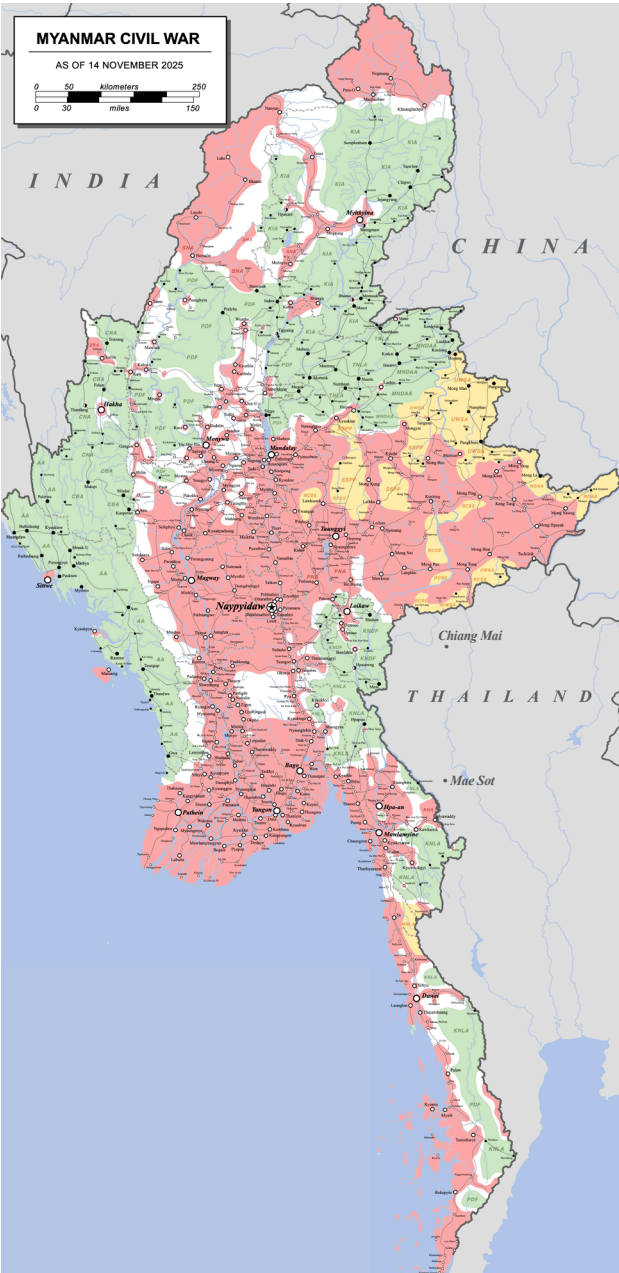
| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>A Dhamma</i> | opposite to the teachings of the Buddha; signifying immoral behavior, misconduct, or unjust actions |
| <i>a thoat sone sai</i> | teashop |
| <i>Amyotha Hluttaw</i> | National Assembly/House of Nationalities |
| <i>baht</i> (THB) | Thai currency; 1USD=32.3 baht as of October 2025 |
| <i>dalan</i> | informant; spy |
| <i>Dana</i> | charitable acts |
| <i>Dhamma</i> | the teachings of the Buddha |
| <i>kyat(s)</i> (MMK) | Myanmar currency; 1USD=2,100 kyats as of October 2025 |
| <i>kyu</i> | squatters |
| <i>kyu myo</i> | squatter community or settlement |
| <i>longyi</i> | traditional Burmese garment worn by both women and men, comprised of a single piece of cylindrical cloth |
| <i>mhaekho</i> | financially dependent (adjective) |
| <i>mohinga</i> | the national dish of Myanmar: rice noodle soup with a fish-based broth |
| <i>nat(s)</i> | traditional Burmese spirit(s) |
| <i>Pa-Ah-Pha</i> | People's Administration Team |
| <i>Pa-Ka-Pha</i> | People's Defense Team |
| <i>pankthakyu</i> | donations |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <i>parahita</i> | social welfare; charity |
| <i>phon</i> | power or spiritual potency culturally associated with males |
| <i>pwe</i> | traditional ceremony or festival |
| <i>pyidaungsu</i> | union |
| <i>Pyidaungsu Hluttaw</i> | Assembly of the Union (national parliament under the 2008 Constitution) |
| <i>Pyithu Hluttaw</i> | People’s Assembly/House of Representatives |
| <i>Sa-Ya-Pha</i> | Military Intelligence |
| <i>sayama</i> | female educator |
| <i>sit-khwe</i> | military dogs (colloquial, derogatory term for military informants and collaborators) |
| <i>tainyinthar</i> | indigenous ethnic groups |
| <i>Tatmadaw</i> | Myanmar’s military, administered by the Ministry of Defence and composed of the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Navy and the Myanmar Air Force. |
| <i>thanaka</i> | traditional cosmetic paste made from ground tree bark |
| <i>thila</i> | moral precepts |

CONFLICT MAP OF MYANMAR

Military situation in Myanmar as of November 14, 2025

red: military (Tatmadaw) control; other colors: resistance forces and contested areas



Source: Wikipedia Commons, Myanmar conflict (accessed November 27, 2025)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Myanmar_civil_war_simplified.svg

Ethnography Thrice Under Fire: An Introduction

Gustaaf Houtman and Elliot Lodge

Abstract

This introduction establishes the “thrice under fire” (TUF) framework for understanding ethnographic research conducted under conditions of extreme repression. It analyzes how researchers of Myanmar’s post-2021 coup landscape conduct fieldwork while facing three simultaneous threats: criminalization for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement, communities targeted for erasure, and institutional collapse. These academics study communities under military attack while they themselves lack institutional protection. This triple convergence transforms conventional researcher-participant boundaries, producing what we term “solidarity knowledge”: understanding validated through shared persecution rather than institutional authority. This introduction documents methodological innovations including trust-based sampling, encrypted digital ethnography, and mobile documentation. It presents ethical adaptations that prioritize collective protection over conventional consent procedures. The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development provides an institutional model for supporting at-risk researchers. TUF conditions change fundamental aspects of ethnographic practice: researcher positioning, temporal dynamics, knowledge validation, and gendered dimensions of fieldwork. The experiences of Myanmar’s vulnerable post-coup researchers offer both a warning about the fragility of academic freedom and practical methods for sustaining rigorous research when conventional approaches fail and institutions become weaponized against scholars.

Keywords: Myanmar, Civil Disobedience Movement, ethnographic methods, research ethics, authoritarianism, solidarity knowledge, at-risk researchers, fieldwork under fire

What happens to ethnography when researchers themselves become targets of state violence? When their field sites face active erasure? When universities are weaponized against the scholars they once housed?

Myanmar's post-2021 coup researchers confront this triple convergence. As Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants who have refused to continue working under military authority, they face criminalization for their resistance activities, study communities under military attack, and operate in an environment of complete institutional collapse. We term this condition "thrice under fire" (TUF). Three simultaneous threats converge: to researcher safety, community survival, and knowledge infrastructure. Together, they fundamentally transform what ethnographic practice means and what insights become possible.

This introduction establishes the TUF framework: what happens when researchers, communities, and institutions face simultaneous targeting. It documents the methodological innovations and ethical adaptations these conditions require. The ten chapters that follow demonstrate how knowledge production persists even when its foundations face deliberate erasure—generating insights unavailable through conventional approaches.

Book structure and chapter overview

This volume organizes chapters by risk geography: Under the Regime (urban surveillance), In Exile (border statelessness), and In the War Zone (active conflict). This geographic framing embodies a theoretical argument about the politics of place-making. It engages with how space is socially produced and contested (Lefebvre, 1991). Myanmar's military regime attempts to control physical space by un-making communities. Phill's "ethnography of erasure" (chapter 3) documents this process directly: neighborhoods demolished, populations scattered, evidence destroyed. Against this, people forge new social places for survival through what de Certeau (1984) calls "tactics." These range from Mya Aung's digital commons on encrypted platforms to Ayadaw Thu's forest refuges where displaced villagers establish temporary governance structures. Space under TUF is not merely a research setting but contested political terrain. Knowledge production itself becomes an act of place-making against state-imposed erasure. When the military burns a vil-

lage, researchers documenting that village before its destruction assert that place existed, that community mattered, that erasure will not be absolute.

Part I (Under the Regime) presents chapters 1–4, research conducted in Myanmar's cities where the military retains control through pervasive surveillance. **SyyS** examines generational Bamar attitudes toward federalism in Yangon. **Rose** documents female CDM members' downward mobility in Mandalay. **Phill** witnesses forced evictions in Yangon's Hlaing Thayar District. **Thiri** studies everyday resistance in Kantkaw's weaving community. The common thread: covert research methodologies, documentation of state-led erasure, and analysis of everyday resistance practices under constant monitoring. These researchers navigate checkpoints, informants, and digital surveillance while maintaining scholarly rigor.

Part II (In Exile) follows chapters 5–7 to the Thai-Myanmar border, primarily Mae Sot, where legal limbo defines the research condition. **Kalyah** examines how female CDM teachers negotiate identity and maintain professional dignity while stateless. **Mya Aung** analyzes how digital communities become survival infrastructure for displaced CDM participants. **Than Lwin Oo (Thar Gyi)** explores Myanmar Muslims' prospects for political inclusion from his position as an exiled minority insider. These chapters reveal how statelessness creates different vulnerabilities than urban surveillance. Deportation replaces arrest, but shared precarity with participants remains constant.

Part III (In the War Zone) presents chapters 8–10 from Myanmar's active conflict zones, particularly in Sagaing Region where resistance forces contest military control. **Aye Mya** documents women's leadership transformation among CDM teachers. **Lwin** examines gendered dimensions of displacement and resilience. **Ayadaw Thu** analyzes how a village mobilizes social capital to sustain collective life under siege. Here, kinetic violence creates the immediate backdrop: airstrikes, artillery, ground combat. This demands mobile ethnography and rapid documentation as communities face potential erasure.

Readers may approach the volume sequentially to better understand escalating risk intensities, or thematically by focusing on specific concerns: gender dynamics of resistance and leadership (chapters 2, 5, 8, 9), digital methods (chapter 6), political structures (chapters 1, 7, 10), or community resilience (chapters 4, 9, 10). Each chapter stands alone while contributing

to the larger framework, demonstrating how TUF conditions enable insights unavailable through conventional ethnographic approaches.

Myanmar's post-coup crisis

Myanmar's February 1, 2021 coup shattered a decade-long experiment with semi-democratic governance. The military seized power by arresting State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other elected leaders. They claimed (without evidence) widespread fraud in the November 2020 elections that the National League for Democracy (NLD) appeared to have won decisively. This power grab sparked immediate nationwide resistance through the newly-formed CDM. An estimated 75 percent of approximately one million government workers had joined the movement by March 2021 (Renew Democracy Initiative, 2021). The education sector saw particularly high participation rates. Teachers and university faculty recognized that legitimizing military rule over schools and universities would normalize authoritarian control over knowledge production itself.

The regime's response to the resistance was swift and brutal. Military and police forces deployed deadly violence against peaceful protesters. They killed over 1,500 civilians in the first year following the coup. By mid-July 2025, civilian deaths had reached 7,008, with 29,459 arrested and 22,231 remaining detained (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2025). Tactics expanded beyond street violence to systematic persecution of CDM participants specifically. The military terminated CDM participants from government positions, evicted them from state housing, and placed their names on arrest lists. The military charged many under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code, which carries penalties of up to three years imprisonment for acts vaguely defined as "disloyalty" or "agitation." By early 2022, close to 10,000 anti-coup activists had been criminalized under this sweeping decree (Free Expression Myanmar, 2022). Many fled to border areas or went into hiding. The junta denied CDM members basic government services, including passport issuance. This effectively confined them within the country even as it made remaining there dangerous.

The junta also implemented forced conscription, targeting young men and women for military service. This effectively renders every young person a po-

tential enemy combatant in the regime's eyes, intensifying surveillance of families and creating additional layers of danger for CDM households whose children face both suspicion of resistance sympathies and recruitment pressure.

For academics specifically, joining the CDM has meant choosing professional ethics over employment security. Nearly 30 percent of the country's total teacher workforce were ultimately fired (World Bank, 2023). In higher education alone, over 13,000 academic and other staff were suspended or dismissed for CDM participation. This represents nearly 45 percent of the workforce (Spring University Myanmar, 2021). These were the destruction of carefully built careers. Educators who had spent years achieving professorial rank and social respect found themselves criminalized, unemployed, and institutionally abandoned. Students who had completed years of medical or engineering training saw their education frozen, their futures suspended indefinitely. The military's message was clear: resistance would be punished through violence and systematic erasure of professional identity and livelihood.

The regime's assault on academic institutions has extended from firing CDM participants to dismantling the entire knowledge infrastructure. As of late 2025, public universities and schools remain mostly closed or operate at reduced capacity under strict military control. Myanmar's education system has been effectively frozen since COVID-19 closures began in early 2020. The military has occupied campuses, monitored remaining staff, and stripped curricula of potentially critical content. Academic departments studying politically sensitive topics (federalism, gender studies, ethnic relations, etc.) have faced targeted suppression. The military has arrested faculty, canceled courses, and prohibited research from being conducted. Independent media outlets have been banned. Internet access has been severely restricted through mobile data blackouts in conflict areas and prohibitively expensive costs for virtual private networks needed for secure communication. Academic freedom has been criminalized, not merely constrained. The very act of conducting unauthorized research has become dangerous.

The military regime's oppressive forms of militarization have sparked armed resistance on a scale Myanmar has never before witnessed from its Bamar-majority heartland. New People's Defense Forces (PDFs) have formed

alliances with ethnic armed organizations that have long operated in frontier regions. Together, they now control or contest large areas of the country, particularly along borders and throughout Sagaing Region (see Conflict Map of Myanmar, page xv). A 2024 analysis found that the junta's direct administrative and security control had shrunk to a mere 21 percent of Myanmar's territory. The remainder is challenged or held by resistance forces (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). The military has responded with increasing brutality: bombing civilian areas from the air, burning entire villages, routinely torturing arrestees. As of mid-July 2025, over 3.57 million people were internally displaced, with 1.3 million refugees sheltering in neighboring countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025a; 2025b).

This is the post-coup context that has produced the research included in this volume. The contributors are not studying Myanmar's crisis from a safe distance but rather living within it as targets themselves. Their CDM participation is not research positioning but professional and ethical commitment with severe consequences: job loss, criminalization, potential arrest, institutional abandonment. Their refusal to work under military authority stems from their commitment to academic integrity and principles of democratic education. Yet this same commitment provides them unique access to, and understanding of, community resistance that external observers are not able to achieve. They document Myanmar's transformation not as visiting ethnographers but as participants whose scholarly work and professional ethics have become inseparable, whose survival and knowledge production are equally threatened, whose research represents both intellectual practice and acts of defiance.

The “thrice under fire” framework

To better understand the conditions enabling solidarity knowledge, we propose the TUF framework. It identifies three simultaneous, mutually reinforcing threats that fundamentally transform ethnographic practice. Malinowski's (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* established fieldwork's foundational premise: extended immersion in a bounded site where the researcher, while facing certain practical challenges, maintains relative safety and institutional support. His wartime fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands as an Austrian

citizen in British territory brought movement restrictions and surveillance, yet these constraints pale against the existential threats confronting contemporary researchers in active war zones or under repressive regimes. The field remained stable. The researcher could eventually exit. The university awaited his return.

Our framework builds on Nordstrom and Robben's foundational 1995 volume, which established that violence must be studied ethnographically, from within, attending to what they termed the "everydayness of war." Their contributors conducted research in Somalia, Guatemala, the Balkans, Palestine, Mozambique, and Northern Ireland. They documented how violence reshapes fieldwork practice, how researchers navigate danger, and how the "ontics of violence" (lived experience) cannot be separated from its epistemology (ways of knowing). This volume builds directly on their intervention.

Yet their framework presumed conditions that TUF negates. Their researchers, however endangered, could eventually exit to safety. Their field sites, however volatile, persisted as researchable locations to which one might return. Their contributors wrote from functioning universities that awaited their return. Even amid violence, their ethnographers remained observers of others' persecution rather than co-targets. Nordstrom and Robben's question was: What happens to ethnography when researchers enter violent field sites? Ours is different: What happens when the foundational premises enabling fieldwork collapse entirely?

TUF describes not merely intensified danger but structural transformation. Myanmar's CDM researchers cannot exit because persecution follows them into exile. Their field sites face deliberate physical erasure, not mere instability. Their institutions have been weaponized against them rather than merely made inaccessible. They share identical criminalization with participants, making observation of others' persecution impossible when it is equally one's own. Where Nordstrom and Robben examined violence as a condition of research, TUF examines what remains possible when every assumption underlying conventional fieldwork fails simultaneously. This convergence produces what we term "solidarity knowledge": understanding validated through shared persecution rather than observational distance.

The first dimension involves direct targeting of researchers for their participation in CDM activities. Myanmar's CDM scholars face arrest warrants, criminalization under Section 505A, property confiscation, and constant surveillance. They cannot move freely, communicate openly, or access government services. Their scholarly identity has become legally dangerous. Conducting research on civil resistance in Myanmar constitutes evidence of sedition. Publishing findings can trigger arrest. Even possessing field notes risks incrimination. This is not ambient risk that researchers might encounter but systematic persecution because of who they are. The regime targets them because of their scholarly work, recognizing that knowledge production threatens authoritarian control. Unlike researchers who visit dangerous field sites temporarily, these scholars cannot exit to safety. They live under constant threat.

The second dimension addresses attempts at community erasure through active targeting. The populations these researchers study face displacement, violence, and deliberate destruction of their communities. Villages are burned, neighborhoods forcibly cleared, communities scattered through military operations designed to eliminate resistance infrastructure. Field sites do not remain stable but disappear entirely. They are physically demolished, legally erased from maps, socially dispersed through forced migration. Research participants face imprisonment, torture, or death not as unfortunate possibilities but as outcomes of systematic state practice. Documentation becomes urgent preservation work. Delay means evidence disappears. Communities being studied may cease to exist as coherent entities. The conventional ethnographic assumption of returning to continue fieldwork becomes impossible when there may be nothing to return to.

The third dimension involves institutional collapse and weaponization. Myanmar's universities are actively deployed against scholars, not merely closed. Campus occupation by security forces, mandatory reporting of CDM participants, criminalization of unauthorized research—these acts transform institutions from sites of knowledge production into surveillance mechanisms. Libraries become inaccessible. Archives are sealed or destroyed. Peer networks are severed by arrests and exile. The infrastructure academics rely upon dissolves entirely. This includes physical resources but also collegial re-

relationships, mentorship structures, and disciplinary communities. Research, if it is to be conducted at all, must proceed in the absence of institutional support: no funding, no libraries, no official affiliations, no protection. The university system has not failed passively but instead has been deliberately weaponized to prevent the production of knowledge that might challenge military narratives.

The distinctiveness of the TUF framework lies in threat convergence and mutual reinforcement. Each of the three dimensions multiplies the effects of the others rather than simply accumulating. Researcher criminalization amplifies community danger, which intensifies the impact of institutional collapse. Community displacement destroys the institutional relationships that might provide some protection. Destruction of institutions leaves researchers and communities equally vulnerable with no mediating structures. The result is a research environment where conventional boundaries—between researcher and researched, between fieldwork and daily life, between observation and survival—become impossible to maintain.

This confluence of dangers changes what researchers can know and how they know it. When scholars are unable to maintain distance with communities they study because both face identical threats, understanding arises through shared persecution rather than observation. Documentation becomes survival practice for researcher and community alike. We call this “solidarity knowledge”—understanding validated through lived experience rather than institutional authority. The chapters in this volume demonstrate how solidarity knowledge functions.

Positioning research under fire

The ten contributors to this volume navigate TUF conditions across three distinct geographies. Each creates specific manifestations of the triple threat. Their simultaneous positioning as targeted researchers, community members, and displaced intellectuals shapes what insights become possible. The predominance of women among these researchers reflects both the gender composition of Myanmar academia and the gendered nature of CDM participation, aspects we examine more fully in the section on how gender shapes what can be known.

Urban researchers under surveillance work in Myanmar's cities where the military retains control through pervasive monitoring, informant networks, and checkpoint systems. Researchers must work covertly, documenting through memory rather than notes while navigating constant surveillance. **SyyS** analyzes differences in Bamar attitudes toward federalism across different generations in Yangon. He develops memorization techniques to avoid written documentation that could incriminate participants or himself. **Rose** documents female CDM members' experiences of downward social mobility in Mandalay through dual sampling strategies. She accesses trusted CDM contacts through encrypted networks while observing strangers through informal encounters. This demonstrates how shared CDM affiliation enables certain research access while heightening mutual risk. **Phill** rushes to document forced evictions in Yangon's Hlaing Thayar squatter settlements before communities disappear entirely. He develops what he terms "ethnography of erasure," a methodology focused on preserving evidence of communities the state actively dismantles. **Thiri** studies forms of everyday resistance among villagers in Kantkaw by disguising research interviews as casual conversations. She shows how covert observation enables documentation of resistance practices occurring under military surveillance.

Exiled researchers on the Thai-Myanmar border navigate legal limbo where statelessness creates different vulnerabilities than urban surveillance. Deportation from Thailand replaces arrest in Myanmar, but shared precarity with participants persists. **Kalyah** examines how fellow exiled CDM teachers negotiate identity and maintain professional dignity while undocumented. Her own statelessness enables insights into the strategic "identity performance" refugees must practice to survive. They imitate Thai dress and speech patterns to avoid police detection while preserving Burmese cultural identity in protected spaces. **Mya Aung** analyzes how digital communities on encrypted platforms like Signal become survival infrastructure for displaced CDM participants. Her security-conscious digital ethnography reveals how online spaces function not as separate virtual realms but as vital extensions of physical resistance networks. They enable information sharing, resource coordination, and psychosocial support. **Than Lwin Oo (Thar Gyi)** explores Myanmar Muslims' prospects for political inclusion in a future federal demo-

cratic union. His overlapping identities as CDM academic, displaced person, and Muslim researcher create what he terms “epistemic privilege.” His insights are accessible precisely because of, rather than despite, his marginalization.

War zone researchers in active conflict sites operate in areas where resistance forces contest or control territory. They study communities experiencing what Nordstrom and Robben (1995) term the “everydayness of war.” Violence becomes embedded in routine existence as a constant backdrop, no longer an exceptional event. **Aye Mya** documents transformations in women’s leadership roles and practices in Sagaing Region while sharing participants’ targeting by military forces. Her research is interrupted by participants fleeing approaching troops mid-interview, applications deleted to avoid potential phone confiscation and inspection. She explicitly theorizes “solidarity knowledge” as insights validated through shared persecution rather than institutional authority. She argues that conventional researcher-participant boundaries collapse entirely when both face identical criminalization. **Lwin** investigates gendered dimensions of displacement and resilience by moving with communities fleeing military operations. Her “mobile ethnography” captures experiences in real-time as displacement occurs rather than retrospectively, preserving testimonies that would otherwise be lost amid the chaos of crisis. **Ayadaw Thu** analyzes how villages in Ayadaw Township make use of pre-existing forms of social capital to sustain collective life when formal governance collapses and PDFs assume security functions. Her concept of “normalcy under fire” describes how communities reassert routine and continuity as forms of resilience amid ongoing violence.

Across these geographies, TUF manifests distinctively: surveillance in cities, statelessness in exile, kinetic violence in war zones. Yet all produce collapsed boundaries between researcher and researched. Threat configuration varies. Shared vulnerability remains constant as the foundation for understanding. These researchers document resistance from within the communities they study.

Methodological innovations

TUF conditions require methodological innovations in response to the triple threat. Aye Mya terms these adaptations “resilient methodology.” Research

practices persist by acknowledging shared vulnerability. Contributors to this volume developed several key innovations, described below.

Security-first protocols respond to direct researcher targeting. Trust-based sampling through verified CDM networks replaces conventional recruitment. Access to informants depends on shared CDM participation and risk rather than credentials or institutional affiliation. Rose's division of participants into "friendship groups" (trusted CDM contacts) and "stranger groups" (observed informally) demonstrates how CDM affiliation determines research relationships under criminalization.

Covert documentation becomes essential when the carrying of research materials brings the risk of arrest for researcher and researched alike. SyyS's memorization techniques for interviews conducted in Yangon exemplify this: he mentally encodes entire conversations and then transcribes them later in secure locations. Thiri disguises research interviews as casual conversations in Kantkaw's weaving community, embedding questions within everyday social interactions to avoid suspicion from informants or authorities.

Encrypted communication protocols structure all digital interaction. Researchers and participants rehearse coded language, immediately delete applications after contact, and prepare contingency plans should phones be confiscated. These practices become shared survival strategies rather than researcher-imposed methods. They are developed collaboratively with participants.

Gender shapes security adaptations in distinct ways. For example, female researchers must navigate heightened surveillance and harassment while attempting to manage personal care responsibilities. Rose's research decisions about methodology and participant access involve **gender-specific risk assessments**: protecting participants from threats of sexual violence, documenting experiences while avoiding exposure that could trigger targeted online harassment, and conducting interviews while seeking to shield households from conscription pressures. These constraints, rarely acknowledged in conventional ethical guidelines, demand innovations in trust-building and documentation strategies.

Urgency-driven documentation responds to community erasure. When field sites face physical destruction, documentation becomes a race against

disappearance. Phill's "ethnography of erasure" in Hlaing Thayar captures communities as they are actively being dismantled. He hastily documents displaced families' testimonies, photographs demolished settlements, preserves evidence before state-led erasure removes all traces. Urgent witnessing replaces patient observation as researchers create counter-archives against official narratives.

Lwin's "**mobile ethnography**" moves with communities fleeing military operations in Sagaing. She documents displacement experiences in real-time rather than retrospectively, conducting interviews between artillery strikes, recording testimonies in temporary forest shelters, capturing crisis moments that would otherwise be lost to memory or death. This temporal compression challenges ethnography's traditional assumption of extended immersion. Depth emerges not from duration but from intensity of shared experience under immediate threat. Preservation becomes the primary methodology when the alternative is complete loss. Researchers position documentation itself as resistance against erasure, creating records that might outlast both researcher and community. Ringel (2022) terms this "conceptual fieldwork": ethnographic interference transformed into methodological virtue when studying rapidly changing contexts where traditional observation proves inadequate.

Alternative infrastructures respond to institutional collapse. **Digital ethnography** becomes a necessity rather than a choice when physical fieldwork is impossible. Mya Aung's analysis of CDM exile communities on Signal demonstrates how encrypted platforms enable research that protects both researcher and participant. Interviews are conducted without location disclosure. Observations are made of group interactions without physical presence. Data is collected through platforms designed for security rather than scholarly purposes. This resonates with what Estalella and Sánchez Criado (2018) term "fieldwork devices": patterned arrangements that produce knowledge through collaboration when traditional ethnographic engagement proves impossible. This inverts conventional digital ethnography where researchers study naturally occurring online communities. Here, digital methods enable the study of primarily offline resistance networks rendered inaccessible through surveillance.

Käihkö (2021) terms similar approaches in Ukrainian conflict zones “chatnography”: conflict ethnography conducted through messaging apps when physical access proves impossible. Yet while Käihkö describes accessing wartime experiences from safe distances, TUF researchers share identical risks with participants through the very platforms enabling research. Waltrip (2018) conceptualizes this as “fieldwork as interface,” where digital technologies simultaneously link and separate researcher and community, but under TUF conditions the interface becomes a site of mutual vulnerability rather than a protective barrier.

Peer networks replace institutional mentorship structures. Monthly encrypted consultations among research fellows create collective problem-solving spaces. Scholars facing similar TUF conditions deliberate methodological challenges, ethical dilemmas, and security protocols together. This distributed peer review substitutes for institutional gatekeepers who no longer exist or actively oppose the research.

Remote research capabilities become essential when researchers cannot safely access field sites or participants cannot risk in-person meetings. Aye Mya’s interviews with Sagaing teachers occur entirely through encrypted voice calls. Conversations with participants are often interrupted in order to flee approaching military convoys. This demonstrates how remote methods adapt to conditions where physical co-presence multiplies danger.

These innovations demonstrate how rigorous research persists when conventional frameworks fail by reimagining what systematic inquiry means under shared threat. Aye Mya terms this “resilient methodology”: research design that embeds security, community protection, and collective survival as foundational elements rather than peripheral concerns.

Ethical adaptations

Standard research ethics presume stable conditions that TUF contexts render impossible. Institutional review boards designed for biomedical research often function as “ill-informed obstruction” in qualitative fieldwork (Sluka, 2018), prioritizing institutional risk management over contextual ethics. Such boards require consent procedures that would incriminate participants or demand data transparency that would endanger resistance networks. When

universities are militarized or researchers operate in exile in the absence of institutional affiliation, conventional review becomes unavailable and anonymization strategies prove inadequate for ensuring participant security in surveillance states. Such situations necessitate “security-embedded ethics.” Safety becomes inseparable from ethics. Protection takes priority over documentation. Collective survival reshapes what research pursues. Conventional consent processes create danger in these contexts. Researchers shift from individual informed consent toward collective protection.

Researchers reimagine what ethical engagement means when conventional consent processes increase potential for danger. Written consent forms become incriminating evidence rather than protective documentation. Researchers develop alternatives. Verbal agreements are documented only through encrypted recordings that are immediately deleted after transcription. As Grimm et al. (2020) argue, in contexts of authoritarian fieldwork, the quality of consent matters more than its format. Participant-controlled disclosure allows individuals to determine what can be documented and when. Ongoing negotiated consent means permissions are renegotiated as threat levels evolve rather than secured once at project outset. The ethical principle shifts from individual autonomous consent to collective protection assessments. Will documentation endanger not just this participant but also their family, their community, others in similar situations? Aye Mya describes confronting “difficult decisions regarding which findings to include or withhold.” She recognizes that “although some findings represented key insights that merited presentation, ethical considerations sometimes necessitated their exclusion.” Ethical practice prioritizes safety over completeness. Significant findings sometimes remain undocumented when sharing them would create unacceptable risks.

Both anonymization and strategic visibility involve persistent ethical tensions without clear resolutions. For example, some participants request to have their real names used. They act in defiance, claim political voice, and ensure families know their stories are told. Yet revealing identities increases the risk of targeting and reprisal even when participants consent. Researchers must judge when honoring agency might inadvertently cause harm. Revolutionary contexts intensify this tension because voicelessness contradicts

resistance commitments. Many participants seek visibility rather than protection through anonymity. Researchers navigate these tensions case-by-case through participant consultation, community input, and ongoing risk assessment. Some chapters use pseudonyms universally. Others allow carefully considered exceptions when participants have insisted on being named despite documented risks. The ethical complexity lies in recognizing that protection through anonymization can itself constitute a form of erasure when individuals seek recognition as actors in resistance. Standard ethics frameworks provide no guidance for such situations where safety and agency conflict irreconcilably.

The burden for ethical decision-making shifts from individual researchers to collective deliberation within peer networks. The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development's (RCSD) fellowship model (described below) creates spaces for peer consultation. Scholars contending with similar TUF conditions deliberate ethical dilemmas together through monthly encrypted virtual meetings. Distributed ethics replaces institutional review boards, not by approximating their function but by creating fundamentally different accountability structures. Researchers present challenges to colleagues experiencing identical threats, those who understand stakes conventional review boards cannot grasp. Decisions emerge through collective deliberation rooted in solidarity rather than hierarchical approval by administrators insulated from danger. This approach also extends to community accountability where research priorities respond to local concerns rather than external academic agendas. Rose's research on female CDM precarity, for example, emerged from community requests to document their experiences, not researcher-imposed interests. Documentation serves community needs for historical preservation, visibility, and mutual recognition as much as scholarly objectives. Ethics becomes a practice of alignment with communities' survival struggles rather than mere harm minimization.

Researchers process their individual grief, anxiety, and fear as lived reality while simultaneously documenting others' parallel experiences. Aye Mya reflects: "As both participant and witness, I worked through grief and anxiety, drawing on resilience not as a research theme, but as lived necessity." The threats inherent in the TUF condition extend beyond researchers to their

families, particularly young people vulnerable to forced military conscription. The regime targets youth both for recruitment and as potential resistance sympathizers. Parents must navigate dual dangers facing their children: conscription by the junta and suspicion by resistance forces. This compounds the risks CDM participation creates for entire households, adding family protection to the already overwhelming ethical and emotional burdens researchers carry.

These emotional burdens affect research integrity. Trauma can impair documentation capabilities, trigger avoidance behaviors, and compromise judgment. Yet conventional support structures are inaccessible when researchers operate in hiding or exile. Weiss et al. (2023) critique what they term “macho ethnography”: the disciplinary tendency to valorize dangerous fieldwork while silencing its psychological costs, framing survival as scholarly virtue rather than acknowledging how trauma compromises both researchers and research. Recent scholarship has powerfully documented the emotional and psychological hazards inherent in ethnographic fieldwork. Davies and Spencer (2010) argue that emotions possess “heuristic, epistemological, and practical currency,” making them “central to our academic endeavour, even intrinsic to it.” Yet conventional academic culture has long maintained the pretense that fieldwork can proceed through emotional detachment. The TUF condition makes this pretense impossible. Emotional vulnerability is not methodological failure but the very condition enabling solidarity knowledge. Peer networks become essential not just for methodological consultation but for mutual psychological support, creating spaces where scholars can acknowledge emotional costs without risking professional stigma. The sustainability of TUF research depends on recognizing that researchers cannot maintain indefinite exposure to violence and loss without consequences for both personal well-being and scholarly rigor.

These adaptations transform ethics from compliance framework to solidarity practice, from one-time approval to ongoing negotiation, from individual researcher responsibility to collective accountability.

RCSD as institutional model

Solidarity knowledge requires institutional support, yet TUF conditions destroy conventional academic structures. How can knowledge production persist when universities become weaponized against scholars? The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University in northern Thailand offers one answer—not as the only model, but as a sustained experiment in what becomes possible when institutions prioritize scholar well-being and survival alongside scholarly rigor.

RCSD's engagement with Myanmar scholars predates the current crisis. Beginning in 2015, as director of the RCSD, Professor Chayan Vaddhanaphuti led regular academic research training visits to Myanmar, particularly the University of Mandalay. He fostered relationships with local researchers and supported their efforts to critically understand rapid changes unfolding in the country. These pre-coup connections created trust networks that became lifelines after February 2021 when such visits became impossible. As joint authors of this introduction, we have been privileged to witness an extraordinary transformation. Both of us participated in RCSD's pre-coup capacity-building efforts at the University of Mandalay and other Myanmar institutions beginning in 2015. We observed emerging scholars evolve into seasoned researchers under conditions that would paralyze most academic careers. Our positioning as former collaborators turned supporters shapes this volume's editorial approach: we write not as external observers documenting Myanmar's crisis but as long-term colleagues accompanying scholars through transformations none of us could have anticipated.

Rather than abandoning Myanmar colleagues when conditions deteriorated, RCSD rapidly reoriented to support scholars at risk. It transformed its capacity-building program into targeted fellowships for researchers facing persecution. This reorientation was not merely logistical but represented institutional commitment to sustaining intellectual life when formal structures have disintegrated.

From 2021 through the present, RCSD has annually supported approximately ten to twelve at-risk researchers. It adapts programming as the crisis evolves from immediate emergency response to sustained long-term support. The program provides financial assistance, methodological training adapted

for TUF conditions, and trauma-informed mentorship that addresses psychological impact as integral to research sustainability. Monthly encrypted peer consultations create collective ethics spaces where scholars deliberate dilemmas together, developing situated responses conventional review boards cannot provide. Digital security training addresses practical realities of conducting research under surveillance: encrypted communication protocols, secure data storage practices, contingency planning for raids or forced relocation. Flexible research support responds to the fluctuating nature of crises. When fellows face displacement, when internet access becomes impossible, when family emergencies interrupt work, RCSD adapts timelines and expectations rather than imposing rigid academic calendars designed for more stable conditions.

RCSD integrates care, security, and scholarly standards as inseparable rather than competing priorities. Conventional academic support treats scholar well-being as separate from research quality. Mental health resources exist alongside but apart from methodological training. RCSD recognizes these cannot be separated under TUF conditions. A researcher experiencing the acute effects of unprocessed trauma cannot conduct rigorous interviews. A scholar facing imminent arrest cannot maintain analytical distance. Support must address survival needs, emotional processing, and intellectual development simultaneously because these dimensions of TUF research mutually constitute each other. This represents what might be termed “holistic academic support” where the person and the project receive equal institutional attention.

The program creates not just individual fellowships but scholarly community. Networks of peers experiencing similar threats share methodological innovations, provide mutual psychological support, and create collective accountability structures. This community sustains when isolation would overwhelm. One fellow described RCSD as “an oasis in the middle of a desert”: material support and reconnection to intellectual life that persecution had sought to extinguish. The network persists beyond individual projects, creating lasting relationships among scholars who may spend years or decades unable to return to their home country.

Yet critical questions remain about sustainability and scalability. What happens when fellows cannot safely return to Myanmar for extended periods, when temporary support extends to five years, ten years, indefinitely? How should institutions address dependency when funding mechanisms are necessarily finite while conditions requiring support persist? These concerns intensify given structural inequalities between better-resourced institutions providing support and scholars requiring it, often reflecting broader patterns of academic dependency despite genuine solidarity. Even genuinely supportive relationships operate within power asymmetries: fellows must produce knowledge legible to international audiences, navigate institutional expectations shaped by Thai contexts, and accept research timelines designed for stability they cannot access. Can RCSD's intensive model scale beyond small cohorts when numbers of at-risk scholars grow? What do post-conflict transitions require institutionally when peace eventually arrives, particularly regarding scholars' choices between reintegration and permanent exile, between Myanmar institutional affiliation and international academic careers? How do displaced scholars reintegrate into Myanmar academia without international institutional validation becoming prerequisite for legitimacy?

These unresolved tensions do not diminish RCSD's significance. Supporting research under siege requires sustained institutional commitment, adaptive programming responsive to evolving crises, and willingness to reimagine what academic support means when conventional structures fail. Universities worldwide host scholars from Afghanistan, Hong Kong, Syria, and other contexts where academics face persecution. RCSD demonstrates how institutions can enable rather than merely shelter TUF research: integrating material support with methodological training, trauma-informed care, security protocols, and community building. Its significance lies in demonstrating that alternative infrastructures are possible, that knowledge production can persist through rather than despite conditions designed to extinguish it, and that institutional courage can sustain intellectual life when formal systems collapse.

Under Professor Chayan Vaddhanaphuti's strong leadership and initiative, RCSD has demonstrated that institutions can stand with persecuted scholars rather than merely assist them, navigating power asymmetries through trust-

based relationships and scholar-centered governance. The scholars in this volume represent one cohort among several RCSD has supported over the past four years, demonstrating that intellectual life can persist when provided an institutional foundation adequate to its conditions.

What this changes

Solidarity knowledge affects four aspects of ethnography: researcher positioning, temporal dynamics of fieldwork, knowledge validation, and how gender structures what can be known. While fieldwork literature addresses dangerous research conditions (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000; Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016), co-vulnerability (Kovats-Bernat, 2002), and compromised positionality (Adams, 1999), solidarity knowledge represents a distinct configuration where all three TUF dimensions converge simultaneously.

How researcher positioning changes

Traditional frameworks assume researchers can maintain distance. “Native ethnography” presumes analytical distance despite shared background. “Activist anthropology” allows protective distance from immediate dangers. “Vulnerable observer” frames vulnerability as choice. None of these concepts, however, address unavoidable, shared persecution—which entirely alters the meaning of positioning. Solidarity knowledge emerges from this condition. It builds directly on what Liu and Shange (2018) refer to as “thick solidarity”: a form of relating that does not rely on false equivalences of shared suffering, but rather “pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of” persecuted experiences. It is grounded in a “radical belief in the inherent value of each other’s lives despite never being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives.” Their framework addresses solidarity across different communities of struggle, assuming some minimal distance between allies. TUF researchers experience something qualitatively different. Even that minimal distance collapses entirely. Researcher and researched face identical persecution, making solidarity an existential condition rather than a political choice.

Solidarity knowledge emerges from qualitatively different positioning: shared targeting for CDM participation as foundation for understanding.

Myanmar's CDM researchers do not choose engagement with persecuted communities—they themselves are persecuted in similar ways. They cannot maintain distance because both researcher and the researched face the same risks of arrest, displacement, and effects of institutional abandonment.

Marcus (1995) conceptualizes fieldwork relationships through “complicity”: affinity rooted in shared anxiety about external forces. Yet he assumes researchers remain “markers of outsideness” who eventually exit the field site and return to institutional safety. TUF researchers experience no such outsideness. They are insiders to persecution itself. The impossibility of separation distinguishes the TUF researcher's positioning from varying degrees of engagement. Being subject to the same constraints as those they study becomes a shared predicament, making solidarity the precondition for any knowledge production. Positionality shifts from something researchers navigate to the condition that determines what they can understand.

How time shapes what can be known

Traditional ethnography presumes temporal structure: researchers enter field sites for defined periods, conduct extended immersion, then exit to write. Even dangerous fieldwork assumes temporally limited exposure to danger. Researchers may face threats during fieldwork but eventually return to safety. On the other hand, the TUF condition creates permanent, unbounded crisis where temporal boundaries disappear. Researchers experience no separation between “being in the field” and ordinary life because the entirety of their lives exists under threat. Research becomes ongoing survival practice rather than a discrete temporal project.

Cohen (1992) describes “post-fieldwork fieldwork” where researchers’ “mental notebooks are never closed,” carrying field experiences into later life. TUF intensifies this beyond metaphor. TUF researchers can never completely close their notebooks because the field (defined by persecution) follows them even in exile, making temporal boundaries between fieldwork and ordinary life impossible to maintain. This temporal compression has methodological implications. Linguistic anthropology has long grappled with documentation urgency when languages face extinction (Bower, 2008), but TUF extends

this imperative to communities and knowledge systems facing deliberate political erasure rather than gradual cultural shift.

Phill's ethnography of erasure documents communities as they disappear, creating urgency that redefines what "sufficient" data collection means. Enough is whatever can be captured before erasure occurs. Lwin's mobile ethnography moves with displaced populations, conducting research between artillery strikes, in temporary shelters, during active flight. Depth emerges not from duration but from intensity of shared experience under immediate threat. Research persists as ongoing survival practice rather than as discrete temporal project.

How knowledge becomes validated

Conventional research validity relies on institutional authority (peer review, academic credentials, methodological rigor verified by disciplinary standards), replicability (other researchers could repeat procedures to verify findings), and detachment (distance enables objectivity). TUF research operates outside these conventional criteria while maintaining rigor through alternative validation mechanisms. Validity operates through different mechanisms: experiential grounding in which shared persecution validates understanding conventional observation cannot access; community verification where those experiencing conditions confirm or challenge interpretations, replacing institutional peer review with participant accountability; and collective survival where knowledge proves useful for navigating shared threats, demonstrating validity through practical application rather than abstract standards.

Olivier de Sardan (2016) argues anthropology operates through "traces"—quotations, descriptions, case studies—that substantiate claims when quantitative verification proves impossible or insufficient. Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) describe a "dialectic of guessing and validation" where theory emerges through iterative engagement. Aye Mya's concept of "experiential validity" and "preservation epistemology" extend these arguments to conditions where conventional distance proves impossible. When tomorrow may bring complete loss, understanding emerges through shared vulnerability rather than detached observation.

How gender shapes what can be known

The gendered nature of solidarity knowledge in Myanmar emerges predominantly from women's positioning. Seven of ten contributors to this volume are female. This is not coincidental. Women vastly outnumber men in Myanmar's education and healthcare sectors. This numerical dominance reflects Myanmar's academic institutions and caring professions offering women social status despite low pay (Proserpio & Fiori, 2022). Women's mass CDM participation has been driven not only by professional ethics but by principled resistance against the military's pervasive "culture of male violence" (MiMi Aye, 2021). Their refusal to work under junta control formed the bedrock of early resistance, significantly disrupting the regime's ability to govern. Women dominated professions with the highest representation and visibility in early coup resistance, causing them to be disproportionately targeted for CDM participation.

Gender shapes how TUF manifests. Women face gender-specific surveillance including monitoring of movement and family responsibilities. Caregiving obligations become weaponized as control mechanisms. Sexual violence is deployed as both threat and weapon of war. Women navigate these dangers while simultaneously confronting persistent patriarchal norms within resistance movements themselves, what some term "triple resistance": against the regime, internal patriarchy, and traditional gender expectations. Care networks that sustain families amid displacement become both research sites and survival infrastructure, collapsing conventional boundaries between domestic and political spheres. They navigate different survival strategies: using domestic spaces as research sites when public movement becomes dangerous, leveraging care networks as information sources, theorizing crisis through gendered analytical frameworks.

Aye Mya's concept of "gendered moral authority" shows how female leaders gain legitimacy through principled resistance, visible suffering, and community care rather than formal institutional positions. This authority leverages traditional associations of women as nurturers while meeting the urgent needs of besieged populations, transforming care labor into political leadership. Lwin's analysis reveals the differential impacts of displacement by gen-

der, with women shouldering primary responsibility for maintaining family and community cohesion during forced movement. The institutional collapse documented throughout this volume hits women educators particularly hard given their concentration in these sectors, yet simultaneously sparks women-led innovation in alternative knowledge networks. These are not incidental observations but instead demonstrate that solidarity knowledge cannot be abstracted from specific power structures creating shared vulnerability. In Myanmar, patriarchal structures have placed women at the frontlines of resistance; thus, solidarity knowledge emerges largely from their positioning. This builds on Haraway's (1988) foundational argument that all knowledge claims emerge "from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body." Feminist ethnography has long challenged the fiction of the ungended scholar (Abu-Lughod, 1990), but TUF conditions cause this fiction to collapse entirely. Female researchers cannot perform gender neutrality when their gender determines surveillance patterns, care responsibilities become weapons of control, and professional sectors placing them at resistance frontlines also mark them for persecution.

This recognition challenges us to ask: whose knowledge counts as solidarity knowledge? In Myanmar, it is predominantly that of women. In Palestine, it might emerge from different subject positions shaped by specific targeting patterns of the occupation. In Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it would reflect those who face education bans and movement restrictions. The framework requires attending to how specific structures of domination create conditions for specific forms of shared persecution—and thus specific possibilities for understanding. Solidarity knowledge is not a universal category but rather a historically and structurally specific phenomenon requiring analysis of the power relations producing it.

TUF research produces a distinct form of knowledge that conventional approaches cannot access. Solidarity knowledge demonstrates that extreme limitation can produce analytical advantage, that collapsed boundaries enable rather than prevent rigorous understanding, and that knowledge production persists through reimagining rather than approximating conventional practices.

Global implications

Myanmar's specificity demands caution in universalizing the concepts of TUF and solidarity knowledge. Yet certain methodological and ethical innovations may inform research in other contexts where academics face persecution, communities experience targeting, and institutions collapse. Application requires adaptation to distinct conditions.

While the TUF framework was developed from Myanmar's post-2021 context, we recognize that researchers in other authoritarian environments face analogous convergences of threats, though manifested through different mechanisms. Palestinian scholars, for example, experience systematic surveillance and movement restrictions, community displacement and violence (reaching catastrophic intensity in Gaza since October 2023 with complete destruction of universities), and institutional control through military occupation. Female Afghan scholars face collective criminalization through gender-based educational bans, erasure of women's intellectual life, and complete ideological reconstruction of universities under Taliban rule. Hong Kong academics navigate lawfare through national security charges, dismantling of civil society and political memory, and institutional co-option where administrators enforce state repression.

Rather than claim Myanmar's uniqueness, we propose TUF as a diagnostic framework for understanding how researchers, communities, and institutions come under simultaneous attack across diverse political contexts, whether through military violence, theocratic reconstruction, settler-colonial occupation, or legal-administrative control. The specific configuration and intensity of these threats varies substantially, requiring careful attention to local power structures and historical conditions. The framework applies beyond the Global South. Since April 2024, police have arrested over 3,000 students and faculty at Palestine-related protests on more than sixty US campuses, and universities have dismissed professors for pro-Palestine speech in what scholars describe as attacks reflecting "the ideology behind the logic of destruction inflicted on the cultural infrastructure of Palestine itself" (Lenard, 2024). Liberal democracies suppress scholarship when it threatens geopolitical alignments.

Each context differs in crucial ways. Lee (1994) and Kovats-Bernat (2002) distinguish “ambient danger” (generalized instability affecting everyone) from “situational danger” (systematic targeting of researchers specifically). Most authoritarian contexts involve ambient danger with occasional situational risks. TUF describes sustained convergence: researchers face systematic targeting, communities experience ambient danger escalating to deliberate erasure, and institutions transform from being neutral to weaponized. This triple simultaneity differentiates Myanmar from contexts where one or two dimensions may predominate. Occupation creates different targeting patterns than civil war. Religious authoritarianism differs from military dictatorship. National security frameworks differ from explicit coup conditions.

Transferable elements of the TUF methodology include security protocols for encrypted communication, trust-based sampling through resistance networks, trauma-informed research ethics, collective peer consultation replacing institutional review, and recognition that shared vulnerability can enable rather than prevent rigorous inquiry. These innovations respond to common challenges: how to conduct research when all communication is monitored, when participants face severe reprisal risks, when institutional support evaporates, when conventional ethical frameworks endanger those they purport to protect. Even these useful approaches must adapt to local conditions. Encryption needs appropriate to Myanmar’s internet restrictions may differ from those necessary for China’s sophisticated monitoring systems. Trust networks structured through Myanmar’s CDM may not map onto Palestinian resistance organizations or underground Afghan education networks. Trauma processing adequate for Myanmar scholars may require different approaches for researchers working amidst other conflicts.

Context-specific factors include Myanmar’s religious and ethnic composition, the CDM’s organizational structure, border proximity to Thailand, and gender configurations placing women at resistance frontlines. Other contexts have their own specificities: Palestine’s occupation legacy, Afghanistan’s governance under Islamic law, Hong Kong’s colonial history, Syria’s sectarian dimensions. The framework requires asking: what power structures create shared vulnerability? Who gets criminalized, displaced, erased? What alternative infrastructures emerge?

The broader stakes extend beyond academic methodology to disciplinary futures. The global rise in authoritarianism threatens academic freedom in Myanmar, Hong Kong, Turkey, Hungary, Brazil, and increasingly in the United States and Europe. More researchers face or will face conditions analogous to TUF: persecution for scholarly work, targeting of research communities, weaponization of institutions against knowledge production. The question becomes not whether such research will occur but whether disciplines will recognize it as legitimate, whether institutions are prepared to support it, whether ethical frameworks can accommodate it. Myanmar offers both warning and possibility: warning that academic freedom remains fragile everywhere, possibility that knowledge production persists even when its foundations face deliberate destruction.

This volume cannot predict how solidarity knowledge might manifest in other contexts. We offer Myanmar's post-coup experience as one case study, distinctive yet potentially instructive. Other contexts will generate their own forms of knowledge under siege, their own methodological innovations, their own ethical adaptations. The key is recognizing shared patterns rather than universalizing Myanmar's specifics: when persecution creates conditions making conventional research impossible, scholars develop alternatives through which rigorous inquiry persists. These alternatives deserve recognition as legitimate knowledge production, not degraded approximations of proper ethnography. They require institutional support adequate to their conditions rather than pressures to conform to standards designed for stability. They demand evaluative criteria acknowledging that validity under TUF operates through different mechanisms than conventional peer review. Myanmar demonstrates what becomes possible when scholars refuse to let persecution silence them, when institutions commit to sustaining rather than merely sheltering persecuted researchers, when knowledge itself becomes a form of resistance against erasure.

Conclusion

We opened by asking what happens to ethnography when researchers become targets, field sites face erasure, and universities turn against scholars. The chapters in this volume answer: knowledge production persists, trans-

forms, and intensifies. It does so on fundamentally different grounds, based on what we have termed solidarity knowledge.

Mya Aung's encrypted ethnography functions without physical field sites. Rose's trust-based sampling operates through CDM networks rather than institutional protocols. Kalyah analyzes her own precarity as data. Thar Gyi's marginalized positioning grants epistemic access unavailable to secure observers. Aye Mya makes explicit what others enact: "When researcher, researched community, and research infrastructure face simultaneous threat, the boundary between academic and activist knowledge dissolves." The TUF framework synthesizes patterns visible across all ten chapters.

Solidarity knowledge represents a distinct form of understanding requiring new evaluative criteria, not degraded knowledge struggling under constraint. Solidarity knowledge cannot be validated through conventional peer review when institutions are weaponized, cannot demonstrate replicability when field sites face erasure, cannot maintain detachment when researchers and participants share identical targeting. Its validity operates through experiential grounding, community verification, and collective survival, proving essential for the navigation of shared threats.

TUF conditions reveal assumptions fundamental to ethnography itself, extending far beyond Myanmar. Conventional ethnographic practice presumes researcher safety enabling extended immersion, field site stability allowing return visits, institutional infrastructure supporting data analysis and publication, temporal boundaries separating fieldwork from ordinary life. These assumptions were never universal. They reflect the privilege of scholars working from positions of relative security within functioning institutional systems. TUF makes visible what has always been true: knowledge is situated within specific power relations, precarious rather than guaranteed, enacted through commitment rather than neutral. The environment in which contemporary Myanmar researchers operate does not represent an extreme exception but rather an increasingly common condition as authoritarianism spreads globally, as academic freedom contracts, as universities face state pressure to suppress critical inquiry. Their experiences prefigure challenges growing numbers of scholars will confront as conditions deteriorate in contexts from Hong Kong to Hungary, Turkey to Brazil, Afghanistan to Thailand.

The stakes are therefore broader than Myanmar alone. Growing numbers of contexts produce researchers facing TUF or analogous conditions: persecution for scholarly work, targeting of research communities, weaponization of institutions against knowledge production. This demands disciplinary recognition that solidarity knowledge constitutes legitimate academic inquiry deserving support rather than skepticism, institutional preparedness through models like that of RCSD demonstrating what adequate support requires, and ethical frameworks centering security and collective protection rather than individual consent and institutional compliance. Universities hosting scholars from Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, and elsewhere must recognize that temporary refuge alone proves insufficient. Sustaining TUF research requires long-term commitment, trauma-informed support, security training, peer networks, and willingness to reimagine what scholarly rigor means when conventional standards presume levels of stability inaccessible to these researchers.

Yet unresolved questions persist, questions this volume opens without closing. Sustainability remains uncertain. Myanmar's crisis may extend years or even decades. Can researchers maintain psychological resilience under permanent existential threat? Does extended exposure eventually overwhelm their capacity for rigorous analysis? Post-conflict transitions pose additional challenges. When peace eventually arrives, how do displaced scholars reintegrate into Myanmar academia or establish themselves permanently in exile? What happens to solidarity knowledge when shared persecution recedes? Does it transform into other forms or does its foundation dissolve? Transferability limits remain unclear: what aspects of Myanmar's experience prove instructive for other contexts versus what remains irreducibly specific to Buddhist-majority, post-colonial, ethnically complex civil war conditions? These questions cannot be answered now because conditions continue to evolve, because some transitions remain years distant, because other contexts will generate their own distinctive forms rather than simply replicating Myanmar's patterns.

The ten scholars whose work comprises this volume have demonstrated that intellectual life persists even when targeted for destruction. Their research proves that when conventional boundaries (between researcher

and researched, between observation and survival, between detached scholarship and committed documentation) collapse, new forms of understanding become possible. Solidarity knowledge emerges through conditions of shared persecution, validating insights accessible only through lived experience rather than institutional authority. This is ethnography forged in crisis. Documentation becomes defiance. Scholarship merges with survival. As authoritarianism intensifies globally and academic freedom faces growing threats, the methodological innovations, ethical adaptations, and contributions developed through this collaboration offer not templates to replicate but possibilities to reimagine: what becomes of knowledge when its foundations face deliberate erasure, how scholarship persists when institutions fail, why understanding forged through shared vulnerability proves not weaker but stronger than that which detachment could ever allow.

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PART I:

**UNDER
THE REGIME**

I keep my home closed and live in isolation
and secrecy with my family.
I avoid speaking with other residents in my ward
due to fear of informants who might report
to the military.

—A woman in Mandalay, speaking to Rose

Chapter 1

Imagining the Bamar State Under Fire: Generational Politics and Federal Recognition in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract

This is a preliminary reflection on attitudes among Myanmar's Bamar majority toward the formation of a "Bamar State" within the nation's proposed federal union in the post-revolutionary era. Using a qualitative approach grounded in narrative methods, in-depth interviews, and discussions conducted under conditions of active civil war, this study engages with participants of various ages and backgrounds in Yangon. It finds a stark generational gap: while older Bamar people still hold onto nationalistic views shaped by years of government propaganda against federalism, younger Bamar are much more open to federal systems that would allow Myanmar's ethnic minorities an equal footing. This research, conducted under conditions of political persecution and security risks for both the author and the research participants, helps us understand how historical experiences shape different generations' views on federalism and highlights why education about federal principles is crucial for creating lasting political solutions in post-revolutionary Myanmar.

Keywords: Bamar State, proposed federal union, generational perspectives, *thymos*, conflict zone research, federalism discourse

Editorial note: *This chapter was prepared while the author was facing risk of arrest for his civil disobedience activities and is not fully finalized due to a breakdown in communication with the editors. The author's research on federalism is particularly sensitive, as the military regime actively targets those discussing federal systems that would grant ethnic minorities equal political standing. Despite briefly reestablishing contact through secure channels, the author has been unable to engage our suggested revisions following the implementation of increased surveillance operations. Given the documented pattern of arrests targeting CDM academics, we have decided to publish this incomplete manuscript with minimal editorial intervention, believing that the author's insights, even in incomplete form, provide valuable documentation of political conversations occurring during this critical period in Myanmar's history.*

Introduction

Myanmar's ethnic leaders first proposed the formation of a federal union that would ensure national equality, self-administration, and self-determination for all ethnicities (or "nationalities") in the early 1960s. As an integral part of their proposal, they urged the power-holding elites of the Bamar majority to re-form Myanmar proper (the central area of the country predominantly inhabited by the Bamar) into a single "Bamar State" in order to cooperate with ethnic states on an equal basis (Peace and Goodwill Union, 1962). This proposal was welcomed by neither the national powerholders nor opposition elites within Bamar political circles. The Bamar-dominated military censured ethnic leaders who advocated for a federal structure as "destroyers of the Union" and launched its 1962 coup with the alleged aim of "saving the Union."

In an ironic response to the aspirations of the country's ethnic leaders, military elite led by General Ne Win divided Myanmar proper into seven divisions and placed them together with seven "ethnic" states under a centralized unitary system (Government of the Union of Burma, 1974). They simultaneously distorted the concept of federalism, portraying it as a dangerous idea that would threaten national unity. Such propaganda created widespread misconceptions about federalism among the Bamar majority. Despite this, ethnic leaders have persistently maintained their federal claims throughout successive military regimes (Federal Constitution Drafting Committee, 2008). While these claims were officially revived during peace conferences during the country's 2011-2021 democratization era, they again failed to gain substantive agreement from power-holding elites (Lian Hmung, 2021).

The 2021 coup and subsequent Spring Revolution uprising intensified ethnic leaders' efforts to materialize a federal union through negotiations with Bamar revolutionary elites. Their arguments for the formation of a Bamar State with equal status to ethnic states as the foundation of the proposed federal union became clearer than ever before, but have yet to receive an adequate response from Bamar revolutionary leaders—most notably the National Unity Government (NUG), the opposition administration formed after the 2021 coup.

This research examines contemporary attitudes among Myanmar's Bamar population toward federalism within the context of Myanmar's ongoing

civil war. To explore this topic, this chapter will first outline the theoretical frameworks underpinning the discussion, including concepts of federalism, confederation, and recognition (*thymos*). It will then detail the research problem and the challenging methodological context defined by the author's positionality under repression. Subsequently, the paper presents findings on the perspectives of different Bamar age groups and ethnic minorities, analyzes relevant political discourse, and concludes with reflections on the implications of these findings for Myanmar's future. This study was undertaken against a backdrop of extreme political volatility, military violence, and personal risk that fundamentally shapes both the research methodology and analytical perspective. The challenges of conducting fieldwork under these conditions are addressed in detail in the methodology section.

Federalism, confederation, and Myanmar

This research utilizes theories of federalism originally developed by Johannes Althusius and Montesquieu in the 17th and 18th centuries as described by Ronald L. Watts (1999). Althusius' theory centers on the concept of "consociation," voluntary associations of communities that retain significant autonomy while forming a larger political body. This resonates with Myanmar ethnic leaders' persistent demands for self-determination within a unified structure. Montesquieu's contribution to federalism emphasizes the separation of powers and checks and balances, informing our understanding of how different ethnic states might relate to central authority in a federal system.

Watts' contemporary configurations of federalism offer practical frameworks for power-sharing in deeply divided societies, particularly relevant to Myanmar's complex ethnic landscape. As Watts (1999) notes, federal arrangements can provide mechanisms for "combining shared rule for some purposes and self-rule for others within a single political system so that neither is subordinate to the other" (p. 1). This principle directly addresses the historical power imbalance between the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities in Myanmar's governance structures.

This research also draws on James Scott's (1990) concepts of "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" to analyze how Bamar people

discuss their views on federalism differently in official settings versus private conversations. Scott's ideas help us understand how groups who feel marginalized develop critiques of dominant ideologies that they cannot express openly. In Myanmar, decades of military propaganda against federalism have created an "official narrative" that portrays federal arrangements as dangerous to national unity. However, my interviews reveal that alternative viewpoints exist—especially among members of younger generations—that question this narrative. Scott's approach helps illuminate how people form and express political ideas differently across generations that have experienced varying levels of state control over political discourse.

This research also examines the concept of confederation, first articulated by Sir John A. Macdonald and other "Fathers of Confederation" during the 1864 Québec Conference and the 1865 parliamentary debates (Macdonald-Laurier Institute, n.d.). While theories of federalism help identify possibilities for power-sharing among diverse ethnic groups within a unified system, confederation-related concepts provide means to consider alternatives for harmonizing relationships among ethnic groups that historically maintained sovereign status. As Rogers (1931) explains, confederation represents "a union of sovereign states, in which each member state retains its independent existence" (p. 396).

The distinction between federation and confederation has particular relevance in the Myanmar context, in which some ethnic armed organizations increasingly favor confederal arrangements. This shift results from their frustration following years of failed federalization talks and their growing control over territory during the civil war, which has allowed them to construct their own systems of governance in many ethnic areas.

Thymos and the politics of recognition

This research utilizes the concept of *thymos* originally developed by Homer and elaborated as *isothymia* and *megalothymia* by Francis Fukuyama to analyze ethnic nationalities' persistent claims for federal/confederal arrangements. Fukuyama (2018) defines *isothymia* as "the desire to be recognized as the equal of other people," while *megalothymia* represents "the desire to be recognized as superior" (p. 21). This framework helps explain

ethnic minorities' continuous struggle for equal recognition (*isothymia*) in opposition to historical Bamar dominance (*megalothymia*).

The *thymos* perspective reveals that ethnic demands for federal or confederal status are not merely centered around administrative arrangements but reflect a deeper psychological and political need for recognition of equal dignity. As Fukuyama (2018) argues, "People do not just want respect from others in the abstract; they want to be respected because they are deemed to deserve respect" (p. 23). This insight helps explain why technical solutions that fail to address the fundamental need for recognition have consistently failed to resolve Myanmar's ethnic conflicts.

Research problem identification

While Bamar revolutionary elites have thus far hesitated to fully respond to ethnic leaders' proposals, Gwan Maw (personal communication, 2023), a key leader of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)—one of the major ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) supporting the Spring Revolution—stated that if attempts to establish a federal union are not accomplished by 2025, ethnic leaders' tactics for forming such a union might change afterward. In making this statement, he intentionally avoided using the term "*Myanmar Pyidaungzu*" (Myanmar Union), instead using only "*Pyidaungzu*" (Union). This linguistic choice reflects growing distrust of Bamar hegemony within the union structure.

Meanwhile, EROs continue establishing autonomy and self-administration within their areas of control as the Spring Revolution gains momentum. Some international analysts suggest these homegrown attempts might deviate from federal formation and potentially lead to fragmentation of the union. Following the Northern Alliance's military and territorial victories since its commencement of Operation 1027 against the Myanmar military in late 2023, commander-in-chief of the Arakan Army (AA) Twan Mrat Naing (personal communication, 2024) clearly stated that the Rakhine people would claim confederal status and desire a "coming-together union" rather than a "holding together" one. He further predicted that if others—particularly the Bamar—were to readily accept Rakhine's confederal status, a future union could be established peacefully.

These developments create urgency for the Bamar majority to respond thoughtfully to ethnic leaders' proposals and demands. This research addresses the following primary questions:

1. How does Myanmar's Bamar majority respond to ethnic leaders' proposal for the formation of a Bamar State with equal status to ethnic states?

Depending on whether responses are negative or positive, the research explores two additional questions:

- 2.1 What are the major hindrances preventing the Bamar majority from recognizing ethnic groups' *thymos*?
- 2.2 Which configuration of a potential Bamar State (possibly divided into federal subunits) would be most practical or acceptable to the Bamar majority?

Researcher positionality and security

This research was conducted under what this volume terms “thrice under fire” conditions—work undertaken by a researcher simultaneously vulnerable as a political dissident, connected to communities under threat, and working in the absence of institutional support. As a member of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) dismissed from my university position for participating in the strike against the coup, I face potential arrest and detention while conducting research in a context where Military Intelligence actively targets those perceived as opposing the regime. Furthermore, the ruling military junta considers the research topic of federalism itself highly sensitive and subversive: it actively propagates anti-federal narratives, making any inquiry into public attitudes towards it inherently dangerous. This positionality is not incidental but central to both the methodological approach and analytical perspective presented in this chapter. My direct experience of state repression and loss of professional status due to political activity has inevitably shaped my interactions and interpretations.

The fieldwork for this research took place between March and June 2023 in Yangon, a city transformed through military control following the 2021 coup. I had to be extremely cautious when attempting to meet people for interviews. Most interviews took place in private homes or secluded corners

of teashops where we could talk without drawing undue attention, always conscious of the potential for informants or surveillance.

As a Bamar scholar who once served in the state-run education system, my positionality shaped every stage of fieldwork—from selecting interviewees to sustaining rapport. My participation in the CDM often fostered instant solidarity with interlocutors who had endured similar risks and losses, opening space for frank conversations on federalism and ethnic politics. Among Bamar respondents, shared background could encourage tacit agreement with majority viewpoints that I needed to surface and examine. Many non-Bamar participants, by contrast, greeted my ethnicity and prior state affiliation with apprehension, wary of hidden ties to Military Intelligence or residual loyalty to official institutions. Navigating these mixed perceptions demanded continual negotiation: I began each interview by detailing my own history, acknowledging the privileges attached to being Bamar, and inviting respondents to question my framing at any point.

Conversations with informants took place against the background of state surveillance. Security concerns fundamentally shaped not only the logistics of the research but also the nature of the data collected: what questions felt safe to ask, how people chose to respond, and what remained unsaid. The inability to use recording devices or take detailed notes during interviews—for fear these could endanger participants (and myself) if discovered at checkpoints—necessitated heavy reliance on memory. Key points and direct quotes from interviews were mentally rehearsed and only transcribed hours later in secure locations. This method, born of necessity, inevitably involves a degree of interpretive filtering. These were not abstract ethical considerations but immediate, practical calculations for the security of both myself and my participants.

This research thus embodies what Behar (1996) calls “vulnerable observation,” in which the ethnographer’s own precarity—professional, economic, and physical—becomes inseparable from the knowledge produced. The methodological adaptations described here reflect not just ethical principles but the lived reality of conducting research under intense repression, where the lines between researcher, dissident, and citizen blur. My experience demonstrates how political persecution directly impacts the

research process, shaping access, data collection, and the very possibility of academic inquiry. Critically, the risks associated with this research did not end with the fieldwork. The act of undertaking and potentially disseminating this work subsequently led to increased suspicion from authorities, forcing me into hiding and further illustrating the profound dangers faced by scholars engaging with politically charged topics while living and working under authoritarian rule.

Research approach and data collection

This study employs qualitative narrative methods, drawing on in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions. Because security constraints prevented access to influential Bamar revolutionary elites, the research centers on data gathered from community members—non-elite residents in and around Yangon.

Data collection involved oral and online interviews, correspondent discussions, and secondary data analysis. The study prioritized participant anonymity and employed security-conscious recruitment strategies. In addition to interviews, this research analyzes how federalism is discussed in revolutionary media and online spaces. I systematically examined 27 statements made by leaders of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and Bamar revolutionary stakeholders between February 2021 and June 2022, focusing on how federalism and potential formation of a Bamar State were framed. This discourse analysis reveals significant shifts in how federalism is discussed in post-coup contexts compared to pre-coup peace negotiations.

The total number of interviewees and participants was 47 individuals from diverse backgrounds and various age groups. Informants can be categorized into three distinct groups: middle-aged taxi drivers and vendors; students in their late-teens engaged in GED and IGCSE preparation courses; and CDM teachers and university graduates ranging in age from early 30s to late 50s. Additionally, three participants are from ethnic minority backgrounds: two well-educated, middle-aged individuals and one student preparing for the GED test. The study also analyzed ethnic and Bamar stakeholders' media interviews discussing potential future federal or confederal arrangements to illuminate their positions on post-revolutionary governance structures.

Follow-up interviews and discussions with student participants could not be completed properly, as many male students fled to foreign countries or EAO-liberated areas following the junta's 2024 conscription order. Some female student informants have also gone abroad to escape potential military recruitment. This disruption illustrates the significant challenges of conducting research in active conflict settings, where participant availability and security concerns can fundamentally reshape data collection possibilities.

Preliminary Findings

Older Bamar generations

Bamar respondents aged 50 and above generally consider it impractical to re-form “Myanmar proper” (areas of the country excluding the seven ethnic states) into a single Bamar State. They have become accustomed to the existing seven regions and seven ethnic states established decades ago. Although they support the Spring Revolution and claim to sympathize with ethnic leaders' positions, they believe ethnic groups should consider alternative arrangements for the country's future structure.

These perspectives appear rooted in chauvinistic and conservative mindsets shaped by decades of anti-federal propaganda from successive Bamar-dominant governments since Myanmar's independence in 1948. Most elderly participants demonstrate limited understanding of federal/confederal principles and express concern that confederal claims by some ethnic leaders might threaten the union's long-term stability.

The differences between older and younger Bamar participants can be understood through Scott's (1990) concept of “public” versus “hidden” viewpoints. Older participants often repeated the official narrative about federalism that was drilled into them during their formative years—that Myanmar's unity requires centralized control and that federal arrangements threaten national integrity. Their responses often echoed military propaganda almost word-for-word, showing how deeply they had internalized these state narratives.

In contrast, younger participants more readily express what Scott would term “hidden viewpoints”—critiques of the dominant ideology that challenge the necessity of Bamar dominance. As one 23-year-old student states, “We

were always taught that federalism would tear our country apart, but now I see it might be the only way to hold it together.” This generational gap shows how political awareness is formed during particular historical periods and how alternative political visions can develop even under authoritarian rule.

This generational perspective can be understood through what Mannheim (1952) describes as the formation of political consciousness during formative years. The older Bamar cohort developed their understanding of national identity during periods when state institutions actively promoted unitary governance as the only viable model for national stability. Their resistance to federal arrangements reflects not only personal preference but institutionalized narratives about national unity that dominated this cohort’s political socialization.

The generational differences in attitudes toward federalism reveal how state power works through everyday experiences of political socialization. As Das and Poole (2004) argue, the state exists not merely through formal institutions but through everyday practices that shape citizens’ political imagination. For older Bamar participants, these experiences included mandatory political education sessions during the socialist period (1962–1988), daily consumption of state media that portrayed federalism as treasonous, and participation in state-organized mass assemblies that reinforced unitary nationalism as the duty of all loyal Myanmar citizens.

One participant in his 60s (personal communication, 2023) recalls: “During Ne Win’s time, we had to attend political education sessions where they taught us that federalism was a Western plot to break apart our country. Anyone who talked about it was considered a traitor.” Such experiences demonstrate what Trouillot (2001) terms the “state effect”—the ways state power manifests in mundane practices that naturalize particular political arrangements while making alternatives seem unthinkable.

Younger participants, on the other hand, experienced different state effects—their political socialization has occurred during periods of greater information access, including exposure to international concepts of minority rights and governance models through education and digital media. This has created what Appadurai (1996) refers to as “disjunctures” between official state narratives and alternative political imaginaries accessible through

global flows of information, allowing younger Bamar to envision federal arrangements that their elders struggle to imagine.

Younger Bamar

Participants between 20 and 40 years old, both graduates and non-graduates, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward ethnic leaders' aspirations for a Bamar State. They generally agree that ethnic nationalities should have the right to equality with the Bamar majority but lack clear ideas about how a Bamar State could be formed with equal status to minority states within a future federal union.

This research reveals that this age group desires additional knowledge about federalism and confederal arrangements. A number of participants express interest in understanding the structural changes that could potentially reshape the country's governance. Their more flexible attitude toward federal arrangements reflects what Kymlicka (1995) describes as the growing recognition in diverse societies that "group-differentiated rights" can promote genuine equality rather than threaten it.

The outlook of late-teen students studying GED and IGCSE preparation courses was clearer than that of the middle-aged group. Having learned about federal and confederal systems such as those in the United States and European Union countries through their curriculum, most readily welcome ethnic leaders' calls for a federal system. However, they express doubts about whether confederal arrangements would benefit Myanmar in the long term.

This study reveals that these students wish to gain more knowledge about confederation in order to better consider alternatives for the future of their nation. Their educational exposure to diverse governance models has created greater openness to federal principles, illustrating how educational curricula can significantly influence political imagination and openness to structural reform.

Ethnic minority perspectives

The three ethnic minority participants offered valuable insights into non-Bamar perspectives on the question of federation. The two well-educated, middle-aged participants strongly believe that ethnic nationalities have an

inherent right to federal or confederal status and stated that their communities would not indefinitely await Bamar consent to determine their future status in the union. The younger ethnic student believes his people deserve equality with other nationalities and expresses confidence that members of the younger Bamar generation will not oppose this principle.

This research reveals that the older ethnic participants demonstrate strong sentiments about recognition of their *thymos*, while the younger participant exhibits less intense feelings on this matter. This difference suggests that lived experiences of discrimination and political marginalization intensify the psychological need for recognition that Fukuyama (2018) identifies as central to identity politics.

Federal discourse

Analysis of revolutionary media reveals nuanced differences in how ethnic leaders and Bamar revolutionary stakeholders frame federalism. Ethnic leaders consistently employ what Sahlin (1981) calls “prescriptive history,” that which depicts federal arrangements as a return to pre-colonial political relationships rather than as innovation. In contrast, Bamar revolutionary stakeholders more often frame federalism as a forward-looking solution to Myanmar’s contemporary political deadlock, without acknowledging historical ethnic claims to sovereignty.

These discursive patterns reflect what anthropologists term “chronopolitics” (Fabian, 1983), or the political use of temporal frameworks to legitimize particular arrangements. The tension between these temporal framings—restoration versus innovation—reveals deeper conflicts about historical recognition that may complicate federal negotiations even among anti-regime forces.

Conclusion

This preliminary research reveals distinct opinions among the Bamar population regarding the formation of a Bamar State in a proposed federal union. Older Bamar, heavily influenced by decades of Bamar-dominated military government propaganda, exhibit chauvinistic and conservative mindsets that could hinder the implementation of federal arrangements.

Their resistance reflects not just political preference but deeply internalized narratives about national unity and stability. In contrast, Bamar people under 40 years of age demonstrate more open-minded and welcoming attitudes toward the formation of a Bamar State. Younger individuals, particularly those with international educational experience, show greater comfort with federal principles, though many express uncertainty about confederal models. Both middle-aged and younger Bamar participants want to learn more about federal and confederal concepts to better evaluate options for Myanmar's future.

The findings support Fukuyama's (2018) assertion that recognition of equal dignity (*isothymia*) represents a fundamental human need that political structures must address. The persistent demands of Myanmar's ethnic leaders for equal status reflect this desire for recognition, which purely administrative solutions have failed to satisfy. The generational differences in Bamar attitudes reveal how political socialization shapes perceptions of governance models, with younger generations much more receptive to institutional arrangements that acknowledge ethnic groups' desires for recognition.

This research also demonstrates how Scott's (1990) framework of "public" and "hidden" transcripts illuminates the process through which dominant political narratives can be challenged across generations. The fact that younger Bamar participants more readily question unitary state ideology reflects not just different political preferences but fundamentally different relationships to state power and political authority. This suggests that revolutionary conditions may create openings for what Scott calls "the rupture of the political *cordon sanitaire* between hidden and public transcripts" (p. 223)—moments when previously silenced critiques of dominant arrangements become speakable in public contexts.

The concept of "state effects" (Trouillot, 2001) helps explain how these different political viewpoints have formed. The older generation experienced state power through direct political indoctrination that normalized Bamar dominance, while younger generations have encountered more diverse influences due to the effects of globalization, digital connectivity, and the partial political opening of the 2010s. This generational divide suggests that the post-revolutionary state-building process must account for fundamentally

different ideas about what the state is and should be across different age groups.

These insights into generational divides in Myanmar were gathered under constant threat, reflecting the lived reality of “vulnerable observation” (Behar, 1996) in which the researcher’s own precarity mirrors that of the communities studied, highlighting the profound challenges and ongoing dangers of producing critical knowledge within repressive contexts.

These findings highlight the urgent need for educational initiatives on the topics of federalism and confederation among the Bamar majority. Such education would enable more informed discussions about possibilities for Myanmar’s future governance structure and help bridge the gap between generational perspectives. However, all stakeholders should acknowledge ethnic communities’ growing assertion of their right to self-determination, with or without Bamar consensus. As Myanmar continues to move through this most critical period, understanding these diverse viewpoints becomes essential for developing lasting political solutions that address both the practical needs of governance and the psychological need for equal recognition among all ethnic groups. Achieving such solutions requires not only understanding diverse perspectives but also acknowledging the profound risks taken by those who dare to explore them—risks that extend far beyond the research process itself.

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Chapter 2

Everyday Insecurities and Downward Social Mobility: The Gendered Experiences of CDM Women in Mandalay from 2021 to 2024

Rose

Abstract

This chapter explores the gendered insecurities and downward social mobility experienced by female participants of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Mandalay following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Drawing on a deep ethnographic study of six CDM women conducted under the "thrice under fire" research condition, this chapter examines their lived experiences and shifting perspectives over three years. It argues that the process of militarization has thrust these women from relative middle-class security into an emerging urban precariat, forcing them to live with constant fear of arrest while grappling with the loss of their former lives. Despite ongoing threats to their security and survival, these women continue to defiantly resist military dictatorship, driven by a desire to reclaim their society and achieve fundamental system change for a new Myanmar.

Keywords: militarization, CDM, resistance, gender, everyday insecurity, downward social mobility, thrice under fire, precariat, Mandalay

Introduction

Myanmar's current crisis extends beyond political upheaval to encompass a comprehensive disintegration of state functions and civil society institutions. The country today can be described as a failed state with extended civil war conditions and a dearth of peace, security, and the rule of law across its territory. Beyond its ever-shrinking territorial control (Lee, 2023), the military administration is unable to provide essential public goods and services such as health, education, and security to the population (Aung Naing, 2024). However, the failure of the state is not simply due to the military's lack of effectiveness and capacity, but has increasingly been characterized by a deliberate malevolence where "the widespread militarization of the administrative and justice systems has enabled the process of detention, trial, sentencing and, in some cases, extrajudicial killing which points not simply to a failure to provide such public goods, but a deliberate subversion of them" (Wells & Aung Naing, 2023, pp. 282-283). Since the coup, the country's politics, economics, education, health, and security sectors have collapsed under military control.

Myanmar's socio-economic and human security indicators have reached their lowest levels since measurements began. Food insecurity among the general population is worsening despite an estimated GDP growth rate of three percent for 2023 (World Bank, 2023). One in three people in Myanmar, mostly women and children, requires humanitarian assistance (Asian Development Bank, 2023, p. 217). Moreover, the middle class in Myanmar has shrunk by fifty percent in just three years (United Nations Development Programme Myanmar, 2024). Many people are facing famine under the dominance of the militarized masculine regime. In this context, military domination constitutes a process of militarization, which increasingly affects the everyday lives of individuals, and especially those practicing civil disobedience.

Notably, the city of Mandalay has been more heavily dominated by the militarized regime relative to other regions where some potential for liberation has emerged. It has become a place of militarization within the context of social, economic, and political collapse. "Militarization" can be defined as the processes through which military influence and priorities are extended to

civilian life (Woodward, 2009). The local people have been brutally oppressed through the military's various forms of violence in their everyday lives. They face not only physical insecurity but also mental insecurity as part of their daily existence. According to the Mandalay Free Press, members of the military have been illegally arresting businesswomen, CDM teachers, and CDM doctors in Mandalay, sealing their houses, buildings, and clinics, and at the behest of military supporters, more than 30 local people were arrested by military authorities in Mandalay during the month of August 2023 alone (Aung Ye, 2023). In this context, residents of Mandalay, particularly Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)-affiliated former civil servants, face significant fear and insecurity in living, surviving, traveling, and even speaking with each other since the 2021 coup.

This chapter offers a specific, empirically grounded illustration of the “thrice under fire” (TUF) condition, as outlined in this volume’s introduction. It examines this triple vulnerability through the experiences of female Civil CDM participants in the heavily militarized, non-liberated urban context of Mandalay. Their everyday insecurities emerge directly from their status as a “community under fire,” while the research process itself, conducted by a “researcher under fire,” reveals how these risks permeate daily life and necessitate specific survival and resistance strategies.

Focusing primarily on female former civil servants-turned-CDMers, this research explores how the everyday insecurities they face are inherently gendered. This research examines the intersections between militarization and everyday insecurity as these women experience downward mobility in their lives, becoming part of the emerging post-coup urban precariat. Furthermore, it also highlights how aspects of the gendered everyday insecurity and downward social mobility of CDM women have changed or shifted since the coup. This research focuses on Mandalay, which is forcibly dominated by the militarized regime. The focus group consists of CDM women in Mandalay, studied through personal experience, interviews, and observations.

Theoretical framework

Precariat

In economics and sociology, the “precariat” is a social class comprising people

suffering from precarity. Precarity or precariousness refers to an unstable existence lacking job security, predictability, and psychological or material welfare (Standing, 2011). Precarity refers to the fact that, in the downstream neoliberal flux of the 21st century, much of the world's population lacks stable work and steady incomes. Informal, temporary, or contingent work is the predominant mode of livelihood in the contemporary world. In the global south in particular, garbage collection and sorting, day labor, the selling of petty commodities, and the sourcing of task-based, freelance "gigs" through digital platforms exemplify some of precarity's many forms (Kasmir, 2018).

Judith Butler's (2004, 2010) writing is a cornerstone for the growing literature on precarity. Butler draws a critical distinction between "precariousness" and "precarity." She conceptualizes precariousness as a generalized human condition that stems from the fact that all humans are interdependent and therefore all are vulnerable. In her view, precarity is different precisely because it is unequally distributed. Precarity is experienced by marginalized, poor, and disenfranchised people who are inequitably exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Further, social value is ascribed to some lives and bodies while it is denied to others, and some are protected while others are not. Neoliberalism, war, and climate crises render these inequalities especially acute. Butler sees the potential for emancipation in embracing the common circumstance of precariousness against the unequal societal distribution of precarity. She renounces politics that aim at achieving stability for select groups and instead favors an egalitarian precariousness for all as a liberating condition.

Anthropologists are particularly interested in the feelings of those who face danger and insecurity in their lives. They focus on emotion and subjectivity, exploring disenfranchisement, displacement, and uncertainty (Kasmir, 2018). As Anne Allison (2016) comments, "In this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts don't align with a teleology of progressive betterment, living can often be just that. Not leading particularly anywhere, lives get lived nonetheless" (p. 1). This observation calls into question the notion of "everyday." Ethnographers regularly utilize the term to denote predictable social patterns and the routines of household, community, and work that are

at the heart of the concept of culture, while in fact there is little regularity in the context of poverty, political disempowerment, and violence (Sider, 2008).

Drawing on Hayder Al-Mohammad's (2012) ethnography of post-invasion Iraq, I note that prolonged violence has forced many Iraqis to "live without letters." In other words, to conduct daily life with almost no written communication, schooling, or paperwork because starvation, kidnappings, and constant danger have dismantled the institutions that make literacy meaningful. These are dangerous and painful conditions. Similarly, Allison's (2013) study of Japanese society found that in the 1990s, Japanese people faced an economic downturn and many young people lost their jobs, causing Japanese people to experience increased loneliness. The unemployed had to live alone with little hope for the future. They felt depressed, believing they were worthless and could not contribute to their families. This situation indicates that unemployment and income are not only social problems but also a condition in which people are cut off from others, which is a precarious life full of vulnerabilities. In Molé's (2010) study, it was found that in Italian society, dangerous conditions occur in the workplace when bosses and coworkers attempt to sexually abuse female employees. These females, therefore, become paranoid and anxious about living with a man who is always ready to molest and seduce them.

These case studies include a wide range of experiences and struggles under the rubric of precarity, from social isolation and depression born of joblessness to violence and torture suffered in conflict zones (Kasimir, 2018). In Myanmar's current context, the gendered experiences of CDM women reveal how they suffer various forms of violence in their everyday lives. In Myanmar's post-coup context, every domain of life for these women—employment, family relations, economic pursuits, and social participation—has lost its former stability and is trending downward in status, income, and opportunity, illustrating their descent into downward social mobility as new members of the precariat.

Downward social mobility

According to the Corporate Finance Institute (2024), downward mobility occurs when a person moves from a higher position in society to a lower

one. It can occur when someone is caught performing a wrongful act that results in the loss of the position they previously held. Downward mobility can be highly stressful for people who face a rapid decline in their social status. They may find it hard to adapt to their new social environment, as it is different from the standard of living that they are used to. Pelz (2018) explains that some people experience downward mobility due to business setbacks, unemployment, or illness. Dropping out of school, losing a job, or getting a divorce may result in a loss of income or status and, therefore, downward social mobility.

Concerning downward social mobility, Newman (1988) in *Falling from Grace* demonstrates how these people and their families experiencing the phenomenon contend with financial hardship, as well as with the psychological, social, and practical consequences of their sudden displacement from the middle class. Exploring the minds and lifestyles of this hidden segment of society, the author also captures the despair of people long accustomed to feeling in control of their destinies who suddenly face unpredictable futures, finding it extraordinarily difficult to climb up the social ladder once more. Despite this, middle-class culture is neither uniform nor monolithic. There are variations in the values and worldviews contained among those in the middle class, and these refract the experience of downward mobility in distinctive ways. In K. L. Sharma's (1973) study, downward social mobility is a complex process involving social, economic, cultural, and motivational factors, and occurs in different contexts and forms, reflecting the experience of culturally middle-class CDM university teachers.

Violence and militarization

Veena Das (2007) contributes to contemporary thinking about violence and how it affects everyday life. In a significant departure from much anthropological inquiry, Das asks how violence has managed to enter the "recesses of the ordinary" rather than being viewed as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness. She also engages with anthropological work on collective violence, rumor, sectarian conflict, new kinship, and state and bureaucracy as she explores relations among violence, gender, and subjectivity. Weaving anthropological and philosophical reflections on

the ordinary into her analysis, Das points toward a new way of interpreting violence in societies and cultures around the globe.

In *Violence in Everyday Life*, Aliraza Javaid (2022) explores how identity markers such as gender and sexuality intersect with violence, synthesizing the themes of gender, sexuality, and violence to offer a crucial and coherent framework for understanding the interrelationship between these concepts. Javaid explores how violence is experienced at local, regional, and global levels, and considers how hegemonic masculinities are reproduced through violence. Attention is given to the particular ways in which these constructions of masculinity are reflected in areas such as homophobic violence, transphobic violence, and violence against intimate partners. Drawing on new empirical data and his own experiences of violence, Javaid's work represents a study of the interconnectedness of violence, gender, and sexuality, and of how violence is fueled by society's attitudes towards masculinity.

In the post-coup society of Myanmar, militarization has intensified through violence as the militarized regime seeks to extend its sovereignty and capitalize on economic opportunities as part of masculinism and capitalism. Even before the coup, militarization in Myanmar exposed civilians to an increased number of human security threats rather than ensuring their safety, with severe consequences for families and communities (Fink, 2008). Abuses persist because the junta relies on its soldiers both as enforcers and as revenue-generators, deploying units to seize resources, run lucrative side-businesses, and extort civilians, while senior commanders look the other way on misconduct and enjoy diplomatic cover from foreign economic partners. While civilians seek to manage these threats as best they can, their agency is highly constrained, and women in particular have been negatively affected (Fink, 2008). Therefore, for CDM women in Mandalay who regularly face insecurities due to the violence of militarized masculinity, and who are experiencing downward social mobility as an emergent urban precariat during Myanmar's Spring Revolution, security must be rooted in the eradication of military dictatorship and militarization. All aspects of survival—addressing everyday insecurities and enabling the everyday survival of individuals amid political, economic, and social crises—require not merely regime change but

system change to rebuild a federal democratic union in the future society of a new Myanmar.

Analytical framework

As human security focuses on security at the individual level, and human security itself has been gendered (Hoogensen & Rottem, 2004), this research recognizes the comprehensive nature of human security. Through this analytical framework, this research contends with the question of how female CDMers in Mandalay have experienced everyday insecurities and downward social mobility in their urban lives, and how their gendered experiences have changed or shifted since the 2021 military coup. This research also focuses on the small ways in which CDM women face insecurity in their everyday lives and experience the loss of middle-class security to survive as part of a gendered urban precariat from the bottom up.

Methodology

This research employs ethnographic methods within the chaotic context of Myanmar under military rule. It focuses on the lives of six CDM women in Mandalay as case studies, including that of the author herself, to understand their lived experiences over three years since the 2021 coup. This approach enables the generation of rich narratives of these women's experiences and includes vignettes that capture their everyday lives throughout this period.

Ethnographic narratives offer insight into experiences of security as they are based on subjectivity and identity (Innes, 2016). This research explores the intersection of gender and militarization, particularly how these intersections lead to everyday insecurities, using a constructivist approach as an epistemological foundation. The key informants were selected from a group of previously middle-class female CDMers with backgrounds in educational and health services. Because the majority of CDMers come from these sectors, the informants can effectively represent the broader CDM community. I conducted in-depth interviews about their security, livelihood, and social dynamics, as well as their resistance and challenges in their everyday lives, using both formal and informal interviews.

This research methodology was shaped by the TUF reality of conducting research as a targeted individual within a targeted community in a heavily surveilled, military-dominated urban environment. My own position as a CDM researcher living in constant fear of arrest directly influenced every methodological decision, intertwining my own security concerns with those of the participants. Due to travel restrictions and the fear of military informants (known locally as *dalan*), direct in-person interviews were often impossible or too dangerous to conduct. Participants themselves were hesitant to speak openly over insecure phone lines or to travel to private spaces. The risk extended to digital communications—I avoided using platforms like Facebook even to contact relatives, as digital security could not be guaranteed. Furthermore, the risks shared by both participants and myself meant that traditional interview methods involving audio recording, extensive note-taking during conversations, and taking photos or videos, were unfeasible throughout the research process.

These conditions, born from these shared risks, fundamentally altered the dynamic of discussions and the nature of data collection, necessitating a security-embedded ethical approach where safety dictated method. These were not merely methodological limitations but survival imperatives in a context where any evidence of research activity could lead to arrest. The security situation in Mandalay deteriorated further after Operation 1027 expanded urban guerrilla warfare closer to the city in late 2023, making even informal meetings at teahouses increasingly risky.

My research area of Mandalay functions essentially as what could be described as “enemy territory”—a place with few escape routes where the military can easily make arrests, unlike in partially liberated areas such as Sagaing. This reality fundamentally shaped how I approached my research subjects. I divided potential participants into two distinct categories requiring different methodological approaches: a “friendship group” consisting of fellow CDM members with whom I had pre-existing relationships of trust, and a “stranger group” comprised of CDM women I encountered through careful community navigation. This bifurcated approach was necessary not merely as a research strategy but as a security protocol essential for both my safety and that of my participants.

My research methodology was therefore adapted to these constraints through a combination of approaches. When direct meetings with participants posed too great a risk, I conducted formal interviews via online meetings, utilizing secure platforms such as Signal and Zoom. Alongside this, I relied heavily on informal “ground meetings” which involved more organic observations and conversations conducted cautiously in everyday settings like local salad shops (*a thoat sone sai*) or during secret teahouse meetings with trusted contacts. These informal encounters often required careful navigation of trust-building and identity presentation, given the pervasive fear of my informants.

Thus, this research required stretching the traditional boundaries of fieldwork ethics. With members of my friendship group I could obtain a form of informed consent through secure online platforms. However, with the stranger group, formally disclosing my research intentions or seeking explicit consent would have created unacceptable security risks for all involved. This ethical tension between transparency and security represents a fundamental challenge for research in military-dominated contexts. I used a coding system for data storage that protected identities, and in presenting findings, I have carefully concealed names, locations, and identifying details that could endanger participants.

Through these adapted approaches, combining secure online communication with discreet real-world observation and interaction, I collected data specifically on the six focal female CDMers’ everyday insecurities, livelihood sensitivities, downward social mobility, diverse forms of informal income generation, and resource-sharing networks. Despite the inherent difficulties in carrying out direct observation and collecting visual data under intense surveillance over several months, this blended methodology allowed for the development of a comprehensive understanding of their lived realities within the CDM community.

As a member of the CDM community myself, my identity significantly influenced the research process, my relationships with participants, and my understanding of the data. The TUF condition meant the conventional researcher/researched boundary collapsed as our risks were shared. Due to the security risks in Mandalay, even though I belong to this community

and have close relationships with some participants, establishing security and trust was essential for data collection and for understanding their lived experiences during the revolution. Within this high-risk context under military dictatorship, I continuously reflected on how to shape my identity and how to engage with the CDM community as a CDM researcher operating under threat. Based on ongoing reflexivity, I defined my position/identity differently depending on the relationship. With the friendship group, where pre-existing trust allowed for more direct engagement (often via secure online means), I operated transparently as a CDM researcher. However, with the stranger group, made up of participants encountered through informal ground meetings, I initially presented myself indirectly (specifically, as a mother visiting her daughter's teacher) to minimize security risks for potential informants before gradually building rapport. This dual approach reflects the complex ethical navigation required when both researcher and participant are vulnerable.

My own experiences of insecurity directly informed my analysis of other CDM women's narratives. When participants described their constant fear of arrest, I recognized the same hypervigilance that characterized my daily existence—listening for unusual sounds outside my home, scanning for unfamiliar vehicles, and developing a sixth sense about potential surveillance. When participants discussed the psychological toll of isolation, I recalled my own experience of living behind closed doors, afraid to engage with neighbors who might be informants. These shared experiences created a form of embodied knowledge that shaped my interpretation of data and allowed me to recognize subtle references to experiences that might be missed by researchers without direct exposure to life under military surveillance.

With security being a central concern throughout my research, I adapted my recruitment and data collection strategies accordingly. For the friendship group, I selected key informants from my close CDM friends through our pre-existing Signal group, formed exclusively by CDMers after the coup. The formal research process prioritized informants based on considerations of security and trust during this dangerous period, identifying individuals whose situations were particularly high-risk and relevant. For example, one key informant is a CDM woman charged under Section 505(a) of

the Penal Code (a provision often used against journalists and activists to restrict freedom of expression, especially against those seen as critical of the military), who has been living in constant fear and hiding in a monastery since fleeing her home. Her experiences shed light on the difficulties CDM women face in finding safe refuge and coping with issues of daily insecurity and gender-based violence. Another informant contending with an informal divorce and domestic violence due to her job loss offers insights into gender equality issues and the need for systemic change. A third informant who struggles for survival as an unemployed woman in Mandalay, producing and selling traditional medicines while continuing to resist the regime, shares her gendered experiences of insecurity and survival strategies.

For the stranger group, building social connections and trust occurred through informal ground meetings. Learning that a former teacher of my daughter had joined the CDM, my daughter and I visited her home. There, I met three CDM women: the teacher, now running a small salad shop (*a thoat sone sai*) from her home; a CDM nurse now teaching English part-time; and a CDM administrator. By initially presenting myself as a mother paying respect to her daughter's teacher, and then frequently visiting the salad shop, engaging in conversations, and developing friendships, I was able through regular, informal interactions over time to learn about the women's livelihood struggles, insecurities, and survival strategies. This method highlights the ethical challenges surrounding formal consent in high-risk situations where explicitly stating research intentions could endanger participants.

I also maintained connections with close CDM friends in Mandalay through secret meetings. In the early days following the coup, we hid and lived silently in secure places, avoiding meetings in public for security reasons. However, more than two years after the coup, we began meeting secretly at teahouses where we felt relatively safe, exchanging experiences of survival, offering mutual support, and sharing security information about current political conditions and risk situations. When urban guerrilla warfare intensified in late 2023, we again ceased meeting in public due to increased military surveillance. Through the informal conversations we managed to have, I gathered valuable observational data about how my contacts face insecurities, struggle for survival, and persist in resisting the military. This ethnographic approach, adapted to the high-risk

environment and the researcher's own embedded vulnerability, offers a deeper understanding of these women's everyday life experiences and practices, providing detailed information about their behaviors, strategies, and changing perspectives over time.

For data analysis, I conducted thematic analysis of the information gathered through my interviews and observations. I wrote detailed transcriptions of interviews (often reconstructed from memory or brief, coded notes taken immediately after meetings due to recording restrictions) and field notes, then translated and interpreted them into English. During data processing, I highlighted essential words and direct speech for strong evidence. This methodical approach enabled frequent analysis through an iterative process, allowing me to continuously review with additional questions and seek a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, I systematically interpreted the results to identify patterns and themes across the women's experiences.

Findings: Gendered experiences under military rule

As part of their resistance to the 2021 military coup, recently resigned civil servants participating in Myanmar's CDM—commonly referred to as CDMers—are living with persistent fear in their everyday lives. In the first days after the coup, CDMers shouted the Burmese slogan “*yone ma tet nae, yone htwat*”—literally “Don't go into the office, walk straight out!”—to tell fellow civil servants to leave their desks and join the street protests. The defiance of the CDM movement took the military regime by surprise. The movement was particularly impactful when hospitals were left without doctors and schools without teachers, creating significant challenges for the military regime (Nway Oo Tar Yar, 2023). This movement represented a surprise and threat to the maintenance of the military's coercive, centralized power in the post-coup era (Anonymous, 2021). Later, significant numbers of railway workers, electrical engineers, and administrative servants also joined the CDM.

Civil disobedience can be understood as the “deliberate, discriminate violation of law for a social purpose. It becomes justifiable and necessary when a fundamental human right is at stake and when legal channels are inadequate for securing that right. It may involve violating an unjust law,

protesting an unjust condition, or symbolically enacting a desirable one. It may or may not eventually be held legal, but its aim is always to close the gap between law and justice as an infinite process in the development of democracy” (Marsh & Brown, 2012). Due to their defiant protest against the unjust military coup, CDMers now face various forms of violence in their everyday lives while continuing to fight for democracy.

The processes of militarization and the dominance of the military junta increasingly impact the security and survival of CDMers in their everyday lives in post-coup Myanmar. Broadly defined, militarization is the cultural, symbolic, and material preparation for war. Militarization and the presence of state militaries influence much of everyday life in many societies and cultures around the world, both explicitly and subtly (Bickford, 2015). Since the 2021 coup, militarization has created everyday insecurities for CDMers, who are experiencing downward social mobility within the current trajectory of Myanmar’s revolutionary politics. Nevertheless, they have decided not to return to work under military rule, choosing instead to grapple with the longer-term consequences stemming from their initial principled stance. Despite living in fear and struggling for survival, they continue to resist the military dictatorship and seek to rebuild their new commons in Myanmar’s future federal democratic union.

To unpack how this daily defiance plays out, the discussion now turns to three tightly linked pressures these women face. First come the bodily and psychological risks of raids, surveillance, and constant dread; second, the livelihood shocks—lost salaries, shrinking markets, mounting debt; and third, the shifts in social standing as activism and displacement reshape kinship roles and reputations in the community.

Physical and psychological insecurities

Case study 1: Autoethnography

The lives of CDM women in Mandalay differ significantly from those of female CDMers in other areas, such as Sagaing and Mae Sot. Mandalay has been more heavily dominated by the militarized regime than both Sagaing, where conflict has intensified to create potentially liberated areas, and Mae Sot, which exists as a conflict-free, liberated area on the Thai-Myanmar border. Mandalay is

not a liberated area, but rather one subject to various forms of violence under military dictatorship. Under this military domination, Mandalay has become a place of militarization where the military's violence and coercive power create everyday insecurities for CDM women. These women tend to keep their houses closed, living in isolation and secrecy. They dare not speak with others in their community due to fear of military informants (*dalan*). In the specific context of Mandalay, they live with constant fear of arrest and suffer physical and mental insecurities in their everyday experiences.

As a CDM woman in Mandalay, I constantly face the fear of arrest and insecurity in my everyday life, yet I have continued to defiantly resist the military's illegitimate coup throughout the Myanmar Spring Revolution. Since the 2021 coup, we now-former civil servants, joined the CDM to express our rejection of the military takeover. On February 28, 2021 (referred to as "Black Sunday"), our demonstration in Mandalay was brutally suppressed when the military opened fire and crushed the protest with coercive and violent means. Some protesters were wounded, and others were arrested. Most of them were female CDMers. We demonstrators quickly fled without a clear destination and hid in nearby houses. While hiding, we were terrified and afraid of being arrested by the authorities. Fortunately, we survived this violent crackdown. After that traumatic event, I temporarily fled to my mother's home in a Sagaing village because I feared being arrested in Mandalay. At that time, Sagaing was relatively safe with minimal risk or conflict, though now it has become a conflict area.

Later, after being dismissed from my professional position by the military, I returned to my home in Mandalay where my family lives. Despite this, I continue to feel scared of potential arrest and experience insecurities in both physical and mental aspects of my daily life, as my home exists in a city under military domination and oppression. I keep my home closed to visitors and live in isolation and secrecy with my family. I avoid speaking with other residents in my ward due to the fear of informants who might report to the military. These security concerns prevent me from pursuing activities that could support my survival.

In the past, my daily life was entirely different from my current experience. Before the coup, I, a married woman in my 50s, worked as an associate

professor at a university, enjoying a position, salary, and dignity within Mandalay's middle class. My daily work in the department involved teaching, research, capacity building, and related activities, giving my life meaningful purpose each day. Though somewhat tiring, I was satisfied, experiencing happiness, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Now, those normal aspects of my previous life no longer exist.

As a consequence of my resistance to the military coup, I lost my professional job. Without salary or income, I face numerous difficulties in my daily life. The military also limits opportunities for professional employment in various ways. As a jobless female CDMer, I am now dependent (*mhaehko*) on my family for my livelihood, although I was previously proficient and independent in my social life. When alone at home without professional work to do, I am haunted by the trauma of this period. I feel a lack of empowerment compared to my life before the coup, and I fear the loss of our collective future.

Despite losing my normal life, I have no regrets for what I have lost.

Even though we can still laugh and talk with each other, establishing relationships with others has become extremely difficult since the military coup. Unexpectedly, I received a research grant from a foreign university during this difficult time. This opportunity has been energizing and precious for my personal empowerment. I use some of the grant money for my family's survival, some for donations, and some for sharing with others in similar situations, embracing the principle "we have only us" in this revolution against military dictatorship. No matter how much oppression I face, I endure all hardships and continue to resist the military coup because these everyday difficulties we face are rooted in the illegitimate coup—in militarization. I will never return to work under this militarized regime. I stand with what is right (*Dhamma*). This revolution fights for justice, freedom, and democracy for my country and aims to remove the military of my country from power by bringing about a system change for our future.

After three years of the revolution, the psychological traumas have become more pronounced than the physical problems. At the beginning of the revolution, these traumas were not very obvious, but later, the effects of stress became significantly more noticeable. Troubles in my mind and unhappiness in my environment have increased. I no longer have the position, income, or

status I had in my previous career, and I feel that I have become insignificant in my social environment. Everything feels unjust under military domination, though I try to encourage myself. In my heart, I am not happy. My life seems to have lost meaning. Day by day, I struggle within the confines of my home. After being in hiding for so long, I have become lonely and powerless.

Even now, when I think back to the events during which I ran to escape violence, the fear resurfaces. It has become a nightmare I will never forget. Despite facing brutal repression by the military, we continue to fight against dictatorship. One day, we will achieve justice. With this belief, self-reliance, mutual aid, and reciprocity in the Spring Revolution, we persevere in our daily lives guided by these ideas and practices of good citizenship. This revolution is a fight between right and wrong, between *Dhamma* and *A Dhamma*. It is not easy, but it is a necessary duty for citizens. When injustice appears, resistance becomes our duty. The greatest fear in life is being forced to submit to domination (*A Dhamma hlawn moechin*).

We CDMers will continue to resist the military coup regardless of the troubles we face. We will reclaim our democracy, rights, and futures. The military dictatorship must fall. Only by eradicating the military dictatorship and the terrorist military will we escape from the threats to our lives, safety, and freedom. While we emphasize justice, the desire to dominate and discriminate must be eliminated along with the dictatorship. Our country and society must be fair, peaceful, and secure. We must prevent it from becoming a failed society. We will reconstruct what has been destroyed by military dictatorship.

During three-plus years of this revolution, we, the oppressed CDMers, have found that the international community functions as little more than a “talk shop,” issuing resolutions and statements rather than taking action, especially regarding humanitarian aid. Since the beginning of the revolution, we have asked the UN and the international community, “How many people need to die before we get international assistance for the people of Myanmar?” They have ignored our voices. Yet our revolution’s strength is based on our people’s collective power. With this people’s power, we believe our revolution will eventually succeed.

In the Myanmar context of living under militarization or military violence, my personal experiences reflect how CDM women are confronting military dictatorship despite being ignored by the international community. As members of the precariat, we experience marginalization, poverty, and unpredictability, and are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Social value is ascribed to some lives and bodies while denied to ours; some are protected while we are not. Political, economic, and social crises intensify these inequalities. We see potential for emancipation in embracing our common precariousness, as against the unequal fate of precarity. We renounce politics that aim at achieving security for selected groups and instead favor an egalitarian precariousness for all as a liberating moment. Therefore, we continue fighting for justice, democracy, and freedom for all citizens as part of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. Despite the constant fear of arrest and security threats to our everyday lives, we are working to reclaim what we have lost and striving to make a fundamental system change for the future of our country.

Case study 2: Female CDM university professor 1

In Mandalay's highly male-dominated military subcultural context, CDM women have inherently faced gendered forms of insecurity in their everyday lives since the coup. Moreover, in Myanmar's socio-cultural context, the structure of society shapes or enables different individual experiences of securities and insecurities in everyday life based on gender. Social and cultural norms dictating what is considered possible and appropriate strongly emphasize women's modesty and domesticity, discouraging public leadership roles or challenges to the status quo (Faxon et al., 2015). In terms of gender perspectives, these different experiences of everyday insecurities are more specifically relevant to CDM women than men in the social system of Myanmar under prolonged militarization.

A female CDMer who has been charged under Penal Code Section 505(a) by the military regime (personal communication, 2024) describes her personal experiences related to gendered forms of insecurity:

My name appeared on the junta's Section 505(a) wanted list—read out on state-run MRTV and printed in *The Global New Light of Myanmar* on 11 March 2021—after the regime broadened Section 505(a) of the Penal Code on 14 February 2021 to criminalize calls for civil servants to join the Civil Disobedience Movement, a charge that carries up to three years in prison. Then, I fled and hid with other close relatives. When I fled to the houses of my relatives, they did not accept me in their houses because they feared the military would also arrest those who had accepted me. So, I am fleeing and [currently] hiding in a monastery where I am safe. But hiding in the monastery is not convenient for me as a woman, and it is not as convenient as for men [either]. In my society, a woman in the monasteries is considered culturally inappropriate as women are limited in social spaces relative to men.

After about a year, I'm still moving to a monk friend's farm near the monastery. At night, I feel scared due to physical and mental insecurities because of the sound of barking dogs, the sound of cars and motorbikes that I can hear. I'm always worried about who may be coming to arrest me. These [fears] are all because of the military. So, although it is difficult for me, disappointing, but I will continue to fight for democracy until the end of the revolution.

During the three years of the revolution, I have wondered where we could find the truth about the world. No matter what the international and regional countries say, the terrorist military is killing people in chaos. We shouldn't be trying to teach this military that is in chaos and violence at the moment. There is no other way but to end the terrorist military with the kind of punishment they deserve.

The experiences related above illustrate how being a CDM woman inherently involves facing gendered forms of insecurities in everyday life since the 2021 coup. Before the coup, this single woman in her 50s lived with her family in conditions of middle-class security, including having her own

house and professional position. She drove her own car and went to work in her everyday life. Though not belonging to the highest social class, she was a professor at a university with dignity in her social community. After joining the CDM, she was charged under Section 505(a) by the military. Currently, she is hiding in a monastery because of her fear of being arrested. However, as a woman, she faces distinct insecurities in her everyday life and difficulties in finding safe hiding places to evade detention during the Spring Revolution. She has experienced gender discrimination and limitations in social spaces within Myanmar's society and culture. These gendered experiences demonstrate how CDM women face structural violence within Myanmar's social system.

Livelihood challenges and precarious employment

Case study 3: Female CDM university lecturer

As a consequence of their resistance to the 2021 military coup and their participation in the CDM during Myanmar's Spring Revolution, many CDM women in Mandalay have lost their professional jobs and future career prospects. Although they were previously "salaris" in their social lives within the middle class, they now lack stable work and steady income since the coup. Due to the loss of their professional positions and salaries, they are now suffering from precarity and unpredictability, negatively affecting their psychological and material welfare as they form a new social class within their communities. As new members of the precariat, they face livelihood difficulties and struggle for survival in their everyday lives by working in informal and temporary jobs such as selling petty commodities, performing day labor, and finding task-based gigs under the dominance of military dictatorship.

Regarding her experiences with difficulties securing her livelihood and everyday survival under military dictatorship during the Spring Revolution, a CDM woman in Mandalay (personal communication, 2024) says:

For my daily survival, I can't do any work because of [concerns for] the security of my family. I lack a job, salary, and income. So, although I was a salariat in my social role before, now I am a dependent

(*mhaehko*) upon my mother's pension for my life. But when [I knew] the revolution [would be] long, I began selling the traditional medicine I had formulated since I graduated with a diploma in traditional medicine. Despite facing insecurities, this is needed for my daily survival in the revolution.

Since the 2021 military coup, I have experienced mainly insecurities and livelihood difficulties in my daily life because, as we all know here in Mandalay, we live under military domination and oppression, and live in insecure situations in everything, as in living and traveling, lacking the rule of law, violating human rights, and increasing crime and starvation because the prices of every good are so inflated in urban Mandalay, such as rice, oil, and everything for survival.

These difficulties are the result of the military coup. I feel a loss of our future because we had peaceful lives before the coup. So, I hate the military for this. But, although I face various difficulties in my life unexpectedly, even though I no longer want to live in Myanmar, I will continue to fight to liberate our lives from the military dictatorship and to protect democracy until the end of the revolution.

At present, as an unemployed person, my production and sale of traditional medicine has not yet been successful, but I am doing it as a profession under the conditions of my new social life under this military dictatorship.

Every time I think again now, it is satisfying to participate in the revolution itself. Whether a success or failure, we had to leave [our roles as civil servants] under those who rule unjustly. One day, we must win.

This woman's experiences exemplify how CDM women in Mandalay are struggling to survive as jobless individuals in an urban environment by creating small-scale income-generation projects—in this woman's case,

producing and selling traditional medicines. Before the military coup, this single woman in her mid-40s was a senior lecturer at a university, receiving a salary that enabled her to live with middle-class security in urban Mandalay. After the coup, she lost her employment due to her resistance to the military and her participation in the CDM. Now unemployed, she suffers a precarious existence that lacks security and predictability in her everyday life. She cannot pursue professional work due to security concerns for herself and her family. Consequently, she now lives as a dependent (*mhaehko*) on her mother's pension, becoming part of the urban precariat of Mandalay. The everyday difficulties she faces stem directly from militarization. Although she is encountering an unfamiliar level of precarity and even considers leaving Myanmar, she continues fighting to liberate her life and protect democracy for her country.

Case study 4: Female CDM nurse

In Mandalay's hyper-masculine labor market, female CDMers face sharper, gender-specific barriers to earning a living than their male peers. Employers still loyal to the junta blacklist women named on Section 505(a) wanted lists, while the "quick-cash" jobs open to jobless men—night-shift security, construction day labor, motorbike delivery—are largely closed to women for safety and cultural reasons. Even when women start their own ventures (home tutoring, salad stalls, small-batch soap production), customers, landlords, and lenders often withdraw support once they learn of their CDM status. Stripped of professional posts and steady salaries, many have slipped into the urban precariat.

The following account from a former government nurse (personal communication, 2024) reveals how those gender-specific barriers shape one woman's daily fight for work, safety, and dignity:

As the revolution goes on, it becomes difficult to endure. The main thing is food shortages. No job, no salary, no income. After the coup, I couldn't work elsewhere with my profession. I was banned in various ways by the military so that it couldn't be done, and as the revolution went on, it became difficult to make a living. Then I found a job, but

I still face many hurdles because of my gender. In my community, employers treat hiring a woman as almost unthinkable, so we have far fewer job options than men. In the past, I was a nurse, and I worked at a government hospital. But now, I am teaching English part-time to children at their homes as I need to do it for my daily survival. Even though I face these difficulties, I will continue to resist the military coup and participate in the CDM until the end of the revolution.

I [recently] went to the government hospital because my child was sick. At that time, I had a negative experience in the hospital. Due to my financial difficulties, I couldn't go to a private clinic, so I went to the hospital where I previously worked. The non-CDMers who are [still] working under the military dictatorship ridiculed and insulted me. I was traumatized. Despite the discrimination, harassment, and hardships I face as a jobless CDMer, I encourage myself to go forward until the end of the military dictatorship because it is a citizen's ethical responsibility for my country.

This woman's gendered experiences reveal how unemployed female CDMers in Mandalay face more significant livelihood difficulties than men in their everyday lives. Prior to the military coup, this woman in her 30s—a married mother of two children—was a nurse at a hospital in Mandalay, a vocation she had pursued for more than 10 years, living a comfortable life in her community. After joining the CDM, she lost her position at the hospital and was forced into hiding near Mandalay City. As an unfamiliar member of the new precariat, she struggles to meet the needs of her everyday survival by working as a part-time teacher at children's homes. As a woman, she also experiences extreme gender discrimination in employment opportunities when looking for outside income in her social environment. Local employers tell her that hiring a woman CDMer is “socially impossible,” leaving her with far fewer options than men; even at the hospital where she once worked, she was “ridiculed and insulted” when staff recognized her CDM status.

This finding aligns with broader observations from the fieldwork, which indicate that CDM women as a group experience more livelihood difficulties

than CDM men since the 2021 coup, underscoring how her obstacles go beyond the political penalty that male colleagues face. Moreover, in her newly precarious reality, she has encountered direct discrimination in her social life within her own community in the form of ridicule from non-CDMers who continue working under military rule. These experiences show that jobless CDM women face a gender-shaped precarity: employers blacklist them, the casual work that keeps some men afloat is closed to them, and any business they start is crippled by stigma and harassment in a militarized marketplace.

Social status transformation

Case study 5: Female CDM teacher

As the CDM approaches nearly three years since its inception, civil disobedience has become a long-term reality rather than merely a timely political stance in the immediate aftermath of the military coup. Nearly three years as CDM women in Mandalay has allowed many to develop new perspectives on situations such as insecurity, unpredictability, survival challenges, trauma, and unhappiness in everyday life. Due to the military's multiple forms of violence, these women have lost their middle-class security following the coup and have experienced downward mobility on the social ladder of their everyday lives as new members of the precariat. They often live in secrecy and isolation, experiencing everyday difficulties and finding it hard to explain to themselves what is happening. As a result, these CDM women have been suddenly displaced into new abnormal lives, experiencing downward social mobility during the revolution. They contend not only with financial hardship, but also the psychological, social, and practical consequences of their sudden displacement from the middle class. They were previously accustomed to feeling in control of their lives, but now experience insecurity, sudden powerlessness, and an inability to direct their everyday affairs.

Concerning the experiences of moving downward into a new abnormal life within her social class as the revolution continues, a CDM woman (personal communication, 2023) says:

There are three CDM women at my home. When the revolution is long, the main issues are security and food. In the early days, I didn't go out much because of security, and I didn't do any work for fear of being arrested by the military. For a while, there was still food, but after nearly three years since the military coup, I faced the difficulties of livelihood as I had lost my professional job. To get income, I looked for a [new] job, but I couldn't get any job because I am an old CDM woman. Firstly, I thought to sell *mohinga* [rice noodles with fish soup], but there can be a big loss unless there is a regularity of customers. So, as there was a loss of expenses, I have now opened a salad shop. I can't do work related to my profession as I was a civil servant before. Although there are security concerns, food is needed.

Before, I felt meaningful with my life. Now, life is joyless and meaningless. I miss my old, normal life. I am struggling to live in an abnormal life situation. If the revolution succeeds, I still want to do my work with human dignity. Under this military, I will never work again. I go through my daily life with this faith. We will continue to resist the military until the end of the revolution. We will get our lives and our futures back one day.

This woman's experiences illustrate how nearly three years as a female CDMer have meant facing a new abnormal life with insecurities, survival challenges, trauma, and unhappiness while resisting military dictatorship. Before the military coup, this widow in her 50s and mother of two daughters (who are also CDMers) was a middle school teacher at the Basic Educational High School of Mandalay living with comfortable economic conditions. As she practiced civil disobedience following the coup and lost her professional job and salary, she has also lost the middle-class security of her everyday life. Thus, she suddenly faces downward mobility in her social class, becoming part of the urban precariat during the Spring Revolution. Now, she operates a salad shop for her everyday survival, experiencing downward social mobility in urban Mandalay.

Despite the various difficulties faced in their new abnormal lives, these CDM women endure all hardships while continuing to resist the military dictatorship. These experiences demonstrate the strong resistance and resilience of CDM women against military dictatorship after nearly three years.

Case study 6: Female CDM university professor 2

Despite facing brutal repression by the military, CDM women in Mandalay continue to resist the return of military dictatorship through their civil disobedience. By participating in the CDM, they have sacrificed their everyday lives, professional jobs, housing, and salaries. These circumstances directly and indirectly impact CDM women's middle-class security through the financial hardships they experience in everyday life. Consequently, these women also face various forms of domestic violence in their everyday lives as members of the urban precariat, experiencing downward social mobility and broken families since the 2021 coup. This demonstrates how violence affects CDM women's everyday lives within their homes and how this violence enters these women's ordinary existence rather than merely interrupting life in their communities.

Regarding the everyday violence that she faces in domestic affairs within her family as a jobless woman, a female CDMer (personal communication, 2023) says:

I had to leave my government housing because of my CDM involvement. I moved with my three children to my husband's relatives' village house, and the five of us planted rice for a living. But as the revolution neared its third year, they began to look down on me as a jobless woman. Without the associate-professor post I once held, they said I no longer had honor. Later, I experienced some forms of violence, including scolding and physical and mental abuse in domestic affairs. Then, I moved to a close friend's house as a tenant and lived there with my three children. Although I am not legally divorced, it is still impossible to live together [with my husband and his relatives].

For my livelihood, I am now producing and selling detergent, teaching a child at home, and helping to work at a small restaurant part-time for my family's survival. Although I have faced various hardships and trauma, I will not work under this military dictatorship again.

Even if we are hungry, even broken, it's satisfying to see those guys [the military] falling and demoralized. We will walk forward because it is a path paved with dignity. No matter how much we struggle, good things will happen to those of us who are patient and calm.

This woman's gendered experiences illustrate how nearly three years as a CDMer has meant facing various forms of violence in her domestic affairs as a member of the urban precariat. Before the 2021 coup, this woman in her 50s—a married mother of three children—was an associate professor at a university and lived with her family in middle-class security. With her position, home, and income, her everyday family life was quite comfortable. It was a golden time in her life. However, this situation was suddenly destroyed when the military illegitimately seized power in 2021. As she resisted the military coup and participated in the CDM, she lost her professional job, government housing, and salary. Consequently, she also came to be subjected to domestic violence within her home. Although her marriage has not been legally dissolved, living together with her husband in the same home has become impossible. Thus, in addition to downward social mobility, she is also experiencing an informal divorce and a broken family as she has shifted into a new abnormal life, producing and selling detergent, teaching, and assisting part-time at a small restaurant for her and her children's survival.

Despite the violence in their everyday lives, these women continue resisting military dictatorship, struggling for survival in their broken lives, and fighting for democracy in their country. These CDM women's experiences reveal how violence affects their domestic lives within their families, how communities need to address everyday violence in domestic settings based on gender, and how fundamental system change is needed for the future society of a new Myanmar. This harrowing account of a family's dissolution is not an isolated

tragedy; rather, it exemplifies the systematic erosion of social, cultural, and economic capital that CDM women across Mandalay have experienced.

Forms of erosion: Social, cultural, and economic capital

As a result of the violence of militarized masculinity following the 2021 military coup, CDM women in Mandalay have experienced multiple forms of social capital erosion in their everyday lives. Militarization has led directly to the everyday insecurities encountered by CDM women, and they experience downward social mobility in their urban lives as members of a gendered precariat. Militarization attempts to establish hegemony through the promotion of military values, fear, and defense, making these values seem natural, standard, and desirable (though this is not always successful, as evidenced by resistance to militarization, conscription, and war) (Bickford, 2011). According to Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2014), “In places where the military dominates, women face extreme discrimination. Moreover, the highly male-dominated military subculture, within Burma’s more significant cultural context, especially deprecates women.” As militarization in Myanmar represents an extreme form of patriarchy where men hold power and women are largely excluded from it, CDM women experience unique daily challenges, including personal insecurities, political oppression, economic difficulties, and social discrimination based on gender.

Working while living in TUF conditions means confronting three stacked dangers: (1) the ambient violence that surrounds all fieldwork in post-coup Myanmar, (2) direct persecution of the researcher inside the very communities she studies, and (3) the systematic dismantling of universities and research networks that normally safeguard scholarship. My Mandalay case studies sit squarely at that second fire-line: the same soldiers who blacklist me as a CDM academic also strip CDM women of their government posts, raid their homes, and choke off their income streams. The result is a shared risk environment that shapes both my methods and their day-to-day survival strategies. By tracing how gender amplifies this joint exposure—to job loss, housing eviction, and harassment—these findings reveal not only women’s resilience in a militarized city but also the methodological imperative of researching *with* rather than merely *about* a community under siege. Ending

military rule remains the only path to safety for us all, yet in the meantime, these women—and this research—keep pushing for a deeper systemic transformation grounded in justice, freedom, and federal democracy.

Moreover, as Myanmar society is currently experiencing a prolonged coup, CDM women in Mandalay have also experienced forms of cultural capital erosion in their everyday lives. Under militarization, CDM women inherently face more insecurities and livelihood difficulties than men in society, experiencing a significant decline in social status and mobility during Myanmar's Spring Revolution. In terms of gender, these women face inappropriate and limited positions in social places and opportunities in their communities, such as hiding in a monastery for security and seeking income-generating opportunities for their survival as new members of an urban precariat in their social environment. Although Burmese women enjoyed a comparatively favorable position in society in previous eras, this position has gradually eroded and declined under the influence of prolonged colonialism, nationalism, and especially militarization (Walton & Khin Mar Mar Kyi, 2015). Militarization draws from and shapes cultural contexts, histories, and individual life courses, and functions as a social process designed to bring about support for the military and shape social structures to support it (Bickford, 2015). In Myanmar's social structure under prolonged militarization, being born as a woman is culturally associated with gender discrimination, and this socialization leads to gender inequality and creates structural violence in Myanmar's social system.

Additionally, as members of the gendered urban precariat under the dominance of militarized masculinity, CDM women in Mandalay have also experienced forms of economic capital erosion in their everyday lives. More than three years since the coup, CDM women now have a longer-term perspective on the chaotic situation in Mandalay in terms of insecurities, uncertainty, trauma, and unhappiness in everyday life. These CDM women are losing their middle-class security and experiencing downward social mobility in their communities due to the military's multiple forms of violence—a direct consequence of the political crisis impacting everyday economic reality. Moreover, being unemployed female CDMers has also meant experiencing domestic violence in everyday life, including gender-

based physical and mental abuse within the home. Research on violence in the home that has attempted to document women's experiences has shown that different people within the home experience it very differently (Das, 2008). The home is often a place of masculine domination in which the man expects the woman's labor to secure the peace he craves (Price, 2002). In Myanmar's social community, the home is typically likewise dominated by masculinity, meaning the home is a place where the husband dominates or may even commit violence against the family, while the wife is subordinated or subjected to violence.

These gendered experiences of military, structural, and domestic violence show that after more than three years of resistance, CDM women in Mandalay endure not only unfamiliar precarity—no job security, no predictable income, constant psychological strain—but also cascading political, economic, and social crises. The case evidence links militarization directly to gender-specific everyday insecurities and to a slide into downward social mobility, marking their lives as part of a post-coup urban precariat. Although this research itself has been conducted under TUF conditions, it is important to clarify how this concept is applied. The experiences of the CDM women directly constitute the “community under fire” component of the framework. The TUF framework as a whole, however, is used here to describe the researcher's overall methodological context—navigating personal risk (“researcher under fire”) while studying a targeted community amid collapsing infrastructure (“infrastructure under fire”). What the cases illuminate is the lived impact of state collapse and vanishing professional infrastructure on these women's individual trajectories.

Militarized masculinity

The evidence presented in this chapter illuminates how militarized masculinity fundamentally shapes the experiences of CDM women in post-coup Myanmar. The military regime in Myanmar represents not merely a political force but an ideological project that promotes specific forms of masculinity intertwined with violence, domination, and control. This militarized masculine identity has profound consequences for society broadly and for women specifically.

Since the 2021 coup, the junta has instrumentalized violence as both a tactical and symbolic tool. Reports from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (2024) document that from May 1 to June 19, 2024, alone, 15 women were killed through military violence—eight while in detention and seven from gunfire. These statistics represent just a small window into the broader pattern of gender-based violence that has characterized the post-coup period. The *Mandalay Free Press* (2023) has also documented how the military specifically targets women who resist the regime, particularly in areas like Mandalay, where the junta struggles to maintain full territorial control. As Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2014) argues, “In places of military dominance, women can never be valued, women can never be equal, their rights are not protected, and their needs are not considered.” The experiences of the six CDM women documented in this chapter substantiate this claim through their lived realities.

The case studies reveal three intersecting manifestations of violence that CDM women face: military violence (direct physical threats from the regime), structural violence (gender discrimination embedded in social institutions), and domestic violence (abuse within households exacerbated by economic stress). This reality exposes a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Myanmar’s military: while militaries hypothetically exist to protect citizens, Myanmar’s junta actively creates and intensifies insecurity for the population it claims to serve. The experiences of CDM women in Mandalay demonstrate how the military has transformed itself from a purported protective institution into the primary source of danger in citizens’ everyday lives.

The militarization process in Myanmar extends military values, priorities, and modes of operation into civilian spaces (Woodward, 2009). Significantly, this militarization is not gender-neutral; it promotes specific forms of masculinity that valorize aggression, domination, and control while simultaneously devaluing attributes culturally associated with femininity. This helps explain why, as documented in this research, CDM women face unique challenges in finding safe places to hide, securing alternative employment, and maintaining dignity within their communities and families. Military masculinity creates what Walton and Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2015) have

described as a “gradual erosion” of women’s once relatively strong position in Myanmar society.

The CDM women’s experiences captured in this study demonstrate how the current crisis extends far beyond political repression into the intimate domains of everyday life. When a CDM nurse describes being mocked by former colleagues at a hospital while seeking care for her child, or when a university professor recounts experiencing domestic abuse after losing her position, we see how militarization penetrates the most personal of spaces. As Das (2007) argues, violence enters “the recesses of the ordinary” rather than simply interrupting life. For CDM women in Mandalay, military masculinity has reconfigured their entire social world, from their economic security to their personal relationships.

This analysis suggests that any vision for Myanmar’s future must address not only the political structure of military rule but also the cultural and ideological dimensions of militarized masculinity that permeate society. The experiences of CDM women indicate that genuine democratization in Myanmar will require not merely a change in leadership but a fundamental transformation in gender relations and values.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of six CDM women in Mandalay reveals how militarization creates gendered insecurities and precipitates downward social mobility, producing an emerging post-coup urban precariat. The findings demonstrate that women participating in civil disobedience face a constellation of challenges shaped by their gender: physical insecurity amplified by cultural restrictions on women’s mobility; employment discrimination that limits survival options; and domestic vulnerability as economic pressures strain family relationships.

The case studies illuminate the multidimensional nature of precarity that Butler (2004) theorizes—insecurity that is unevenly distributed and which disproportionately affects those already marginalized. For these women, precarity manifests not only in economic terms but also as physical vulnerability, psychological trauma, and social isolation. Their experiences align with Allison’s (2016) observation that precarity disrupts the predictable

patterns of everyday life, creating a sense that survival itself becomes all-consuming with little prospect for progressive betterment.

This research also reveals the complexity of resistance under extreme repression. Despite living under constant surveillance in military-dominated Mandalay, these women demonstrate remarkable agency and resilience. They are not helpless or incapable victims waiting for heroes to liberate them; rather, they actively create alternative livelihood strategies through informal economies, build mutual support networks, and maintain an unwavering commitment to democratic principles. Their resistance occurs not through dramatic public actions but through their daily refusal to legitimize military rule by returning to their government positions, a form of self-sacrifice that persists despite the international community's relative indifference to their struggle.

Significantly, while the international community has largely failed to take effective action to support Myanmar's democracy movement, the findings show that local forms of solidarity persist. CDM women describe sharing resources, warning each other of security threats, and providing emotional support. This creates what might be termed "resistance communities" that sustain opposition even under the most oppressive conditions.

Looking beyond Myanmar, these findings contribute to a broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes specifically target women who challenge state power, and how gender shapes both the experience of repression and modes of resistance. They highlight the need for international stakeholders to recognize gender-specific vulnerabilities when developing humanitarian and political responses to crises like Myanmar's.

As Myanmar continues its struggle toward a federal democratic future, the experiences of these female CDMers underscore that genuine system change must address not only political structures but also the deeply embedded gender inequalities that military rule has intensified. Their stories reveal that any sustainable peace must encompass both a formal political transformation and a fundamental reshaping of gender relations in Myanmar society.

Despite the immense personal cost—loss of professional identity as social status, financial security, and sometimes family stability—these women's commitment to resistance remains unshaken. They continue to defiantly

oppose military rule, working to reclaim their once-vibrant society and envision a new commons. Their resistance represents not merely opposition to a specific regime but a powerful demand for a fundamentally reformed society with gender equity at its core.

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Chapter 3

Hlaing Thayar Under Siege: Witnessing Eviction After the Coup

Phill

Abstract

This research investigates socio-political and identity transformations occurring among individuals forcibly evicted from squatter settlements in Hlaing Thayar, Yangon, following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Focusing on female-led households, the study explores how eviction reshapes roles, subjectivities, and coping mechanisms, particularly through the perspectives of gender and social status. This study employs assemblage theory and narrative methods adapted for high-risk fieldwork necessitated by the researcher's precarious position as a targeted individual within a collapsing state. Data were collected through interviews and discussions with individuals representing 40 evicted households now resettled in hostels, as well as secondary sources. The findings reveal that forced evictions disrupt established social networks and deepen vulnerabilities, particularly among women, who often assume expanded leadership roles in their families and communities post-eviction. Despite these challenges, female evictees exhibit remarkable resilience while adapting to new environments, negotiating with authorities, and fostering collective agency in hostel settings. The study highlights how these transitions foster new social assemblages that reshape community dynamics and identities. It suggests a need for inclusive, gender-responsive urban policies that protect displaced populations' rights and support their socio-econom-

ic integration. By centering the lived experiences of evictees, this research contributes to our understanding of the intersections of forced displacement, gendered resilience, and community adaptation in politically turbulent contexts. It offers critical insights for developing equitable and sustainable urban resettlement strategies through an approach that blends witnessing with security-embedded ethics and an “ethnography of erasure.”

Keywords: squatters, forced eviction, removal, hostel, documented, subjectivity, gender, Hlaing Thayar, thrice under fire, ethnography of erasure, security-embedded ethics

Introduction

This chapter explores the turbulent aftermath of the 2021 military coup for squatter communities in Yangon's Hlaing Thayar township, focusing on the forced evictions that have dramatically reshaped lives and identities beginning in October 2021. Centering the experiences of women-led households transitioning from precarious settlements to hostel accommodations, it explores the profound shifts in subjectivity, roles, and resilience under conditions of extreme duress. Conducted amidst the “thrice under fire” (TUF) reality outlined in this volume in which personal risk, community targeting, and institutional collapse converge, this study employs narrative methods and assemblage theory to understand these transformations. The chapter begins by setting the historical and social context of Hlaing Thayar before examining gendered impacts of the evictions. Through detailed narratives and analysis, the chapter then traces the evictees' difficult adaptation to hostel life, discusses the necessary methodological and ethical adaptations for conducting research under siege, and finally considers the broader implications of eviction for community dynamics and equitable resettlement in politically volatile environments.

Hlaing Thayar on the margins

Hlaing Thayar, a substantial township in western Yangon, Myanmar, has evolved into a complex urban landscape. Established in 1989 (Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2021), it now encompasses a total of 20 wards, nine village tracts, and 12 industrial zones. Hlaing Thayar hosts somewhere between 700,000 and one million inhabitants; estimates vary due to its large floating workforce. Within that total, between 124,000 and 350,000 residents live in informal settlements (UN Habitat, 2020; University College London [UCL], 2021). Much of their migration to Hlaing Thayar can be traced back to the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, a cataclysmic event that propelled a wave of internal migrants searching for sustenance, employment, and environmental stability.

Hlaing Thayar was originally created through the relocation of evictees from other areas following Myanmar's 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Therefore, it was already an established *kyu myo* (squatters' town) prior to

2008. After Cyclone Nargis, an influx of cyclone victims accounted for the emergence of new undocumented families and individual squatters (*kyu: kyaw*) in the town. The only difference is that the original residents (the first *kyu*) had been officially documented since the town's establishment, while the subsequent *kyus* were not (Myint, 2023).

The squatter communities of Hlaing Thayar were previously scattered adjacent to industrial zones and major market areas, serving as buffers between the town's residential and industrial and commercial areas. Although existing in the vicinity of middle-class gated communities, shops, supermarkets, and industrial buildings, the squatter communities always represented a different world with no electricity, clean water supply, or sanitation system. In addition, the residents lacked access to public services like healthcare, garbage collection, and state-led humanitarian assistance due to their undocumented or semi-documented status. Some residents resorted to using battery-powered lights, distributed at a reasonable price by a local businessman, while access to drinking water remained an ongoing challenge. A few influential squatters managed to access the public electricity supply unofficially supplied to them by an adjoining factory owner in exchange for their security services, and some relatively better-off families bribed the authorities in order to access electricity.

For clean water to wash clothes and crockery, residents had hand pumps installed, while for drinking water, they relied on vendors who came around the areas selling clean water by barrel on wheeled carts. Most squatters earned their living as street vendors, construction workers, garment factory workers, and bricklayers. In contrast, others ran roadside food stalls, provided automobile services and repairs, and practiced nursery farming. Most squatters' children relied on monastic schools for education as these schools are free and less strict with identity documentation requirements in comparison with government-run schools. However, once the children completed primary monastic education or obtained a certificate, they had the option to enroll in government schools.

Sometimes, as some squatter families migrated from upper Myanmar, they brought the transfer certificates for their children's education and could send them to public schools. This was the case for Maung Kaung Pyae, who

was a young boy when his family moved from Taungtha in Mandalay Region and became settlers in one of the squatter communities in Hlaing Thayar as his family could not afford to rent a house. Using transfer certificates from their village, he and his siblings were able to enroll in Yangon's public school system. He passed his matriculation exam with five distinctions in 2016, while his elder sister was completing a master's degree in math, and his elder brother has already completed an engineering degree (Eleven Broadcasting, 2024).

Life on uncertain ground

This research focuses on individuals and families that previously lived in squatter settlements along Yangon-Pathein Road stretching from the base of Bayintnaung Bridge to the junction of Yangon-Pathein Road and Yangon-Twantay Road near Pan-Hlaing Bridge (UCL, 2021). Several years prior to the 2021 coup, the situation in this squatter community took an unfortunate turn in 2014 when regional authorities executed an earlier eviction drive that saw the dismantling of over 4,000 huts, displacing thousands of residents (Kyed, 2019). These individuals, often referred to as “evicted migrants,” represent a distinct group of internally forced migrants within Myanmar, setting them apart from other internally displaced persons (IDPs) typically associated with refugees of civil conflicts living in border camps. In this study, I will use the term “squatters” to characterize Hlaing Thayar's migrant workers living in squatter communities, recognizing their unique circumstances.

Myanmar faced significant challenges in 2020 and early 2021 with the COVID-19 pandemic followed by a military coup on February 1, 2021. These twin crises exacerbated the precarious situation for the squatters (*kyus*) residing in Hlaing Thayar. This industrial township, boasting the country's highest population density, was home to as many as 350,000 squatters, a considerable proportion of whom experienced violations of their cultural, social, and economic rights (Kyed, 2019). This squatter population can be divided into two main categories: those forcibly evacuated from other areas by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government after the 1988 democratic uprising, and those who migrated from the Ayeyarwady Delta region following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Both groups encountered

human rights violations during the country's brief transition to democracy and the subsequent coup, particularly regarding access to adequate housing.

Evictions and gendered upheaval

Following the 2021 coup, the military authorities implemented a new round of forced mass eviction initiatives beginning in October 2021. Security forces destroyed between 5,000 and 10,000 homes and displaced roughly 8,000-plus families in Hlaing Thayar alone (UCL, 2021; Community Damage Mapping Group, 2021) for the purported objective of improving environmental health as explained by the coup leaders, yet in truth for more complex political and economic reasons (UCL, 2021). Evictions from Hlaing Thayar marked the largest forced expulsion in Myanmar since the coup, situating it within the regime's broader campaign of repression against civilian populations and dissent, exacerbating the squatters' inaccessibility to the right to housing, tantamount to freedom from eviction.

Since the evictions, residents have been relocated to hostels in and around Hlaing Thayar, with costs covered not by the military authorities but by a patchwork of local civil society organizations and private donors. These hostels often lack access to adequate or reliable water, electricity, schools, and work opportunities, challenging the adaptability of the community members. With many men having been imprisoned or killed during the regime's violent crackdowns on anti-coup protests—particularly the Hlaing Thayar massacre of March 2021—women have become *de facto* heads of many households, shouldering family responsibilities for both income-generation and caregiving. This gendered leadership shift, corroborated by UN Women (2021), has reshaped community dynamics and placed a dual care and income burden on female evictees.

The post-coup forced evictions disproportionately impacted women, especially those forced to assume household leadership roles due to the loss or imprisonment of male family members. This shift goes beyond mere role adjustment; it represents a profound transformation in identity for many women, altering social structures and gender dynamics within these communities. By focusing on these shifting subjectivities, this study aims to capture how gender roles evolve under conditions of political upheaval

and forced migration, framing the narrative through the lived experiences of affected women.

Voices from the margins

This research focuses on the transformation of subjectivities among former residents of Hlaing Thayar squatter settlements, particularly women, who have been forced into new roles and identities due to forcible eviction by Myanmar's military authorities and resettlement in nearby hostels. The analysis will focus on how these subjectivities and roles shift in response to external socio-political pressures and the practicalities of hostel resettlement. It is vital to understand that evictions, rather than resolving the issue of squatter settlements, drive vulnerable populations deeper into poverty, intensifying their financial, social, and emotional vulnerability (see Cernea, 1997). "Clearance operations," as some proponents refer to them (UCL, 2021), do not make informal settlements disappear. Instead, they often lead to the establishment of new informal settlements, perpetuating a cycle of evictions. Given this backdrop, this research seeks to answer two key questions. First, how do squatters transition in their subjectivities during their adjustment from being semi-documented squatters to hostel-dwellers, and how does this transition intersect with gender and social status to shape their experiences and coping strategies over time? Second, what are the profound effects of eviction on squatters' lives and their roles within their current communities, and how do these effects influence their relationships with authorities, social networks, and economic opportunities in the context of broader urban development policies?

Participants of this research are those who directly experienced forced eviction from Hlaing Thayar in October 2021 and after, as well as influential community members. The research approach is grounded in narratives that illuminate the socio-economic challenges faced by 40 households following their eviction, and the subsequent domino effects affecting their housing rights. Furthermore, this study also examines the transformation in self-identity from being an "unauthorized squatter" to becoming a "partly authorized community member as a hostel-dweller" (Roberts, 2020). This research aspires to comprehend the temporality of forced evictions and shed light on

how those who have been relocated have managed to rebuild their lives. It will focus on how their auto-constructed infrastructure, encompassing physical and human connections essential for sustaining social life, has intersected with government development plans and emerging economic opportunities. Undertaking this research has felt particularly urgent given the active erasure of these communities by the regime—homes reduced to rubble and legal identities systematically obliterated by the regime’s bureaucratic machinery—and the inherent dangers of documenting such processes under conditions of compounded risk where personal persecution, communal destruction, and institutional collapse have converged. This exploration, an “ethnography of erasure,” aims to provide valuable insights into the multifaceted consequences of forced evictions in Hlaing Thayar.

Displacement, gender, control

The following literature review explores the dynamics of forced evictions in Myanmar, especially post-2021 military coup, with a focus on Hlaing Thayar’s squatter communities. This study employs assemblage theory and gendered perspectives to examine the evolving subjectivities of displaced individuals, particularly women, transitioning from being semi-documented squatters to hostel dwellers. This transition requires a renegotiation of identity within new socio-spatial contexts influenced by intersecting forces of socio-political pressures and forced migration.

Understanding the historical backdrop of evictions in Yangon is crucial for contextualizing the current situation. Yangon’s history of informal settlements dates back to the former capital’s history of rapid urbanization and lack of affordable housing, which led to the formation of the city’s longstanding squatter communities (UN-Habitat, 1991). Following Myanmar’s independence in 1948, rural-to-urban migration surged, leading to the proliferation of informal settlements on the city’s peripheries. The government’s policy responses have consistently involved demolishing squatter settlements and forcibly relocating residents to outlying areas, often without adequate compensation or alternative housing provisions (Rhoads, 2018). Such strategies have deepened the instability faced by these communities. The 1962 military coup further intensified urban eviction

policies, with the government perceiving informal settlers as destabilizing elements that posed a threat to urban order (Curless, 2015; Popoola et al., 2020). Thousands of families were forcibly relocated to satellite towns with substandard infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate access to essential services in the years following the 1962 coup. In the 1990s and 2000s, redevelopment projects in Yangon spurred yet another wave of evictions that the authorities attempted to justify as necessary for urban beautification and infrastructure improvement efforts that disproportionately affected the urban poor (Seekins, 2009).

These historical eviction patterns are intertwined with broader trends in urbanization. Myanmar's urban landscape has transformed significantly, with rural-to-urban migration fueling rapid urbanization, particularly in Yangon. Between 1983 and 2014, the urban population rose from 24 percent to 30 percent, with most of this growth centered in Yangon, the country's former capital and largest commercial hub (Johnstone, 1983; Estoque, 2017). The influx of rural migrants has led to additional informal settlements in the city's peripheral areas, where residents face persistent eviction threats (Forbes, 2019; Green Lotus, 2020). Furthermore, these settlements typically lack essential services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity, further compounding the challenges faced by Yangon's vulnerable squatter population.

The consequences of eviction and resettlement are not felt equally; gender plays a significant role. Women and children bear the brunt of forced evictions and resettlement, often facing amplified difficulties in maintaining household well-being and community cohesion (Mya Naing, 2021). The gendered burden of eviction reflects women's roles in sustaining familial and communal structures, which are severely disrupted by displacement. Forced evictions often dismantle critical support networks, livelihoods, and childcare options, disproportionately impacting women (Takeda, 2020; Das & Guha, 2016). Additionally, resettlement sites are often located far from employment opportunities, forcing women to either travel greater distances or abandon their livelihoods. These issues have worsened since the 2021 military coup as the junta consolidates control over urban spaces, heightening the securitization and surveillance of informal settlements (Forbes, 2019).

This suggests that forced evictions may serve as a means for the military to suppress dissent and reshape Yangon's urban landscape.

Beyond infrastructure or development justifications, evictions often serve political purposes. Research indicates that eviction drives in Myanmar have historically been wielded as instruments of urban planning and control. According to Rhoads (2018), the use of forced evictions to regulate land and population can be traced back to colonial land control practices in Yangon. Although eviction policies ostensibly aim to improve urban infrastructure, they often disproportionately affect marginalized populations, reflecting broader socio-political motivations. Forbes (2019) observes that these evictions serve to marginalize low-income residents and reallocate prime urban land for redevelopment.

Assemblage theory provides a perspective from which to explore the reconfiguration of social and material interactions among displaced squatters. This theory views identity as continuously evolving, shaped by dynamic interactions with socio-political forces (Roberts, 2020). Forced displacement disrupts established community ties and leads to new forms of identity as individuals adapt to new material conditions and social networks within hostels, even when those hostels are located within the same township individuals previously inhabited. The theory's application reveals the fluidity of identity as squatters redefine themselves within restructured spaces. In the case of Hlaing Thayar, assemblage theory helps explain how the forced eviction process displaces and reshapes community structures, enabling us to explore new subjectivities that emerge amid destabilized relationships and disrupted support networks.

This research pinpoints the gendered impacts of forced evictions that place a disproportionate burden on women, particularly those who have become *de facto* heads of households following their husbands' imprisonment and arrests (Boutry et al., 2014; Das & Guha, 2016). Forced relocation often results in women adopting complex roles to ensure family resilience and stability, negotiating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems, and reestablishing social networks (UN-Habitat, 2020). In Hlaing Thayar, women face significant challenges as they navigate these dynamics in fragmented socio-political

contexts, highlighting the role of gender in influencing adaptive strategies and survival mechanisms.

Positioning this research

While substantial research addresses the implications of forced evictions, the gendered impact on shifting subjectivities within Myanmar remains under-explored. Studies from other countries often highlight how women disproportionately bear the burden of household adaptation post-eviction. However, limited research has focused on the Myanmar context, where socio-political crises further complicate these dynamics, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of gendered responses and transformations in identity among evictees. Addressing this gap is particularly challenging in the post-coup environment, where research itself is fraught with danger and institutional support has collapsed. While research on the gendered dimensions of eviction exists, the Myanmar context—characterized by political instability, threats to safety, and shifting family structures—introduces unique complexities that deepen the gendered impacts of displacement. This study seeks to address this gap through the integration of assemblage theory and a gendered perspective, particularly focusing on how forced eviction in Myanmar has altered the social identities and responsibilities of women, often positioning them as *de facto* community leaders in the absence of men.

A recurring theme in the literature on squatter communities is the precarious nature of informal settlements, where residents, due to semi-documented or undocumented status, often face eviction threats and lack access to basic amenities (Kyed, 2019; UCL, 2021). However, while studies highlight the instability of squatter life and the constant risk of eviction, there is limited research on how these conditions shape squatters' self-conceptions and community roles over time, particularly when transitioning to alternative housing situations, such as hostels. Research on identity shifts typically does not fully address how squatters adapt their sense of self in response to new socio-spatial contexts, such as moving from a squatter settlement to a hostel.

The second research question addresses eviction's broader social, economic, and political impacts on squatters' roles within their communities. While existing studies cover the immediate displacement effects and the

breakdown of social networks (Forbes, 2016; Rhoads, 2018), they often lack an in-depth exploration of the long-term implications for community roles, relationships with authorities, and access to resources. Literature on forced eviction typically points to increased economic vulnerability and loss of social cohesion but does not detail how these transformations impact individuals' political agency, their engagement with local governance structures, or their capacity to secure economic opportunities in resettlement settings. Evictions dismantle social networks and reconfigure power dynamics within the community, shifting community roles and undermining collective agency (UN-Habitat, 1991; UCL, 2021). By applying assemblage theory to explore how these new configurations impact squatters' roles and relationships within a newly imposed environment, this study seeks to capture the multifaceted nature of eviction effects, which extends beyond economic loss to encompass broader transformations in community organization and political agency. The literature suggests that displacement places squatters at a disadvantage in engaging with authorities and accessing necessary resources, often leaving them reliant on informal support systems. However, the current research addresses a gap by examining how these shifts influence squatters' roles in negotiating access to resources, shaping their interactions with local authorities, and reestablishing networks within broader urban development policies.

In addition, this study also seeks to explore how squatters rebuild social networks, manage economic uncertainty, and redefine their roles in a way that aligns with or resists prevailing urban development agendas. The literature acknowledges that eviction can be a tool of political repression and urban control. Yet, there is a need for further analysis of how squatters respond to these policies, particularly when they are relocated to hostels and expected to adapt to new regulatory environments. Examining these adaptive strategies not only addresses a gap in understanding the personal and collective resilience of squatter communities, but also illuminates how these transitions reshape squatters' economic agency and political relationships in ways that are often overlooked by existing research on urban displacement and eviction (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2014; Roberts, 2020).

Contextual Yangon studies

Early reports and history

Turning to specific studies, an early report on forced eviction in Hlaing Thayar (Anonymous, 2021) recounts how shortly after the 2021 coup the military committed a rapid eviction of squatters along Yangon-Pathein Road in Hlaing Thayar. It also explores the possible reasons behind this urgent forced relocation. This was the first source of information about the eviction since the coup, which prompted me to further investigate its effects on the squatter community. However, being preliminary, the report leaves much room for improvement regarding the detrimental and associative effects of the eviction on those evicted. While this report provides initial insights, further investigation is needed to understand the long-term consequences of the eviction for the displaced squatters, such as their access to basic amenities and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the junta's comprehensive rationale behind this sudden eviction and whether alternative solutions were considered for addressing the housing needs of the squatter community.

Yangon's history from the period of British annexation to 2009 is covered by Seekins (2011), including a massive displacement of population from 1958 to 1960 during the first military ("caretaker") regime. Seekins details how some non-squatters in urban Yangon were compelled to migrate to satellite townships without electricity, water, transportation, or other services. He paints a generic image of forced migration in Yangon, leaving holes in the causes and contexts. While historical context like that provided by Seekins is valuable, addressing current housing needs requires comprehensive strategies considering socio-economic factors, urban planning, and collaboration between government agencies and community organizations.

Others have studied the causes of forcible evictions as policy responses. Bosson (2007) examines forced migration and specific forced eviction variables in government-controlled areas. Since colonial times, forcible evictions have been used to control land and population, according to Rhoads (2018), although her study does not examine trends occurring later than 2015. The use of forced evictions is not solely a historical issue; in recent years, there have been ongoing cases of forced evictions in Yangon and other

cities in Myanmar, highlighting the need for continued research and action to address this pressing issue.

Settlements, poverty, and land

Beyond military evictions, recent research has examined informal settlements, frequently in the exact locations of resettlement sites. Forbes (2016) examines urbanization frontiers and how core development has led to the eviction of most inner-city squatters and priced out low-income inhabitants. He describes many push-pull variables that explain informal squatters' mobility between central and peripheral Yangon and informal settlement development. Similarly focusing on urban poverty, Boutry (2014) employs qualitative research to examine urban poverty's causes and effects, including rural-urban migration. Adding another dimension, Roberts (2020) explores the Burmese word for squatter and its criminal overtones, which portray peri-urban Yangon as unsafe and lead to counter-narratives by squatters. These counter-narratives aim to challenge the negative perception of peri-urban Yangon and highlight the resilience and resourcefulness of squatters in creating their communities. Additionally, Roberts argues that understanding the complexities of informal settlement development is crucial for implementing effective urban poverty alleviation strategies.

Other urban Yangon studies focus on land use and environment rather than lived experience, though they provide context for the physical spaces involved. San Moe (2009) studies Yangon's land use and environmental issues, yet she only covers Yangon's urban changes up to 2005. The Greater Yangon Strategic Urban Development Plan (JICA, 2014) includes much information about land use, urban planning, and environmental challenges. It proposes a step-by-step urban development framework for the central business district, regional, transit-oriented, capacity development, and strategic ecological evaluation.

Institutional reports and surveys

A report by UN-Habitat (1991) titled *Human Settlements in Myanmar* provides details of households that relocated to new satellite townships and urban centers in Myanmar. The study covers a 20-year period, though its

data is consequently dated. Thus, the report provides many solid statistics to explain Yangon's forced expulsion of squatters from urban to peri-urban areas. More recently, UN-Habitat (2020) surveyed five informal villages in Hlaing Thayar. The study assesses housing and potential for community improvement. The survey includes household interviews, case studies, ward manager interviews, community organization interviews, and focus group talks. Although the household survey is the core of the report, insights from additional instruments add to the analysis. A key conclusion about the settlement's dynamics is that respondents were typically dependent on parents or relatives prior to their migration. Most respondents were squatters, but nearly half had obtained cards proving they own their homes. Roughly one-third of respondents were unregistered.

A report from Human Rights Watch (2020) critically reviews the country's human rights situation, including informal settlement abuses. Such reports are vital for documenting the specific rights violations relevant to the studied area.

Poverty, displacement, and security

In related qualitative research, Boutry et al. (2014) examine urban poverty's causes and impacts using human rights indicators, seeking to understand the causes and effects of Greater Yangon's urban and peri-urban forced displacement. This study examines urban poverty from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, painting a thorough picture of urban poverty and its causes, which helps explain why the urban poor have suffered so severely in the post-coup period. By analyzing human rights indicators, Boutry et al. aim to shed light on the systemic issues contributing to Greater Yangon's urban poverty and highlight the specific impacts of forced displacement, providing valuable insights into the experiences of those affected. This comprehensive understanding is essential for addressing the root causes of urban poverty and advocating for the rights of marginalized populations in the region.

Forbes (2016) explores the frontiers of urbanization in Yangon and their relationship to the city's informal settlements. This allows urban studies scholars to better understand squatter marginalization throughout the township. His work also addresses land-related issues and complexity due

to the country's flexible legal structure, highlighting the potential legal gap between hostel residents and squatters. Understanding the legal complexities and gaps between urban residents is crucial to developing effective policies and interventions that uplift marginalized populations. By addressing these issues, urban studies can contribute to the creation of inclusive and sustainable cities that prioritize the rights and well-being of all residents, regardless of their housing status.

As the largest informal squatter settlement in Yangon, Hlaing Thayar was studied by Kyed (2019) to determine how poor informal migrants survive, based on interviews conducted in early 2017 with informal settlers, local leaders, and city officials. The most crucial finding of her research is that the government's securitization of arrivals and informal settlers creates insecurity in Yangon's informal settlements, which could worsen stability.

This preliminary literature review establishes the relevant contextual and foundational knowledge for the present study, emphasizing the urgent need to investigate the effects of the 2021 military coup on squatters in Hlaing Thayar. By synthesizing these sources, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges squatter communities face and the uncertainties accompanying forced evictions in the wake of a significant political event. The research examines how these evicted female squatters navigate socio-spatial changes, adapting their roles and responsibilities within fragmented social structures. The significance of this study lies in its ability to illuminate the strategies women employ in response to both displacement pressures and socio-political constraints, shedding light on the resilience of these communities as they adapt and integrate within new urban landscapes.

In sum, this literature review contextualizes forced evictions in Greater Yangon, addressing critical gaps in existing research. By investigating the intersection of socio-political forces, identity shifts, and gendered resilience, this study contributes valuable insights into the adaptive strategies of Myanmar's displaced populations, predominantly female household heads.

Methodology under duress

This study employs a qualitative methodology integrating narrative methods, assemblage theory, and participatory action research (PAR) principles to deeply explore the research questions. The specific approaches were necessarily shaped and constrained by the precarious reality confronting myself as the researcher—including direct personal risk as a CDM participant on junta arrest lists and forced into hiding, the targeting of the study community being actively erased, and the collapse of institutional support with universities militarized and archives inaccessible. This context demanded embedded witnessing, understood here as a methodological stance involving the documentation of events from within the affected community while sharing risks and experiences. This necessitated significant adaptation from conventional fieldwork practices, transforming the research from academic pursuit into acts of radical documentation and witnessing. This approach is designed to better understand the experiences of squatters in Hlaing Thayar who have been forcibly relocated to hostels, focusing on their evolving self-identities and the profound effects of eviction on their lives and community roles.

The research is grounded in assemblage theory and adopts a gendered perspective. Assemblage theory offers a conceptual framework with which to scrutinize the dynamic and fluid relationships between the diverse elements constituting the participants' experiences. The theory focuses on how heterogeneous components—such as social identities, material conditions, institutional practices, gender roles, community ties, and political pressures—merge to form unique, fluid, and evolving assemblages. This perspective enables an analysis of how intersecting factors shape the participants' transitions from semi-documented squatters to hostel dwellers, emphasizing the contingent and emergent nature of these transitions and highlighting new forms of subjectivity and agency developed in response to the evolving socio-political landscape. By viewing shifting subjectivities as emergent assemblages, this study aims to reveal how women, in particular, respond to the socio-political changes imposed by forced relocation, exploring how individual agency, community dynamics, and material conditions merge, resulting in newly configured identities continuously shaped by external forces.

Narrative methods are central to this research, emphasizing the collection and analysis of personal stories. Primary data was gathered through several methods adapted for extreme risk. These include in-depth oral interviews of witnesses with firsthand experience with forced eviction (conducted in person when fleetingly possible, often disguised as casual conversations in tea shops, or via telephone using secure channels), online interviews conducted personally with trauma survivors to gain deeper insights, correspondent interviews conducted remotely via Zoom with local social service workers for additional context, and analysis of secondary data such as books, journals, government news and reports, and records. Given the impossibility of traditional prolonged immersion and the risks of carrying recording devices, methods like those related to “flash ethnography”—brief, focused interviews conducted during lulls in military patrols, often using market banter as cover—were employed. Sensitive information, too dangerous to record digitally or on paper, was sometimes memorized using traditional Burmese verse structures or coded into seemingly innocuous notes (e.g., GPS coordinates of potential mass graves disguised as lottery prompts), transforming oral traditions into a form of secure, living archive.

Principles of PAR were also employed to involve participants actively where feasible, though constrained by security concerns. PAR emphasizes reflection and action, empowering participants to engage critically with issues affecting their lives. Where possible (e.g., through focus group discussions or community workshops, though not explicitly detailed here as primary methods), participants contribute to the interpretation of findings, enhancing the relevance of the research. Data for this study were collected by forming a collaborative team of four-to-five IT-savvy research participants, ensuring inclusiveness. In some cases, participants were hired as research assistants and provided fair compensation, though this required adaptation for religious leaders. My positionality and multiple identities as a local community leader, academic, and revolutionary member facilitated interactions with participants from diverse backgrounds. Our shared vulnerability sometimes transformed traditional researcher-subject roles; in one instance, a participant provided me shelter during a raid, shifting our

dynamic towards that of co-conspirators, further highlighting the need for constant reflexivity regarding my insider status and potential biases.

The study involves approximately 40 households in Hlaing Thayar led mainly by women who experienced eviction after October 2021 and subsequent relocation to hostels. Recruitment relied heavily on trust-based sampling through verified networks, an ethical necessity when introductions could carry lethal risks for all involved. My prior role in the area as vice-chair of a COVID-19 response committee helped establish trust. Significantly, many participants are women whose husbands had been imprisoned or killed during the March 14, 2021 Hlaing Thayar massacre following the evictions. Their ardent desire to participate, sometimes at great personal risk, underscored the collaborative nature and shared stakes of this research. The diverse participant group includes Buddhist monks, Islamic scholars, ward administrators, social workers, and land rights activists. From the 40 studied households, 10 individual case studies were selected for deeper narrative analysis of gendered shifts in subjectivity, providing detailed insights into the evolving identities of women compelled to take on primary roles in the absence of adult male family members. These narratives serve as focal points for analyzing shifting subjectivities and gender dynamics following eviction.

The study employs MAXQDA software to systematically analyze the qualitative data. Each interview narrative has been transcribed and imported into MAXQDA, where text segments were coded based on themes such as identity, coping strategies, perceptions of eviction, loss of community, adaptation, and resilience. Applying assemblage theory involves using the software to link different data types (transcripts, notes, secondary data) and create networks of interconnected codes reflecting the complex assemblages shaping participants' lives. Where PAR methods generated data (e.g., workshop transcripts), collaborative coding allows participants' interpretations to be integrated. MAXQDA's demographic variable tools help manage and analyze data based on participant categories (gender, role, etc.), ensuring the analysis accounts for diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Data security was paramount. After security forces raided my apartment, interview transcripts were often split into encrypted fragments stored across different cloud servers or secure folders accessible only with consent,

constituting a “distributed memory” system to mitigate risks of confiscation or complete data loss. Secure group chats on platforms like Signal were also used for end-to-end encrypted communication between participants and myself.

Ethical considerations and anonymity

Navigating ethical requirements under conditions of extreme duress has required constant adaptation and generated profound dilemmas during the research process, moving far beyond standard institutional review protocols into what might be termed “security-embedded ethics.” To ensure privacy and anonymity, semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted online or in neutral public locations disguised as casual meetings. This approach safeguards identities but may introduce limitations from relying on internet-based methods or truncated interactions. Informed consent and participant anonymity are fundamental. Recording and use of key informant interviews comply with prior, ongoing, and subsequent consent, which has often required dynamic negotiation based on immediate safety assessments and participant directives.

Tiered consent approaches have been used, ranging from verbal approval for low-risk exchanges to participatory risk assessment where subjects co-determine recording limits. Difficult decisions arose, such as when participants facing immediate state violence requested their real names be used either as an act of defiance or to inform imprisoned family members of their participation. This posed a direct conflict between respecting agency and the duty to protect from further harm. Consent documents were provided at least one week before interviews where feasible, and participants retained autonomy to negotiate or withdraw their contributions at any stage. Compensation also presented ethical challenges; while secular collaborators were paid, monastic ethics prohibit the remuneration of monks, leading to compromises like trading essential medical supplies for oral histories, creating an economy of survival rather than simple data extraction.

The study is confined to a specific geographical region (Hlaing Thayar township) and a particular community of squatters relocated to hostels after the October 2021 evictions. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to other urban areas. The sample size, while involving 40 households, may not

represent all relocated informal settlers. The selection of 10 cases for deeper analysis was based on thematic saturation. Additionally, the sensitive nature of the topic and participant vulnerability, compounded by the pervasive risks associated with the challenging research context for both participants and the researcher (including my own experiences of persecution trauma and symptoms of hypervigilance), mean some perspectives might not have been fully disclosed due to overriding security concerns or the emotional toll (“compassion overload”) of recounting traumatic events. For instance, listening to participants’ harrowing accounts of sexual violence and relentless harassment left me deeply shaken, necessitating pauses in fieldwork for self-care and processing. Witnessing the extreme poverty and depression of participants, such as the mother who attempted suicide after her husband’s imprisonment and subsequent business seizure, created profound emotional and psychological challenges. This included not only compassion overload from the witnessing of participants’ suffering but also “institutional grief”—mourning the loss of academic mentors and colleagues who had disappeared or been imprisoned. Furthermore, while necessary for survival, my reliance on methods like flash ethnography as part of this “ethnography of erasure” inevitably means certain layers of context and nuance typically captured through prolonged immersion may be less represented in the gathered data.

Furthermore, ethical considerations extend to dissemination, with plans to share findings with the community through workshops and accessible formats, alongside academic outputs, ensuring the research serves those whose experiences it documents.

Ten case studies

From the 40 households this study focuses on, 10 individual case studies were selected for deeper narrative analysis and insight into the shifting subjectivities of female household leaders following eviction. These cases, introduced briefly below, illustrate the transformative effects of forced eviction and are referred to throughout the following analysis sections.

Ma Nge’s harrowing experiences reflect the human cost of political unrest in Myanmar. Her family moved to Hlaing Thayar after Cyclone Nargis devastated their home in 2008. Despite the hardships, she found happiness

with her family in the squatter area until the 2021 military coup in Myanmar altered her life drastically. Ma Nge joined street protests and sit-in strikes after her husband was shot dead during the 2021 Hlaing Thayar massacre. A year later, she herself was shot, arrested, and endured endless torture while her three-year-old son was abducted. Upon her release, she found her house gone and her son staying in a shabby hostel with her parents. Since becoming a trash collector to survive, Ma Nge has remained unbowed, embodying strength and resilience.

Ma Thandar's life was upended by political persecution following the military coup of February 2021. A respected community member in Hlaing Thayar, she was falsely accused of being an accomplice to a murder. Her husband was killed, her properties confiscated, and her mother, who has throat cancer, was left alone. Despite her arrest and personal losses, Ma Thandar remains determined to fight the false charges and seek justice, drawing strength from her mother's resilience. Her story underscores the human cost of political persecution and the indomitable spirit of those who fight against oppression.

Daw Nyo's life exemplifies the shifting subjectivities and resilience of women in conflict zones. After a tragic burglary in Karen State 15 years ago, she relocated to Hlaing Thayar, securing a job in a garment factory and later marrying a man from the Scottish community. The military coup in early 2021 disrupted their lives, leading to her husband's death during a crackdown and the eventual confiscation of their house. She secured a room in a hostel with international assistance, marking a significant shift from being a semi-documented squatter to a somewhat documented hostel dweller. This transition brought new challenges, highlighting the precarious nature of identity and the resilience required to navigate political instability.

Buddhist monk **U Ottama** has experienced serious internal conflict regarding the squatter community in Hlaing Thayar. Despite pitying the squatters, he rarely accepted their alms, believing their resources were too limited. The forced eviction on March 14, 2021, changed his perspective as he regretted not allowing the squatters to contribute. The population shift following the evictions led him to reevaluate his thinking, prompting a deeper understanding of compassion and equality. The monk's transformation

underscores the importance of embracing all acts of giving and highlights the broader themes of inclusion, dignity, and human capacity for transformation.

U Min Thura, a ward administrator in Hlaing Thayar, faced significant challenges managing the influx of squatters into his ward following the military's forced evictions in November 2021. Initially viewing the squatters with sympathy and apprehension, he had to negotiate with hostel owners and collaborate with humanitarian workers to generate support for the displaced population. Over time, his perception of the squatters has evolved, coming to recognize them as integral members of the community. His journey from apprehension to acceptance underscores the importance of compassion, collaboration, and community resilience in managing population movements during crises.

Daw Khin Hla, a hostel owner in Hlaing Thayar, has faced numerous challenges and ethical dilemmas while attempting to accommodate displaced squatters after the military evicted them in late 2021. Despite bureaucratic obstacles and a need to resort to bribery at times, she secured permission to shelter the squatters. Her actions, driven by empathy and a commitment to social justice, highlight the complexities of humanitarian efforts in conflict zones. Integrating the squatters with existing tenants has required careful management and continuous communication, emphasizing the importance of empathy, collaboration, and perseverance in addressing the needs of displaced communities.

The life of **Daw Mya Yee** took a drastic turn after her sons participated in anti-coup activities, leading to severe repercussions from the military authorities. Both her business and her family's home were confiscated, and she was forced to move first to a squatter's area in Hlaing Thayar and later a hostel. Despite her husband's death from throat cancer and constant discrimination from local authorities and others aware of her sons' imprisonment, she remains resilient, regularly visiting her imprisoned sons and supporting her family through a small water-selling business. Her story is a testament to human resilience and the power of unwavering determination in the face of severe hardships.

Hla Hla Win's journey from working as a prostitute in the squatters' area to becoming a social worker highlights the strength and determination

of the human spirit. Active in anti-coup protests, she was wounded in the Hlaing Thayar massacre and redirected her life towards social work after her injuries prevented her from continuing her previous means of earning a living. Despite facing discrimination from colleagues because of her past in sex work, her deep understanding of the local community has allowed her to connect effectively with other squatters, significantly improving their lives. Her transformation showcases the potential for change and the power of determination.

A dedicated factory worker and labor union member, **Nan Myat Mwe** became a prominent figure in the fight against the military coup in Myanmar. Leading marches and sit-in strikes, she narrowly escaped death during the army raid in Hlaing Thayar on March 14, 2021. Adopting a new identity to avoid military retribution, she became a *pwe-sa*—a type of broker who traditionally helps people find housing and navigate local networks. She uses these same skills and connections to support those fighting against the military. Her journey from a peaceful life as a factory worker to that of a resistance supporter working through informal channels highlights her unyielding spirit and determination to fight for justice.

Jojo, a dedicated social worker and philanthropist, has been supporting marginalized communities in Hlaing Thayar for five years. His role became crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hlaing Thayar massacre, and subsequent squatter clearance initiatives. Navigating complex social dynamics, he has connected local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international donors, and members of squatter communities, ensuring a steady flow of resources and support to those in need. Despite challenges, his compassion, resilience, and ability to bridge divides have significantly impacted the communities he serves, highlighting the importance of dedication and empathy in humanitarian efforts.

U Ba Thaw, a steadfast advocate for squatters in Hlaing Thayar, has been dedicated to helping the most vulnerable in society since the early 2010s. Following the 2021 coup, he has faced constant surveillance, harassment, and death threats. His efforts to aid displaced squatters during the March 2021 Hlaing Thayar massacre involved building a network of supporters, leveraging media attention, and establishing safe houses. His extraordinary

courage and resilience in the face of immense danger highlight his unwavering dedication to human rights and the lasting impact of his work.

Emerging realities

This research, conducted amidst the triple jeopardy of personal, communal, and institutional risk, investigates the profound impacts of forced evictions and relocation on squatter communities in Hlaing Thayar, specifically focusing on how these events reshape identities, roles, and community dynamics. The study employs participatory action research, narrative methods, and thematic analysis using MAXQDA software to explore themes such as role transformations, gendered experiences, the effects of political violence, and collective identity formation. These findings reveal the intersections of gender, social status, and political forces in shaping displaced communities' coping strategies and resilience.

The findings are organized around the following key thematic areas: (1) transformation of roles and subjectivities, which encapsulates changes in household responsibilities and identities; (2) impact of political violence, focusing on how political forces reshape personal and community dynamics; and (3) community dynamics and collective identity, highlighting how collective responses form around shared experiences of displacement. The findings illustrate how eviction and forced resettlement in Hlaing Thayar have catalyzed the formation of new social assemblages, particularly among women who have taken on expanded social roles and household responsibilities. Assemblage theory is used to illuminate these dynamics, illustrating how the interaction between socio-political forces, gender norms, and community structures facilitates the emergence of collective identities. As women engage in hostel-based community support networks, they forge new subjectivities co-constructed with their environment and shifting social expectations. This transition is seen in how women's identities evolve from traditional roles to those of leaders and organizers, underscoring the adaptive and contingent nature of identity in response to assemblages of forced migration.

Through an assemblage perspective, the study illuminates how the forced eviction and relocation process has destabilized and reconfigured existing social, spatial, and material relations within the squatter community leading to

the emergence of new subject positions, collective identities, and community dynamics. For instance, the study reveals how the loss of established social networks, the disruption of daily routines, and the challenges of adapting to new physical spaces have reshaped the roles and subjectivities of female heads-of-household who must navigate these transformations and negotiate their place within new family and community structures.

Transformation of roles and subjectivities

The transition from semi-documented resident of a squatter settlement to resident of a hostel represents a profound shift in identities, particularly among female household leaders. These changes are marked by the loss of established community networks and the necessity to adapt to unfamiliar environments. For women like Ma Nge (personal communication, 2024), who recounts, “When I got out, our house was gone. My son was living with my parents in a shabby hostel nearby. We had nothing. I had to do something to survive,” this process has meant rethinking their roles and responsibilities. This transformation in subjectivity, from “unauthorized” squatter to “partly authorized” hostel-dweller, directly reflects the analytical framework’s emphasis on how state violence and political upheaval actively reshape identities and social positioning for targeted communities.

Through assemblage theory, these transformations can be understood as a dynamic interplay between social, spatial, and material factors. Previously constrained by traditional roles, women from Hlaing Thayar have emerged as leaders and organizers in their new environments. Daw Nyo (personal communication, 2024) highlights this shift, describing how she navigates the dual burdens of household stability and community advocacy: “Living as a widow and a squatter, my responsibilities have increased tenfold. Maintaining stability and well-being for my children is a constant struggle.” This and similar narratives reflect the adaptive and contingent nature of identity, shaped by the challenges of displacement. The resilience demonstrated by figures like Daw Mya Yee, maintaining family support through informal work despite immense personal loss and discrimination, further exemplifies these shifting subjectivities under duress. Similarly, Nan Myat Nwe’s compulsory

transformation from factory worker to underground broker illustrates how political violence forces radical shifts in roles and identities.

Relocation often also catalyzes a reconfiguration of gender norms. As women have taken on expanded roles post-eviction, they demonstrate resilience and agency, leveraging their circumstances to build new social networks and resist oppressive systems, echoing wider patterns of grassroots resistance and community self-organization observed across Myanmar post-coup. Women like Hla Hla Win (personal communication, 2024) have transformed their struggles into opportunities: “Losing my old means of living was a blessing in disguise. It pushed me towards a path where I could truly make a difference.” Their stories illustrate how forced evictions disrupt traditional structures, enabling the emergence of new subjectivities rooted in resilience and adaptability. Furthermore, observations of these community adaptations made while navigating personal risks as a researcher also under threat suggest that the shared vulnerability experienced under these conditions has the potential to sharpen analytical insight into diverse forms of resilience.

Impact of political violence

The forced evictions in Hlaing Thayar unfolded against the backdrop of political turmoil, with the military regime using eviction and displacement as tools for repression and control, a tactic consistent with the military’s systematic targeting of perceived opposition and dismantling of community structures. These evictions not only dismantled squatter communities but also inflicted deep emotional and physical trauma on the affected populations. Ma Thandar’s (personal communication, 2024) story captures the human cost of this violence: “The soldiers came to our home and took me away, leaving my family in chaos. My properties were sealed off and confiscated. We lost everything in an instant.” Ma Thandar’s experience exemplifies the political repression and control exerted by the authorities. The repercussions have extended beyond those directly evicted, impacting families like Daw Mya Yee’s, whose home and business were confiscated due to her sons’ anti-coup activities, and allies like the activist U Ba Thaw, who has faced surveillance and death threats for his support of the community.

Assemblage theory provides a framework with which to analyze these events, highlighting how political violence reshapes personal and communal dynamics. The forced evictions have severed established social networks, leaving individuals like Ma Nge and Daw Nyo to navigate the disruptions independently. However, these adversities have also united displaced individuals, fostering collective action and resistance against systemic oppression. For instance, as communities have coalesced around shared experiences of loss, they have begun to construct new support systems and advocate for their rights. U Min Thura (personal communication, 2024), a ward administrator, observes: “When the military cleared the squatter houses, I knew our ward would be impacted. I felt for these people, but I also worried about how we could manage such an influx.” The actions and ethical calculations of intermediaries like U Min Thura, hostel owner Daw Khin Hla, and activists Jojo and U Ba Thaw are themselves inevitably constrained and shaped by the pervasive pressures and risks of this environment, influencing their interactions with both the community and the researcher operating under cover. These efforts underscore the resilience of displaced populations and their allies in the face of political violence and systemic marginalization.

Community dynamics and collective identity

The displacement of Hlaing Thayar squatter communities in late 2021 disrupted long-standing social networks and support systems, leading to a reconfiguration of collective identities. Relocation to hostels, while challenging, has also provided opportunities for rebuilding community bonds. For many, the new environment has offered a sense of stability and belonging, reinforced by everyday interactions and material markers. The specific nature of this emerging hostel assemblage—its internal dynamics, modes of interaction with authorities operating under the junta, and reliance on support networks forged in crisis—can be understood as a direct outcome of the crisis conditions that forced the evictions and shaped the possibilities for resettlement.

Ma Nge (personal communication, 2024) describes the symbolic significance of her new surroundings: “We feel safe and warm here. It’s enough with the sight of my room number for me to be happy as a hostel dweller.”

Signboards, street names, and room numbers have become identity anchors, helping individuals navigate their new lives and forge a sense of home. Similarly, the sights of monks on alms rounds and street vendors contribute to a new shared social reality, fostering psychological stability. This evolving perception is also reflected in figures like the monk U Ottama, whose initial reluctance to engage with squatters has shifted towards greater compassion and understanding following the evictions.

Community-building initiatives have played a crucial role in bridging the gap between the past and the present. Organizations like the local philanthropic group Eat My Heart (established after the 2021 killings), and the networking efforts of social workers like Jojo to connect the community with NGOs and donors, have facilitated activities such as the provision of essential supplies (food, clothing, medical aid), support for children's education, and organization of skill-building workshops and support groups. These efforts have strengthened solidarity, reduced stigma, and allowed displaced individuals to integrate into their new communities. Over time, these initiatives have transformed the social fabric of the hostels, creating a new assemblage of collective resilience and adaptability.

The case studies also illuminate the interactions between individuals and state forces or legal frameworks. U Min Thura's and Daw Khin Hla's experiences reveal the complexities of negotiating with local authorities and navigating bureaucratic challenges, highlighting the ethical dilemmas and practical difficulties faced by intermediaries striving to support vulnerable populations during periods of political instability. As former squatters transition to being hostel dwellers, they experience a significant identity shift. This transformation is internal and reflected in how others perceive and treat them, although challenges like discrimination, as faced by Daw Mya Yee, persist. The move to hostels in town changes evictees' subjectivities as they start to see themselves as part of a new community. The physical and material landscape, including buildings, street signboards, monks on their daily alms round, uniformed men collecting garbage, and electricity bill collectors, all contribute to a sense of belonging in this new environment. These everyday interactions and sights help build a sense of community, shaping the new identities of these individuals as town residents. Ma Nge's story illustrates

how moving into a hostel in the town provided her with both a new place to live and a new identity as a town resident. This shift has been mirrored in how other town residents have started to see and interact with her, treating her as one of their own rather than an outsider.

The thematic analysis reveals that the transition from being semi-documented squatters in settlements to residents of hostels has severed strong community ties and support networks previously established within the squatter communities. Keywords such as “community,” “support,” “networks,” and “severed” were frequently mentioned by participants. This disruption is vividly portrayed in the experiences of Ma Nge (personal communication, 2024), who lamented upon her release from detention, “When I got out, our house was gone. My son was living with my parents in a shabby hostel nearby. We had nothing. I had to do something to survive,” highlighting the loss of community and support networks. Similarly, Ma Thandar (personal communication, 2024) emphasized, “My properties were sealed off and confiscated. We lost everything instantly,” a loss that also severed the physical foundations of her support system. U Min Thura (personal communication, 2024), a ward administrator, observed, “When the military cleared the squatter houses, I knew our ward would be impacted. I felt for these people, but I also worried about how we could manage such an influx,” underscoring the disruption of community ties. These disruptions have undermined the collective bargaining power and political agency previously exercised by the squatter residents in negotiating with authorities and accessing resources, making it more difficult for them to advocate for their rights and needs.

The forced eviction and relocation process has placed a disproportionate burden on female household leaders. These women are forced to juggle responsibilities such as maintaining household stability, securing alternative income sources, and ensuring the well-being of their families, all while adapting to new and unfamiliar environments. Keywords such as “burden,” “responsibility,” “stability,” and “well-being” were prominent in their narratives. Daw Nyo’s (personal communication, 2024) story encapsulates this burden: “Living as a widow and a squatter, [my] responsibilities have increased tenfold. Maintaining stability and well-being for my children is a constant struggle.” Hla Hla Win (personal communication, 2024) reflected

on her journey, saying, “Losing my old means of living was a blessing in disguise. It pushed me towards a path where I could truly make a difference,” illustrating the responsibility and adaptation required in her new role. Social worker Jojo (personal communication, 2024) mentions, “Connecting the dots between donors and those in need is a complex task, but it’s incredibly rewarding to see the impact of our work on the ground,” referring to the responsibility of facilitating support. Women have had to confront challenges like navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems, establishing new social networks, and accessing essential services and resources, often demonstrating remarkable resilience and agency while doing so.

This study finds that the coup leaders have used evictions primarily as a tool of political repression to consolidate power and control over urban spaces, targeting perceived opposition and marginalized groups. This disregard for human rights, driven by political motives, underscores the need for international scrutiny and accountability. Participants commonly mentioned keywords such as “repression,” “control,” “political,” and “targeting” when reflecting on the broader context of evictions. Nan Myat Nwe (personal communication, 2024) also reflected this sentiment, stating, “We couldn’t stand by and watch our freedom be stripped away. I knew I had to be at the forefront of this fight for democracy and peace,” indicating the targeting of activists and dissenters.

Broader echoes, lessons learned

The experiences documented in this study share common themes with other cases of forced migration and displacement. The risks of landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, loss of access to shared resources, and disruption of social and community networks have been widely observed in various contexts of involuntary displacement (Cernea, 1997). This comparative perspective highlights the need for explicit, risk-reversing strategies supported by adequate financing to successfully reconstruct livelihoods and re-establish displaced populations.

This study contributes significantly to the growing body of research on the gendered dimensions of development-induced displacement by providing an in-depth analysis of the disruptions faced by women-led households

and their strategies for coping and resilience. The findings underscore the profound impacts of forced eviction and relocation, particularly on female household leaders, highlighting the need for more inclusive and participatory urban development and resettlement policies.

By centering the experiences and voices of marginalized communities, particularly women, policymakers and practitioners can develop more equitable and sustainable solutions to these complex challenges. Adopting a gender-transformative approach that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs and perspectives of women-led households is crucial. This study advocates for gender-responsive, rights-based approaches to urban development and resettlement with the aim of creating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable outcomes for all affected populations.

Conclusion

This research, undertaken within a challenging TUF environment, has examined the complex impacts of the forced displacement of squatters in Hlaing Thayar following the 2021 coup, focusing on the shifting subjectivities and experiences of female-led households relocated to hostels. The findings highlight the critical importance of adopting a gender-transformative approach to urban development and displacement, recognizing the disproportionate burdens women bear and working to empower them as agents of change.

The analysis suggests the evictions were motivated by the military authorities' pursuit of political control as much as stated reasons like environmental health. Parallels with other forced migration cases underscore the need for robust legal frameworks, monitoring, accountability, and meaningful community involvement in decision-making. This research stresses the need for policymakers and practitioners to prioritize the rights and perspectives of marginalized groups, especially women, in displacement and resettlement interventions in order to foster inclusive and sustainable solutions.

Based on participant narratives and the role of support from intermediaries (like the local NGO Eat My Heart), the relocated households have begun forming a new social assemblage. This transformation manifests

in their evolving perceptions of their physical environment and a renewed sense of community. The shift to more organized hostel accommodations has reconfigured social dynamics. Roads, signboards, and even room numbers have become symbols of stability and identity. Familiar sights like street vendors and monks provide continuity, anchoring residents in a shared social reality and fostering inclusion. Interactions with local residents have evolved, with relocated individuals being treated more as legitimate community members, strengthening the social fabric and reducing stigma. Communal activities facilitated by support organizations have bridged the gap between past and present, fostering solidarity and enabling the rebuilding of social ties essential for well-being and resilience.

These collective experiences create a new social assemblage marked by resilience and adaptability. Assemblage theory helps us understand how diverse elements—social identities, material conditions, institutional practices—converge. This new assemblage reflects not just survival but a transformation in social and spatial identities shaped by displacement, community support, and socio-political change.

The removal of “unauthorized” squatters disrupted structures but also catalyzed new community subjectivities. While forced eviction severed networks, relocation initiated the reconstitution of community bonds. Visible environmental markers and everyday interactions helped reconstruct normalcy and belonging. Gradual acceptance of relocated hostel dwellers by local residents highlights the importance of community-building activities in nurturing a resilient social assemblage.

The narratives of Hlaing Thayar’s forcibly evicted squatters encapsulate a significant shift in community subjectivities. The emerging social assemblage highlights the resilience and agency of displaced households navigating their new environment, supported by interventions. Documenting this emergence, despite the profound risks involved and the inherent limitations of conducting an ethnography of erasure under such extreme conditions where methodology becomes survival, highlights the critical function of ethnography as both witnessing and counter-memory—a form of “life support” intended to counter the junta’s narrative machinery and ensure displaced families remain legible to history. This work becomes less

observation and more transfusion, keeping memory alive in contexts where states actively seek to erase communities and suppress knowledge. This transformation reveals the intricate interplay of material conditions, social relationships, and institutional practices shaping the lived experiences and collective agency of relocated squatter families in post-coup Yangon.

Further research is urgently needed to explore the lived experiences of women displaced by development projects, as existing literature often overlooks the nuances of gendered impacts. In-depth investigations using rigorous methodologies are invaluable for shedding light on the challenges displaced women face. Such understanding is crucial for informing more gender-responsive, rights-based policies and programs addressing women's specific needs and vulnerabilities in contexts of involuntary resettlement.

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Chapter 4

**Weaving Resistance:
Living and Researching Under Fire
in Post-Coup Kantkaw**

Thiri

Abstract

This ethnographic study examines everyday resistance and local negotiation in a peri-urban Buddhist weaver community near Kantkaw, Sagaing Region, Myanmar, in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. As a long-time resident and participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement, the author has adapted research methods to navigate surveillance, community suspicion, and deteriorating infrastructure. By disguising interviews as informal conversations and relying on embedded observation, the study reveals how residents have transformed consumer choices, healthcare strategies, and autonomous security into quiet forms of resistance. These practices, while shaped by constant threat, reflect both the fragility and resilience of community life under repression. The chapter contributes insights into how political agency can be exercised through daily acts when formal governance collapses and trust is strained.

Keywords: political space, negotiated space, boycott, collective action, everyday resistance

Introduction

A community of weavers established itself in the town of Kantkaw¹ in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with residents relocating from nearby villages due to a combination of political instability and public health crises. During this pre-1962 period, Myanmar's political situation was characterized by significant unrest, with tensions between different governing factions creating insecurity for rural villagers. Simultaneously, plague was spreading rapidly through village communities with limited medical intervention. As one villager (personal communication, 2024) recounts, "My mother often told stories about our relocation to Kantkaw with fellow villagers. During that period, plague was spreading from village to village with no medical care or treatment available. It posed a severe danger to our community. Additionally, we feared the politically opposed groups, right and left wing." These dual threats prompted a collective migration to what was then a newly developed extension of Kantkaw's urban area. The community became known as *Yett Kann Oksu* (weaving group), a designation based on the residents' primary economic activity and skill specialization.

The community, currently comprising approximately 300 households, established itself through kinship networks and shared economic activities. Socially, community members have maintained cultural cohesion through the preservation of traditional ceremonies and religious practices. Economically, they specialized in traditional weaving, particularly producing blankets and *longyi* (a traditional Burmese garment). This industry created interdependent production processes that strengthened community bonds. Following the 1962 military coup, Myanmar's economic structure underwent significant transformation with state nationalization of all industries. After widespread unrest in 1988, the military regime gradually retreated from the command economy model, opening up the country's economy to global markets. The community's weaving industry declined in the face of competition from imported goods, particularly from China, forcing occupational diversification. Administratively, as part of Kantkaw's urban expansion, the community gradually came under centralized government control.

1 "Kantkaw" is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of all individuals involved in this sensitive research.

Since the February 2021 military coup, this community has actively opposed the military regime. Ongoing confrontations between citizens and military authorities have emerged regularly throughout Kantkaw. While military authorities attempt to impose governance through legal mechanisms, these efforts have largely been ineffective due to community resistance. The area has experienced a gradual transformation in governance characterized by increasing militarization alongside power vacuums in civil administration. This evolving security situation has significantly impacted local residents, creating serious concerns about physical safety and civic functioning. The community has experienced persistent insecurity for over three years since the coup, with children facing substantial educational disruptions and the local economy experiencing a considerable deterioration.

Motivated by a desire to understand how communities sustain resistance under such pressure, and grounded in the author's position as a native resident seeking insight into local problems, this ethnographic study—conducted by the author as an embedded, long-term community member facing risks similar to those of residents—examines how this peri-urban community has employed everyday resistance practices and strategic negotiation strategies to undermine traditional authority structures following the 2021 military coup. Integrating negotiation theory and everyday resistance frameworks, this research reveals how community members have transformed ordinary activities into political acts while maintaining social cohesion despite severe constraints.

Resistance and methodology in contested space

Since the 2021 military coup, this peri-urban community in Kantkaw has actively opposed the military regime through both overt and covert means. Their responses reveal how civilian resistance operates when direct confrontation carries severe risks. By examining how ordinary activities from consumer choices to educational decisions acquire political significance, this chapter documents how communities maintain agency even under extreme repression. This exploration, inevitably shaped by the researcher's own "thrice under fire" (TUF) positionality, contributes to our understanding of how power operates at local levels during Myanmar's ongoing political crisis,

revealing forms of resistance that might otherwise remain invisible to outside observers.

This research embodies what Houtman and Lodge (see Introduction, this volume) define as the TUF condition where I (as the researcher) face personal persecution as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) member, document a community under military threat, and work without institutional support following the collapse of Myanmar's academic infrastructure. This triple vulnerability does not compromise the research, but instead fundamentally shapes both process and findings, creating analytical insights accessible only through shared experience with the community.

This chapter examines community responses to military governance through two complementary perspectives. First, Michel De Certeau's (1984) concept of "tactics" illuminates how ordinary people transform imposed systems through everyday practices, creating what he terms "ways of operating" that constitute resistance within daily life. This framework helps reveal how seemingly mundane activities—consumer choices, healthcare decisions, and educational arrangements—function as meaningful political acts that effectively undermine authority structures, actions observed firsthand under conditions of shared risk. Next, these everyday practices are complemented by strategic negotiation approaches with which community members engage with power structures even under highly constrained circumstances. As conceptualized by Pruitt and Carnevale (1993), such negotiation represents problem-solving that seeks mutually acceptable agreements, essentially creating workable solutions even under severe limitations. Together, these perspectives illuminate how communities maintain social cohesion and political integrity through both resistance and strategic engagement with imposed authority.

This approach aligns with this volume's framing of "situated theory under pressure"—analytical insight forged through the collapse of distance between observer and observed. As a researcher experiencing the same conditions as those I study, my theoretical understanding emerges not despite this shared vulnerability but through it, creating what might be termed "positional objectivity through transparency."

This research employs various ethnographic methods during extended fieldwork within the community. Given the volatile security situation and politically sensitive nature of the research, establishing trust with community members—already complicated by eroding social cohesion under military pressure—was essential for data collection and understanding their political perspectives. During seven months of immersive fieldwork, conducted while navigating personal risk as a CDM member, I conducted direct observation and collected visual documentation to develop a comprehensive understanding of local practices. This ethnographic approach provided deep insights into residents' experiences, detailed information about behavioral patterns, and nuanced understanding of community dynamics.

Data collection initially included open-ended interviews with key informants identified through established community networks. The formal research process began by identifying several key informants who could provide crucial information about livelihood adaptations, local political dynamics, and community relationships. However, as detailed below, deteriorating security forced significant methodological adaptations. All data was systematically compiled, including transcription of interview recordings (when possible) and field notes, interpretation of photographic evidence and draft maps, and translation of materials into English. Data analysis employed thematic approaches with particular attention to direct speech from participants to preserve authentic voice where feasible given the constraints. The final analysis represents a systematic interpretation of data derived from these diverse sources.

Conducting research under surveillance

This research was conducted under extraordinary security constraints that required significant adaptations to traditional ethnographic methods. As a CDM teacher living in the community, my identity simultaneously facilitated trust and created vulnerabilities, a dynamic that shifted over time. Being one community member among many who have participated in resistance activities, I navigated multiple layers of risk—including the potential for arrest based on my CDM status and/or research activities—while documenting everyday life.

This constant state of vigilance transformed what might be a temporary research challenge into a permanent condition of my existence throughout the period of research. Unlike external researchers who might enter and exit zones of danger, my position as a CDM teacher meant anxiety over security concerns permeated every aspect of my research and daily life, fundamentally reshaping my approach to knowledge production.

Initially, I conducted formal interviews with close associates who understood my research aims. However, as security conditions deteriorated, and arrests increased—sometimes reportedly based on social media evidence—community trust fragmented. Fear of spies (*dalan*)—a label that carries extreme danger for anyone suspected—grew, necessitating a shift away from open interviewing towards what might be called “embedded observation,” or living as a member of the community while carefully noting resistance practices without explicitly identifying as a researcher to those outside my trusted circle. I informally categorized residents into two groups: those safe for direct interviews and those whose information was gathered through informal conversations in everyday settings such as street meetings, markets, or local shops.

After identifying potential key informants, I maintained contact by strategically shifting relationship dynamics. When one informant whose children attend military schools expressed discomfort with my identity as a CDM teacher, I deliberately downplayed this status, presenting myself instead as just another community member. This required consciously adapting my persona and being mindful of how I speak and the words I use, attempting to appear as a regular member of the community. I created opportunities for informal interactions by performing everyday tasks; for example, I would borrow my husband’s three-wheeled motorbike for market trips, which allowed me to encounter community members in a natural and non-threatening setting. These tactical identity shifts allowed me to build and maintain trust while continuing data collection under increasingly difficult circumstances.

The deteriorating security environment required a variety of methodological innovations. I avoided carrying notebooks that could be discovered during frequent searches by military authorities, instead memorizing

conversations and recording them privately after returning home—a mentally taxing process. This reliance on memory and the constant, necessary destruction of irreplaceable notes took a significant emotional toll, marked by persistent worry over data security and the potential loss of verbatim insights. Prioritizing participant safety meant choosing silence in some cases, and I constantly questioned what could or should be recorded.

This methodological shift carried emotional weight. I constantly worried about data security and whether my research activities might endanger community members who were also my neighbors and friends. The stress of memorizing conversations rather than recording them, combined with the pervasive fear of military searches and potential arrest, created a persistent anxiety that shaped every research interaction and underscored the psychological toll of TUF research.

I developed a security-conscious data management system that included a nickname coding system for participants, temporary note-taking on scraps of paper later destroyed, and hidden digital storage on removable media kept outside my residence. I maintained “clean” devices without searchable histories and always logged out of accounts to prevent information discovery during potential military searches. This constant destruction of field notes was emotionally taxing but necessary for participant protection. Each destroyed notebook felt like a loss; I grieved data I could not safely preserve.

These security practices emerged from necessity in a context where electronic documentation itself has become dangerous. Under a regime that classifies independent research as illegal activity associated with terrorist organizations potentially punishable by death, the very act of documentation has become criminalized, transforming ethnographic practice into political resistance.

The constant destruction of field notes was particularly distressing, as I watched irreplaceable data disappear for safety reasons. Each deletion represented both a necessary security measure and a small loss to the completeness of the research record, creating an ongoing tension between thorough documentation and risk mitigation. This necessary prioritization of security inevitably affected data richness, sometimes resulting in the loss of verbatim quotes or the precise, insightful phrasing of a comment captured

only imperfectly in memory. These adaptations mark a shift from traditional ethnography toward what might be called “survival ethnography” in which research methods themselves become part of the contested terrain, and knowledge production occurs not despite restrictions but through creative navigation of them.

As a CDM member on an arrest list, my inability to travel freely shaped my research design. I could not leave my immediate community because CDM teachers must remain in “unmarked” locations—places where our presence is not known or tracked by the authorities—to ensure our safety. This forced localization to my own neighborhood constrained my research, requiring significant adaptation of standard ethnographic practices that assume freedom of movement.

Navigating ethical boundaries under threat

Conducting this research in a militarized environment created complex ethical dilemmas beyond those of traditional research frameworks, demanding an approach of situated ethics grounded in immediate context and risk assessment. The foundational principle that guided this work was prioritizing community safety above research objectives. In practice, this meant ethical decisions often functioned as necessary ‘tactics’ for navigating immediate risk, constantly balancing inquiry against protection. This meant consciously excluding potentially valuable but highly sensitive information—even when offered by participants—when its documentation might endanger them, creating a tension between comprehensive documentation and the ethical imperative to protect.

My position as both researcher and community member triggered profound ethical conflicts. When participants shared sensitive information about their resistance activities, I had to make difficult judgments about what to document versus what to exclude—decisions that balanced scholarly thoroughness against potential risks to neighbors who were also friends. This dual role meant that standard research ethics frameworks often proved inadequate for navigating these complex social relationships under surveillance.

Particular challenges arose from political divisions over education, specifically between myself—as a CDM teacher—and community members

who chose to send their children to military-controlled schools. This created social pressure and a sensitive fault line within the community. When one key informant whose children attended military-controlled schools began expressing discomfort due to my identity as a CDM teacher, I had to adapt my approach. This meant temporarily setting aside my researcher identity, modifying my behavior to appear as just another community member, controlling my speech, and avoiding sensitive topics like education choices. These adaptations were necessary to maintain relationships essential to both community cohesion and data collection, but also highlighted the delicate ethical balance required. The fear of either side being misidentified as an informant (*dalan*) added another layer of complexity and risk.

This methodological adaptation emerged from necessity. I divided potential informants into two distinct groups: those with whom I had established sufficient trust for formal interviews and those whose information I could only gather through informal observation. This approach was not merely methodologically convenient but ethically necessary, as it minimized risk to community members while still enabling documentation of local resistance practices.

Consent processes were necessarily informal and ongoing. Traditional written consent forms would have created unacceptable security risks, potentially linking participants to research that military authorities would consider illegal. Instead, consent was established through trusted relationships and verbal agreements, with continual reassessment as security conditions changed. When community members expressed concerns about identification, I implemented a system of anonymization and location obscurity (avoiding specific community names) to protect identities, agreeing not to use photos or videos.

My dual identity as both researcher and CDM activist has shaped my approach to objectivity. Rather than claiming detached neutrality, I acknowledge my political position while maintaining methodological discipline. I believe this transparency has actually enhanced analytical insight by providing access to forms of knowledge that would remain inaccessible to external researchers, particularly those regarding everyday resistance practices.

Social organization and governance

Returning to the research context, this community established itself in Kantkaw's peri-urban zone nearly seven decades ago with strong kinship networks that initially centered around their collaborative weaving industry. This traditional craft involves complex production processes from raw materials to finished products, including yarn preparation, dyeing, fabric weaving, and product finishing prior to distribution to markets. These interconnected production stages were performed by different kinship groups within the community, fostering economic interdependence. Daw Thin and U Tin were prominent weaving industry business owners who maintained important relationships with workers throughout the community. Such economic connections fostered strong social bonds that facilitated community organization.

During Kantkaw's period of urban expansion, different occupational groups settled in distinct areas, with neighborhoods designated according to predominant occupations: *La Tha Marr Chung* (carpenter group), *Yett Kann Oksu* (weaving group), and *Kyapaan Oksu* (casual workers' group). These occupational designations became geographical and social identifiers. Project owners initially functioned as group leaders, exercising significant managerial authority. However, this dynamic shifted after 1988, when the opening of Myanmar's economy led to the weaving industry's decline in the face of competition from imported goods. As a result, leadership transitioned to subsequent generations who diversified into government service, retail, transportation, and manual labor while maintaining kinship-based community structures. Community cohesion was perpetuated through social activities and traditional seasonal ceremonies (*pwe*).

Being situated within the urban area of Kantkaw, the community operated under urban administrative governance. The central government established formal administrative positions and regulatory frameworks to maintain stability and control. The community was integrated into layered governance structures, including town administration, ward governance bodies, hundred-household administrators, and ten-household administrators. These officials managed local development and security while serving as intermediaries between residents and government authorities. Before the 2021 coup, ten-

household administrators were selected from within the community through local voting, ensuring representation for community interests. This created a dual power structure where formal authority resided with government officials while informal influence came through personal relationships and reputation, as exemplified by community figures like U Moe, U Maung, and Uncle Gyee.

Following the February 2021 coup, former ward administrators were arrested by military authorities, with some fleeing to other regions. Military-appointed administrators were rejected by community members, effectively preventing them from establishing residence within the community. This created a governance vacuum where community members developed their own autonomous systems to organize, problem-solve, manage resources, and make collective decisions in the absence of formal ward or town administration. While town government officers continue to hold office, they avoid entering the community and have ceased collecting taxes. Community members likewise avoid engagement with these authorities.

Pre-coup community life

Pre-coup daily life followed predictable patterns. Men would leave for work each morning and return in the evening, while women's roles were primarily focused on managing household responsibilities. Children attended school regularly. Evenings included watching news and entertainment on television channels like MRTV, Myawaddy, and Sky Net. Morning routines regularly featured newspaper deliveries, with elderly men gathering to read and discuss daily news on streets or in the shade of trees. This communal news-sharing was a characteristic social practice.

U Maung exemplifies how community members navigated pre-coup existence. As an electrical repair worker, he maintained regular employment with daily income. His wife worked in the noodle industry while also participating in *parahita* (charitable) activities at the local monastery. Their three children were well-provided for by the couple's combined income. U Maung maintained strong community relationships by assisting with neighbors' electrical problems and leading traditional ceremonies. These seasonal festivals strengthened trust and social cohesion.

The community celebrated numerous traditional ceremonies, including New Year *Payake Tayar Pwe*, *Sar Yee Tanme Pwe*, *Thitingyut Miew Twinn Pwe*, *Tazaungmone-Tazaungtaing Pwe*, and *Tapaung Pwe*. The New Year *Tayar Pwe* is nationally celebrated during the transition from the old to the new year, with this community organizing celebrations across two streets under U Maung's leadership. *Thitingyut Miew Twinn Pwe*, celebrated during the full moon of *Thadingyut* month, ranks as Myanmar's second most popular festival and strengthens communal bonds through shared activities. Community members illuminated candles at Buddhist stupas, pagodas, and house entrances while organizing street light festivals led by U Maung and his wife.

U Maung (personal communication, 2024) describes how during the full moon of *Tazaungmone* month, community members exchanged traditional foods like *masalephoo thoo* and practiced *pankthakyu pyit tal* (anonymous donations) by leaving food packages and money on streets at night for others to discover in the morning. He recalls how "Every day [during the festival], Daw Maw put one package of rice and one thousand *kyat* on the road at night. Early the next morning, we would search the road for the *pankthakyu*. We would be very happy if we found something." During *Waso* month, community members visited monasteries to make donations and observe *thila* (moral precepts) on Sabbath days, further strengthening community relationships. December was highlighted by collective early morning exercise activities for physical and mental well-being.

Community leadership and transformation

U Moe, another long-standing community member, inherited his father's weaving business and attempted to maintain it despite industry decline while diversifying into merchant activities. He cultivated strong relationships throughout the community and was respected for his knowledge. He managed street festivals and ward celebrations. Each ward and community in Kantkaw maintained distinctive pagoda festivals (*pwe*) featuring traditional foods like *mohsekyaw* and *mohinga*, with donations to monasteries. These traditional and religious celebrations fortified community bonds.

The community's eastern section was led by U Moe's group, with the area divided by two lanes but maintaining a unified community identity. Initially

after the coup, U Moe organized night security patrols during the period of political unrest, gathered intelligence about military movements, and shared information to protect community members. During the second wave of protests, when military forces fired on demonstrators, U Moe was shot and lost his leg, ultimately dying five months later. Though his case is not unique, he is remembered as the community's first resistance leader during the Spring Revolution.

Following the coup, seasonal ceremonies and community pagoda festivals have been prohibited, though military authorities continue to allow certain ceremonies. While many traditional gatherings have been disrupted, community cohesion has actually strengthened through participation in political activities and shared struggles to navigate the crisis. Despite periods when security concerns have forced residents to isolate behind closed doors, community members have developed creative methods to maintain social connections. One villager (personal communication, 2024) explains that during *Tazaung Taing* full moon celebrations, "Although it is not the same as in former years, we [still] give our neighbors salad of *masalephoo thoa*, papaya, and mango." These small gestures have become crucial for rebuilding trust and maintaining community bonds during crisis.

The coup has dramatically transformed the daily habits of community members. Work routines have been disrupted, children have stopped attending school, and marketplaces experience shortages due to widespread consumer boycotts. This resistance extends to information and media; viewing the remaining newspapers and television channels as state-controlled propaganda, residents have collectively stopped consuming them. As a result, daily routines have been altered, from morning coffee gatherings to evening entertainment. A community member (personal communication, 2024) observed: "In the morning, they [used to] read the newspaper but now they do not read it. They have televisions but they have not [turned them on] since the coup. They do not listen to the news, and they do not see entertainment and their programs on TV." These altered behaviors, from boycotting goods to abandoning state media, reflect de Certeau's (1984) concept of political engagement through changes in daily practices.

Resistance and political engagement

A few months prior to the coup, the November 8, 2020, general elections marked a significant political milestone for members of the community. Voting took place across constituencies for both *Amyotha Hluttaw* (House of Nationalities) and *Pyithu Hluttaw* (House of Representatives) members, with community members eagerly participating. The ink-marked pinky fingers from voting represented many residents' first meaningful act of political engagement. Before the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (2016-2021), citizens experienced systematic political disenfranchisement.

Prior to this period, both ordinary citizens and government employees were deliberately isolated from political information through institutional barriers and social norms. Government service workers were indoctrinated with principles like "Government servants must remain clear of party politics" and "We serve the nation, not political interests." These mechanisms effectively depoliticized public spaces and discouraged civic engagement. The government actively suppressed discussions about contemporary political conditions at both local and national levels. With information channels restricted to state-controlled newspapers and television broadcasts, citizens developed a habitual disengagement from political consciousness.

My personal upbringing reflected a common experience under the previous military regime. When I was young, I knew not to read or keep books related to politics. The older generation discouraged children's political curiosity, presenting it as dangerous. Once I obtained a book about my country's politics and tried to read it secretly, but I became afraid and eventually destroyed it. We understood that we were not supposed to concern ourselves with politics. During the NLD's administration, political consciousness began permeating community life.

Mass movements and community mobilization

Soon after the February 2021 military coup, mass protest movements emerged nationwide. In Kantkaw, both urban and rural populations engaged in widespread demonstrations demanding democratic governance, with local communities developing distinctive approaches to political expression.

Public assemblies became a common form of resistance, with hundreds of thousands gathering to establish a “public administration committee.” After this committee was suppressed and its members arrested, Kantkaw became what Castro (2018) would term “a space for the action of public policies and social movements.”

Community members participated in daytime mass movements throughout Kantkaw, joining protests and distributing water bottles and face masks to protect demonstrators from COVID-19 as the first wave of the pandemic was subsiding. At night, they organized separate neighborhood-based resistance activities. U Maung, an electrical worker and community leader, participated with his family members in both daytime mass protests and evening community actions. Though not a government employee, he and his brother install electrical systems for new homes and repair electrical equipment. His family’s strong community relationships, including leadership roles in traditional ceremonies, positioned them as natural organizers during resistance activities.

U Maung described how night demonstrations were organized by ward between approximately 6 to 8 p.m. across Kantkaw, with his ward participating from 7 to 8 p.m. The community established routes beginning in the eastern section and circling through western and northern areas, deliberately avoiding the southern street which lacked adequate escape routes due to sparse lighting and wide house fencing. As U Maung (personal communication, 2024) explains: “If the soldiers came to arrest and shoot, we [were] prepared to run and hide in the nearest houses, and all houses also agreed [to help demonstrators]. This is unity. And one man in this community named U Moe managed and helped my night strike. When we needed to know information about the soldiers’ plans, he contacted his friends to get the information for our security and he gave us the information.” These security arrangements reflected collective community decision-making prioritizing safety.

Symbolic resistance and territorial control

At 8 p.m., community members would strike tin containers in a revolutionary adaptation of a traditional ritual practice (*ma kaung sowar hnin*) typically used to drive away malevolent spirits from villages. This sound-making ritual was

repurposed to symbolically expel the military regime from society. During this period, military forces searched for protest participants, prompting the community to construct sandbag barriers at street entrances. As U Maung's wife, Ma Hnin Si (personal communication, 2024), a member of the local monastery's *parahita* (charity, social welfare) group, explains: "In my mother's ward, I saw the sandbag barriers at the top of the streets. They were [so] the military trucks cannot enter into the settlement area immediately. While the soldiers are moving the sandbags, we could flee to other places. We could get more time for escape."

Ma Hnin Si (personal communication, 2024) describes how the community organized this effort: "We started to work. First, we collected the bags. Some people gave their bags and some gave money for the cost of bags and sand. We brought two light trucks with sand. The women put the sand into the bags, the children helped to tie the sandbags, and the men carried the sandbags and arranged them as a barrier. It was not easy for cars to enter but motorcycles [didn't have any problems]." Barriers were placed at both eastern and western community entrances specifically to impede military vehicles. This collective effort demonstrates how social participation can create functional power structures in the absence of formal state authority—an example of Weberian legitimacy emerging from collective action—with members cooperating effectively to achieve shared security goals (Mintzberg, 1972).

Military pressure on the community eventually increased after soldiers removed sandbags themselves only to find them replaced soon after their departure. This escalated to forcing nearby residents to remove the barriers under threat of punishment. One community member, Daw Moe (personal communication, 2024), recalls: "I suffered from backaches because I picked up and removed the sandbags. If it was not [done], they would knock on the door of the nearest house and order us to remove the sandbags. So we cleared the bags quickly. I did not carry sandbags to my house because it would be the source of a problem. It would mean I could be arrested." This situation represents ongoing contestation between military forces and community members.

Community security organization

As town governance structures collapsed and administrative bodies disintegrated across the country, the military regime imposed Section 144 of the criminal code in some townships on February 8, 2021 (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2021). While this officially imposed martial law in Kantkaw, it initially had only limited practical effect. The governance vacuum created security concerns as ward administrative bodies ceased functioning. During this period, rumors about potential arson attacks spread throughout Kantkaw, prompting communities to independently organize neighborhood security groups.

Local male residents formed watch patrols with neighboring households to guard street junctions and protect against both fire and arsonists, while women remained behind to secure individual homes. These groups were not formal governance structures but focused specifically on security threats from outside the community. Watch duties typically occurred nightly from 8 p.m. until midnight. Two distinct groups emerged in the community: U Maung's group in the western section and U Moe's group in the eastern area.

U Maung (personal communication, 2024) describes their approach: "Every night, we would group together at about 8 p.m. We met at the lane junction point nearest to our homes, away from the main road. We brought long knives and a slingshot. My group would wait there, and U Moe's group would be at the other end of the street." U Maung first organized neighbors through meetings where they discussed fire protection strategies, reached agreements, and established decision-making processes. Once consensus was achieved, U Maung received authority to manage security duties and coordinate cooperative efforts.

Similar groups formed throughout neighboring streets, coordinating through lamp signals and occasional phone calls. These patrols restricted unknown individuals from entering the area, while community members avoided traveling to other neighborhoods without notifying the security groups in advance. This effectively established territorial boundaries. Group members occasionally gathered to share information about local political conditions. U Moe, a 60-year-old longtime community member and former weaving industry owner, has a history of providing financial assistance to

neighbors and his reputation for reliability gave him the influence needed to successfully organize security efforts.

Security adaptations and spatial politics

As military pressure intensified across Kantkaw, increasingly strict restrictions on nighttime movement forced residents to remain indoors after dark. This created an atmosphere of silence and fear that forced the suspension of community night patrols and fire watch duties. However, residents adapted by gathering in small groups of four or five people during early evening hours (around 5 p.m.) near their homes to exchange updates. Mornings and afternoons saw normal travel patterns, while the community's streets became important spaces for sharing information about political developments and security concerns in the early evenings before the military-imposed curfew emptied them later at night.

The streets thus became grounded political dialogue spaces, illustrating Lefebvre's concept of space being socially produced (Zieleniec, 2018), as residents repurposed these public areas under restriction for vital political discussion and information sharing. These spaces facilitated the continuation of certain social relations and political processes that helped shape resistance strategies in response to changing local conditions.

Since the initial period of conflict, confrontations between authorities and residents have regularly occurred, with military personnel conducting arbitrary searches and arrests under vague pretenses, particularly targeting teenaged boys and young men. These security threats significantly disrupt daily activities, including work and education. Community members have developed adaptation strategies, beginning each day by gathering intelligence about military movements through informal networks. Only after confirming relatively safe conditions will residents venture outside.

Ma Hnin Si (personal communication, 2024) described the constant anxiety, offering me direct advice based on our shared vulnerability as individuals at risk: "You should prepare to run because your family includes you and your son," she warned, before sharing her own strategy: "I have prepared an exit to run. I have a seat on the fence behind the house, so if they come to arrest us, we can escape." This "seat" was a makeshift step she

had placed to allow for a quick escape over the back fence during a raid. Her words underscore the reality for families with members in the CDM or with teenaged children, who feel particularly vulnerable to potential arrest.

Although official curfew hours during the initial conflict period ran from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m., military violence occurred outside these hours as well, creating broader de facto restrictions. According to Ma Hnin Si (personal communication, 2024): “We heard news that a man was shot when he came back from work to his home around 6 p.m. While he passed through the soldiers’ gate, he was shot. He died on the spot.” This unpredictable violence effectively rendered streets unsafe after 6 p.m., creating significant challenges for manual laborers who typically worked later hours. These conditions also increased vulnerability to criminal activity in the security vacuum, while simultaneously shifting resistance from public demonstrations toward subtler forms of everyday resistance integrated into daily practices.

By 2023, security dynamics had evolved once again. Military presence became less consistent, with soldiers appearing primarily for specific political arrests rather than routine patrols. While this shifted military focus from urban governance to armed conflict, it also created a security vacuum where residents received neither military protection nor civilian policing, leaving them vulnerable to criminal activity. Community members faced increased robbery and home invasion incidents but avoided reporting these to police due to their resistance stance. One community member (personal communication, 2024) recounts a recent incident: “In the last two months, I heard noise from one house at about 8 p.m. But the sound cannot be made clear. I wanted to know what was happening. But I could not go outside because the 144 law has been active until now.” News of this potential home invasion then spread silently throughout the community.

This situation reveals the limited penetration of military governance despite formal legal structures. After these incidents, community members developed collective security strategies through informal street meetings. They agreed on three protective measures: reinforcing house fences, establishing phone communication networks, and creating alarm systems involving the throwing of stones on roofs if suspicious activities were detected at night. These agreements were reached through community consensus under U

Maung's leadership, demonstrating continuing collective organization in the community despite the governance vacuum.

Consumer boycotts as political resistance

Under increasingly restrictive conditions, community members transformed their forms of resistance from public demonstrations to everyday practices, embodying de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactical resistance through ordinary activities like reading, shopping, and consumption choices. Documenting these practices required me as the researcher to rely on informal conversations and observation, as overt note-taking about boycotts could attract unwanted attention and pose security risks.

Community members systematically boycotted daily commodities and foodstuffs associated with military economic interests, including certain brands of soap, coffee, soft drinks, and beer, explicitly aiming to undermine regime revenue streams. Particularly significant was the rejection of once-ubiquitous household cleaning products like Shwewar laundry soap, carbolic soap, and Thatthar powdered soap. These products, manufactured by state-owned enterprises under the Ministry of Industry, had been deeply integrated into local domestic routines for generations.

A 78-year-old longtime community member named Daw Mi (personal communication, 2024) explains: "I refuse to buy Shwewar soap. Instead of it, I buy Fuji Cream soap. We usually used Shwewar soap to wash our clothes before the coup. It is suitable for my clothes. However, I don't buy their [the military's] products after the coup. About one year ago, my friend worked at a small company. Her company distributes the Shwewar soap boxes and she gave me a soap box but I did not take it because I did not want to use it." Regime-affiliated products have nearly disappeared from local markets. Similar boycotts have targeted military-affiliated beverages, including Nan Myaing coffee, Shwe Phe Oo tea mix, and alcoholic products like Mandalay Beer and Myanmar Beer. Coffee and tea products have particular significance as daily consumption items in Myanmar.

Daw Mi (personal communication, 2024) describes her changed consumption patterns: "I used to prefer Nan Myaing coffee, but after the coup, I switched to another coffee mix. I don't buy the coffee related to them

[the military]. In the early days, I did not know all the names of the boycotted items. Thus, I went to buy [my usual] coffee mix. I told the seller that I wanted to buy Nan Myaing coffee. Suddenly, they looked surprised and replied, 'No.' I thought, what is this and why? I asked another neighbor. She said that it [Nan Myaing coffee] is a boycotted item because it is one of the military regime's products." These practices represent forms of consumer empowerment (Shaw et al., 2006) where collective purchasing decisions become political acts. When consumers join boycotts, they collectively withhold purchasing power from specific companies or brands associated with the military regime as punishment for what are perceived to be unacceptable behaviors (Hoffmann & Müller, 2009; Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001).

Cultural participation and non-participation

As part of a national public health promotion organized by the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, community walks were traditionally held every Saturday in December. These events, aimed at improving national fitness, were typically followed by group physical exercises and dance routines (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2021).

Daw Mi (personal communication, 2024) explains that while the collective December walks were annual traditions in Kantkaw, they were suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic and took on a different character after the coup:

In my town, we [used to] have an annual mass walk in December. At the end of every week in December, almost everyone in the local community took part in walking for their health. However, over the past three years, we have not participated. The military regime has organized the public walks with non-CDM supporters. They have only walked along certain roads with the limiting of the route and direction. They have taken photos and videos, promoting the event as the 'December Public Walking' events on their TV and in the news. Really, we know it is a tactic of the military regime to distribute the news that they put into the minds of the public. However, we are against the activities held by them. We did not participate and were

not aware of it, as we did not join in this December public walk under the military regime.

Daw Mi (personal communication, 2024) further describes boycotting recent local water festival celebrations: “We did not go to that. My children also did not go outside the house and they stayed in the house [during the festival]. We were against it and did not cooperate with their water festival with our silent power.” This represents what Koefoed (2017a, p. 39) describes as “constructive resistance”—responses to power that undermine different aspects of authority through non-participation.

Healthcare strategies

The community’s navigation of the second wave of COVID-19, which severely impacted Kantkaw beginning in June 2021, reveals how health crises can become entangled with political resistance. The pandemic devastated the community, causing widespread illness and numerous deaths while exposing the complete breakdown of systems of governance. Despite the existence of government-run hospitals and dedicated COVID-19 care facilities, residents deliberately avoided accessing care at these institutions as an extension of their resistance practices.

The military regime prohibited private hospitals from admitting and treating COVID-19 patients, forcing them to transfer severe cases to military-controlled facilities. While this policy eliminated trusted options for inpatient care, it created a complex reality where residents still sought whatever limited help they could from private sources. They attempted to manage the disease at home using private doctors, traditional medicine, and community-based care networks. This navigation of the healthcare system became an alternative way of operating to circumvent state control, a situation further complicated by nighttime violence that restricted movement and emergency care options.

Daw Soe (personal communication, 2024), a CDM teacher, describes her family’s experience during the second COVID-19 wave: “At that time, all my neighbors were also sufferers. I did not want to attend their [the military’s] hospital or its care center. I did not like and did not believe in that, so my son sent me to get care at a private hospital. When my son got this disease,

I sent him to a private doctor. My daughter's case was more difficult than ours; at that time, the military regime forced private hospitals not to accept COVID-19 patients, and some private doctors were also afraid of that order."

Daw Soe explains that a private hospital measured her daughter's oxygen levels and prescribed paracetamol, but ultimately directed the family to a government hospital for further treatment, which they refused to utilize. Community members instead shared traditional treatment methods, including eating onions and *pinsein* (holy basil) leaves, using steam inhalation, and consulting doctors privately. Local pharmacies became overwhelmed with customers. A crucial resource emerged through social media networks identifying doctors willing to treat COVID-19 patients by telephone despite potential legal consequences. Daw Soe (personal communication, 2024) recalls:

I searched on Facebook for their names and phone numbers. I found four doctors' names and numbers. I called the phone number of one doctor. He gave me the medicine's name and guided me to take it. After two days, I called him again, but could not contact him. I trembled in fear [during] that situation. At that time my father and mother also suffered from this disease. I tried to contact the next doctor on Facebook. At that time, the doctors were afraid of the military regime's order. They treated the parents silently. It is lucky. I contacted one doctor. He came to us and he cured us.

During this period, deteriorating political conditions further complicated survival. Movement restrictions prevented the purchasing of food and necessities, forcing community members to help each other with provisions. Many community members died from COVID-19 during this period. This healthcare crisis demonstrated how residents developed autonomous solutions without engaging military-controlled services, effectively undermining regime authority through healthcare choices that embody de Certeau's (1984) concept of everyday resistance.

Negotiating essential services

Following a rainstorm a few years ago, the community experienced an extended power outage when one of two electrical transfer boxes serving the area was damaged. Despite waiting for a month, no repairs were made by authorities. Residents faced a dilemma: they needed electricity but could not approach the electricity department directly because they had been participating in bill payment boycotts as part of their resistance activities. This prompted community members to explore alternative problem-solving approaches.

Daw Mi relates how a wealthy local merchant with a good reputation initially proposed a community-funded solution in which he would cover pole costs while individual households would pay for connections to their homes. This solution failed, however, when electricity officials refused permission for independent repairs. Two weeks later, three men—including U Ni, a local shop owner married to a CDM teacher—approached the community with another proposed solution. U Ni (personal communication, 2024) explains how he proposed a one-time payment for materials while affirming the community's ongoing refusal to pay the regular tax:

So we want to try to get light. We want light, and we need light. We want to engage with them [officers]. We considered the cost, which would be 20,000 Myanmar *kyats* per home for the preparation of the transfer box, not including the tax which we refused to pay. We then asked the community if they agreed, explaining that if they did, we would organize everything and engage the other side on their behalf.

U Ni secured community agreement through door-to-door organizing and negotiated directly with electricity officials. His approach exemplifies Pruitt and Carnevale's (1993) concept of negotiation as the search for mutually acceptable agreements. By exercising influence in a manner consistent with Weber's theories of power as action forcing change within a system (Mintzberg, 1972), community organizers achieved results. After two weeks, officials repaired the transfer box, with residents paying for materials but continuing to withhold regular electricity tax payments. This arrangement

represented a negotiated compromise where both parties partially achieved their goals, with the community receiving the necessary service whilst not compromising their anti-junta principles. The episode demonstrates Lukes' (2005) concept of power as the ability to influence other actors across various situations and contexts, demonstrating how community power structures can be mobilized through authority and influence distribution.

Adaptations in education

Since the 2021 coup, community members have faced complex educational challenges that have led to tensions between families choosing to send their children to military-controlled schools and those resisting participation in state-run institutions, though these divisions were eventually navigated through careful accommodations and mutual understanding for children's welfare. Educational contestation in Kantkaw reflects what Salomon (2002, p.32) describes as conflicts deriving from tangible competing interests perceived as momentous, including authority and independence.

After the coup, Kantkaw's regular school system was shut down throughout 2021 and 2022. Upon reopening under military orders in 2023, these now military-controlled schools operated with minimal student attendance and were staffed by few non-CDM teachers. Most students and parents resisted enrollment in military-controlled institutions, while security concerns created additional barriers to attendance. During this period of educational disruption, families sought alternative learning opportunities through private tutoring and online "federal schools" organized through the CDM and administered by the National Unity Government (NUG), with the latter providing cost-free education but carrying significant security risks. The military regime's declaration of NUG—a group of mostly exiled elected representatives ousted in the 2021 coup—as an illegal terrorist organization extended to its affiliated educational institutions, creating vulnerabilities for teachers and students participating in federal schools. According to community reports known to the author, "One teacher and one student who teach at Kaung for You Federal School are [being] terrorized by the military regime [using] their precise address" (Phio Thitha Facebook, personal communication, 2022). Children faced both physical and psychological

security concerns, experiencing persistent fear while navigating educational choices. The economic hardship resulting from the coup created additional educational barriers, with private tutoring fees reaching approximately 30,000 kyat monthly per subject, making quality education increasingly unaffordable.

Education became a sensitive subject in the community. Parents of children attending military schools often felt shame, while families relying on online federal platforms faced legal threats. These tensions strained relationships and altered how residents interacted with each other. During my period of field research, I avoided asking members of the community direct questions about schooling in order to preserve fragile trust, allowing education-related concerns to emerge indirectly through observation and informal dialogue.

Kantkaw's student-age population divided educational participation between military-controlled schools and alternative online federal schools, leading to social stigma and a sensitive fault line within the community. Documenting the choices of individual families required extreme sensitivity due to my identity as a member of the CDM. Some families quietly enrolled their children in military-controlled institutions despite community pressure against this choice, straining social relationships. Approximately one-third of local students attended online private schools or other private institutions, while another third attended military-controlled schools and the remaining third discontinued their studies to become child workers. Students have confronted multiple obstacles to education during this period, including initial school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and early phases of the revolution, security risks associated with schooling choices, and financial constraints limiting educational options.

Villager Ma Ni (personal communication, 2024) describes her children's educational dilemma: "How to do our children's education? I want to continue their education. I am not a rich person. I am in the normal class. So, I can give their education only as a gift of the parents' *amwei* [parents' inheritance]." In saying this, Ma Ni articulated that with no future material legacy to offer, the education she was struggling to provide had become the most valuable inheritance she could give her children. "I considered the

tuition fee for [private] learning. My daughter's *sayama* (female teacher) is good at teaching. She will teach English to my daughter. I will organize my daughter's friends to learn with my daughter."

Ma Ni has arranged a tutorial space at her sister's nearby home where children can safely gather for lessons. During a period when teenagers faced specific targeting by military forces, parents prioritized both educational continuity and physical security. Ma Ni took a leadership role in organizing not only her own children's education but creating opportunities for other children in the community by coordinating a small learning group of five students with a trusted teacher. However, the arrangement lasted only four months, ultimately succumbing to economic pressures as families struggled with reduced income and could no longer continue paying tuition costs.

These educational divisions created particularly challenging ethical dilemmas. As a CDM teacher documenting families' educational choices, I sometimes found myself in situations where my identity became a source of discomfort for participants whose children attended military-run schools, requiring careful negotiation to maintain trust. In these moments, I had to temporarily set aside my researcher identity and modify my behavior to appear as just another community member, avoiding sensitive topics to maintain relationships essential to both community cohesion and data collection.

Researching under fire

My documentation of the community's diverse resistance practices was itself conducted under conditions that exemplify what this volume describes as TUF in that I (as the researcher) faced persecution as a political dissident due to my CDM status, was studying a community under threat, and completed the work without institutional support following the collapse of Myanmar's academic infrastructure. This positioning fundamentally shaped both my research process and understanding of resistance practices.

Conducting research while sharing the same risks as my participants posed emotional challenges that shaped every aspect of my work. Site selection was immediately constrained by security realities. Each interaction with participants required careful calculations about what could be safely documented, creating persistent anxiety. I always worried about safety for

me and my community. When security conditions deteriorated, I suspended data collection entirely. The stress of balancing scholarly objectives against security concerns produced a form of researcher vulnerability unique to TUF conditions. As a female researcher, I navigated additional complexities in building trust relationships. My gender sometimes facilitated access to domestic spaces and women's experiences, while also requiring careful management of public visibility in a context where all movement is scrutinized.

The psychological toll of conducting research while personally at risk created ongoing tension between documenting resistance and protecting community members. Questions about what information could be safely gathered, who could be approached, and how to store data securely had to be constantly reassessed as security conditions changed, reflecting the situated, security-embedded ethics required in such contexts.

These adaptations reflect a kind of “temporally urgent ethnography”—research conducted with an acute awareness that the communities and practices being documented face imminent erasure. By recording boycott practices, security adaptations, and educational negotiations as they evolved, this research preserves evidence of community resistance that military authorities actively attempt to suppress.

Living under these conditions has provided unique insights into how resistance operates in daily practice. Experiencing surveillance and restrictions firsthand mirrored the experiences of other community members, allowing me to understand the significance of boycotts, information sharing, and other tactical resistance from within rather than as an outside observer—a form of “positional objectivity” grounded in shared vulnerability.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of a peri-urban community in Kantkaw reveals the complex intersection of everyday resistance practices and strategic negotiations following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Conducted under challenging TUF conditions in which I faced persecution as a CDM member, studied a community under threat, and worked without institutional support, the research demonstrates how residents have transformed ordinary activities into political acts that undermine traditional authority structures.

From boycotting military-affiliated products to creating autonomous community security systems, residents have engaged in what de Certeau (1984) identifies as tactical resistance embedded within daily life. These practices are complemented by strategic negotiation approaches when necessary, as seen in the electricity repair case, revealing how communities maintain agency even under severe constraints. The specific forms these actions have taken—boycotts, autonomous security arrangements, healthcare choices, and educational adaptations—highlight the resilience of community bonds and the emergence of collective strategies uniquely adapted to extreme pressure.

This documentation serves not merely as academic knowledge production but as an act of resistance itself, aligned with the community's struggle and aiming to validate citizen agency within Myanmar's broader revolution. By preserving evidence of community agency during a period when military authorities attempt to project normalized control, this research challenges the regime's narrative while validating the significance of seemingly small acts of defiance that, collectively, undermine imposed governance structures.

This study also contributes to anthropological methodology by demonstrating how ethnography must adapt under extreme constraints. The TUF conditions necessitated methodological innovations—disguising interviews as conversations, using memory when recording was impossible, developing coded documentation systems—that push ethnographic practice beyond conventional boundaries. These adaptations suggest that anthropology's future relevance in conflict zones may depend less on traditional immersion and more on responsive, adaptive approaches that can continue functioning despite surveillance and repression. What emerges is not a compromised ethnography, but a methodologically nimble practice that captures critical social processes even as they unfold under threat of erasure. This approach offers the field of anthropology new ways to remain relevant and rigorous when conventional fieldwork becomes hazardous or otherwise impractical.

The methodological adaptations developed during this research (including trust-based sampling, coded documentation, embedded observation, and situated ethics) offer potential frameworks for researchers in other conflict

zones where traditional academic approaches prove dangerous or impossible. These innovations suggest that ethnographic knowledge production can persist even when its foundations are under attack, though in significantly transformed forms, generating what might be called “vulnerable knowledge” rooted in shared experience.

This case study offers broader insights into how communities navigate political crises through both resistance and adaptation. It demonstrates how political agency can be exercised through everyday practices when formal governance collapses and trust is strained. Perhaps most importantly, it reveals how communities can maintain social cohesion and political commitment even under extreme constraints through the creative repurposing of ordinary activities as sites of resistance—transforming consumer choices, healthcare strategies, and educational arrangements into quiet but powerful forms of opposition that preserve both community integrity and political agency during extended periods of repression.

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PART II:

IN EXILE

When I go out, I must be careful not to speak
Burmese loudly. I always imitate the way Thai
women dress. If I go out, I must dress
like that so the Thai police will not notice.

—A CDM sayama, *speaking to Kalyah*

Chapter 5

Agency Under Fire: Refugee CDM Teachers and Identity Performance on the Thai Border

Kalyah

Abstract

Many former civil servants involved in Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have fled to Mae Sot, Thailand, following the 2021 coup. This research examines how these refugee CDM participants, particularly female teachers (*sayamas*), perform strategic identities and enact professional roles in exile. They navigate Mae Sot as a "state of exception" (Agamben, 1998) where normal rules governing legal status, immigration, and economic rights are suspended. Through the performance of strategic identities, they build trust and create possibilities for integration into Thai society while maintaining connections to their professional and cultural backgrounds. This ethnography, conducted by a CDM teacher experiencing the same precarity as her participants, reveals how identity performance and role enactment become forms of resistance and survival in a border region characterized by both exceptional vulnerability and possibility. The methodological innovations developed under these layered vulnerabilities contribute new approaches to conducting research when researchers, communities, and institutions are simultaneously under threat.

Keywords: Civil Disobedience Movement, agency, identity performance, role enactment, refugee teachers, state of exception, exile spaces, Thai-Myanmar border, thrice under fire, researcher positionality

Introduction

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military seized power in a coup, ousting the democratically elected government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud in the November 2020 election. This coup marked not just a political rupture, but a systematic assault on civil society, democratic institutions, and particularly the education sector. Universities have been closed or militarized, academic freedom criminalized, and educators who resist the junta have become targets of a coordinated campaign of intimidation and violence.

This political upheaval has significantly impacted government employees, particularly *sayamas* (female teachers) who have actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The CDM arose as a grassroots civil resistance campaign, mobilizing civil servants who refused to serve under military rule. *Sayamas* emerged as some of the most active participants, facing severe threats, displacement, and loss of their livelihoods. Along with healthcare providers, *sayamas* were crucial to the functioning of the state and have become central figures in the resistance movement. Despite pressure from military authorities to restore normalcy by returning to work, many have persisted in their refusal, choosing not to “kneel under the military boots.” As Homi K. Bhabha (1994) suggests, participation in acts of political resistance is not only a form of defiance but also constitutes an active performance of identity, where individuals such as the *sayamas* assert their political beliefs through their actions.

The 2021 coup has had far-reaching consequences for government employees, particularly *sayamas* involved in the CDM. The immediate aftermath saw mass dismissals, arrests, and violent crackdowns on dissenters by the military junta. *Sayamas* were especially targeted—facing arrest warrants and threats of legal action and physical harm—because their mass refusal to work, estimated at over 80 percent of all teachers, not only paralyzed the nation’s education system but also represented a powerful moral challenge to the military regime’s authority. As a result, many have since fled to border areas. Mae Sot, a Thai town on the border with Myanmar’s Karen (Kayin) State, became a critical haven for displaced individuals, including numerous *sayamas*.

This chapter proceeds as follows: First, it details the ethnographic methodology employed, reflecting on my personal positionality as the researcher and the ethical considerations inherent in conducting research under “thrice under fire” (TUF) conditions. Second, it presents a thematic analysis of the findings, exploring the daily challenges faced by CDM *sayamas*, their strategies for maintaining professional pride and enacting resistance through teaching, and their broader repertoire of coping mechanisms, including identity management and concealment. Finally, the chapter discusses these findings in relation to theories of resilience, adaptation, and identity negotiation in exile, before concluding with reflections on the implications of this research.

The “thrice under fire” condition

Beyond personal safety threats, the Myanmar military’s systematic dismantling of educational institutions—closing universities, militarizing campuses, and criminalizing academic freedom—created a third dimension of vulnerability for educators following the 2021 coup. CDM *sayamas* lost not only their jobs, but the entire institutional framework that validated their professional knowledge and identity. This collapse of academic infrastructure, completing the TUF condition, has forced them to reimagine how educational practice can continue in the absence of institutional legitimacy and resources (forcing formerly respected professionals into precarious survival situations, a reality reflected in my own experience of lost status).

According to John W. Berry (1997), the migration and displacement of such individuals necessitate a process of “acculturation” where displaced professionals—in this case, CDM *sayamas*—must learn to navigate and perform within the new socio-cultural landscape of Mae Sot, drawing upon, adapting, or suppressing elements of their previous professional and cultural selves. Mae Sot has long been a prominent entry point for people fleeing Myanmar’s political instability and violence, and following the coup, it became a vital refuge despite numerous challenges documented by scholars like Darling (2017) and Campbell (2018), including precarious legal status and limited access to rights.

Upon arriving in Mae Sot, CDM *sayamas* faced the precarious reality of living as undocumented refugees, exposing them (and myself as the researcher) to constant threats and hardships (a direct consequence of the first two “fires”—being dissidents from a targeted group). Balancing these challenges with efforts to enact culturally relevant and professionally meaningful roles has become a critical aspect of their exile experience. While Anthony Giddens (1991) notes the importance of professional identity narratives as anchors, the specific ways CDM teachers manage this in Mae Sot remain under-explored. Existing literature (e.g., Betts & Collier, 2017; Haikkola, 2011) often focuses on general survival strategies, neglecting the unique experiences of educators attempting to manage and perform professional, cultural, and political aspects of self under duress. Understanding these processes provides crucial insights into their resilience and agency.

This study, therefore, centers on the concept of identity performance and role enactment, building upon earlier work on “negotiated identity” by Simon & Behnjarachajarunandha (2025) that explores how individuals in exile actively manage their self-presentation and enact social roles to navigate potentially hostile environments (Goffman, 1959). For CDM *sayamas*, this process involves constant performance, balancing the enactment of roles required for integration into the host community while maintaining connections to their backgrounds and commitments. Identity here is understood not as fixed, but as a dynamic repertoire drawn upon and enacted contextually (Jenkins, 2004), a “production” always “in process” (Hall, 1990). “Negotiation of identities” thus refers to the dynamic, situational process through which *sayamas* adjust their self-presentations and enact certain roles. This study focuses on how they manage to perform and sustain aspects of their professional selves despite their precarious status, exploring these adaptive performances and practices to shed light on the resilience required in exile (Berry, 1997).

This study is guided by the author’s imperative to understand the unfolding community dynamics and challenges faced by CDM *sayamas* living in exile spaces like Mae Sot. Furthermore, it explores how these individuals form coping strategies and adapt to life in Thailand, particularly while navigating and reconstructing their professional and cultural identities and roles. This

research argues that the process of identity negotiation for CDM *sayamas* in Mae Sot involves continuous adaptation and performance tailored to the shifting socio-political landscape of the Thai-Myanmar border region. Despite significant challenges stemming directly from their TUF status, they strive to maintain meaningful connections to their backgrounds while participating in resistance.

The border town of Mae Sot, functioning as what Giorgio Agamben (1998) terms a “state of exception,” amplifies the struggles faced by *sayamas* in exile. In such a state, the normal functioning of the state is suspended, particularly in areas like migrant education, involving both the application and deliberate departure from policy (Nongyao, 2012). In existing scholarship on Mae Sot, Pitch (2007) highlights how this exceptional border space fosters “partial citizenship,” while Shona Loong (2019) views it as a “neoliberal borderscape” where the Thai state capitalizes on migrant labor. Yet, beyond state-imposed exceptions, scholars like Supatsak (2014) argue that displaced persons strategically navigate this space, creating a “state of exception within a state of exception,” to forge lives and communities. Kusakabe and Pearson (2016) further illustrate how Burmese migrant women actively leverage Mae Sot’s borderland dynamics to balance life choices and responsibilities. As of 2024, Mae Sot exists as a zone of uncertainty, but this very “grey zone” of state functionality continues to offer opportunities for newer exiles to negotiate their existence and build community. This study builds on this existing scholarship, providing a dynamic perspective on how new arrivals construct new, often exceptional, identities in this state of exception.

In essence, the border town of Mae Sot represents a space where normal legal and social rules are suspended, creating a paradoxical environment for CDM *sayamas*—one that simultaneously increases their vulnerability through legal precarity while enabling forms of resistance and adaptation impossible within Myanmar. The exceptional nature of this space, where Thai authorities exercise discretionary power yet cannot fully control the border region, produces both heightened risks and unique possibilities for CDM *sayamas*. Their identity performances and role enactments are fundamentally shaped by this exceptional quality of the border, where the suspension of standard

protections requires strategic adaptation while also creating interstices where alternative communities and practices can emerge.

Scholars like Bakewell (2008) and Boland (2020) have emphasized the importance of understanding refugee agency beyond those characteristics necessary for survival and recognizing their role in shaping their futures and communities. The dedication of the CDM *sayamas* to enacting their professional roles reflects their commitment to dignity and agency. Exploring these dynamics contributes to the broader discourse on refugee studies, identity construction as performance, and agency in border towns, offering insights potentially relevant to similar contexts (Darling, 2017; Campbell, 2018).

Method, positionality, ethics under fire

Ethnography involves the systematic study of people and cultures, aiming to understand phenomena from the subject's point of view. However, conducting ethnographic research under the TUF condition in which I simultaneously face persecution as a CDM member, study similarly targeted communities, and work without access to formal academic infrastructure requires significant adaptation to field methodology and heightened ethical awareness. This section will further explain how the TUF framework affects the research methodology and ethical considerations of my study.

My positionality as a CDM teacher researching fellow CDM teachers in exile shaped this study. Being an insider deeply embedded in the community granted access and facilitated rapport, as participants often viewed me as “one of them,” sharing similar struggles and understanding their experiences without judgment. This was crucial for eliciting in-depth narratives about sensitive topics such as identity negotiation.

However, my insider status was double-edged. As the researcher, I faced the same multi-layered risks as the participants. This included the risk of surveillance, arrest, or deportation by Thai authorities due to my undocumented status (risks I personally navigated through experiences such as house searches and the constant need for vigilance); the ongoing threat from Myanmar's military regime, which targets CDM members even across borders; and vulnerability within the exile community, where trust remains

fragile. These dangers required not merely caution but active concealment: maintaining a low profile often meant denying CDM affiliation entirely, distancing from CDM and PDF networks, and participating in communities that disguised their CDM identity through renamed groups and covert operations.

This created a paradox where maintaining the dignity and pride of CDM identity had to be balanced against the imperative of survival through strategic invisibility. Furthermore, my insider status could introduce biases. For example, participants might assume understanding and omit details during interviews or hesitate to share views diverging from dominant narratives. Thus, cultivating active neutrality during interviews was essential.

The complete collapse of conventional researcher-researched boundaries represents a distinctive methodological contribution to the TUF framework. This methodological innovation—conducting research while simultaneously experiencing the same precarity as participants—extends beyond conventional understandings of “insider research” or “native anthropology.” It necessitates the development of new approaches to data collection, field relationships, and research ethics that acknowledge the shared vulnerability of researcher and participants under authoritarian targeting. These innovations include security-embedded ethics protocols, identity-negotiated fieldwork practices, and trauma-informed interview techniques specifically adapted to high-surveillance contexts.

In this context, the traditional ethical principle of “do no harm” evolved into an ethics of solidarity and mutual protection, where research design itself became an exercise in collective security. Data collection methods were not merely adapted but co-created with participants based on shared vulnerability assessments. This collaborative approach to navigating multi-layered threats—from Thai authorities, the Myanmar military, and surveillance within exile communities—transformed methodology from an individual research practice into a community-based negotiation, offering a model for how knowledge can be ethically produced when all conventional research protections have disappeared.

The research methodology employed for this study was primarily ethnographic, involving immersion, observation, and engagement. However,

standard methods required significant adaptation due to the high-risk environment stemming from the TUF reality. This involved several key approaches. Data collection needed to be flexible and safe. Instead of formal, structured interviews, informal, conversational interviews were conducted in carefully selected safe spaces like trusted community centers or quiet religious sites, minimizing suspicion and allowing for organic discussion, always with careful assessment of security and participant comfort. Field note practices also required adaptation. Open notetaking was avoided in public, and I instead relied on mental recall techniques to write detailed notes later in secure locations, often using coded language to protect identities. Secure digital practices were also crucial. Encrypted communication tools were used, and research data were stored securely with multiple backups in separate locations to mitigate risks of raids or forced relocation, with interview recording avoided unless explicit consent was given. Finally, in situations where direct interviews were too risky, there was a greater emphasis on participant observation. This involved my performing the role of a community member and adapting to local customs in order to better understand daily routines, adaptive strategies, and subtle forms of resistance not articulated verbally. Volunteering at a migrant school yielded specific insights using this method.

The combination of case studies, in-depth interviews, and adapted participant observation made possible a multi-dimensional analysis and understanding. Ethical considerations were paramount and required constant reflexivity beyond standard protocols. Navigating these ethics involved addressing several core challenges. Obtaining informed consent required sensitivity due to the pervasive climate of fear; verbal consent emphasizing the right of each participant to withdraw at any time was used instead of potentially risky signed documents. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality was a top priority, achieved through the use of pseudonyms, the removal of identifying details, and secure data handling, including data deletion upon participant request or following a participant's arrest. There was also the challenge of balancing advocacy and objectivity. Sharing the community's struggles, I felt a threefold moral obligation: to protect my participants from harm, to bear witness to their fight for dignity, and to represent their voices

with accuracy. This complex responsibility was balanced with the need for scholarly objectivity through the solicitation of external peer feedback.

Throughout the research process, I continuously reflected on my dual role as both a researcher and a member of the affected community, acknowledging potential biases and the profound personal impact of conducting research under such conditions, often taking the opportunity in peer workshoping sessions to unpack certain dilemmas. Documenting shared suffering created a personal emotional burden and led to exhaustion. However, this shared vulnerability also fostered empathy and a deep sense of responsibility to represent participants' voices accurately and ethically. This process of navigating risk, adapting methods, and managing ethical dilemmas while living the experiences being studied is central to the knowledge produced in this chapter, reflecting the lived reality of the TUF condition.

Thematic analysis of research findings

This research focuses on three primary themes emerging from the findings: the daily life challenges CDM *sayamas* face; the strategic performance of identity and role enactment; and their repertoire of everyday coping strategies. The analysis of identity performance centers on how these teachers maintain their professional pride and enact teaching as a form of political resistance. The section on coping strategies then details the specific tactics of survival, including the careful management of appearances, anonymity, and strategic concealment.

The overarching analysis explores how CDM *sayamas* adapt their practices and self-presentations to their new environments, balancing the need to perform acceptable roles with efforts to maintain connections to their cultural and professional backgrounds. By examining how these teachers negotiate and perform identity in an unstable socio-political context, the research provides deeper insights into the resilience and agency of the CDM teachers' exile community. Ultimately, this thematic analysis illuminates the complexities of identity construction and the adaptive strategies required to cope with the pressures of living in a precarious border area—a direct outcome of the layered vulnerabilities faced by dissident educators in exile.

Daily life challenges

CDM *sayamas* who have fled Myanmar, often entering Thailand illegally, face numerous daily challenges upon arriving in Mae Sot. Their undocumented status exposes them to constant security threats and legal vulnerabilities. Economic hardships force many to relocate frequently in search of safer and more stable living conditions. These financial struggles serve to exacerbate health problems, as the inability to work formally leaves them with few options for supporting themselves. Furthermore, upon arrival in Mae Sot, job opportunities are scarce, and the language barrier further complicates their integration into the larger community. They find it difficult to navigate the environment and access resources without knowledge of the Thai language. The lack of established support networks makes finding employment difficult, and even when they succeed in securing work, the long-term sustainability of living in Mae Sot remains uncertain.

Many CDM *sayamas* who previously held respected positions as educators find it difficult to re-establish their professional roles in exile due to a lack of documentation, minimal recognition of their Myanmar teaching qualifications, and the collapse of their home institutions. Still, there is some room for them as volunteers in Mae Sot's migrant schools. A migrant education system along the Thai-Myanmar border has developed over decades of cross-border displacement, creating a parallel but precarious educational infrastructure. These schools vary considerably in size, resources, and administrative structure, with some functioning as formal institutions while others operate as informal community learning centers. For CDM *sayamas*—particularly those who previously held university positions—this educational landscape represents both opportunity and constraint. Their professional qualifications are sometimes recognized, while their status as highly educated professionals is often diminished within this system.

Some migrant schools in Mae Sot reportedly refuse to hire CDM *sayamas* entirely, and those that do may subject them to discrimination and exploitation. Migrants from previous generations who manage these schools sometimes enforce hierarchies that remind CDM teachers of their fallen status. The power dynamics within these schools often reflect broader tensions between established migrant communities and newly arrived CDM educators whose

different experiences of displacement and political activism create subtle but significant social divisions. Even when CDM *sayamas* manage to secure teaching jobs, they often face oppressive working conditions. Competition from other job seekers and the arbitrary actions of certain groups within the community can result in them losing their positions. The constant need to demonstrate their qualifications and potentially move from one job to another places them in a precarious situation, undermining their professional stability and economic security.

One of the significant challenges CDM *sayamas* face is managing the performance of appropriate identities within the host community. A former *sayama* with 25 years of teaching experience in Myanmar, identified here as K (personal communication, 2024), shares details of her daily life experience in Mae Sot. She describes the anxiety she feels each day, wondering what new inquiries or security checks she might face: “When I go out, I must be careful not to speak Burmese loudly. I always imitate the way Thai women dress. If I go out, I must dress like that so the Thai police will not notice.” This daily performance of inconspicuousness highlights how CDM *sayamas* must navigate cultural differences through careful role enactment, driven by their need for security as targeted individuals. *Sayama* K also explains how she has adapted her public behavior to the norms and preferences of the local community, such as avoiding hanging clothes in front of her house and wearing culturally appropriate attire during significant Thai holidays. She emphasizes that these efforts are essential for her security and survival in a foreign environment. By mimicking the behaviors of Thai women, she manages to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities while still holding on to aspects of her Burmese background in private or safer contexts.

Another CDM *sayama*, Mya (personal communication, 2024), who volunteers at a migrant school, shares her experience adapting to life in Mae Sot. Initially, she felt isolated and uncomfortable, but she became more familiar with the environment over time:

When I first arrived, I was very uncomfortable. I did not go out much [...] Now, I am volunteering at a migrant school, so I go out every day.

If possible, I pray that the police will not inquire. However, I have to be careful when speaking as much as possible.

Though she still struggles with Thai language, she finds comfort in simple daily interactions, such as greeting people with a smile or performing respect with a polite “*sawadi kha*” (“hello” in Thai). Mya’s story reflects the gradual process of incorporating host community practices into her performance repertoire, as well as the importance of enacting small, meaningful connections despite the challenges of being undocumented. In illustrating her efforts to adapt and find her place in the new community through interactional performance, Mya (personal communication, 2024) shares:

I am familiar with [life in Mae Sot], but I do not speak Thai. However, [the local Thai people] always make a face of recognition when I meet them. I make a gesture of respect by putting my palms together and raising them; I say *sawadi kha* and greet them.

The experiences of CDM *sayamas* like K and Mya illustrate the profound daily challenges they face, ranging from security concerns and economic instability to the constant task of managing self-presentation in an unfamiliar environment. Their stories highlight the resilience required to adapt local customs into their behavioral repertoire while maintaining a semblance of normalcy in a host community that may not fully accept them, all while living under the shadow of their TUF reality.

Upon arrival in Mae Sot, one of the immediate and critical challenges CDM *sayamas* face is securing adequate housing. The paths to Mae Sot vary; while some arrive through personal connections and must stay temporarily with acquaintances, many rely on organizational referrals from groups like the New Myanmar Foundation (NMF) and the Overseas Irrawaddy Association (OIA). Access to the safe houses these NGOs provide typically requires completing an online application and caters to the diverse needs of refugees, with specific accommodations for women, men, and families.

These safe houses function as more than just temporary shelter; they are pivotal guidance centers for reconstructing lives in exile. They offer a range

of support services—from Wi-Fi and bicycles to emergency healthcare access and libraries—that help residents maintain a sense of normalcy. Crucially, they also serve as venues for vital community activities that are impossible in Myanmar, including political meetings and emotional memorial ceremonies, fostering both practical support and collective healing. However, these programs are not a permanent fix. With support typically lasting only three months, the constant search for long-term housing solutions remains a significant source of uncertainty for *sayamas*.

Despite the support, communal living arrangements in the safe houses present their own challenges. Each safe house is managed by a warden, who oversees the residents' needs and coordinates with a safe house manager to ensure daily operations run smoothly. The structured nature of these facilities reflects a collective effort to create a stable environment. However, living in close quarters with strangers, many of whom come from different regions of Myanmar, can cause tension. Residents are expected to collaborate on daily tasks like cooking and cleaning, which are rotated among them. Strict rules are enforced to maintain order, and violations can result in expulsion. In one instance, the support network within the safe house was tested when a resident's son was arrested. The safe house community quickly mobilized, using a communal motorcycle to visit the police station and negotiate the son's release. This incident illustrates the complexities of life as an undocumented refugee and the importance of community support in navigating such crises. While the safe house program offers temporary refuge, it does not address the long-term challenges CDM *sayamas* face. The constant search for housing and the instability of their undocumented status leaves them in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Without access to permanent housing or legal employment, CDM *sayamas* remain in a precarious position, unable to fully rebuild their lives in exile.

Maintaining professional pride

This section explores how CDM *sayamas* strive to continue enacting meaningful personal and professional roles while in exile, directly countering the impacts of the regime's actions and the collapse of their professional worlds. It examines the role of cultural practices and traditions in sustaining a

sense of community and dignity among CDM *sayamas*. Additionally, it looks at how these *sayamas* perform their professional roles and continue pursuing their educational mission despite the disruption caused by their displacement. They endeavor to continue serving as teachers in the border region without fundamentally changing their perception of themselves in this role. Although they have lost their official teaching positions due to the military coup and the subsequent dismantling of Myanmar's formal education system, they have not abandoned the teaching profession. Persevering in their occupation is a way of actively constructing and asserting a valued aspect of their identity. They skillfully utilize their experience, knowledge, and teaching methods. Despite the challenges, they manage to demonstrate competence and commitment through their actions.

Furthermore, this section examines the *sayamas'* ongoing political commitment to the principles of the CDM and the importance of the movement in their identity negotiation process. Their enactment of a teacher identity is revealed through their commitment to the truth they believe in. They cannot accept the arbitrary coup and therefore have resisted it using various strategies. Their actions have overturned the previous perception that politics has nothing to do with government employees. They demonstrate through their practices and self-understanding that *sayamas* have the right and responsibility to participate in politics.

The persistence of CDM *sayamas*, despite the challenges faced, is evidence of their unwavering commitment to their professional roles and standards. Their involvement in the CDM movement has shaped their identity within the community and profoundly impacted their professional lives. They have garnered support and sustained their professional sense of self through their actions, a commendable feat.

Regarding the maintenance of identity, CDM *sayama* Khaing (personal communication, 2024), a teacher who had been in Mae Sot for a year and a half at the time of research, shared her experiences and perspectives. She proudly speaks of her role as a university lecturer in Myanmar and her active participation in the CDM movement, explaining her feelings and reflecting a selfless attitude characteristic of many teachers:

Since I joined CDM, my attitude has not changed at all. I will continue with the CDM until the end. We are teachers. Moreover, we are university teachers. We will not shy away when our children, even students, are participating in the revolution with full energy. We must be able to distinguish between right and wrong. If we do not lead, who will? The CDM involves difficulties. I have to be strong and overcome them. Sometimes, I feel depressed. But looking at the children [younger people] in the revolution, I feel reborn with energy.

I cannot support the revolution financially because I do not have a regular income. I can survive with the support of my daughters [who are still] living in my hometown. I am now able to sustain [only] myself in Mae Sot. I have decided to serve as much as possible, so I am volunteering at a migrant school. Before I got this volunteer position, it was uncomfortable for me living in Mae Sot. I did not know how to get through each day. I served as a teacher at the university for a long time and was then jobless in Mae Sot. I wanted to return to my hometown but did not dare because I would be arrested. My daughters were left behind in my hometown, so I was worried about them, too. Now I am volunteering at this school, and while teaching, I do not even realize the time passing. I spend my day teaching the children. After volunteering at this school, I feel lighter in my heart. So, I take care of the students and prepare their lessons. I take care of them carefully and teach them. Our CDM *sayamas* are good at teaching, so they make sure they do their job well. I am happy every time I teach the children. I am proud of myself. I can forget everything when teaching and talking with the children. As long as we are teachers, we only want to do teaching work.

Additionally, Khaing (personal communication, 2024) explains the challenges she faced upon arrival in Mae Sot, as well as some unforgettable life experiences:

When I first arrived in Mae Sot, I went to a factory [to seek employment]. Some people were already there when I arrived, including some CDM participants. I was very depressed. There is a woman who works as a cook at the factory. She is one of the older migrants, having arrived earlier. She is in charge of cooking at the factory. She serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner to bosses, workers, and guests. I was going to have hot rice for breakfast. The woman shouted, “Do not take the rice yet! I have to offer food to the gods [*nats*] first.” As I am old, I wanted to have hot rice, but I stopped trying to take it. To eat, I took a ceramic plate from the shelf. She yelled at me again. “Those ceramic plates are reserved for guests and bosses. You cannot take them.” I was depressed. “Yes, I know,” I replied. Then she said, “When the teacher [referring to me] eats, you can eat with a plate from here.” When I looked, they were plastic plates. These plastic plates—we had never eaten from them. At home, such plates were used as water saucers under flower vases. When I saw that and felt it, I wanted to cry. I did not want to eat rice anymore. I could not eat rice anymore. Tears began to flow spontaneously. Nevertheless, I became determined again. “It is not because I am weak-minded,” I told myself, “I must try to endure.” Every morsel of rice that I ate, I ate with the mindset of “I must survive.”

The next day, when the others were going out, I asked them to buy me a [ceramic] plate for rice and a plate for curry. Regarding drinking water, the glasses were only for the guests. We had to drink with a [plastic] cup. So, I bought myself a steel cup and drank water. That is how I got the idea, “Is this what life is?” I now understand the essence of life. I had to be careful in everything and everywhere. We came from an educated community of teachers. There is a circle of relatives. We are not from an uneducated class that must bow down to whatever others say. We lived at our own level. We have dignity. This can never be undone.

Khaing reports that she has no regrets about joining the CDM, as it allows her to maintain her dignity and pride.

Teaching as political resistance

CDM *sayamas*, despite being displaced and forced to leave their homeland, continue to work actively to perform their roles as educators. Teaching has become more than a profession; it is a vital practice for resisting the erasure of valued aspects of self, particularly in the face of state persecution and institutional collapse. Even in unfamiliar surroundings, continuing their educational work reaffirms the *sayamas*' sense of self-worth and allows them to perform with competence and purpose. Teaching, even in informal settings like migrant schools, becomes a quiet form of resistance, allowing them to enact their core identity as teachers and nurturers of the next generation. The act of teaching not only fulfills their professional aspirations but embodies key aspects of their identity, allowing them to stand against the loss and displacement they have suffered. One CDM *sayama* (personal communication, 2024) shares, "Teaching is not just what we do, it is who we are. Even in exile, we continue to shape minds, refusing to let displacement erase our identity as educators."

Moreover, the professional pride of these CDM *sayamas* remains largely intact despite their daily obstacles, including legal vulnerabilities, financial hardships, and even social humiliation. Teaching is not only their potential livelihood; it is a source of dignity. Even though they have lost their official roles and titles due to the coup and its aftermath, their commitment to the practice of education and their students remains unwavering. In the informal settings of Mae Sot's migrant schools, these teachers often exhibit the same dedication and rigor they would in a formal school setting, striving to ensure their students receive the best education possible. Their pride stems from their ability to continue performing their profession with dignity, even when the environment makes it challenging to do so. A university teacher (personal communication, 2024) explains the profound sense of loss that comes when hard-won qualifications are rendered meaningless, stating: "We have lost our degree and rank, but our purpose is not lost. Every lesson I teach reminds me of the dignity and pride that comes from knowing I am still a teacher."

Performing cultural identity is another significant aspect of the *sayamas'* lives and intersects with their professional roles. While they perform Thai cultural practices in public for their safety and survival, they continue to enact Burmese traditions in private and professional spaces. They often maintain Burmese teaching methodologies, moral values, and cultural practices in the classroom, helping ensure their students stay connected to their heritage even in exile. Their dedication to their professional and cultural practices helps reinforce their sense of belonging despite being far from home. Balancing this performance of cultural duality is essential for surviving in exile while staying true to their origins. "Even as we adapt to a new land, we hold onto our roots. Our classrooms are where we preserve our culture, passing it on to the next generation, even in exile," a CDM *sayama* (personal communication, 2024) explains.

For CDM *sayamas*, their professional role as teachers is often inseparably tied to their political identities. Participating in the CDM has become more than just resistance; it is now a defining aspect of their self-understanding and public alignment. Their role as educators is not limited to imparting academic knowledge but extends to nurturing future leaders who understand the value of democracy, justice, and truth. Even in exile, they continue their resistance, viewing education as a vital tool in the larger struggle for Myanmar's future. Their participation in the CDM has shaped their social identities as both political activists and educators, reinforcing their belief in standing for what is right. As one (personal communication, 2024) mentions, "Teaching is not just about books; it is about freedom. Every day we stand in front of our students, we continue the fight for justice and democracy."

The psychological challenges faced by CDM *sayamas* are immense. Displacement from their homeland, the loss of their official teaching roles, and the insecurity of their current lives often lead to feelings of depression and worthlessness. However, despite these challenges, the practice of teaching can provide a psychological protective factor. Even in difficult circumstances, the ability to impart knowledge can give the teachers a renewed sense of purpose and help combat the feelings of loss that often accompany life in exile. The classroom can become a sanctuary for them, where they can momentarily

forget their hardships and focus on the future they are helping to build through their students.

“When I teach, the weight of exile lifts. In the classroom, I am not just surviving; I am thriving, one lesson at a time,” relates a CDM *sayama* (personal communication, 2024). This resonates deeply with the researcher’s own experience of the emotional burden and exhaustion coupled with the sense of responsibility inherent in this work conducted under TUF conditions. The transfer of professional knowledge takes creative forms in these constrained contexts. Unable to teach their specialized university subjects, former lecturers adapt their pedagogical expertise to new settings—from embroidery classes to informal tutoring in makeshift classrooms. A former university mathematics professor now teaches basic arithmetic to migrant children, while a literature scholar offers creative writing sessions in safe houses. This flexibility represents not an abandonment of professional identity but its creative reconfiguration under constraint, where the act of teaching itself becomes more significant than the subject taught. As one university lecturer (personal communication, 2024) explains: “I used to teach advanced statistical theory. Now I teach children how to count and add. The content is different, but the core of who I am as a teacher remains. I still prepare thoroughly, still observe how each student learns differently, still feel that sense of responsibility for their growth.” This transformation of academic knowledge into accessible forms appropriate for new audiences demonstrates both resilience and a commitment to maintaining professional standards despite radically changed circumstances. The methodical approaches to even basic subjects reveal the *sayamas*’ continued dedication to pedagogical excellence, a subtle but significant way of performing their professional identities in exile.

The network of community support plays a crucial role in helping CDM *sayamas* sustain their professional roles and sense of self. Among their fellow displaced colleagues, they find solidarity and shared resilience. These networks of exiled professionals help reinforce their identity narratives and purpose. Through collaboration and mutual support, they are able to maintain their roles as educators and activists, finding strength in numbers and shared experiences. This communal support helps them navigate the difficulties of

exile and bolsters their professional pride as they continue contributing to their communities, even in displacement. “In this community of teachers, we find strength. Together, we uplift each other, proving that even in exile, we can still stand tall as educators,” states one *sayama* (personal communication, 2024).

The impact of enacting their professional roles extends beyond their personal pride. By continuing to teach, even in exile, they are shaping the future of the next generation. Teaching migrant children or others in refugee situations involves not only providing education but also passing on values of resilience, perseverance, and hope. Their work helps ensure that the children of displaced communities do not lose their connection to their heritage or the potential for a better future. This gives CDM *sayamas* a sense of purpose and pride that transcends their personal struggles as they see the potential fruits of their labor in the future leaders they are nurturing. “Every child I teach is a beacon of hope for the future. Through them, I know that our culture, values, and fight for justice will live on,” reflects one participant (personal communication, 2024).

Coping strategies

This section examines the performance strategies CDM *sayamas* employ to cope with uncertain situations. These strategies include practical ways to explore and find solutions to address their daily challenges and deal with threatening situations resulting from their status as dissidents within a targeted community. These strategies highlight the resilience of CDM *sayamas*, involving community support networks and practical solutions to everyday problems. Building trust with the host community is also one of their key strategies. Performing appropriate Thai social practices is crucial for their survival and well-being. Building trust with Thai neighbors helps them feel safer. They believe their positive relations with the Thai community has, in some cases, led to employment opportunities.

However, for the undocumented CDM teachers arriving in Mae Sot, insecurity remains a daily challenge. Being undocumented makes finding job opportunities difficult, compounding financial hardship. Security threats are encountered frequently, as directly experienced by the researcher (e.g.,

during a house search incident following nearby discovery of explosives). Daily living in Mae Sot presents significant challenges for CDM teachers, necessitating adaptation strategies in the process of adjustment to the host community and the new environment. A key strategy for CDM teachers involves enacting identities in ways that might facilitate acceptance and lead to employment opportunities.

Regarding coping strategies, a CDM *sayama* in Mae Sot known as Myint (personal communication, 2024) explains her experience. She was a university instructor before the coup. She was forced to flee to Mae Sot after she faced arrest locally for participating in the CDM. At the time of research, she had been in Mae Sot for one year and eight months:

Mae Sot has many difficulties. Thai authorities have often arrested me. I had to apologize to the authorities several times because I had no more money [to pay fines/bribes]. Then, I did not dare to go out. Nevertheless, one day, my thinking changed. That day, an acquaintance invited me to a Thai monastery, so I visited the nearby monastery. There was an offering ceremony of provisions to monks in that monastery. We also did the ceremony to specially offer monks' robes at the beginning of Buddhist Lent. When we arrived, the monk gave us linen and asked us to make lotus flowers. We did not know how. A Thai woman came to teach us how to sew a lotus flower. When they get those lotus flowers, they spread them in front of the pagoda and add them to the items to offer to monks. They put money and incense in the lotus flowers and make offerings. We were delighted to see it. I also got close to the monk and became friends with Thai women. However, we do not speak Thai. We communicate with gestures.

That day, I had a realization that it would be good to learn a craft. So, I learned the craft of embroidery. I am now earning money from the embroidery work that I have learned how to do. Another job I am delighted with is teaching embroidery to children as a volunteer vocational trainer at a migrant school organized by a teacher I know. This is not done as a duty but for the children's future; I am teaching

them intending to help them learn a vocational skill. As former higher education teachers, it is difficult for us to get jobs as teachers at a migrant school. Now that I am doing this, I am more satisfied. I feel satisfied and proud because I can use my skills and knowledge for the children.

CDM teacher Daw Sabae emerged as a prominent leader among the residents of one safe house. With the consent of her peers, she took on a leadership role, organizing and spearheading various activities within the house. Her leadership style is characterized by collaboration rather than authority, fostering a sense of community and mutual support among the residents. Daw Sabae's involvement includes managing daily routines and leading educational initiatives, such as sewing machine classes and lectures. Her approach underscores a particular perception of leadership in displaced communities, where the role extends beyond traditional authoritative frameworks to encompass communal support and empowerment. As Daw Sabae (personal communication, 2024) articulates:

In the heart of displacement, our role extends beyond teaching. We are lifelines of hope and pillars of support. Our work is not just about education but about fostering a sense of community and resilience among those who have lost everything. Every lesson we deliver is a step towards rebuilding lives and empowering the next generation.

This perspective highlights how leadership within the safe houses integrates educational and social functions, contributing to individual empowerment and collective resilience. By emphasizing collaboration and community-building, Daw Sabae exemplifies the transformative potential of leadership in displacement and crisis contexts.

As a CDM teacher in exile, I myself have also taken on the responsibility of assisting fellow CDM members and others who face political persecution. This role extends beyond traditional teaching duties, involving support for those struggling to navigate the challenges of displacement. As part of these efforts, a small group of two or three CDM *sayamas* regularly gather

to educate the children of families residing in a safe house. Despite their undocumented status, their commitment to education remains steadfast. They understand that teaching in exile is more than just imparting knowledge; it is about fostering hope and resilience in adversity. Their makeshift classrooms, though temporary, are spaces where they strive to make a lasting impact. They (personal communication, 2024) articulate, “Even in exile, our dedication to education is unwavering. We teach not only to share knowledge but also to ignite hope and resilience amidst adversity. Our classrooms may be temporary, but the impact we strive to create is enduring.”

These narratives demonstrate a crucial set of coping strategies employed by displaced educators. By continuing to fulfill their professional roles despite immense constraints, they transform the act of teaching into a tool for empowerment and community building. These strategies serve multiple functions: they help preserve cultural identity, cultivate hope, and reaffirm a sense of professional purpose, underscoring how education becomes a powerful mechanism for coping with the trauma of exile.

Managing anonymity

Moreover, CDM *sayamas* who have fled Myanmar due to political unrest and have sought refuge in Mae Sot often navigate their daily lives with strategic planning and high degrees of caution. Their displacement and undocumented status compel them to perform identities aimed at preserving both their safety and their ability to continue their resistance efforts, a direct consequence of being dissidents targeted by the regime. For example, when traveling to markets or participating in local events, these teachers carefully manage their public presentation to avoid detection and potential repercussions. In these public spaces—whether at markets, shopping malls, or local Thai events—CDM *sayamas* continually perform and adjust their identities, shaped by their experiences of displacement, undocumented status, and political activism. As one CDM *sayama* (personal communication, 2024) states:

Survival in exile demands not just hiding in the shadows but also learning to navigate life in plain sight while blending into the community without losing who we truly are. Every action we take, whether speaking

softly or dressing like a local, is a calculated effort to stay safe while keeping our purpose alive.

However, these teachers remain acutely aware of the risks associated with their presence in Mae Sot, where the threat of surveillance and arrest is ever-present. This awareness informs their interactions with the local environment, leading them to engage in self-censorship practices and strategic anonymity to mitigate risks. The experiences of these CDM *sayamas* in exile reflect broader themes of identity negotiation and adaptive performance in displacement contexts. Their performances illustrate how displaced individuals manage the tension between visibility and invisibility, seeking to enact agency while navigating the constraints of their new, precarious environment. The ongoing risks these teachers face underscore the complexities of living in exile, where everyday actions are imbued with political significance and the constant need for vigilance.

For CDM *sayamas* in exile, survival in the precarious landscape of Mae Sot relies heavily on their skill in navigating complex security challenges and carefully managing their self-presentation. Fleeing persecution and life-threatening situations, these teachers face a new reality that demands sophisticated strategies to avoid detection and mitigate risks. Their exile is characterized by a constant tension between visibility and concealment, where performing inconspicuousness becomes vital for survival. Maintaining security in an insecure environment compels CDM *sayamas* to engage in a careful balancing act in which caution and subtlety become essential tools. Their daily behaviors—from language use to social interactions—must be meticulously calibrated to avoid drawing unwanted attention. This vigilance is not just about self-preservation; it reflects a broader adaptive strategy that allows them to navigate the uncertainties and potential dangers of their displaced lives.

The experiences of these teachers illustrate the intersection of identity management, risk mitigation, and social adaptation in exile. Blending in while maintaining a low profile underscores the complex interplay between individual agency and environmental constraints. This thoroughness in managing public personas can be seen as a form of protective adaptation,

where every action is weighed against the potential for exposure and harm. In this context, the careful performance and negotiation of identity becomes a critical mechanism for coping with the challenges of displacement and the constant threat of danger.

Therefore, for CDM *sayamas* living in exile, survival in the unfamiliar terrain of Mae Sot demands an acute awareness of the risks associated with political visibility. To safeguard themselves, these teachers must often eliminate any trace of incriminating documentation or connections that could expose their political affiliations or activities. This extends to their daily interactions, where they strategically blend local dialects (such as Thai) with carefully chosen language and mannerisms, particularly when discussing politically sensitive topics. These actions reflect a conscious and deliberate effort to navigate their surroundings, ensuring they remain inconspicuous through performance.

The CDM *sayamas*' experience in this context exemplifies broader principles of survival in exile, where the need to obscure one's reality and integrate seamlessly into the local environment becomes paramount. Their nuanced approach to safety and identity management highlights the resilience required to navigate constant threats and uncertainties. This resilience is not just a defensive measure but also a form of adaptation that allows them to leverage networks for community support and survival while minimizing the risks associated with their status as political activists. In this complex landscape, CDM *sayamas* must continuously balance the need for security with the demands of daily life. As one CDM *sayama* (personal communication, 2024) shares, "Surviving in an unfamiliar foreign or border area, which is not your home, means not only hiding but also navigating daily life in a way that allows you to find sustenance and blend into the environment without drawing attention." Her perspective underscores the dual challenges of maintaining safety and ensuring survival, where the ability to adapt one's performance and remain undetected is crucial.

Managing appearances

When CDM *sayamas* in exile are compelled to venture into public spaces, they strategically adopt low-profile identities to avoid drawing attention

or exposing their political affiliations. A key aspect of this impression management involves wearing modest, unassuming clothing that allows them to avoid drawing attention to themselves. To minimize the risk of standing out, they consciously avoid attire or accessories associated with their political stance or previous professional roles as educators. These teachers carefully study the clothing norms of the local Thai population and choose simple and nondescript styles, deliberately avoiding any items that might mark them as outsiders or political dissidents. Additionally, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated health risks, many CDM *sayamas* employ the widespread practice of mask-wearing as an additional layer of anonymity when entering public spaces. This practice serves a health function and further conceals their identity. CDM *sayamas* without official credentials are particularly vigilant in avoiding clothing that could signal their Burmese origin, including any symbols or markers that might reveal their political leanings. This careful attention to dress and appearance reflects a broader strategy of identity performance focused on concealment and risk mitigation, essential for their safety in an environment where visibility could lead to exposure and potential harm due to their dissident status.

Cultural adaptation extends well beyond clothing choices to encompass minutely detailed behavioral adjustments in everyday practices. CDM *sayamas* learn to modify their housing practices—avoiding hanging clothes in front of houses in ways that might mark them as foreigners, for example—and adjust their religious participation by learning Thai Buddhist customs as demonstrated in *Sayama* Myint's experience at the monastery. They carefully map their movements through the town, frequenting markets rather than malls where they might encounter more Thai officials, and even modify their walking pace, posture, and gestures to minimize unwanted attention. One CDM teacher explains how she practiced Thai-style *wai* greetings at home prior to using them in public to ensure the gesture appeared natural rather than forced. These embodied performances reflect the totality of identity adaptation required in exile, where even the most mundane aspects of daily life become sites of conscious performance and potential risk.

From an ethnographic perspective, the practices of these teachers illustrate the intricate processes of identity performance and social adaptation

in exile. Their choice of clothing is not merely a matter of personal preference but a calculated effort to navigate the socio-political landscape of their host environment. This behavior underscores the broader themes of resilience and survival strategies employed by individuals in precarious situations, where the management of identity and appearance becomes a crucial element of their overall security. Their actions demonstrate how individuals in exile develop sophisticated strategies to negotiate the precariousness of their situation, balancing the need to remain invisible with the imperative to sustain themselves in a foreign environment. This ongoing negotiation and performance of identity is a testament to the *sayamas'* resilience and adaptability in the face of constant threats.

Mae Sot, a town with a significant population from Myanmar, provides a relatively familiar environment for CDM *sayamas* who have fled the country. The Mae Sot city market, where many vendors are from Myanmar and the Burmese language is widely spoken, has become a preferred shopping location for these teachers. However, their interactions within this space are marked by caution and subtlety. CDM *sayamas* deliberately avoid discussing political issues or topics that might reveal their backgrounds or expose them to risk when communicating with vendors. The market includes shops run by both local Thai merchants and vendors from Myanmar. In these interactions, CDM *sayamas* maintain a strictly polite and distant relationship, consciously withholding information about their identities and backgrounds. This behavior is rooted in their need to avoid unwanted attention and potential threats from both the Thai authorities and any actors sympathetic to the Myanmar military regime.

CDM *sayamas* often deliberately limit their shopping to the market, avoiding larger shopping centers for several reasons. Firstly, the vendors in shopping centers are primarily Thai, leading to language barriers that make communication difficult. Secondly, shopping centers are generally less affordable than the market and may not cater as well to their daily needs. Finally, these locations pose a higher risk of exposure, as they are frequented more by locals than by members of the Burmese diaspora, increasing the likelihood of interaction with Thai authorities.

CDM *sayamas*' navigation of Mae Sot is heavily influenced by their need to perform inconspicuousness. They rely on networks of fellow exiles and refugee associations for information about potential dangers, such as areas under surveillance by Thai authorities. They avoid these areas and follow practical advice on navigating the local environment safely, strategies I have personally also had to employ. This careful management of their behavior and visibility is essential for their survival in exile, as they seek to avoid detection by both Thai and Myanmar military authorities. One CDM teacher (personal communication, 2024) speaks of the constant vigilance required:

I had to escape to Mae Sot because of the political situation [in Myanmar], but to survive here, I must hide my behavior and profile to avoid being targeted by the military authorities and to stay unnoticed by the Thai authorities.

This statement encapsulates the broader self-preservation strategies employed by CDM *sayamas*, illustrating the complex interplay between their political identities, social interactions, and survival needs in a precarious and potentially hostile environment shaped by the TUF condition.

In summary, survival in exile often depends on blending into the surrounding environment. Keeping a low profile allows individuals to move more quietly and stay alert to the dangers of being noticed. Drawing from discussions on anonymity and survival strategies in displacement contexts, it becomes evident that CDM members must prioritize adapting their behaviors to avoid detection. This involves cultivating an inconspicuous presence, which is critical for mitigating the dangers inherent in their politically charged identities.

Strategic identity concealment

Since arriving in Mae Sot, CDM *sayamas* have engaged in strategic identity concealment to ensure their safety. This includes avoiding the use of real names in both their political activities and professional work. To navigate the procurement of their daily needs, they employ various methods, such as conducting online transactions under local relatives' names and account

numbers or using open payment systems like K-Pay and Wave Pay. Some teachers further distance themselves from their real identities by making payments through informal money transfer services, thereby avoiding direct association with their actual names. On social media, these individuals maintain a heightened level of anonymity by consistently using pseudonyms, often changing their profile names periodically (e.g., every three months) or as necessary to evade detection. This careful management of identity reflects a broader strategy of low visibility, which CDM *sayamas* consider crucial for their security in an environment where the risks of exposure are significant due to their political status.

One CDM teacher (personal communication, 2024) emphasizes that maintaining a low profile has been instrumental in protecting herself from surveillance and other threats: “Maintaining a low profile in exile extends beyond mere physical concealment; it demands continuous awareness of one’s identity and surroundings.” This vigilance is crucial for achieving seamless integration into the local environment and becoming an unnoticed part of it. In addition, reflecting on the critical role of communal support in navigating the complexities of exile, another CDM teacher (personal communication, 2024) remarks, “While the safety of CDM *sayamas* remains paramount, their strategies underscore the profound challenges they encounter as they attempt to reconstruct their lives amidst persistent threats and uncertainty. These difficulties highlight the necessity for solidarity within the CDM network.” Survival in exile necessitates a combination of strategic sophistication and careful maneuvering. Every action, including interpersonal interactions, demands meticulous attention to detail to shield oneself from detection and safeguard personal security.

Resilience and adaptation

The challenges faced by CDM *sayamas* who have fled to Mae Sot reflect a complex interplay of social, economic, and political issues resulting from their undocumented status and forced displacement. Their experiences cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political crisis in Myanmar, where the military junta has specifically targeted educators as part of its strategy to dismantle potential sites of resistance. The regime’s deliberate destruction

of educational infrastructure has created the “third fire” that fundamentally shapes CDM *sayamas*’ experience of exile.

The “state of exception” that characterizes Mae Sot, as conceptualized by Agamben (1998), produces a unique environment where CDM *sayamas* must constantly recalibrate their behaviors and self-presentations. Unlike more structured refugee contexts, this exceptional space requires heightened adaptability but also creates gaps in governance where alternative forms of community and resistance can take root. The ambiguous legal status of CDM *sayamas*—neither officially recognized refugees nor legal residents—mirrors the exceptional nature of the border space itself. Their strategies for identity performance and role enactment must navigate this exceptional status, finding security in the very interstices of power that make them vulnerable. This dialectic between exceptional vulnerability and exceptional possibility fundamentally shapes their experiences in ways that conventional refugee frameworks may not fully capture. These challenges can be analyzed more deeply using existing literature on refugee and displaced communities, connecting them to broader theories of migration, identity performance, and adaptation, particularly within the TUF context where researcher, community, and academic infrastructure are simultaneously threatened.

The precarious position of CDM *sayamas* is perhaps best understood through the perspective of forced migration studies, which emphasize how undocumented status exacerbates vulnerabilities (Campbell, 2018). According to Campbell (2018), displaced individuals in border regions often experience heightened precarity due to their lack of legal recognition, which exposes them to threat of arrest, deportation, and economic exploitation. This legal precarity not only undermines their access to stable employment, housing, and healthcare but also entrenches their marginalized position within the host community. As Betts and Collier (2017) have documented, undocumented migrants in regions like Mae Sot face a dual burden: the precariousness of their legal status and the socioeconomic challenges of navigating new environments without sufficient resources or support networks. These intersecting challenges echo the broader global issues faced by displaced professionals, who often struggle to regain their professional footing and economic security while in exile. The experience of CDM *sayamas*

highlights this intersection, as their ability to enact their professional roles is often devalued in exile, further contributing to their precarious existence (Bloch, 1999).

Furthermore, the challenges surrounding the economic livelihoods of CDM *sayamas* indicate broader global issues faced by displaced professionals. As Khanal (2020) points out, displaced professionals often find their previous qualifications and experiences devalued in host countries, leading to downward occupational mobility. For the CDM *sayamas* who were once respected educators, the inability to secure stable teaching positions without proper documentation highlights the broader issue of “brain waste” often seen in refugee contexts (Haikkola, 2011). Despite their professional qualifications, CDM *sayamas* frequently find themselves in precarious, sometimes exploitative employment conditions, mirroring the experiences of displaced professionals globally.

In addition, the performance and negotiation of identity, a recurring theme in anthropological and forced migration literature, is central to the CDM *sayamas*’ experiences. According to Castles and Miller (2009), displaced individuals often face a tension between maintaining continuity with past identities and assimilating into their host communities for survival. This is evident in how CDM *sayamas* like K and Mya adopt aspects of Thai culture (e.g., dress and mannerisms) as part of their public performance to avoid scrutiny by local authorities. The need for such “performative assimilation,” drawing on Goffman’s (1959) concepts of impression management, underscores the complexities of identity work in exile, where survival often necessitates the enactment of roles that align with the expectations of the host community. This process has not only been observed but also lived by myself, whose own experiences with identity negotiation have informed this analysis.

Moreover, the housing challenges faced by CDM *sayamas* echo broader patterns identified in refugee studies. As Liisa H. Malkki (1995) argues, displacement often leads to the fragmentation of social networks, leaving individuals reliant on informal and temporary living arrangements. In the case of CDM *sayamas*, the reliance on safe houses provided by organizations like the NMF highlights the temporary and potentially insecure nature of

their accommodation. This reflects the broader transient nature of much refugee housing, which often fails to provide long-term solutions for displaced individuals. The literature on refugee camps and safe houses emphasizes the importance of community solidarity in overcoming the trauma of displacement (Agier, 2011). However, it also notes the potential for conflict, particularly when individuals from different regions and backgrounds are forced to live in close quarters (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The CDM *sayamas*' experiences in the safe houses illustrate this duality: while the communal setting provides some degree of security and support, it can also exacerbate social tensions, underscoring the limits of temporary housing solutions.

The displacement of CDM *sayamas* to Mae Sot following their participation in the CDM highlights the complexities of daily survival in an insecure environment. As they navigate a new socio-political landscape, CDM *sayamas* employ various coping strategies and adaptive behaviors to ensure their survival while attempting to enact meaningful professional and cultural roles. Drawing from the broader literature on displacement, identity negotiation, and resilience, this discussion explores how these teachers manage their cultural repertoires, professional practices, and political commitments in the face of uncertainty and insecurity stemming from their TUF condition.

As discussed in migration and refugee literature, the concept of identity negotiation is a critical aspect of survival for displaced individuals. Giddens (1991) posits that identity is not static but is continuously reconstructed through social interaction and adaptation. For CDM *sayamas*, this dynamic negotiation is evident in how they balance cultural continuity with the need for performative assimilation in the host community of Mae Sot. By adopting Thai customs and mannerisms, such as local dress patterns and communication styles, these teachers practice what Berry (1997) terms "acculturation strategies" in which individuals from minority cultures adjust their practices to those of the dominant culture while selectively maintaining aspects of their original identity where possible or appropriate.

The experiences of CDM *sayamas*, such as Myint's participation in activities at the Thai monastery, exemplify this balancing act. Through participation in local religious and cultural activities, CDM *sayamas* can

integrate to some extent into the Thai community, forming relationships and creating a sense of security. These small but significant acts of cultural exchange reflect the broader notion of “cultural hybridity” described by Bhabha (1994), where displaced individuals adopt elements of the host culture into their own performative repertoire. This hybridity functions as a key coping strategy, enabling them to navigate daily interactions without fully relinquishing connections to their Burmese background.

In addition to cultural negotiation, performing their professional identity as educators is central to the *sayamas*’ coping mechanisms. The literature on displaced professionals highlights the importance of maintaining one’s professional role enactment for psychological well-being and social status (Williams & Baláž, 2014). For CDM *sayamas*, continuing to teach—whether in formal migrant schools or informal settings like vocational training centers—allows them to assert their role as educators, thereby resisting the erasure of this valued aspect of their identity in exile (countering the third fire). This mirrors the findings of Bloch (1999), who notes that displaced individuals often find meaning and stability by continuing their professional work, even in challenging contexts.

Furthermore, leadership roles adopted within their displaced communities, such as those exemplified by Daw Sabae, highlight the capacity of CDM *sayamas* to foster collective resilience. As Norris et al. (2008) discuss, community resilience is often strengthened when individuals take on leadership roles, creating support systems that help others navigate displacement. Daw Sabae’s leadership within the safe house, where she organizes educational initiatives and daily routines, illustrates how displaced educators can extend their professional skills beyond teaching to encompass community-building and empowerment. This aligns with Turner’s (2005) framework of “adaptive leadership” where displaced individuals leverage their skills to support collective survival in crises.

Moreover, the strategic adaptation of public self-presentation is a key coping mechanism for CDM *sayamas*. As Goffman (1959) theorizes, individuals manage their public personas based on social context, often engaging in performative acts to align with societal expectations. For CDM *sayamas*, blending into the local community by adopting inconspicuous

clothing and limiting political expression is a form of “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) aimed at minimizing visibility and avoiding detection by Thai authorities (a response to the first fire). This practice reflects what Shahram Khosravi (2010) calls “undocumented everyday tactics” in which displaced individuals employ subtle strategies to navigate potentially hostile environments without drawing unwanted attention to themselves. These adaptive strategies observed in participants mirror those necessarily adopted by myself as the researcher to conduct the fieldwork safely under the TUF condition.

Professional continuity and resilience

The psychological aspects of coping are also crucial for understanding the resilience of CDM *sayamas*. The constant threat of surveillance, coupled with the precariousness of exile, can lead to feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression. However, as Betancourt and Khan (2008) have argued, acting as a teacher can serve as a psychological anchor, providing a sense of purpose and continuity. The classroom becomes a sanctuary where these teachers can temporarily escape the pressures of displacement. This aligns with findings that suggest enacting a valued professional role in exile helps mitigate the psychological toll of displacement by fostering a sense of agency and control (see, for example, Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

The strategic management of identity extends beyond personal interactions and includes practical survival strategies, such as the use of pseudonyms and informal payment systems to evade surveillance. The literature on refugee coping mechanisms, such as that by Rygiel (2011), emphasizes the importance of informal networks and practices for navigating bureaucratic and political barriers. CDM *sayamas*’ reliance on these informal strategies reflects their resourcefulness in leveraging local knowledge and networks to ensure survival while avoiding detection by potentially hostile authorities.

Sustaining valued roles and practices among CDM *sayamas* is key to their resilience in exile. Displaced by political upheaval, these educators face the dual challenges of performing cultural and professional aspects of self while navigating the uncertainties of life as refugees. This discussion critically examines how CDM *sayamas* manage self-presentation through

their professional activities, cultural practices, and participation in political resistance. Focusing on relevant literature, the analysis explores the intersection of identity performance, professional pride, and exile, highlighting the importance of enacting self-worth and dignity in difficult circumstances arising from the TUF condition.

Identity, particularly in the context of forced migration, is understood here not as a fixed entity but as one performed through active, socially mediated processes (Castells, 2011). The performance of educator roles remains central to the participants' sense of self and pride. Despite being forced into exile and stripped of their official positions, these teachers continue performing their duties through informal teaching in migrant schools or vocational training. Their persistence in enacting this professional role reflects the broader concept of identity as socially constructed and situationally performed (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 2004), where individuals constantly reconstruct their sense of self in response to changing social contexts. The literature on professional identity in exile highlights how displaced professionals often use their previous expertise to cope with the loss of social status (Bloch, 1999). CDM *sayamas*, such as Khaing, who proudly recounts her role as a university lecturer and active participant in the CDM, embody this phenomenon. Her story illustrates how acting as a teacher, even in an informal context, is essential to her sense of self, offering her psychological stability and a sense of continuity. The ability to continue performing professional roles in exile helps displaced individuals maintain their self-esteem and sense of purpose, reinforcing their resilience.

Moreover, professional pride among CDM *sayamas* is deeply tied to their political commitments. Their involvement in the CDM is not just an act of resistance but a key aspect of their public identity as educators and political activists. The literature on political resistance and identity formation suggests that participating in movements like the CDM reinforces a collective identity, which is essential for maintaining social cohesion and solidarity in times of crisis (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). CDM *sayamas* view their role in education as encompassing more than imparting academic knowledge to their students; it is also a vehicle for transmitting values of democracy, justice, and political resistance to the younger generation. The continuation of their teaching

practices, even under the precarious conditions of exile, serves as a quiet form of defiance against the regime that has displaced them (linking the first and third fires).

The intersection of cultural practice and professional pride is another critical element in understanding how CDM *sayamas* navigate their lives in exile. Cultural identity, according to Hall (1990), is both a reflection of shared traditions and a constantly evolving construct realized through performance. CDM *sayamas* actively enact Burmese cultural traditions while adapting their public behavior to the Thai cultural environment for safety and survival. This cultural duality—balancing adaptation to the host environment with opportunities to perform one's heritage—is a recurring theme in the literature on migration and identity (Berry, 1997). In the classroom, these educators pass on not just knowledge but also Burmese values, traditions, and cultural practices, helping ensure their students remain connected to their heritage despite living in exile. This commitment to cultural performance reinforces the CDM *sayamas*' sense of belonging and identity, providing them with a sense of continuity and purpose.

The psychological benefit of performing a professional role in exile is also significant, as discussed by Betancourt and Khan (2008) and others. Displacement from their homeland, the loss of their official positions, and the insecurity of their lives in Mae Sot often lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and worthlessness among CDM *sayamas*. Teaching provides them an opportunity to regain a sense of agency and control. The classroom becomes a sanctuary where they can temporarily escape the hardships of exile and focus on the future. As Khaing notes, teaching allows her to forget her troubles and feel fulfilled, even in a foreign land. This aligns with the literature on the potentially therapeutic role of professional engagement for displaced individuals, which suggests that meaningful work can help mitigate the psychological toll of displacement.

In addition to the psychological benefits, the community support networks among CDM *sayamas* play a crucial role in validating their professional identity performances. Norris et al. (2008) emphasize that community resilience is built through collective efforts and mutual support. For CDM *sayamas*, solidarity with fellow displaced colleagues provides a sense of shared

resilience and strength. These networks help them navigate the difficulties of exile and bolster their professional pride as educators. Through collaboration and mutual support, they continue contributing to their communities, even in displacement. This communal support system highlights the importance of social networks in maintaining professional roles and dignity in exile.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges faced by CDM *sayamas* in Mae Sot mirror broader patterns observed in refugee and forced migration contexts but are acutely shaped by the specific political situation following the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the precarious existence in a border “state of exception.” Their undocumented status exacerbates their vulnerability to legal, economic, and social challenges, while their ability to publicly enact their professional identities as educators is often constrained or devalued in the host community. The literature on forced migration highlights how displaced professionals, like the CDM *sayamas*, frequently face significant barriers to reintegrating into their professions, contributing to their economic precarity. Furthermore, the need to strategically perform or suppress cultural identity markers and the challenges of communal living in temporary housing underscore the complex social dynamics of displacement.

Nevertheless, the experiences documented in this study, gathered through ethnographic practices conducted under challenging TUF conditions, highlight the remarkable resilience and agency of these displaced individuals, expressed through their adaptive identity performances. Their stories underscore the need for more sustainable, long-term solutions that address the legal, economic, and social challenges inherent in displacement. The role of organizations like the NMF in providing temporary housing and support is vital, but without comprehensive legal and policy frameworks addressing the root causes of their displacement and providing pathways to stability, CDM *sayamas* and others like them remain in a precarious and uncertain position.

Similarly, the everyday coping strategies employed by CDM *sayamas* in Mae Sot reveal a sophisticated interplay of identity performance, resilience, and adaptation. Focusing on a combination of situational cultural assimilation, continuity in professional practice, and strategic anonymity, these teachers

navigate the complexities of exile while finding ways to enact core aspects of their identities as educators and political activists. Their ability to blend into their host community while maintaining a distinct sense of self underscores the dynamic and performative nature of identity in displacement contexts. The literature on forced migration and identity negotiation provides a framework for understanding how CDM *sayamas* employ adaptive strategies to cope with precarious situations. By integrating into the local community through appropriate cultural and professional performances, they maintain dignity and agency in exile. Moreover, the leadership roles taken on by some CDM *sayamas* demonstrate the potential for displaced individuals to foster collective resilience, creating networks of support that enable them to navigate the challenges of displacement. Ultimately, the experiences of CDM *sayamas* reflect broader themes of resilience and survival in exile, illustrating how displaced individuals can strategically manage their self-presentation and actions to navigate insecure environments. While the risks and challenges remain significant, their coping strategies highlight the enduring strength of community, shared practices, and meaningful role enactment in the face of displacement.

Performing valued professional and cultural roles remains central to the resilience and adaptation of CDM *sayamas* in exile. Their enactment of the educator role, deeply intertwined with their political and cultural identities, provides them with a sense of purpose and continuity despite their hardships. The continuation of their teaching work, whether in formal or informal settings, serves as both a psychological protection and a form of quiet resistance against the regime that displaced them. The literature on identity formation and performance in exile provides a framework for understanding how CDM *sayamas* navigate their precarious situation. By maintaining relevant cultural practices, participating in political resistance, and continuing their educational work, these teachers sustain a sense of self and dignity. Furthermore, the support networks they form among their fellow displaced colleagues reinforce their resilience, allowing them to stand tall as educators and activists even in the face of adversity.

The methodological innovations developed as a necessity due to the layered vulnerabilities inherent in the TUF condition—from security-

embedded ethics to identity-negotiated fieldwork—contribute to a broader reconceptualization of anthropological practice. By documenting how knowledge production persists when researchers, communities, and institutions are simultaneously under attack, this research extends beyond conventional understandings of “fieldwork under fire” toward a more comprehensive framework for understanding how scholarly inquiry adapts and survives under authoritarian regimes.

This research offers a contribution to the TUF framework by demonstrating how professional identity performance becomes a form of resistance when all three dimensions of vulnerability converge. Unlike contexts where only fieldwork itself is dangerous, CDM *sayamas* in Mae Sot demonstrate that maintaining their identity as teachers through informal teaching, knowledge sharing, and cultural transmission directly counters the military’s attempt to dismantle not just educational institutions but the very concept of independent knowledge production. Their strategic identity enactment reveals how, even when researchers, communities, and institutions are simultaneously targeted, the performance of professional roles can preserve both epistemological authority and political agency. This case thus illuminates how the TUF condition may paradoxically strengthen, rather than merely constrain, certain forms of knowledge production through the very process of resistance. Specifically, the negotiation and performance of identity, explored throughout this chapter, emerges as a crucial survival strategy and form of agency uniquely shaped by the pressures of the TUF condition.

The experiences of CDM *sayamas* ultimately illustrate the complex interplay between identity performance, professional pride, and survival in exile. Their ability to perform new identities while enacting valued roles as teachers and political activists highlights the importance of professional role continuity, cultural performance, and community support in navigating the challenges of displacement. The resilience and agency of CDM *sayamas*, documented through research conducted under conditions of shared risk and solidarity, serve as a testament to the enduring power of situational identity management in the face of profound loss and uncertainty.

This ethnographic documentation of CDM *sayamas*' experiences, conducted under TUF conditions, serves both scholarly and historical purposes. Beyond contributing theoretical understandings of identity performance in exile, this research preserves testimony that might otherwise be lost. The methodological innovations developed through necessity offer valuable approaches for anthropologists working in similar high-risk contexts. Most importantly, centering the voices and experiences of CDM teachers documents their resilience and agency in conditions designed to silence and disempower them, making visible their continued resistance through everyday acts of identity performance and professional pride. Conducting and sharing this research, despite the inherent dangers, is presented as an act of resistance and a vital contribution to the historical record.

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Chapter 6

**New Commons Under Fire: Digital Spaces
for Myanmar's Displaced CDM**

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Abstract

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) began as an online campaign in response to the 2021 Myanmar military coup, evolving into a broad pro-democracy movement opposing the seizure of power by the military. This research, conducted under the “thrice under fire” conditions outlined in this volume’s introduction, examines how CDM participants who have fled to Mae Sot, Thailand, have built resilience via digital communities amidst eroded livelihoods, well-being, and security. Community resilience, defined as the engagement of resources to thrive amid change and uncertainty (Magis, 2010), emerges through the interplay of physical and digital spaces navigated by individuals under duress. This research explores how digital platforms facilitate the sharing of information and resources among CDM exiles, and how the physical-digital interface fosters resilience. Employing a hybrid methodology combining traditional ethnography with security-conscious digital ethnography (namely, observation and analysis of two digital Signal groups for CDM members in exile) necessitated by severe risks, the study shows CDM exiles forming a cohesive community based on online sharing, support, and coordination complemented by limited in-person interactions. Three key functions of digital communities emerged from the data: informa-

tion exchange for navigation of threats; social support exchange for survival (training, resources); and psychosocial support fostering belonging amidst displacement and trauma. Findings reveal that online spaces are becoming critical infrastructure for physical security and well-being, enabling exiled CDM participants—a community under fire—to develop resilience and new community modes within precarious legal constraints and political crises. Digital communities function as assemblages connecting multiplicities, facilitating territorialization and deterritorialization as exiles adapt, demonstrating resilience forged under adversity.

Keywords: CDM exiles, community resilience, physical community, virtual community, thrice under fire, digital ethnography, security-embedded ethics, information exchange, social support exchange

Introduction

Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) emerged as a response to the country's military coup of 2021. The CDM rapidly evolved from an online campaign into a widespread pro-democracy movement. This movement has mobilized large segments of Myanmar's population against what they view as an illegal and unconstitutional power seizure by the military junta. Approximately 400,000 civil servants joined the CDM strike, including health-care workers, educators, and government officials, refusing to work under the military regime, making it a unique social movement of "professional revolutionaries" responding to political crisis.

Following their participation in the CDM, many have faced persecution, leading thousands of participants to flee to neighboring countries. This research examines how CDM members who have fled to Mae Sot, Thailand, have constructed resilience through engagement with both physical and digital communities. It focuses on how online digital platforms have facilitated information sharing, resource distribution, and psychosocial support, thereby enabling CDM exiles to adapt and build new lives in exile. This analysis contributes to broader anthropological debates on digital ethnography, forced migration, resilience under authoritarianism, and ethnographic practice under extreme duress.

This study is situated within the "thrice under fire" (TUF) framework articulated in this volume's introduction. As a CDM teacher, I operate under personal risk as the researcher; the participants, fellow CDM exiles, are a community targeted by the Myanmar regime having to navigate precariousness in Thailand; and the research itself is conducted within a context of collapsed academic infrastructure in Myanmar, necessitating adaptive methodologies in exile. This context represents not just immediate threat but also what the editors of this volume refer to as a form of "slow violence"—an attritional, ongoing erosion of academic institutions, professional identities, and scholarly communities. Acknowledging this slow-moving dimension of violence deepens our understanding of the continuous challenges faced by both researchers and the communities they study.

My dual position as both a CDM participant and researcher places me explicitly within the community studied—an insider-activist stance aligning

my scholarly work directly with political resistance. This positionality has fundamentally shaped my methodological choices, ethical considerations, and analytical frameworks, rendering the research inherently political and oriented toward community solidarity. Ultimately, solidarity itself has become an explicit ethical foundation of my research, shaping not only how data is gathered but why it is documented, emphasizing collective resilience and shared political commitment.

The CDM has mobilized vast portions of the Myanmar population to oppose the illegal, unconstitutional seizure of power by the military (King, 2022). All CDM participants face hardships and widespread oppression. Hundreds of “CDMers” and those assisting them have been charged under Section 505(a) of the penal code, which carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison. Many CDM participants have been forced to live in obscurity and remain in hiding. The military junta has prohibited known CDMers from legally traveling abroad. Consequently, some CDM participants who have faced charges under Section 505(a) and others who fear arrest have fled to neighboring countries such as India and Thailand. This study specifically examines the resilience developed by CDM exiles in Mae Sot on the Thai-Myanmar border—a community under direct fire.

CDM exiles and their families must endure numerous challenges and potential stressors, including alterations in financial status, loss of close relationships, pressure to secure new occupations, language barriers, the need to establish new social networks, disrupted education of children, housing problems, isolation and loneliness, and fear of new secondary relationships (such as with healthcare professionals and religious practitioners). At the same time, with the aid of digital technology, CDM exiles actively construct new networks as digital communities, creating possibilities that function as new commons to build resilience amidst these challenges.

Most CDM participants who have fled Myanmar have had to use illegal routes, as the military announced on September 19, 2021, that border checkpoint authorities were seeking to arrest CDM participants (Frontier Myanmar, 2022). In addition to seeking refuge across Indian and Chinese borders, many CDMers and their families have migrated to Mae Sot, a contested space with contradictory dynamics extending to trading, traveling,

displacement, and confinement. In Mae Sot, survival typically depends on rapid adaptation to precarious conditions. Cut off from familiar physical networks and resources, CDM exiles have increasingly turned to digital platforms as essential infrastructure for building community and sustaining resistance.

Considering the TUF context described earlier—in which researchers, researched communities, and research infrastructures face simultaneous threats—this study explores how digital platforms specifically facilitate resilience among displaced CDM participants. It asks two central questions: How do these digital platforms manage to create political spaces for the sharing of critical information, ideas, and resources essential for the survival and resistance of the CDM exile community in Mae Sot? And how does the interplay between digital and physical community interactions support individual and collective resilience, foster cultural adaptation, and sustain dynamic community engagement amidst continuous threats?

Analysis of digital interactions and ethnographic observations reveals three primary resilience mechanisms at play: vital information exchange necessary for navigation of immediate threats; structured social support, including access to trainings and essential resources; and psychosocial support fostering emotional resilience and a sense of belonging despite trauma. These mechanisms underscore the critical role digital spaces play—not as secondary or supplementary to physical interactions, but as integral elements deeply intertwined with everyday survival strategies under siege.

The following sections unpack these mechanisms, emphasizing how digital communities actively counteract threats identified in the TUF framework. In doing so, the analysis demonstrates how CDM exiles leverage digital technology not only as tools of communication, but as transformative spaces for the construction of new forms of collective action and identity in the face of ongoing precarity.

Building resilience under siege

Theoretical approach to understanding community resilience

The digital communities formed by CDM exiles exist within a complex array of geo-political conditions shaped by multiple intersecting boundaries. To

conceptualize this diverse environment, this study employs assemblage theory as its primary theoretical framework. According to DeLanda (2006), an assemblage is not a fixed entity but a collection of heterogeneous elements that establish diverse relations between them. The assemblage's unity comes from the co-functioning of its elements rather than from hierarchical organization. Unlike rigid structures based on filiation, assemblages work through alliances and alloys—through connections, contagions, and flows. This theoretical approach is particularly valuable for understanding the fluid, emergent nature of digital CDM communities. The use of assemblage theory is particularly apt here, helping to conceptualize how resilience emerges from the connections forged between diverse elements (individuals, digital platforms, support networks, regulations) within the fragmented and high-risk TUF context.

In the context of this study, we can identify several key assemblage components: CDM participants with their diverse professional backgrounds, digital platforms (particularly the Signal application), legal status limitations, support organizations, the governance structure of the National Unity Government (NUG), and Thai regulatory frameworks. These components do not merely exist alongside each other; they actively form relations that define the territory and boundaries of the CDM exile community in Mae Sot. The assemblage approach helps us recognize the ongoing processes of territorialization (boundary-making and community formation) and subsequent deterritorialization (adaptation and transformation) within the CDM exile experience. Witteborn's (2015) concept of "becoming" further enhances our understanding of how forced migrants navigate conditions of physical and social constraint. "Becoming" describes how people shift between different modes of being and relating while responding to historical, sociopolitical, and economic realities, ultimately moving toward new ways of acting in the world. New technologies, as this research demonstrates, play a crucial role in facilitating this process.

Literature on resilience and digital communities

Resilience is a popular theoretical framework that can be used to assess how humans adapt to, rather than merely maintain, established patterns (Barrios,

2016). As Barrios (2016) posits, resilience is the ability and capacity to recover quickly from difficulties or to adapt successfully in the face of adversity and social transformation. Resilience can be understood as an attribute, an ability or capacity, a process, and an outcome associated with successful adaptation to and recovery from adversity (Pfefferbaum et al., 2013). In the context of migration, resilience can be seen as a process of reinforcement of emotion, sociability, and liveliness that reflects elastic integration within a new environment of networks and collaborations (Adger et al., 2002). In the political conceptualization of resilience, it has come to denote not only recovery from stressors and disturbances, or “bouncing back” to previous normalcy, but also a “bouncing forward” effect through adaptation that can be considered desirable despite the general negativity attached to being vulnerable to continuous external shocks (Vuori, 2021). Resilience has emerged as a dominant theme in the governance of crises such as political instability, armed conflict, terrorism, and large-scale refugee movements (Anholt, 2020).

This research explores the construction of resilience among CDM exiles through digital Signal communities that facilitate access to various information, support resources, and a sense of belonging. Kraut and Resnick (2012) define an online community as a “virtual space where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other.” Alongside other key domains, international migration as a growing phenomenon in recent decades is increasingly affected by digitalization processes and related technological advances (McAuliffe, 2021). Recently, a key focus of “digitalization” has been the realm of information and communication, and how migrants, potential migrants, and their families and networks engage with the act of migration through information and communication technologies (Metykova, 2010). Digital platforms offer capabilities to match participants, primarily organizations and individuals, via platform-facilitated connectivity (Gawer, 2009; Tiwana et al., 2010). Other scholars argue that the digital community emphasizes the convergent commonality of shared experience, condition, goal, and conviction that creates a common interest in the collective welfare (Sproull & Arriaga, 2007). Digital communities facilitate access to information

and online relationships that are significant and productive for many CDM exiles in Mae Sot.

Context: CDM exiles in Mae Sot

Mae Sot as border space

The motivations behind the decision of CDM participants to seek refuge in the border town of Mae Sot vary greatly. Some individuals opt for Mae Sot due to its advantageous geographical location, which offers a convenient navigable route from central Myanmar, and its proximity to Karen-controlled areas. Additionally, the reputation of Mae Sot as a haven for Myanmar exiles and dissidents with a significant population of Myanmar migrant workers influences the choice of destination. Mae Sot shares the border with the town of Myawaddy in Myanmar's Karen State, and it has been home to thousands of Myanmar migrants and refugees for many years. Mae Sot is a district of Thailand's Tak province, a large border town that is a hub of numerous economic activities and migration (Pongsawat, 2007; IRC, 2012). Mae Sot has many types of trade and commerce centers through which textiles, garments, gems, jade, and teak move through for regional and global trade. Mae Sot is also notorious for the illegal smuggling of consumer goods and narcotics, as well as human trafficking.

Mae Sot has long been a haven of refuge for many of Myanmar's ethnic peoples, especially the Karen and Karenni. Several thousand migrants from Myanmar can be found working in Mae Sot in factories, as shopkeepers, and engaged in many types of business. Many exiled Myanmar politicians and activists who took part in the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings and 2007's Saffron Revolution have been living in Mae Sot for a prolonged period. Among them, some have established migrant learning centers to serve the children of refugees of armed conflict and political persecution. Others have established healthcare centers for migrants and those displaced due to conflict between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed forces.

According to my observations, Mae Sot is characterized by its diverse population, consisting of various heterogeneous communities such as Thai, Chinese, Rohingya, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, and Myanmar. The town is home to religious institutions catering to different faiths, including Buddhism,

Christianity, and Islam. Since the first Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge across the Thaung Yin (Moei) River was opened in 1997, the community has been experiencing significant changes under the pressures of rapid community expansion. The social impact of the Thai government's policy on the Border Special Economic Zone was considered a catalyst for social and cultural changes, especially community expansion and changing occupations and lifestyles (Sriruk et al., 2018).

Lee (2011) finds that the power of the state fails to fully penetrate and dominate within border towns, and indeed there is a history of various actors exercising their powers within Mae Sot. These include the Karen National Union (KNU) as an ethnic organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as an international agency, migrant schools, and migrant clinics where Burmese people can seek assistance. Since the 2021 coup, an increasing number of people from Myanmar—including CDM participants from various government departments, activists, and politicians such as National League for Democracy (NLD) parliamentarians—have arrived in Mae Sot. Therefore, the population of the town has increased with the new influx of Myanmar migrants and exiles.

Legal status and governance in Mae Sot

In terms of official government policy, Thailand is not a signatory to the United Nation's 1951 Refugee Convention, which outlines the obligations of states to protect displaced individuals and asylum seekers. However, the country maintains a lenient approach towards the treatment of forcibly displaced people within its borders, akin to deliberately turning a blind eye to the issue. To illustrate, the situation can be likened to one in which a homeowner is aware of the presence of mice in their home but makes no special effort to contain or expel all of them. This situation could be attributed to resource limitations or the inability of the Thai state to address the situation comprehensively, resulting in only a few mice being captured. Or, more likely, the situation is a result of the political and economic reality of Thailand with its capitalist class that relies on a steady supply of cheap migrant laborers, for whom consistently harsh security policies would serve as a deterrent to migration to Thailand. Regardless, despite the existence of a

significant number of CDMers and other forcibly displaced people residing in Mae Sot, the Thai government does not actively pursue a comprehensive apprehension of all such individuals. In this way, Mae Sot is similar to other administrative systems in Thailand in terms of governance. At the same time, governance in Mae Sot is unique due to its location on the border. Hence, there are many state agencies—including the local, immigration, and border patrol police; the army; and the customs department—that share power to govern the territory and people (Lee, 2007).

Rather than simply existing as lines on a map indicating “here” and “there,” borders have been recognized as having their own unique institutions (Paasi, 1998). Other social institutions and border areas develop norms to dictate behavior, which over time become self-perpetuating and resilient to change. Borders, as institutions, “govern the extent of inclusion and exclusion, the degree of permeability, and the laws governing transboundary movement” (Newman, 2003, p. 18). Unlike other places in Thailand, the enormous presence of non-Thais—particularly unauthorized migrants—makes Mae Sot unique in cases of administration and governance (Lee, 2008). Formal state actors are part of reproducing the border through legislation, politics, and physical enforcement. In addition, a mix of other actors cross, negotiate, and reify the border in both legal and illegal ways. Borders are not simply there, “they are enacted” (Van Schendel & De Maaker, 2014, p. 4).

The unique characteristics of Mae Sot are captured in the account of one man who came to the town following 2007’s Saffron Revolution because he no longer wanted to work under the control of Myanmar’s military government led, at the time, by General Than Shwe. He feared arrest by the Myanmar authorities because of his many poems against the military government and activities as a digital activist since the early days of Facebook in Myanmar. Therefore, he migrated to Mae Sot in March 2008 and found work managing a huge house sheltering about 80 exiled activists and politicians funded by former Myanmar politicians now living in the USA. At that time, there was only a social house, now called a safe house in Mae Sot. Burmese migrants seem to have had diverse experiences of Mae Sot between 2007 and the coup in 2021. According to this informant, many more Myanmar people have fled to Mae Sot since the 2021 coup than did so after the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

Exiled CDMers' experiences in Mae Sot

There are several reasons many CDM participants have chosen exile: some due to being sanctioned under Sections 505(a) or (b) of the penal code by the Myanmar authorities, some due to their family members' status (for instance, their spouses may be NLD parliamentarians), and some due to their children being targeted for arrest by the State Administration Council (SAC). Some do not dare to stay in Myanmar due to fears of being arrested. The routes of their navigation to Mae Sot differ. Some arrange their travel prior to leaving Myanmar via links with organizations in Mae Sot such as May May Yinkhwin, while others connect with friends or acquaintances who have arrived previously, and some come to Mae Sot without having any connections. According to interviews, some CDM participants first sought refuge near the Thai-Myanmar border in territory under the control of the KNU on the Myanmar side for several months where they faced numerous difficulties, especially relating to security issues. They often had to shelter in the jungle due to armed conflicts between KNU and SAC forces. Eventually, they decided to migrate to Mae Sot to ensure survival for themselves and their families. As reported by some CDM participants who are medical doctors, they managed to evade arrest by SAC authorities by fleeing to territory under the administration of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) where they worked for the KIA for one year before relocating to Mae Sot. Some CDM participants report having relatives and acquaintances who have been in Thailand or other countries for many years. These contacts advised CDM participants not to remain in Myanmar and suggested they flee to Thailand to seek opportunities for resettlement in a third country. However, many CDM participants specifically fled to Mae Sot because they felt they did not have any better option to escape persecution from the Myanmar authorities.

Nearly all CDM exiles currently living in Mae Sot have applied for refugee status through the UNHCR. Some would like to migrate to a third country, while others hope to return home once the revolution succeeds. Their primary reason for approaching the UNHCR is to seek international protection while in Mae Sot. Because of the injunction on CDM participants getting passports, most have crossed the border illegally (called *autlan* in the Myanmar language) and stay in Thailand undocumented (*a-htaut-a-htar-me*

Myanmar). Border crossing presents significant challenges for migrant CDM participants. If arrested by Thai police while crossing the border, they risk deportation back to Myanmar where they could face imprisonment by the SAC. CDM participants who have fled due to formal charges under the SAC express particular concern about being arrested. According to interviews, the border crossing process endangers their security due to potential arrest by Thai authorities and the physical dangers associated with crossing the Thaung Yin (Moei) River with the assistance of smugglers.

According to interview data, to survive, CDM participants arriving in Mae Sot must quickly learn about and adapt to the new environment. They face many challenges related to housing, finances, employment, language barriers, and security issues. Many CDM participants reside in downtown Mae Sot and surrounding areas. In the initial stage of their migration, they rely on whatever savings they had plus some remittances from home. According to participant observation, when CDM participants first arrive in Mae Sot, neighbors commonly advise them to apply for accommodation in a safe house, monthly food and financial support, and personal use items provided by the NUG and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), Overseas Irrawaddy Association (OIA), New Myanmar Foundation (NMF), and others. CDM participants often attempt to build a social network in Mae Sot but face constraints in meeting each other physically for many reasons, including lack of prior acquaintance, trust issues, rare chances to meet, unfamiliar environment, and transportation difficulties.

Due to the obstacles faced by those seeking to construct physical social networks, focal CDM participants with ties to the NUG began establishing online digital communities in October 2022 to communicate, share information, and help each other in Mae Sot. CDM “collective groups” consist of diverse CDM participants who previously served in various ministries of government: higher and basic education teachers, medical professionals, and individuals from various positions across government service. Moreover, there are specific Signal communities for those hailing from distinct government departments such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, etc. If certain departments have only a few representatives in Mae Sot, they do not

organize in a single group, instead joining the “collective group” (a gathering of CDM members from various departments). This study investigates two interconnected communities of CDM exiles by observing both the physical community and the two Signal groups (the collective group and the education group) that collectively meet the needs and bolster the resilience capacity of CDM exiles. The purposes of the two Signal groups are not significantly different. Both groups share information about training opportunities and job vacancies, with the education group focusing on educational matters while the collective group shares information about opportunities relevant to general CDM participants. I observed the collective group to be more active than the education group with lively discussion and debate based on members’ interests.

Ethics and methods under fire

This research employs a hybrid methodological approach combining traditional and digital ethnography, a necessity dictated by the TUF context in which both the researcher and participants operate. As a CDM teacher myself, conducting research involves navigating personal risks from the authorities alongside the security concerns of the participants. The precarious legal status of CDM exiles in Mae Sot and the ongoing threats from the Myanmar regime make extensive physical interaction dangerous and often impossible. This reality has forced a significant deviation from traditional research practices and spurred methodological innovation.

Examining how digital platforms facilitate the sharing of information, ideas, and resources requires the researcher’s direct engagement with the digital communities, primarily through methods of digital ethnography as a safer alternative to physical presence. The second research question, investigating how the physical-digital interface contributes to resilience building, necessitates an understanding of both online interactions and their real-world implications, captured through limited, carefully navigated physical participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted with trusted contacts.

This research relies on three primary data collection methods, each adapted for the high-risk TUF environment. First, in-depth interviews (N=13) were

conducted with a purposively selected sample of CDM exiles representing diverse government sectors, recruited primarily through trusted networks due to security concerns. Participants include two medical professionals, two higher education teachers, two basic education practitioners, one from the forestry department, one from the department of agriculture, livestock, and irrigation, and four others. An additional interview with a post-2007 exile living in Mae Sot provided historical context. Research interviews prioritized participant safety while exploring migration experiences, coping strategies, and the role of digital communities. Second, limited physical participant observation occurred in emergent social settings where CDM participants gathered in-person.

This research project required careful and vigilant navigation of the Mae Sot environment, mindful of the risks of arrest or exposure for both myself and the participants of this research. My immersion in town—the second of three primary data collection methods—enabled me to capture daily experiences and adaptation processes, providing insights into how digital connections manifest physically. Finally, recognizing the dangers of physical fieldwork, I conducted extensive security-conscious digital ethnography within two secure Signal groups: the Mae Sot Collective Group (269 members) and the Mae Sot Education Group (288 members). Significantly, digital ethnography in this context was also marked by mutual knowledge co-production. Participants frequently provided crucial expertise in digital security and risk management, effectively guiding my methodological practices. This reciprocity demonstrates how knowledge generated under conditions of extreme insecurity inherently depends on collaborative learning. This approach to digital ethnography was driven by necessity rather than mere convenience. Digital spaces like Signal have become crucial for sustained, deep engagements with CDM participants' daily experiences, emotional struggles, and resilience strategies without requiring risky physical presence—thus transforming digital ethnography into an essential methodological innovation forged under siege.

My access to the Signal groups was based on my verified CDM status and established membership, reflecting the “trust-based sampling” necessary in this context (see Introduction, this volume). Digital data collection

was conducted from May 2023 to July 2024 and focused on participants' interaction patterns, information-sharing for security and survival, and support mobilization. Crucially, constant surveillance and digital insecurity deeply influenced participants' daily online interactions. Awareness of potential digital monitoring forced continuous innovation in communication practices—for example, use of coded language, encrypted messages, and deliberately vague references—to maintain safety while sustaining vital exchanges. This approach allowed for rich data collection while minimizing physical risk.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis of interview transcripts and digital interactions. Manual coding preserved contextual sensitivity, and cluster coding organized themes related to the research, focusing on how digital communities facilitate information exchange, social support, and psychosocial well-being and contribute to resilience under duress. Importantly, these psychosocial dimensions are also deeply gendered. Female participants, who frequently bear heightened care responsibilities and social pressures amidst displacement, utilize digital spaces to share gender-specific coping strategies, emotional solidarity, and practical advice, thus highlighting digital resilience as a profoundly gendered practice.

Conducting research under TUF conditions demands an approach grounded in “security-embedded ethics” (as discussed in this volume's Introduction) where ethical considerations are inseparable from the safety of all involved. In practice, this requires continuous ethical recalibration, balancing truthful representation of participants' lived realities against the risks of exposure and potential harm. Consequently, I often represented sensitive data obliquely or indirectly, ethically foregrounding participants' safety over exhaustive transparency. In addition, deliberate strategic silences—consciously deciding to omit certain sensitive data entirely—also formed an integral component of ethical methodology. These omissions were not simply gaps in data but active, considered ethical choices designed to minimize potential harm.

Standard ethical protocols were insufficient during the conduct of this research. Ethics became an ongoing negotiation shaped by shared risk. Protecting participant identities was paramount given the severe potential

consequences (arrest, persecution by SAC, etc.). All data was anonymized and securely stored. Navigating these ethical dilemmas required continuous negotiation between empathy, driven by my shared vulnerability with participants, and the necessary analytical detachment to ensure rigorous scholarship. Rather than existing as separate poles, empathy and detachment became intertwined in my methodology—what could be termed an “analytical empathy”—shaping how experiences were documented and analyzed. This involved careful decisions about how much detail to include, sometimes describing data obliquely or from a participant’s general perspective to avoid identification, navigating the tension between transparency and protection. Informed consent was obtained through thorough conversations explaining the research and its risks, assuring participants of their right to withdraw at any time.

The identity I share with participants as an exiled CDMer facilitated trust, but obtaining consent remained a sensitive process due to participants’ experiences with trauma and security fears. Building trust was not merely methodological but a core ethical imperative; verification processes for Signal group entry and reliance on personal recommendations were essential safety measures reflecting community norms developed for survival. My personal identity was digitally verified by informants within these groups before interactions began, illustrating that trust was not merely logistical but formed the core of my research methodology. Trust-based sampling thus became an explicit methodological practice crucial to conducting research safely and ethically in this high-risk context. As the researcher, I also faced personal risks, including potential arrest by Thai authorities due to my undocumented status. Data security measures were implemented to protect both participants and myself, and the decision to rely heavily on digital ethnography was itself an ethical choice to minimize collective risk. My established presence and shared identity within the CDM community were crucial for navigating these complex ethical dimensions and building the rapport necessary for this sensitive research.

Limitations of the study

In addition to former government sector employees, the CDM also includes

many participants from the private sector who have participated in multiple strike activities to protest against military actions related to the 2021 coup. This research, however, focuses only on exiled CDM participants with backgrounds in various government sectors: medical professionals, university academics, basic education teachers, multi-professionals, and multi-position individuals who have crossed the border and have been persevering through various adversities in Mae Sot. Their abilities and how social communities continue functioning in unfamiliar environments through the utilization of digital technology to support social connectedness and collective actions as a form of digital social capital are acknowledged. The CDM represents a popular movement of revolutionaries (former civil servants, student activists, and others) who, due to political crisis, have become exiles in Thailand. They have acquired resilience by crafting social and digital communities worthy of inquiry. It should be noted that necessary security constraints inevitably limited the scope and depth of physical observation possible compared to what might have been achieved in less dangerous, more traditional ethnographic settings. At the same time, these same limitations also enhanced methodological innovation, revealing how constraints can productively reorient ethnographic practices, generating novel, theoretically informed research strategies.

Furthermore, the process of conducting this research itself reflects a form of temporally urgent ethnography, characterized by rapid, iterative data collection compelled by the ever-present threat of access loss, heightened risk of surveillance, and participants' sudden displacement. This urgency fundamentally reshaped the pace and rhythm of ethnographic practice. Additionally, the research process has carried significant emotional burdens. As a CDM participant myself, constant anxieties regarding personal safety, potential arrest, deportation, and exposure to trauma shared with informants critically shaped the research context, further blurring boundaries between researcher and researched.

Support structures in exile

The CDM exile community has emerged due to Myanmar's political crisis following the 2021 coup, with members struggling to cope and adapt

to life in Mae Sot. In response to Myanmar's political situation, the NUG was formed on April 16, 2021. Most Myanmar people who reject military dictatorship support the NUG as a temporary government-in-exile. Some CDM participants volunteer with the NUG, while others hold positions as NUG government servants. The NUG has assigned some CDMers-in-exile as focal persons to coordinate with CDM participants in Mae Sot. The NUG provides basic food support to CDMers monthly, typically including a small packet of rice, some dried beans, a bottle of oil, a small packet of onions, and sometimes dried fish, potatoes, or canned beans. During the school season, the NUG provides CDM parents with 500 baht per child per term to assist with educational expenses. Many CDM participants rely on the NUG for their basic food because household expenses are high in Mae Sot, and the NUG's support helps reduce their monthly expenses. Most CDM participants recognize the NUG as their government; however, the NUG's operational mechanisms remain somewhat unclear for CDM participants because their working processes are not fully revealed in the digital Signal groups, though members occasionally share information considered important for others to know.

CDM exiles in Mae Sot must observe the rules and regulations of the Thai government, especially in criminal cases. Since 2022, when the regime clamped down on CDM inside Myanmar, many undocumented CDMers have moved to live in hiding in Mae Sot. They face many challenges when attempting daily activities such as buying food, seeking healthcare, and sending their children to school. Although they seek to secure legal status in Thailand, this proves difficult for undocumented CDM participants under Thai government policy. They have sought ways to reduce their security vulnerabilities by registering their names with the local Thai police via brokers (obtaining what are called "police cards" or "Ye cards" in the Myanmar language). These cards cost 300 baht per month per person and provide limited documentation for police checks within Mae Sot town only.

Some brokers have informed CDMers in Mae Sot that holders of "police cards" are not permitted to ride in cars; if discovered by police, they must pay fines of 500 baht or more. CDM participants who wish to ride motorbikes must register with the police for an additional 1,000 baht per month, with car

use incurring even higher monthly costs. According to Thai law, foreigners cannot work legally without a work permit. Illegal residents are allowed to register for a “pink card” after they have received a work permit and a Certificate of Identity (CI)—designed to identify all migrants in Thailand and register their workplaces—but only for blue-collar jobs. Between 2022 and 2024, the Thai government offered two opportunities for migrants to register for pink cards and CI, but in 2024, pink card registrations were delayed by the authorities. Although many CDM participants are educated professionals and academics, they must accept blue-collar work under Thai law due to their precarious status.

Non-governmental organizations provide additional forms of support to CDM participants, including safe housing, food, personal use items, clothes, blankets, and some financial assistance. They also offer awareness training in topics such as digital security, as well as language and vocational training, including sewing machine operations, soap production, sushi making, and other cooking and food preparation skills. Mae Tao Clinic and its affiliated organizations provide basic healthcare and mental health support to exiled CDM participants. Within the digital communities, announcements about training opportunities from OIA, NMF, and Mae Tao Clinic are frequently shared. In 2022 and 2023, CDM participants could apply for food assistance from OIA or NMF, but in late 2023 and 2024, they could no longer do so as these organizations redirected their support to newcomers such as politicians, activists, and young people evading the Myanmar military’s newly implemented conscription laws. However, families with greater needs or insufficient food resources are still able to apply for assistance from OIA and NMF.

Digital technology as a resource

In the early 2000s, a number of empirical studies highlighted the importance of digital technologies as resources for migrants in vulnerable situations, despite persisting inequalities related to access, infrastructure, and digital skills (Diminescu, 2002; Horst, 2006). According to this study, digital technology supports CDM exiles in various ways: communication, access to information, language learning, job search and employment, financial

services, cultural preservation, education and skill development, safety and security, community building and mutual support, and more. Digital technology enables migrants to stay connected with their families and friends back home through various communication tools such as Viber, messaging applications, and social media. This helps alleviate feelings of isolation and homesickness, enabling them to receive emotional support during their exile.

Digital technology aids CDM exiles with access to a wealth of information and resources to help them settle in a new place. CDM exiles can use technology to search online forums and social media groups to find information about local services, housing, employment opportunities, language learning resources, and cultural integration. Language barriers can be a significant challenge, but technology offers language learning apps, online courses, and translation tools that can aid in language acquisition, facilitating integration into the host Thai community. Technology platforms and online job portals provide opportunities for exiles to search and apply for employment. Additionally, freelancing and remote work platforms offer flexible employment options that can help migrants generate income and gain professional experience.

Technology has made financial services more accessible to CDM participants. Digital banking and mobile payment platforms allow for convenient and secure money transfers, bill payments, and access to financial services without requiring a traditional bank account. Sometimes, donations can be received through mobile banking services, and remittances from home can easily be accepted. The NUG has created its own digital money system known as Spring Development Bank (SDB). CDM participants can use SDB accounts and NUG Pay linked with K-Pay (via Kanbawza Bank) and Wave money accounts.

Technology also helps migrants stay connected with their heritage and maintain aspects of their cultural identities. They can access online platforms, streaming services, and social media groups that provide access to culturally relevant content, music, films, and literature from their home communities. This can help preserve traditions and a sense of belonging. Technology provides access to online educational resources, e-learning platforms, and digital courses. CDM participants can acquire new skills, pursue further

education, or enhance their existing knowledge through these resources. Online platforms also offer opportunities for vocational training, certification programs, and professional development, which can improve job prospects and social integration in the new country.

Finally, technology contributes to CDM migrants' safety and security. Mobile applications and online platforms provide information about emergency services, local safety guidelines, and resources to report incidents or seek help. GPS and mapping applications can assist CDM migrants in navigating their new surroundings, finding safe routes, and locating essential services such as healthcare facilities, police stations, or community centers. Online platforms and social media groups allow CDM migrants to connect with others who have similar experiences and backgrounds. These virtual communities can provide valuable support, advice, and a sense of belonging. CDM exiles can exchange information, share resources, seek advice, and build social networks through these platforms.

Digital access and practices

CDM exiles of diverse age groups are currently living in Mae Sot, with younger individuals generally more able to utilize digital technology such as Google Maps, mobile banking, and other online applications compared to middle-aged and older CDM exiles. According to interviews, some middle-aged CDM participants lack skills required for the provision of online education and consequently miss out on some teaching opportunities. A middle school teacher said she had no experience teaching online and could not create PowerPoint presentations for her lectures. An online school offered her a teaching position, but she asked them to wait while she familiarized herself with online teaching methods. She received assistance from her daughter and neighbors but ultimately the employment offer was rescinded. Another CDM high school teacher (personal communication, 2024) shared, "I could not do online teaching with Zoom, and I did not have a computer. So I gave up on online teaching. I have chosen to do physical work, such as being a gardener and waiter, for survival."

Almost all CDM participants use Signal platforms to keep in touch with each other. Encrypted communication is crucial in the CDM exile community

for secure messaging. Before the coup, most used Facebook social media and Facebook Messenger applications. After the coup, CDM participants who fled to Mae Sot began using Signal and Telegram applications, which they assumed were safer than Messenger and Viber, to communicate with each other. Social media and Signal platforms have played an important role in the digital transformation of the CDM community, allowing members to share information, coordinate protests, raise awareness, and engage in collective actions, creating a new common space for the community to construct new possibilities in exile.

The digital community assemblages are composed of CDM exiles who seek survival via various forms of livelihoods in the context of Mae Sot. They formally follow some forms of NUG governance, are required to adhere to the rules and regulations of Thai authorities, rely on digital technology (for family contact, utilizing Google Maps, online remittances, online teaching, development of new skills, etc.), and depend on support organizations (which provide safe housing, food, personal use items, various trainings, etc.). These assemblages represent an ongoing process in which all elements influence and link with each other, leading to changes that help CDM exiles adapt to life in Mae Sot. The components included in the assemblage set boundaries at the same time they establish connections within the assemblage that define a particular territory.

Following Matschke et al. (2014), the concept of “social information space”—which encompasses all digital environments where people can contribute and access information provided by others—can be used to conceptualize the various platforms, forums, and communication tools used by CDM exiles. Data collected from the digital communities through participant observation for this research can be categorized into three main themes: information exchange, social support exchange, and psychosocial well-being support. The virtual community provides complex information, but more importantly, it serves as a place for the exchange of knowledge, wisdom, experience, and new ideas.

Trust, power, and community dynamics

Trust-building is crucial for communication within digital communities.

Membership is determined based on confidence that individuals are genuine CDM participants because security is a major concern for those in exile. CDM participants in Mae Sot live under the pressure of security concerns related to both the Myanmar and Thai authorities. Therefore, CDM participants do not engage with others prior to establishing trust. The digital community members face challenges due to the lack of physical presence and few opportunities to meet each other in-person. If a CDM participant wants to be added to the CDM collective group, another CDM participant who recommends them must first request the relevant board leader to verify their CDM status, with the leader then informing the administrator about the appropriateness of including the nominated individual in the group.

Power dynamics based on perceived expertise, influence, or contributions to group discussions can affect how members are able to shape discussions, decisions, and community norms. In digital CDM communities, there appears to be a power balance, with no one defining themselves as more powerful or influential than others. All members have the opportunity to engage, share perspectives, and make requests regardless of their positions when they joined the CDM. Their relationships in the digital communities are based solely on shared identity of being CDM participants, independent of previous status. However, some members are more active participants, while others primarily receive information, and some only react or respond to postings when necessary.

CDM participants take an active role in preventing domination of group discussions that could harm community cohesion. Control in digital communities involves moderation of content and interactions to maintain a positive atmosphere. Members may have different opinions in some cases and debate these points, but it is observed that they demonstrate self-discipline and mutual control to foster a positive environment. The relative power balance observed within these digital groups may partly stem from the shared vulnerability participants experience as part of the TUF condition, reinforcing the sense of equality among members despite previous hierarchical relationships.

In evaluating the level of engagement across different members, it is noted that some individuals consistently participate actively. They are defined

as active persons trying to keep the group alive, which does not necessarily indicate power imbalances. Anyone can discuss with them or ask questions about any relevant topic. CDM NUG members and some CDM NUG focal persons are included in these digital Signal groups; however, they do not overtly influence other CDM members. Rather, they largely share information about online awareness trainings provided by NUG and other organizations and institutions. Any member can share information about security issues, job vacancies, training opportunities, and various other topics.

Digital resilience functions

The digital communities created and sustained by CDM exiles in Mae Sot serve vital functions, acting as crucial resilience mechanisms for a community navigating vulnerability and risk. Data analysis of these functions reveals three interconnected themes: information exchange, social support exchange, and psychosocial well-being support, with each of these adapted to the specific needs arising from conditions of persecution and displacement.

Information exchange focused on navigating threats and uncertainty

In a context where physical safety is constantly threatened, timely and accurate information is paramount. The Signal groups have become essential conduits for the sharing of security-related intelligence, directly addressing the risks faced by members of this targeted community. Participants regularly share updates about potential dangers, such as Thai police raids. For example, in November 2022, Thai authorities raided a Mae Sot apartment complex in search of individuals with connections to armed resistance forces; seven CDM families resided in that building at the time. Participants also share risks associated with border crossings or registration updates on the Myanmar side especially while general warnings are in force about heightened surveillance or SAC activities targeting CDMers back home.

This constant vigilance and rapid information sharing has formed a collective defense mechanism. While not their primary focus, the groups also serve as spaces for political dialogue, sharing news and opinions about the situation in Myanmar, NUG activities, and resistance efforts. Discussions about events like the battle at Loikaw University or the CDM virtual confer-

ence, both in November 2023, reflect the CDMers' continued engagement with the political struggle from which they were displaced, helping maintain a sense of shared purpose and political identity. Furthermore, information about navigating life in exile, such as understanding Thai regulations and how to access resources, is frequently shared, helping newcomers adapt.

Social support exchange

Social support exchange is crucial for survival and adaptation in exile. Faced with loss of livelihoods and support networks, members of the digital communities facilitate this vital exchange. Information about essential support offered by NUG and various NGOs (food rations, safe housing, financial aid, items for children) is disseminated through the groups. Members actively share resource information like job vacancies (e.g., online teaching positions), training opportunities (language, vocational skills like sewing or cooking), and school information for children.

The platforms have also become spaces for the offer and provision of direct mutual aid. Members, for example, ask for help with housing, food, or clothing, especially during gaps in formal support (e.g., when distribution of NUG rations is delayed). Others mobilize to collect and distribute donations (e.g., *Thadingyut* festival gifts, rice donations, funds for medical emergencies or funeral costs, requests for school uniforms). This peer-to-peer support demonstrates strong community solidarity. Sharing information about vocational trainings and job opportunities also supports livelihood adaptation, essential for long-term resilience, with members sharing both opportunities and cautionary tales about workplace dynamics.

Psychosocial well-being support

Psychosocial well-being support addresses the heavy psychological toll of displacement, persecution, and uncertainty. The digital communities provide essential support in this area. Information about mental health awareness trainings (online and in-person), counseling services (like the "Zero Suicide Campaign"), and resources from organizations like Mae Tao Clinic is shared, connecting individuals who have experienced trauma and stress with potential support. Online psychosocial support activities such as motivational

talks, meditation sessions, art therapy, and yoga training have been provided, offering accessible ways for individuals to manage stress and improve well-being. Importantly, the groups foster a sense of belonging and shared identity among individuals who are often isolated physically. Sharing experiences, expressing frustrations (like encounters with Thai police), celebrating small successes, and offering encouragement creates a vital sense of community and mutual understanding, countering the isolation of exile. Notably, even though members with diverse backgrounds may have previously had hierarchical relationships, they connect as equals facing shared adversity within these digital spaces.

These three functions demonstrate how digital platforms have become more than communication tools; they are critical infrastructure for survival, adaptation, and resistance, enabling the community of CDM exiles in Mae Sot to build resilience while navigating the extreme challenges of their TUF situation. The digital interface directly supports their well-being and security.

Agency, resilience, becoming

The digital community assemblages serve as mechanisms for exiled CDM participants to address daily challenges to survival in Mae Sot, contributing to the process of territorializing (community formation and boundary-making in exile). The CDM exiles attempt to cope with new situations despite the dynamic characteristics of assemblages. The TUF context profoundly shapes how resilience is understood and enacted here; it is not merely adaptation but involves the maintenance of political identity and resistance networks under direct, layered threats. Similarly, these digital communities differ from typical online groups, with security, encryption, and trust-based verification becoming paramount features dictated by the high-risk environment. The specific configuration of the assemblage—linking individuals, secure digital platforms, NUG structures, NGOs, and Thai regulations—is directly forged by these overlapping vulnerabilities.

Some significant factors are beginning to transform the process of territorializing to one of deterritorializing (characterized by adaptation, integration efforts, seeking legal status, and new livelihoods) over time. For example, many CDM exiles seek to secure legal status in Mae Sot; consequently,

they seek permanent work, change their livelihood, reduce apprehension, become familiar with the physical environment, and build connections with established community members and the host community. The CDM exiles are also constructing new digital communities to build resilience, focusing on the features of commonality involving new relations and modes of life through their expanding needs. In the CDM digital community, power relations are significant and continue to exist, articulated with organizations such as OIA, NMF, and other NGOs and networks that work to sustain forming assemblages.

Communities are a kind of collective assemblage that make an individual's internal multiplicity articulate with external multiplicities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In digital communities, there are internal multiplicities and differences such as CDM participants with backgrounds in diverse positions and various ministries of government departments, the NUG's directives, Thai government policies and regulations, the local context of Mae Sot, supportive organizations, and digital technology. These internal multiplicities articulate with external multiplicities, including established migrant communities, newcomer activists, politicians, parliamentarians, former politicians, ethnic organizations, and the host community. However, these internal and external multiplicities influence each other in an ongoing process. The assemblages of internal multiplicities continue to form and maintain their fundamental aspects of identity, norms, and cultural behavior. Observed differences in digital literacy within the community may also shape these internal dynamics, potentially creating challenges or dependencies in accessing resources shared through these digital means.

The establishment of digital community assemblages signifies the community's collective efforts toward becoming a supportive mechanism in response to daily survival challenges. The interaction between internal multiplicities (individual positions, government affiliations, etc.) and external multiplicities (established communities, activists, politicians, host communities) showcases the interconnected nature of the community-building process. The ongoing formation and maintenance of internal multiplicities within the community demonstrate the community's evolution and adaptation to changing circumstances, indicating a process of becoming

and continual growth. The community's struggle with resistance and engagement with external forces, particularly host community policies, underscores their resilience and agency in navigating challenges and advocating for their needs.

As introduced in the introduction to this volume, the methodological necessity of relying on digital ethnography and secure communication reflects the production of "vulnerable knowledge," information that is itself precarious and requires careful handling, compounded by the absence of traditional institutional safeguards and resources. Furthermore, the knowledge shared and co-created within these secure digital spaces can be understood as a form of "solidarity knowledge," deeply embedded in the shared experience and forms of collective resistance necessitated by the TUF context. Ethical navigation, grounded in shared risk and community verification, exemplifies "situated political practice" rather than adherence to detached protocols.

However, community members face dynamic situations, and they need to struggle with resistance and engage with some forces, especially the policies of the host community. The observed processes of territorialization and subsequent deterritorialization can be understood as dynamic adaptation strategies developed by the community in direct response to the pressures and constraints of the TUF environment, demonstrating agency even amidst precarity.

Conclusion

This research, conducted amidst the perils of the TUF condition, demonstrates how digital communities serve as critical infrastructure for resilience-building among CDM exiles in Mae Sot, Thailand. The findings reveal three interconnected functions of these digital spaces that highlight the lived reality of a community under siege.

First, regarding how digital platforms facilitate sharing of political space and resources, the study has identified distinct patterns of information exchange, social support exchange, and psychosocial support, all adapted to the urgent needs of persecuted and displaced CDMers. Digital Signal groups have become indispensable channels for the sharing of information regarding security crucial for navigating the precarious landscape of life in

exile. The groups have enabled the rapid distribution of resources essential for survival—from training and job opportunities to material support—fostering a form of collective action that is vital when formal structures have collapsed or are otherwise inaccessible.

Second, concerning how the digital-physical interface contributes to resilience building, the findings reveal a dynamic process in which online interactions, necessitated by physical danger, enable and strengthen offline survival strategies and social bonds. Digital communities compensate for the risks of physical meetings by creating secure virtual spaces for trust-building, network maintenance, and mutual aid exchange. This research, informed by my own positionality as a member of the CDM, demonstrates how these digital assemblages help CDM exiles navigate immense challenges while preserving their identities as resisters of military dictatorship.

The methodological adaptations required for this research, particularly the reliance on security-conscious digital ethnography and trust-based networks, support the innovations made necessary by the TUF context. These methodological adaptations are not merely technical adjustments but represent theoretical interventions themselves. By redefining digital ethnography, trust-based sampling, and ethical practices under conditions of extreme duress, this research challenges conventional anthropological assumptions regarding what constitutes valid, rigorous, and ethical ethnographic engagement. This research aims not merely to document resilience among exiles, but to actively contribute to it. By capturing and validating the lived experiences of CDMers in exile, knowledge produced under these conditions becomes part of the collective memory and serves as a resource for community empowerment. Thus, the findings represent a form of solidarity knowledge closely intertwined with the community's ongoing struggle for survival, dignity, and political recognition.

The application of assemblage theory highlights how these digital communities function as dynamic spaces where individuals, technologies, support organizations, and regulatory constraints interact, creating new possibilities for connection and resistance under duress. These findings hold broader significance beyond Myanmar. The methodological, ethical, and theoretical innovations developed here offer valuable insights into

how anthropologists worldwide might adapt practices to contexts of rising authoritarianism, digital surveillance, and institutional collapse. This case underscores the urgent need for anthropologists to proactively rethink fieldwork and knowledge production under increasing global constraints. The progression from territorialization (community formation in exile) toward deterritorialization (adaptation and navigation of integration) illustrates the community's resilience and agency in response to their precarious situation, a response shaped by both immediate threats and the long-term, attritional pressures of displacement and infrastructure collapse.

This study's findings underscore the critical role of digital technologies for forcibly displaced populations facing political persecution. For CDM exiles, online platforms provide foundational infrastructure for the building of community, navigation of security threats, meeting of material needs, strengthening of psychological well-being, and preservation of identity. This digital-physical interface exemplifies how technology enables new forms of community and resistance under extreme constraint, offering insights relevant to understanding resilience in other high-risk environments globally.

Finally, this research illuminates the agency of CDM exiles. Far from being passive victims, we actively construct support networks, share resources, adapt our livelihoods, and navigate complex challenges of ethics and security, often employing security-embedded ethics born from our shared risks. Our digital communities reflect sophisticated social organization and collective problem-solving, demonstrating how knowledge, solidarity, and resilience can be forged even when under direct attack.

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Chapter 7

**Muslim Identities in Myanmar:
Research Under Triple Threat**

Than Lwin Oo (Thar Gyi)

Abstract

Since Myanmar regained independence in 1948, its Muslim population has experienced systematic marginalization and exclusion from mainstream political processes and public life under successive governments. This marginalization intensified during the country's recent decade of ostensible democratization (2011–2021), with both military and semi-civilian governments instrumentalizing Myanmar Muslim communities for political purposes. The absence of meaningful inclusion for ethnoreligious minorities undermines democratic function and creates instability, as demonstrated by Myanmar's regression from semi-democracy and comparable international experiences. Following the 2021 coup and subsequent dialogues on establishing a federal democratic union, encouraging initiatives have emerged alongside positive shifts in sentiment regarding the inclusion of Myanmar Muslims. Based on extensive interviews with diverse participants from both Muslim and non-Muslim populations conducted under the “thrice under fire” conditions characterizing research in post-coup Myanmar, this study reveals that while Myanmar Muslims' self-perception has remained consistent in that they continue to identify as integral members of the Myanmar polity, there has been a notable positive shift in how non-Muslims perceive Myanmar Muslim iden-

tity and their potential role in Myanmar's future. This study analyzes these evolving perceptions and suggests that opportunities for meaningful political inclusion of Myanmar Muslims have improved. However, without implementation of an associative democracy model to complement traditional federal structures, Myanmar risks perpetuating cycles of exclusion that have historically undermined its stability and democratic development.

Keywords: associative democracy, identity, minorities, Myanmar Muslim, political inclusion, research under fire

Introduction

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military seized state power, overthrowing the democratically elected government and arresting senior political leaders. This coup marked a significant setback to Myanmar's semi-democratic transition period of the past 10 years, precipitating widespread opposition. Resistance manifested through demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, the emergence of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and eventually armed resistance with the formation of People's Defense Forces (PDFs) under the auspices of the exiled National Unity Government (NUG) and with support from ethnic resistance organizations (EROs). These efforts, collectively known as the "Myanmar Spring" or "Spring Revolution," aim to dismantle military control over the country's political sphere.

Military hegemony has persisted in Myanmar in the decades since the country regained its independence in 1948, rendering the country notable for enduring the most prolonged civil war among all nations of the modern world. Unresolved ethnic tensions serve as a primary catalyst for Myanmar's entrenched military dominance and protracted conflicts. These tensions are further intensified by the consistent denial of self-determination and fundamental rights for the country's ethnic groups. Without addressing such ethnic issues, post-junta Myanmar will not be able to establish a stable and peaceful political environment even if it is successful in removing the military from the political landscape.

This research addresses two critical questions: First, how has the 2021 coup impacted the national identity of Myanmar Muslims, and what differences exist between the self-perceptions of Myanmar Muslims and the perceptions held by non-Muslims? Second, considering the current socio-political landscape, what specific steps and initiatives may be necessary to ensure the meaningful political participation of the Myanmar Muslim community in a future federal democratic union of Myanmar?

Researching under triple threat

This investigation into Myanmar Muslim identity and political inclusion is conducted under the severe constraints described in this volume's introduction as the "thrice under fire" (TUF) framework—a set of conditions

uniquely shaping the research process through the convergence of personal risk, community vulnerability, and institutional collapse. As a CDM researcher, my positioning embodies this triple threat: I myself face potential state persecution for political dissidence while studying a Muslim population historically subjected to discrimination and violence, all within a context in which conventional academic infrastructure has disintegrated.

This complex, embodied positioning fundamentally reshapes ethnographic practice for the TUF researcher. Traditional assumptions of stable field sites, researcher distance, and institutional support become untenable. Instead, research requires methodological innovation born of necessity. Security concerns necessitate adaptations like trust-based sampling through resistance networks—access is often granted precisely *because* of shared political commitment and risk. This precarity, however, also yields unique epistemological advantages. For example, my embeddedness generates “situated knowledge,” offering insights derived from lived experience that remain inaccessible to external observers. It also fosters what philosopher Miranda Fricker (1999) terms “epistemic privilege,” arising from a marginalized standpoint.

Consequently, the “epistemic privilege” afforded by this embedded position exists in constant tension with its methodological challenges, such as navigating potential interviewee performativity or guarding against the researcher’s own biases stemming from shared trauma and identity. Shared identity can facilitate trust and candor with participants, but it also necessitates heightened reflexivity regarding potential biases, the interpretation of potentially performative responses shaped by revolutionary solidarity, and the complex power dynamics inherent in researching one’s own community amid conflict. My identity as a Myanmar Muslim CDMer, for instance, is sometimes welcomed as a sign of shared struggle, yet is occasionally met with suspicion, revealing the conditional nature of inclusion narratives even within resistance spaces.

The overlapping identities I have navigated throughout this research process are not merely conceptual but reflect my lived reality since the 2021 coup. I have simultaneously occupied multiple roles during the past three-plus years: CDM academic (37 months), educator in precarious settings (34

months), internally displaced person (eight months), refugee in Thailand (29 months), and researcher (16 months). The timeline below visualizes how these identities have overlapped and evolved throughout the research period, creating a complex positionality that both enables and constrains different aspects of the research process. This layered experience directly shapes the methodological choices and epistemological stance of this research, influencing everything from access to participants to the interpretation of findings.



Figure 1: Timeline of the author's overlapping identities since the 2021 coup
(courtesy of the author)

Furthermore, the systematic collapse of Myanmar's university system—resulting in severed access to libraries, mentorship, and formal peer review—have necessitated reliance on alternative knowledge infrastructures. Practical challenges, such as the lack of electricity, internet, and materials while internally displaced, at one point halted research completely. My role as an academic researcher was only able to restart after I was selected for an online research fellowship in February 2023. The emergence of networks like the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) fellowship program have provided crucial academic support. For me, it was like finding an oasis in the middle of a desert. This fellowship reopened the door to my academic profession, allowing me to deepen my expertise, develop a systematic understanding of research methodology, and conduct research that will benefit not only my academic career but also the future of Myanmar society. Such programs do not merely provide logistical support;

they reconstitute the social and intellectual fabric necessary for scholarly work that has been systematically dismantled by the coup.

These alternative infrastructures, particularly networks like RCSD, proved crucial not only in overcoming logistical hurdles but also in providing the specific peer support and secure communication channels vital for navigating the compounded risks I face as an exiled Muslim academic targeted by the state. These networks, alongside platforms like the Minority Affairs Institute (MAI), which I co-founded in 2021, operate differently, often bypassing traditional gatekeeping, accelerating the link between research and community application. Secure technologies have become critical enablers, though they introduce their own limitations. Consequently, the research findings presented here emerge not despite TUF conditions but are rather intrinsically shaped *by* them—produced through methodological adaptation, grounded in embodied experience, and facilitated by alternative, resilient knowledge networks.

Framing the inclusion challenge

In the post-coup political landscape of Myanmar, nearly all political actors—including, paradoxically, the military junta known as the State Administration Council (SAC)—advocate for a federal democratic union, though with substantially different interpretations and configurations. The SAC has co-opted federalist rhetoric to legitimize its 2021 coup while aiming to preserve military dominance. EROs and major indigenous groups view federalism primarily as a path to the self-determination they have sought since Myanmar's independence in 1948. Meanwhile, the NUG, functioning as the shadow government of the resistance movement, approaches federalism from national and state-level perspectives, seeking to balance national unity with ethnic autonomy.

Although there are varying views and interpretations among different actors, there is a common consensus that perspectives on the principles of federalism in Myanmar primarily align along geographical and indigenous ethnic lines. This focus centers predominantly on Myanmar's eight major indigenous ethnic groups—Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Kayin (Karen), Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine, and Shan—while neglecting the non-dominant

indigenous groups, “minorities within minorities,” citizens of non-indigenous ethnicities, and other ethnoreligious minorities who lack defined territories and are dispersed throughout the country. Excluding such a significant portion of Myanmar’s ethnic minorities from political and socioeconomic life perpetuates a cycle of instability and conflict.

This research proposes that traditional federal arrangements based primarily on territorial divisions may be insufficient for the complex ethnoreligious landscape of Myanmar. Associative democracy, a model developed by political theorist Paul Hirst (1994), offers a complementary governance framework particularly suited to Myanmar’s dispersed minorities. Unlike conventional federalism, which divides power primarily along geographical lines, associative democracy emphasizes group-based representation through autonomous organizations directly involved in governance. For Myanmar Muslims, including other minorities who lack a concentrated territorial base, this approach could provide a political voice through formally recognized representative institutions with defined powers and responsibilities within the broader federal structure.

To address the research questions, this study examines the historical context of Myanmar Muslims’ political marginalization, analyzes shifts in both self-perception and external perception following the 2021 coup, and explores potential frameworks for inclusive governance in Myanmar’s future political landscape.

Methodology under fire

This research employs qualitative and narrative methodologies adapted to the severe constraints of conducting fieldwork in post-coup Myanmar. My approach draws from a range of sources, including Burmese-language media and documents produced by various political bodies (e.g., the Committee Representing *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (CRPH), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), National Unity Government (NUG), and the military junta itself). Historical sections examining previous Myanmar revolutions, political movements, and their interactions with Myanmar Muslim minority communities are informed by published and unpublished memoirs, contemporary newspapers, and diplomatic reports. Additionally, my

extensive involvement in minority rights and federalism training workshops, conducted under the auspices of the MAI throughout Myanmar, particularly following the coup, has contributed valuable insights.

The TUF conditions have necessitated significant methodological adaptations. Documentary data for this research were collected through interviews with a purposively selected sample of 20 participants, all actively involved in the post-coup resistance movement. Participants were selected based on their varied roles within the movement, religious backgrounds, and ethnic identities to ensure diverse perspectives. Half of these participants identify as Muslim, while the other half are non-Muslim, encompassing a range of backgrounds and positions, including CDM participants from the education sector, CDM students, members of parliament, CRPH members, politicians, religious leaders, medical professionals, ethnic minorities, and Muslim members of the PDF.

The psychological and relational dimensions of this research methodology warrant acknowledgment. Dynamics between myself and the research participants required careful navigation. My position as a university CDM participant and minority rights defender helped me to establish trust with interviewees, while simultaneously introducing complex power dynamics that required continuous reflexive attention. These dynamics were further complicated by how interviewees perceived my identity and research intentions. While conducting interviews, I observed that individuals' responses often reflected established positions and framings within the resistance movement rather than interviewees' deeper personal convictions about minority inclusion. Some interviewees openly remarked or appeared to assume that I favor Muslim affairs under the "mask of the Myanmar Spring," creating a tension between revolutionary solidarity and suspicion. This perception led to additional complexities—my identity as a Myanmar Muslim researcher created openings through shared experience, but also necessitated heightened awareness of potential response bias. Interviewees' awareness of my multiple and intersecting identities—as an academic, a CDMer, an activist, and a member of a marginalized community—influenced how they framed their narratives, sometimes emphasizing inclusivity principles that aligned with revolutionary rhetoric rather than longstanding personal commitments.

Gaining access to participants was possible largely due to my position within resistance networks—a direct example of how researcher positionality in this context both constrains and enables particular research pathways. Trust-based sampling became essential, as conventional random selection methods would have been impractical and potentially dangerous. The collapse of academic infrastructure in Myanmar following the coup meant that conventional resources, databases, and scholarly networks were largely inaccessible. Instead, this research relies heavily on alternative knowledge networks formed within CDM communities, particularly those developed through the RCSD fellowship program.

Myanmar's ethnic diversity

Myanmar is one of the world's most ethnically and culturally diverse countries. Ethnicity is a complex, contested, and politically sensitive issue, and successive governments have manipulated ethnic matters for political purposes (International Crisis Group, 2014). According to United Nations sources, the country's total population in 2023 was 55 million people (UN World Population Prospects, 2023). Population statistics in Myanmar are highly disputed, with no reliable data available for the period between the time the last colonial-era census was conducted in 1931 (Smith, 1994) and the most recent census of 2014. Officially, there are said to be 135 indigenous ethnic groups (referred to officially as 135 “National Races”), but no reliable data or definitive list of groups has been produced (Smith, 1994), making this figure controversial. In 1973, under the leadership of General Ne Win, the junta officially recognized 144 national ethnic indigenous groups (Botathaung Dailies, 1973). The apparent reduction from 144 to 135 national races suggests only nine ethnic groups were removed. However, detailed comparative analysis reveals far more extensive manipulation: 126 actual changes were made to ethnic categories, including both removals and additions. This significant reconfiguration demonstrates how ethnic classifications have been manipulated for political purposes by successive regimes.

Since the 2014 census, no official announcement regarding the number of ethnic groups has been issued. The ethnicity question was “one of the most controversial elements in the 2014 census,” according to U Thein Swe,

labor minister of the NLD government (The Irrawaddy, 2018). Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2015) highlights that the 2014 census identified over 900 distinct ethnic groups across the country, although only 135 are officially recognized. This discrepancy highlights Myanmar's complex ethnic landscape and the politically influenced classification systems established by previous administrations.

Muslim communities in Myanmar

Israeli scholar Moshe Yegar (2002) has extensively documented the historical presence of Muslims in Myanmar, tracing their roots as early as the eleventh century. Evidence indicates that Muslim soldiers of Arab and Persian descent served under King Anawrahta of the Bagan Kingdom (Maung Maung Gyi, 1991). Over subsequent centuries, the Muslim community has demonstrated a strong allegiance to Myanmar. Indigenous Muslims were historically recognized as ethnic national groups and were appointed to prominent governmental roles by both Myanmar and Rakhine monarchs.

During the Burmese royal era, the designation "Pathi" was used officially to refer to Myanmar Muslims (Myint Thein, 2012). The first national census, conducted under British colonial rule in 1891, introduced the term "Zerbadee" to classify Myanmar Muslims, encompassing both native-born Muslims and those of mixed Indian Muslim and Burmese heritage. This term was later replaced by "Myanmar Muslim Ethnicity" following advocacy for official recognition, with the government instituting this change in 1941.

Myanmar's first post-independence census in 1973 officially recognized several Muslim groups as indigenous ethnicities. These included four distinct Muslim communities: Rakhine-Chittagong, Myanmar Muslim, Rakhine-Kaman, and Myedu. The census also recognized various Myanmar-Indian groups, Myanmar-Chinese, and Panthay (Myanmar-Chinese Muslims). However, under General Ne Win's dictatorship, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) excluded all ethnic races who professed Islamic faith, except Rakhine-Kaman, by proclaiming the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law. Under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), established in the late 1980s, the regime began to mention only 135 officially recognized ethnic groups (Working People's Daily, September 26, 1990).

In Myanmar, there are four main groups of Muslims: Myanmar (Burmese) Muslims (including Kaman, Myedu, Pathi, Burmese-Indian Muslims, and Burmese-Chinese/Panthay); Muslims of Indian descent born in Myanmar to two Indian parents; Zerbadees (offspring of mixed marriages between Indian Muslim fathers and Burmese mothers); and the Rohingya. Official government data suggests that Myanmar Muslims constitute approximately four percent of the population, while some scholars and Muslim community organizations have estimated a significantly higher figure of around 13 percent (Khin Maung Yin, 2005). This substantial discrepancy reflects historical under-counting, exclusion of certain Muslim communities from official statistics, methodological differences in population estimates, and the political sensitivity surrounding religious demographics. A Muslim population size of more than 10 percent of Myanmar's total would exceed that of several major official ethnic groups, such as Shan (nine percent), Karen (seven percent), Rakhine (four percent), and Mon (two percent).

This research focuses specifically on the first three groups comprising the Muslim population in Myanmar, excluding the Rohingya community. This methodological decision is based on interviews with Rohingya community members, including prominent activist Ro Nay San Lwin, who emphasized that Rohingya perceive themselves as having a distinct ethnic identity separate from other Muslim communities in Myanmar. Additionally, the Rohingya differ in several significant ways: they are geographically concentrated in specific townships rather than dispersed throughout the country; their identity has historical ties to a specific territory of western Myanmar; and while predominantly Muslim, Rohingya identity encompasses religious diversity, including Christianity and Hinduism. These distinct characteristics justify examining Rohingya political inclusion as a separate, albeit critically important, research question beyond the scope of this chapter.

Identity politics and terminology

The terminology used to describe Muslims in Myanmar has evolved historically and carries political significance. Under British colonial rule, the term “Zerbadee” classified Muslims of mixed heritage. After independence, “Burmese Muslim” (later “Myanmar Muslim” following the country's name

change) became the preferred self-identification for many Muslims who considered themselves indigenous. The derogatory term “Kala Muslim” combines the often pejorative word “Kala” (historically used for Indians) with religious identification, emphasizing perceived foreignness.

The categorization of “Myanmar Muslim” identity presents a conceptual tension in Myanmar’s ethnic politics. Historically, Myanmar Muslims were officially recognized as an ethnic group distinct from other Muslim communities, as evidenced by the 1941 colonial declaration and their inclusion in the 1973 census of indigenous ethnic groups. However, successive governments have increasingly reclassified this identity primarily as a religious designation rather than an ethnic one. This reclassification has significant political implications, as Myanmar’s governance frameworks afford specific rights and recognition to indigenous ethnic groups (*Tainyinthar*) that are not extended to religious minorities. Myanmar Muslims themselves generally maintain that their identity encompasses both religious and ethnic dimensions—they are Muslims by faith but also constitute a distinct ethnic community with historical roots in the country.

Patterns of discrimination

Research participant Ko Phyu (a pseudonym used for security reasons) underscores the SLORC’s clear policy of discrimination against Myanmar Muslims in military service. Ko Phyu and his family are Muslim, and his father, who began serving as a warrant officer in the Myanmar army in 1961, had an exemplary service record. When attempting to arrange for his sons to join the army in 1993, he learned they were denied entry based solely on their Muslim identity. The recruitment officers explained they were following a verbal order from General Khin Nyunt, Secretary-1 of the SLORC. This directive explicitly banned Myanmar Muslims from serving in the national military. The stated goal was to create a Muslim-free army once all existing Muslim personnel retired. Additionally, Myanmar Muslims were informally barred from appointments in key civil governmental departments such as the General Administration Department, Immigration Department, Foreign Affairs Department, and other policy-related sectors.

Beginning with the country's period of nascent democratization, and particularly after the 2012 by-election, there has been an escalation in policies of alienation and discrimination against both the Myanmar Muslim community and the Rohingya community. A notable instance of this alienation occurred in the state-run newspaper *Myanmar Alin* on June 6, 2012, which referred to 10 murdered Myanmar Muslim pilgrims as "Muslim Kala" rather than "Myanmar Muslim." Despite modification of the term in a subsequent issue to "*pyi-twin-ne Islam*" (members of Islam who reside locally), the government did not apologize for the initial terminology, failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of Myanmar Muslim citizenship and national ethnic identity.

The concept of a secular state poses significant challenges that directly affect the political participation and social inclusion of Myanmar Muslims in any emerging federal democratic framework. This situation was highlighted following the emergence of the anti-Muslim 969 campaigns in 2012 and the formation of *Ma-Ba-Tha* (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) in 2014, playing direct roles in socioeconomic discrimination and indirect roles in anti-Muslim violence (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2015). In December 2014, the Myanmar parliament, dominated by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), approved a package of four laws informally known as the "Race and Religious Protection Laws" and perceived by the international community as discriminatory legislation specifically targeting Muslim and Rohingya communities. The structural violations, alienation, and discrimination against Myanmar Muslims represented an unprecedented acceleration of abuse. The perception of non-Muslims regarding Myanmar Muslims' national identity, including that of the Rohingya, was deeply negative prior to the coup of 2021.

Researching shifting perceptions under fire

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has had a notable impact on the identity of Myanmar Muslim communities. This research indicates significant changes in how non-Muslim communities perceive Myanmar Muslims' identity following the coup, as evidenced by interview data from diverse participants. Notably, the perceptions of non-Muslim ethnic groups, including the Bamar

majority, towards Myanmar Muslims have shown evidence of positive shifts. U Myo Kyaw (personal communication, December 14, 2023), General Secretary of the Arakan League for Democracy, observes that:

During the current period of the Myanmar Spring Revolution, resentment towards the Myanmar Muslim identity has significantly diminished. This change is not limited to the Myanmar Muslim community but extends to other ethnic and religious groups, signaling a growing sense of solidarity regardless of ethnic or religious affiliations. Within the Rakhine community, while traces of resentment against the Muslim community persist, there is a noticeable and gradual decline in such sentiments. The Myanmar Muslim community needs to attain sufficient political power in the future to safeguard their identity and advocate for their political, economic, and social rights.

It is important to acknowledge that these perception shifts, while significant, must be approached with critical caution. The positive attitudinal changes expressed by non-Muslim interviewees toward Myanmar Muslim identity may be partially shaped by their roles and positions within the revolution against the military coup. Their articulation of democratic norms and inclusivity principles sometimes appear to align more with prevailing revolutionary rhetoric than with deeply held ideological commitments. This observation contextualizes the shifts within the complex landscape of revolutionary politics, where solidarity may emerge from strategic necessity as much as from transformative understanding.

The self-perception of the Myanmar Muslim community remains deeply rooted in loyalty and a sense of belonging to Myanmar despite a history of systemic discrimination. U Tun Kyi (personal communication, December 18, 2023), a prominent former political prisoner and central executive committee member of the Spring Revolution Myanmar Muslim Network (SRMMN) and the Spring Revolution Inter-Religious Network (SRIRN), articulates this perspective:

According to Islamic teachings, loyalty to one's country is an essential characteristic of being a Muslim. We acknowledge the bitter experiences of exclusion, alienation, and humiliation inflicted by successive governments and societal majorities. We, Myanmar Muslims, have never abandoned our sense of belonging to our homeland of Myanmar. I would like to highlight the consistent participation of the Muslim community in pivotal national struggles, from the fight for independence to the ongoing Myanmar Spring Revolution, as evidence of our firm commitment to the country. Importantly, the perception of our Myanmar Muslim identity remains unchanged, as our continued involvement in the revolution reflects our dedication to both the country's future and the preservation of our identity.

Challenges to sustained change

Recent events highlight the fragile nature of post-coup perception shifts. Following the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027, initiated in October 2023, the Arakan Army (AA) gained control over most parts of northern Rakhine State. In May 2024, after the AA captured Buthidaung Township, reports emerged of Rohingya homes being burned and approximately 100 Rohingya civilians killed. Blue Shirt Initiative (2024) conducted a survey analyzing public responses on social media, revealing widespread Islamophobic sentiment despite earlier signs of improved interethnic relations.

Many Rohingyas assert an ethnic identity distinct from other Myanmar Muslims. Nevertheless, they often face similar patterns of discrimination due to their shared Islamic faith, which demonstrates how religious identity can override ethnic distinctions in patterns of marginalization. The resurgence of Islamophobia, particularly after the AA gained control over Buthidaung Township in May 2024, underscores the fragile nature of solidarity formed during the early stages of the coup and highlights the temporary nature of the majority's recognition of marginalized ethnic minorities.

Drawing on these experiences, most non-Muslim research participants involved in the ongoing Spring Revolution indicate that their perceptions of Myanmar Muslims have shifted positively and expressed support for

their political inclusion in a future democratic Myanmar. This documented positive shift presents an opportunity to establish firm constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks as a critical foundation for the political inclusion of Myanmar Muslims in the country's future.

Historical context of exclusion

From Myanmar's struggle for independence to the current ongoing revolution, the Myanmar Muslim community has continuously been actively involved. However, in post-independence Myanmar, they have been systematically excluded from receiving political, economic, and social rights. As noted, this situation intensified after the 2012 by-elections, leading to political marginalization and alienation coupled with a series of systemic sectarian conflicts. Under the semi-civilian NLD-led government (2011-2021), Myanmar's parliament notably lacked any members representing the Myanmar Muslim community (Human Rights Watch, 2016), the first time in Myanmar's parliamentary history of having no Muslim representation since independence.

In a democratic society, disregarding and excluding a significant portion of the population inevitably jeopardizes social harmony. Robert A. Dahl (2015) argues that democratic governance requires the participation of all significant sectors of the population to maintain legitimacy and stability. Myanmar's current situation starkly contradicts the fundamental values and principles of a federal democracy and undermines the ultimate objective of the Spring Revolution.

Key challenges to inclusion

In Myanmar's post-coup future, the meaningful political participation of Myanmar Muslims in an emerging federal democratic system faces three deeply rooted challenges:

1. Identity perception: Perceptions among the majority and non-Muslim populations regarding the identity of Myanmar's Muslims are unstable.
2. Secular state tensions: The classification of "Myanmar Muslim" as an ethnic identity rather than solely a religious designation remains both controversial and complex.

3. Limitations of federalism: The framework of federalism tends to prioritize the country's eight dominant ethnic groups, overlooking minorities within minorities, non-Tainyinthar groups, and those dispersed across the country without a clearly defined territory.

Challenge 1: Identity perception

In the initial stages following the 2021 coup, there were notable indications of increased recognition and support for minorities, including the Rohingya, by segments of the majority population. Early anti-military dictatorship movements revealed signs of solidarity, as members of the Bamar majority publicly expressed support for ethnic minorities and acknowledged their right to self-determination within the broader framework of opposing military rule. However, historical patterns reveal that such recognition is rarely sustained beyond the immediate context of collective struggle. While these developments represent a significant shift in attitudes, they should be interpreted as temporary rather than indicative of enduring guarantees. Social analyses suggest that periods of collective resistance often generate transient solidarity among diverse groups, as shared opposition to oppressive regimes momentarily bridges entrenched divisions.

The literature consistently highlights that the absence of constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks poses significant challenges to the protection and promotion of minority rights. Will Kymlicka (1995) emphasizes that minorities without explicit legal protections are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and access to public services. This systemic discrimination often entrenches socio-economic inequalities, further marginalizing these communities. As Arend Lijphart (2008) argues, political underrepresentation fosters feelings of alienation and can contribute to political instability, undermining the broader goals of democratic governance.

Challenge 2: Secular state tensions

The political participation and social inclusion of Myanmar Muslims in an emerging federal democratic framework are complexly linked to the challenges posed by the concept of a secular state. In a deeply divided society

such as Myanmar's, where religion and ethnicity are politically charged, the application of secular principles requires careful balancing to prevent further marginalization of minority groups.

Although there has been a significant shift in non-Muslims' perceptions toward Myanmar Muslim identity during the post-coup period, evidence suggests the persistent exclusion of Myanmar Muslims from representation in revolutionary-affiliated institutions. During the current Spring Revolution, several Myanmar Muslim revolutionary organizations have emerged, including the SRMMN, the Muslims of Myanmar Multi-Ethnic Consultative Committee (MMMCC), and the Myanmar Muslim Revolutionary Force (MMRF). However, these groups' proposals for inclusion in the NUCC have been rejected primarily because the Myanmar Muslim identity is associated with religious affiliation and perceived as incompatible with the principle of a secular state as articulated in the Federal Democracy Charter. This rejection underscores the political ramifications of classifying Myanmar Muslims primarily by religious affiliation—despite historical precedents recognizing “Myanmar Muslim” as an ethnic identity—effectively excluding the community from frameworks designed for ethnic representation within a nominally secular state.

From a historical perspective, there is substantial evidence of recognition of Myanmar Muslims as an ethnic minority rather than merely a religious one. The British Colonial Government's Declaration No. 1112 (1941) officially acknowledged Myanmar Muslims as an ethnic group. This view was later reaffirmed by the 1973 national census, which included Myanmar Muslims in the official list of national ethnic groups (*Tainyinthar*). Given these historical precedents, the Myanmar Muslim community should be formally recognized as an ethnic minority, rather than being categorized solely as a religious group.

To address these challenges, several critical measures are necessary: recognizing Myanmar Muslims as an ethnic minority based on historical evidence; establishing a robust constitutional framework to explicitly protect minority rights; supporting this with comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation; and implementing education and awareness initiatives, including interfaith dialogues, to promote social cohesion and community resilience.

Challenge 3: Limitations of federalism

The prevailing emphasis on the eight dominant ethnic groups by the key policy actors of NUG, CRPH, NUCC, EROs, and others involved in the ongoing Spring Revolution in terms of political discourse and representation in the reimagined federal union of Myanmar tends to marginalize other ethnic minority groups without defined territories of their own. The traditional federal model, focused on territorial autonomy and ethno-national considerations, is inadequate for addressing Myanmar's complex socio-political realities. Specifically, such an approach fails to ensure the political inclusion and self-determination of the Myanmar Muslim community.

Myanmar Muslim communities do not possess defined territories and are dispersed throughout the country, posing potential challenges in a future federal state. This contrasts with approaches in some other diverse states where non-territorial mechanisms have been developed to ensure representation for geographically dispersed religious or cultural communities. Therefore, Myanmar's future political framework must transcend traditional federal principles and incorporate specific initiatives to ensure the political representation of minorities lacking their own designated territories, such as the Myanmar Muslim community.

The geographically dispersed nature of the Myanmar Muslim community presents challenges for their inclusion in territorially based power-sharing systems, as traditional federal models rely on geographically defined units to allocate autonomy and representation. This approach inherently excludes dispersed groups that lack a concentrated territorial base. Historically, this has resulted in political exclusion of such groups due to the absence of institutional mechanisms tailored to their unique circumstances (Lijphart, 1999).

Innovative associative democracy model

Given the findings that post-coup solidarity remains fragile and that traditional territorial federalism inadequately addresses the representation needs of dispersed communities like Myanmar Muslims, alternative and adaptive governance frameworks become necessary. Therefore, the innovative model of associative democracy, as conceptualized by Hirst (1994), advocates

for non-territorial, group-based representation. This model operates through autonomous organizations directly involved in political decision-making. Unlike traditional federal models that distribute power primarily along geographical lines, associative democracy emphasizes governance through voluntary, self-governing associations that represent specific identity groups, a principle applied in various forms internationally to accommodate dispersed ethnic or religious minorities within larger state structures.

In practice, this model would involve the formal recognition of Myanmar Muslim representative organizations, granting them defined powers and responsibilities. Furthermore, it would necessitate proportional representation mechanisms to ensure Myanmar Muslims have a voice in national and regional governance structures. Complementing this, constitutional protections guaranteeing minority rights regardless of territorial concentration would be essential, alongside institutional frameworks enabling Myanmar Muslim communities, as well as other non-territorial-based minorities, to maintain cultural autonomy while participating effectively in broader governance.

As a researcher who has directly experienced the failure of existing institutional arrangements to protect minority rights, I approach associative democracy not merely as an abstract theoretical model but as a potential solution to concrete problems faced by my own community and others. Researching alternative governance models within the TUF context has required methodological creativity. Traditional academic resources on constitutional design are largely inaccessible due to the collapse of university infrastructure, requiring me to draw on networks of legal scholars operating underground, digital archives accessed through secure channels, and comparative case studies shared through resistance networks. The TUF conditions have given urgency to this research.

Implementation examples

Saw Ba Oo Lay (personal communication, June 29, 2024), a lawyer and former director-general of the Department of Transitional Justice at the Ministry of Justice under the NUG, identified elements in Myanmar's 2008 Constitution that could inform future federal arrangements while emphasizing a crucial distinction: "There are some positive articles in the 2008 Constitution," he

notes, “However, this does not imply that I recommend its re-adoption or application in future Myanmar politics.” He specifically highlights provisions designed to address representation for displaced ethnic groups: “The [former General] Than Shwe-led junta included provisions to address the political representation of ethnic groups who had left their traditional homelands to reside in major cities like Yangon or Mandalay.” This approach, he suggests, offers a potential model for non-territorial minorities like Myanmar Muslims. He pointed to Article 319(c) of the 2008 Constitution as a specific example which “allows ethnic groups to secure representation in state or regional parliaments if their population meets a legally defined threshold, irrespective of their current location.”

Comparative case studies provide insights into how similar challenges have been addressed elsewhere. Belgium’s governance model enables distinct linguistic and cultural communities to self-manage their affairs, independent of geographic constraints (Swenden, 2006). Similarly, associative democracy frameworks (or elements thereof) in India and Lebanon have facilitated the representation of dispersed religious minorities, including significant Muslim populations, through institutional guarantees and proportional representation mechanisms (Lijphart, 1977).

Implementing associative democracy in Myanmar would face several challenges: determining legitimate representation for diverse Myanmar Muslim communities; balancing associative structures with territorial governance; defining the scope of authority for minority representative bodies; and establishing constitutional safeguards to prevent majoritarianism. However, comparative experiences demonstrate that such arrangements, while complex, can enhance stability and inclusion in deeply divided societies.

Research findings and implications

This research, conducted under TUF conditions, represents more than an academic investigation—it constitutes an act of resistance and documentation. The methodological adaptations necessitated by these conditions have yielded insights that might have remained invisible through conventional research approaches.

Addressing the first research question, the findings reveal that while Myanmar Muslims' self-perception as integral members of Myanmar society has remained largely unchanged, non-Muslim perceptions have shifted positively since the 2021 coup, creating potential opportunities for greater political inclusion. This transformation stems primarily from shared experiences of military repression affecting both the Bamar majority and minority communities, coupled with the visible participation of Myanmar Muslims in resistance efforts. Interviewees from diverse backgrounds consistently highlight the noticeable positive shift in the majority's perception of Myanmar Muslims' identity and their prospective political role. However, they caution that without formidable constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks ensuring sustained political participation, this positive shift could easily be reversed once the situation stabilizes.

Regarding the second research question regarding necessary steps for political inclusion, the research identifies three requirements: first, formalizing recognition of Myanmar Muslims as an ethnic minority based on historical precedent; second, establishing constitutional and legal frameworks that explicitly protect minority rights; and third, implementing an associative democracy model to complement traditional federal structures.

In a future federal democratic union of Myanmar, it will be necessary to create a political framework that guarantees equal and meaningful representation for all citizens, irrespective of their status as indigenous or non-indigenous ethnic minorities. The associative democracy model can be viewed as a feasible approach for Myanmar's deeply divided and pluralist society and its future political reorganization as a federal democratic union.

Conclusion: Knowledge production under siege

The 2021 coup has had profound implications for the perceptions of non-Muslim majorities and minorities regarding the national identity of Myanmar Muslims. Such views have shifted positively among non-Muslim members of the resistance and the general population. However, this evolving trend does not guarantee the future political inclusion of Myanmar Muslim communities. The country's future political framework must transcend traditional federal principles and incorporate specific initiatives to ensure the

political representation of minorities lacking their own designated territories, such as Myanmar Muslims.

Looking beyond the immediate findings of this research, this work represents a foundation for continued engagement with Myanmar's complex ethnoreligious landscape. Through the MAI, which I helped establish, I aim to extend this research into several practical initiatives: conducting workshops for policy stakeholders, publishing accessible versions of the research findings in multiple languages (including Myanmar, English, and relevant ethnic languages), and developing educational programs to raise awareness about minority inclusion. Specifically, I plan to organize a series of seminars focused on implementing associative democracy principles within Myanmar's federal framework, targeting policymakers and community leaders. Additionally, MAI will produce briefing papers tailored for different audiences—from academic to public-facing documents—to maximize the research impact across diverse sectors of society. These efforts represent the continuation of knowledge production under siege: transforming research conducted amid extreme constraints into resources for community resilience and policy advocacy. While these initiatives may encounter resistance from conservatives and nationalists within both revolutionary forces and junta-aligned groups, they are essential for addressing the root causes of Myanmar's political crisis.

The experience of conducting this research within the TUF framework has both practical and theoretical implications that extend beyond Myanmar's specific context. Methodologically, it demonstrates how scholars operating under extreme constraints can develop innovative approaches to gathering, analyzing, and disseminating politically sensitive information. Ethically, it highlights the complex interplay between researcher safety, community protection, and the imperative to document events that powerful actors may prefer to obscure. Theoretically, it suggests that knowledge produced under conditions of shared vulnerability may offer unique insights into processes of identity formation, intergroup relations, and institutional design that are less visible to researchers operating from positions of relative security and institutional stability.

By integrating personal experience with scholarly analysis, this chapter contributes not only to our understanding of Myanmar Muslim identity and political inclusion but also to broader conversations about how meaningful research can be conducted even in the absence of traditional academic infrastructure. In doing so, it affirms that knowledge production itself can be an act of resistance by members of historically oppressed groups against forces that seek to control narratives through intimidation and erasure.

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PART III:

IN THE WAR ZONE

When I hear the sound of a gun, I wrap my clothes
and medicines. We have food prepared so we can run
away quickly. I made preparations in advance.

—A woman from Sagaing, speaking to Lwin

Chapter 8

**Through the Firestorm:
Women's Leadership and Moral Authority
in Myanmar's Besieged Heartland**

Aye Mya

Abstract

This research, conducted under “thrice under fire” (TUF) conditions, examines how, after being fired from their jobs, female teachers involved with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have transformed leadership roles in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar's Sagaing Region following the 2021 military coup. Through narrative research with eight female CDM teachers (as well as two male teachers providing context), this study documents how these women use democratic and adaptive leadership strategies to address both livelihood and security challenges in their communities during the ongoing civil war. The findings reveal a distinctive transformation in gendered moral authority in which women's leadership legitimacy derives from both their principled resistance and innovative crisis management approaches. The researcher conducted fieldwork while simultaneously evading state persecution; the vulnerabilities shared with participants enable documentation of leadership dimensions that would likely remain invisible to external observers, embodying “experiential validity.” This research contributes empirical knowledge about women's leadership during Myanmar's Spring Revolution while advancing theoretical understanding of how knowledge

production persists even when targeted for erasure by authoritarian forces, demonstrating how women's agency can emerge precisely because of—rather than despite—conditions of extreme constraint.

Keywords: CDM women, women leadership, leadership style, resilient capacity, crisis, moral authority, gender, thrice under fire, Sagaing

Editorial note: *Aye Mya relocated abroad during the period of her RCSD fellowship and finalized this chapter there.*

Introduction

This study of emerging forms of female leadership arises in a context characterized by the “thrice under fire” (TUF) condition as described in this volume’s introduction. As both an educator and researcher participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), my dual positionality has shaped every step of this study. Navigation of my insider status has meant constantly balancing political commitment with analytical clarity, heightening issues of both trust and risk. The collapse of conventional researcher-participant boundaries allows me to document ways in which women’s leadership emerges and functions during crises that might remain invisible to external observers. This chapter thus demonstrates not only how women lead during times of conflict, but how knowledge about leadership can be produced precisely because of, rather than despite, conditions of extreme constraint—a form of “solidarity knowledge” arising from shared risk.

Moreover, in research, gender structures how risks manifest. For female researchers, persecution is intensified by gender-specific threats, including surveillance and harassment, and compounded by gender-specific violence and the forced abandonment of caregiving roles. Similarly, females often navigate moral and practical responsibilities within their communities that are inflected by deeply rooted gender norms. This study thus positions gender not as a secondary analytical category, but as a constitutive element of the crises, vulnerabilities, and leadership transformations it documents, showing how the triple-threat framework specifically reshapes gendered roles and authority.

Myanmar has experienced three military coups in its contemporary history: the first in 1962, the second in 1988, and the third in 2021 resulting in the ongoing Spring Revolution. Decades of military dictatorship have led to declining socioeconomic conditions, with military figures and their associates profiting at the expense of farmers and other grassroots populations, resulting in underdeveloped education, economic, and social structures. Civil servants began protesting military rule following the 1988 coup, resulting in some being arrested. Since that time, civil servants have periodically protested successive military regimes in Myanmar (Egretreau, 2015).

On February 1, 2021, the military staged its most recent coup, seizing power based on unsubstantiated allegations of fraud in the 2020 election. Replacement of the popularly elected, civilian-led government with the State Administration Council (SAC), comprised entirely of unelected military insiders, triggered the Spring Revolution, a powerful nationwide non-violent grassroots movement involving widespread protests by members of the public and former civil servants. A significant percentage of the country's civil servants have joined the CDM, refusing to continue working under the military regime. Informed by greater access to information and technology, youth have expressed their opposition to military rule through literature, poetry, music, and lectures, making this revolution arguably the most potent resistance against military dictatorship in Myanmar's history. The CDM has severely hampered the regime, with estimates suggesting nearly 75 percent of civil service personnel from key ministries have joined the strike (Winn Byrd, 2021).

Initially, anti-military protests were widespread and peaceful. However, the authorities' response soon escalated with the use of lethal violence against demonstrators, including sniper fire (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The SAC junta applied the "four cuts" counterinsurgency strategy¹ against urban civilian populations, extending the civil war from border areas into previously conflict-free central regions like Sagaing and Magway (The Irrawaddy, October 22, 2022).

By mid-2021, thousands of civilians had been killed, and many more were subjected to brutal imprisonment and torture. Consequently, many young people joined newly formed People's Defense Force (PDF) units, aligning with established ethnic armed organizations and radically altering conflict dynamics (Hedström et al., 2025). The relentless oppression against peaceful protesters thus transformed the movement from one of non-violent resistance into an armed revolution, leading to intense conflict.

1 The "four cuts" strategy (*hpyat lei ba*) is a counterinsurgency doctrine the Myanmar military developed in the late 1960s focused on cutting off or denying an insurgency's access to four essential resources: food, funds, information, and recruits. The strategy was originally implemented against the Communist Party of Burma and ethnic resistance organizations, and has been repeatedly deployed by the Myanmar military in the country's ethnic borderlands since the 1970s.

Gender, activism, and the CDM

Prior to the 2021 coup, civil servants from diverse departments, including education, health, energy, and the railways, were central pillars supporting the government apparatus. Their widespread participation in the CDM campaign drastically impacted state functions, nearly halting government operations. Women have played a leading role in organizing and sustaining the CDM, which quickly gained international recognition, including a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. According to the Women's League of Burma (2021), approximately 60 percent of protesters active during the Spring Revolution are women (Orgard, 2023). The CDM has significantly hindered the military regime's ability to consolidate control over the country and its population. Notably, nearly 20,000 university faculty and administrators across the country joined the CDM, with women comprising at least three-quarters of this group. Furthermore, over a quarter of primary education teachers have joined the CDM, and nearly 90 percent of these teachers are women. Despite facing constant fear of arrest and significant financial loss, CDM participants have remained committed to the strike, refusing to return to work until democracy is restored in Myanmar (Winn Byrd, 2021).

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, periods of military rule have often relegated women to the sidelines, particularly given the Myanmar military's highly chauvinistic organizational culture. The military's top-down structure has served to reinforce concepts of male superiority and discourage women's political participation. While women in Myanmar historically enjoyed considerable agency and rights compared to those in neighboring societies like China and India (Than, 2013), their roles became constricted over time, especially under successive military regimes after the first coup in 1962. These regimes employed isolationist policies, controlling the population by cutting off the country from the outside world and deliberately weakening public education and health systems. They suppressed civil society and employed state-sanctioned violence against dissenters (Winn Byrd, 2021).

Following the political transition that began after the 2010 election, women in Myanmar gained more opportunities for political participation as the country opened up. Exposure to international engagement introduced new ideas about gender equality, feminism, and human rights, raising

awareness about women's empowerment and capacity-building (Winn Byrd, 2021). Research suggests that increased exposure to, and familiarity with, female leaders can lessen prejudice over time and positively impact young women's aspirations (Duflo, 2008).

Armed conflict typically disrupts economic, social, and political structures, negatively affecting both women and men through loss of resources, trauma, violence, and displacement (Wan, 2021). Conflict often shifts gender roles and responsibilities, frequently resulting in more women becoming heads of households (El Jack et al., 2003). These changing dynamics mean that the loss of household and community support previously provided by husbands and local networks disproportionately burdens internally displaced women, who often manage household livelihoods and family responsibilities in displacement settings. Despite these challenges, the participation of women in education, policy, and business has increased significantly in recent decades, highlighting their contributions to modern society.

Traditionally, many women, particularly in rural areas, adhered to societal expectations and did not often openly oppose governmental authority, even when faced with injustice within organizational hierarchies. Concerns about job loss, salary cuts, and demotions often discouraged dissent. However, the 2021 Spring Revolution saw a marked shift, with women in many rural



Figure 1: A women's strike against the military regime, led by CDM women

areas participating actively in protests against the military regime, sometimes even challenging local conservative figures (participant observation and interviews, 2023).

Basic education teachers, who form a large percentage of CDM participants, face particular difficulties as many come from rural, grassroots backgrounds. Sagaing Region accounts for a significant portion of these teachers, with an estimated 50,000 out of 213,400 basic education CDM participants nationwide living in this region, of which around 80 percent are women (Myanmar Teachers Federation, 2023). In the specific research area for this study, 90 percent of the interviewed teachers involved with the CDM were women (interview data, 2023).

The psychological toll of war—grief, trauma, despair—surfaced in nearly every conversation that contributed to this study. Yet despite these emotional burdens, participants also expressed resolve, underscoring the deep moral courage that sustains resistance. This study further reveals how female CDM participants confront crises and threats on the ground, manage daily challenges, and lead community efforts against the military regime in the Shwebo region of Sagaing. In this rural area, CDM teachers face heightened difficulties due to military oppression affecting their livelihoods and security, exacerbated by measures like enforcement of martial law and the military conscription law. This research explores how these women navigate immense suffering, manage livelihood and security needs, employ distinct leadership styles, and assert moral authority during the current crisis. It analyzes the role of women's leadership and how different leadership styles present both advantages and disadvantages in the struggle against military dictatorship, providing insights into how social structures adapt under the extreme pressures of the TUF condition.

Embodying thrice under fire

Coming from a conventional academic background, my shift to conducting narrative and ethnographic research under siege has been more than a methodological change. “Being TUF” refers to the dangers tied to my CDM status, the perilous conditions of my field site, and the volatile national political climate. This triple bind has forced me to rethink research itself.

During online interviews, respondents often encountered imminent threats from approaching military forces, compelling them to flee and delete communication records to avoid detection. These have become shared survival strategies rather than mere methodological workarounds. Many communities experience power and internet outages and are frequently besieged by military convoys. When residents need internet access, they must travel to locations with Wi-Fi. Consequently, during interviews, if respondents received text messages warning of approaching military convoys, we had to halt immediately and delete instant messaging applications, as soldiers inspect phones and apprehend individuals if these apps are discovered.

As a CDM researcher, I experienced persecution as a political dissident while studying communities under military attack, all within an environment where I lost my job and all academic support inside the country. This triple vulnerability shapes my methodology, ethics, and analysis, offering an unusual vantage point. My position as a researcher is complicated by my identity as a CDM participant: this dual role requires me to balance my commitment to the movement with the need to conduct rigorous research while also navigating the ethical and methodological complexities inherent in studying a community to which I belong and with which I share a common cause.

My position as an educator who has refused to continue working in the state education system under the military regime places me in direct opposition to state power. Like my research participants, I face arrest, property confiscation, and violence. This shared vulnerability has influenced my research approach, creating both methodological challenges and unique opportunities for insight. It embodies the collapse of the boundary between researcher and the researched. While my insider status as a native of Sagaing Region facilitates trust and access to respondents who might otherwise remain silent, it simultaneously heightens my personal risk as I document resistance activities deemed illegal by the regime. This positionality mirrors the “existential shock” described by Nordstrom and Robben (1996, p. 13), but extends it, as per the TUF framework, into a persistent condition defined by shared political persecution alongside the communities studied. This research makes no claim to neutrality. My standpoint is rooted in solidarity, not detachment—grounded in shared survival, rather than observation from afar.

The communities I study in Sagaing Region experience relentless violence, including village burnings, arbitrary detentions, and airstrikes. As one participant (personal communication, 2023) shares, “My elder brother died from the [military’s] missiles while he was just working in the house.” Such a precarious field context has required constant adaptation of research techniques, with interviews frequently interrupted as respondents were forced to flee approaching military forces or delete potentially incriminating communications to avoid detection, reflecting the “everydayness of war” (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, p. 3).

Finally, the collapse of Myanmar’s academic infrastructure following the coup—with universities shuttered, academic freedom criminalized, and internet access restricted—creates challenges for knowledge production itself. The necessity of protecting participants forces the adoption of remote data gathering techniques and participatory research methodologies. This research has proceeded without institutional protections, utilizing fragmented and tenuous networks that remain vulnerable to surveillance. As a researcher, I must navigate technological obstacles, including disrupted electricity, internet blackouts, and compromised communication channels, often requiring participants to travel to internet-accessible sites, exposing themselves to additional hazards.

The notion of “being TUF”—representing dangers associated with my CDM status, the precariousness of the study domain, and the swiftly evolving socio-political environment—necessitates a flexible and adaptive research methodology, what the editors of this volume refer to as “resilient methodology.” This research embodies both academic inquiry and political resistance, documenting women’s transformative leadership practices while challenging the erasure of their experiences under military rule. As a holder of a “5/” identity card (indicating I am from Sagaing Region, the area at the forefront of current opposition to the regime), I face heightened targeting by military authorities who specifically monitor and arrest citizens with similar regional identifiers. This systematic profiling has added another layer to the persecution I experience, making even basic daily movements a calculated risk.

Gender shapes how these vulnerabilities manifest and intersect. For female researchers studying female leaders, the risks of political persecution are amplified by gendered forms of surveillance and threat. For example, female interviewees report receiving sexualized threats at checkpoints—risks their male peers rarely face. The communities I study face not only political targeting but also gender-specific vulnerabilities, including sexual violence and the collapse of protection systems. Meanwhile, the destruction of academic infrastructure disproportionately impacts women scholars, who must navigate research processes while often shouldering increased caregiving responsibilities in crisis. This chapter thus reveals how gender operates as a constitutive element of the TUF condition itself, providing empirical grounding for the framework's emphasis on gendered vulnerability.

Leadership through terror

Myanmar's Sagaing Region (renamed from Sagaing District following the implementation of the 2008 Constitution), once renowned as a peaceful area for Buddhist pilgrimages, has endured unprecedented military violence since the 2021 coup. Regular airstrikes, village burnings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings have transformed residents' daily lives into a struggle for survival. The military regime has imposed martial law and begun enforcing its conscription law while simultaneously disrupting essential services like electricity and communications. Communities with no prior experience of armed conflict have organized defense forces out of necessity. Economic devastation compounds the physical dangers faced by residents. Hyperinflation, commodity shortages, and lost livelihoods affect everyone, with CDM participants facing particularly severe hardship. Yet amid this devastation, female teachers who joined the CDM demonstrate extraordinary resilience. Despite loss of homes, livelihoods, and family members—and in many cases becoming internally displaced—they remain steadfast in their opposition to military rule while creating new systems of support and leadership.

This research documents how female CDM participants in the city of Shwebo navigate this landscape of terror. It examines their leadership approaches during crises and explores how these women continue to

support their families and communities while challenging traditional gender expectations. Of particular interest is how their political resistance transforms their moral authority within communities, creating new forms of leadership born directly from conflict. Their experiences reveal how women's leadership emerges and functions precisely when formal institutions disintegrate and survival depends on adaptive, collaborative responses to constant threat.

This research aims to raise awareness and provide insights regarding the leadership styles and evolving moral authority of female CDM participants, viewed through the interconnected threats they face. The conceptual framing focuses on how these women demonstrate leadership styles that impact the dynamics and outcomes of their daily lives amidst conflict, emphasizing the experiential dimension central to anthropological studies of violence. It explores the interplay between bravery, moral courage, and authenticity in their leadership approaches. While women's participation in formal leadership roles has historically been constrained, contemporary social movements, including the Spring Revolution, show increased female activism across political, social, and economic fields (cf. Collier et al., 1982).

This study engages with notions of gendered leadership qualities, often contrasting task-oriented or transactional approaches (stereotypically associated with masculinity) with nurturing, relationship-oriented styles (stereotypically associated with femininity) such as transformational leadership (Mendenhall et al., 2018). This research specifically examines how female CDM leaders in the study area utilize aspects of transformational, democratic/participative, and adaptive leadership styles to guide their communities. This involves coordinating adaptive responses to ensure the safety and well-being of their families and neighbors within the context of civil war, demonstrating resilience and creativity under these harsh conditions.

The primary objective of this research is to explore how female CDM participants manage the ongoing crises and employ different leadership styles in response. The study examines the experiences of these women, many of whom were not established leaders prior to the revolution, as they engage in collective action against the military regime. It investigates their use of relationship-oriented leadership styles during this period, understanding

these not just as abstract styles but as practical strategies and techniques emerging from this context of overlapping threats.

The research prioritizes understanding the lived experiences (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996) of women leading collective action within the crisis, rather than analyzing the crisis itself. It acknowledges the impact of the military regime's actions on the public, especially CDM participants, since the outset of the Spring Revolution. This study recognizes that while many women face significant security risks and livelihood challenges, a subset has emerged as leaders of collective action within their families and communities.

A crisis can be understood as a disruption caused by external forces and posing a significant threat that necessitates an urgent response (Lipsky, 2020). In the context of Myanmar's Spring Revolution, the crisis involves widespread violence. Understanding this violence requires acknowledging its diverse forms: direct violence (physical harm, killing), structural violence (systemic inequalities, deprivation, institutional harm like property confiscation), and cultural violence (aspects of culture used to legitimize direct or structural violence) (Galtung, 1990). The situation in Myanmar encompasses all of these forms, significantly impacting the lives and leadership experiences of CDM participants, reflecting the multifaceted nature of threats. Anthropologically, violence is understood not just as an external event but as culturally constructed and experiential (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, pp. 3, 5).

Moral authority of CDM women

Moral authority refers to the ethical standing and influence an individual or group possesses based on their adherence to principled positions, ethical conduct, and willingness to sacrifice for their values (Rhode, 2006). Unlike power derived from formal positions or coercion, moral authority stems from perceived integrity and consistency between stated values and actions. In contexts of political crisis or resistance movements, moral authority often becomes a crucial alternative form of legitimacy when formal authority structures are contested. In Myanmar's context, moral authority has historically been linked to religious standing (particularly Buddhist monastic communities), educational roles (especially teachers), and political sacrifice (exemplified by figures like Aung San Suu Kyi who endured years of house

arrest rather than compromise her principles). For female CDM participants, moral authority emerges from their willingness to sacrifice careers, security, and comfort by refusing to work under the military regime, despite severe consequences. Their moral stance positions them as embodiments of principled resistance within their communities, enhancing their informal leadership influence despite lacking formal positions of power.

This study proposes the concept of “gendered moral authority” to capture how this authority is specifically shaped by gender roles and expectations, particularly under the pressures of persecution and targeted community violence. Female CDM participants potentially develop this distinct form of moral authority through their visible suffering, persistence, and commitment to community welfare amidst crisis—qualities that may resonate with traditional expectations of women as nurturers and moral guardians. Simultaneously, their public, political stands challenge traditional gender norms. This transformation is arguably enabled or accelerated by the context of the interconnected threats they face, where the targeting of men and the collapse of traditional support systems thrust women into new positions of responsibility and visibility. This research examines how this evolving gendered moral authority influences their leadership capacity and community standing during the Spring Revolution.

Women and leadership

Globally, women remain underrepresented in positions of power, despite comprising a majority of those living in extreme poverty and contributing significantly to the total working hours of the world (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In Myanmar, despite recent political changes, women held only a small percentage of parliamentary seats prior to the coup (4.6 percent in 2012) and are largely absent from senior decision-making roles across sectors (Gender Equality Network, 2012). Such gender inequality hinders inclusive development and democracy. Achieving Myanmar’s vision for a modern, democratic nation requires ensuring women and girls benefit from education opportunities, economic participation, and political engagement (Gender Equality Network, 2012). Stereotypes often associate female leadership with communal attributes (e.g., compassion, collaboration), although educational

attainments have increasingly linked female leaders with competence as well (Eagly et al., 2019). These communal attributes may be particularly beneficial during crises, which often demand calm, compassionate, and collaborative leadership (Petriglieri, 2020). Therefore, stereotypical characteristics associated with women may align well with the demands of crisis leadership (McCombs & Williams, 2021), especially in situations where community cohesion is vital for survival.

Historically, female leadership in Asia has faced significant barriers rooted in traditional patriarchal stereotypes primarily confining women to domestic roles. In several Asian countries, including conservative Muslim nations like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, attempts have been made to block the advancement of potential women leaders by arguing female leadership violates religious principles (Thompson, 2002). Many prominent female leaders in Asia have emerged from political dynasties, often assuming roles after the assassination, execution, or imprisonment of male relatives (e.g., fathers or husbands) (Thompson, 2002). Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi fits this pattern as the daughter of assassinated nationalist leader General Aung San. However, the modern era has also seen the rise of prominent female leaders in Asia who are not from political dynasties, often emerging from long careers in civil service or activism. Examples include Annette Lu (former vice president of Taiwan), Anson Chan (former chief secretary for administration in Hong Kong), and Yoriko Kawaguchi (former foreign minister of Japan) (Thompson, 2002). This suggests alternative pathways to female leadership exist.

Some scholars argue that women have led successful democratic revolutions, particularly in Asia, partly because they have managed to occupy a perceived "moral high ground," gaining widespread support due to perceptions of non-partisanship and self-sacrifice, even without detailed policy platforms (Thompson, 2002). During Myanmar's Spring Revolution, women—including activists, labor unionists, garment workers, healthcare providers, and teachers—have been at the forefront of protests from the beginning (Aye, 2021). The National Unity Government (NUG) has appointed several female ministers, signaling a potential shift towards greater inclusivity (Aye, 2021). Furthermore, some research suggests corporations led by

women may exhibit greater resilience, potentially due to lower leverage and less volatile earnings (Faccio et al., 2016), potentially supporting arguments for the effectiveness of female leadership during crises.

During the Spring Revolution, women have extended beyond political activism to assume concurrent roles as family protectors and community organizers. They ensure household security, livelihood, and health while participating in collective action against the military regime. Across urban and rural areas, women coordinate humanitarian support, lead local defense groups, manage community education, and sustain underground networks essential to the CDM. This everyday leadership rooted in care, courage, and collective action positions women as central agents in sustaining communities amid crisis. Their capacity to lead across domestic and public spheres challenges both traditional gender boundaries and authoritarian power structures.

The female CDM participants studied in this research represent a cohort of leaders, primarily long-serving civil servants, emerging outside traditional dynastic pathways, utilizing various leadership styles shaped by the unique demands of the interconnected threats they face.



Figure 2: A “flower strike” with a large number of female participants

Different types of leadership styles

Leadership involves the ability to inspire, motivate, and empower individuals or groups toward collaborative and effective action, influencing their values, beliefs, attitudes, and conduct (Ganta & Manukonda, 2014). A leader's style reflects their behaviors and actions in influencing others (Northouse, 2018) and significantly impacts decision-making, communication, motivation, and the overall environment for others (Harris et al., 2007). Different situations may call for different styles of leadership, including transformational, democratic/participative, and adaptive leadership, among others. Effective leadership is crucial for achieving shared objectives and can impact the quality of social and work life (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). In contexts involving persecution, targeted community violence, and the collapse of research infrastructure, leadership is often less about a formal position and more about skillful navigation for survival and resistance.

Transformational leadership style

This leadership style is often characterized by charisma, enabling leaders to motivate and invigorate others. Transformational leaders act as role models, inspire followers by articulating a compelling vision, stimulate intellectually by encouraging new perspectives, and show individualized consideration for followers' needs and goals (Bass, 1985; Diaz-Saenz, 2011; Bass & Riggo, 2006). They aim to transform individuals and organizations by fostering creativity, promoting personal growth, and enhancing moral standards (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Muchtar & Qamariah, 2014). This style, often associated with stereotypically female characteristics such as consideration and support for others (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Burke & Collins, 2001), is considered particularly effective during times of crisis due to its focus on the needs of followers and ethical considerations (McCombs & Williams, 2021). Transformational leaders create positive, supportive environments that promote collaboration and purpose (Northouse, 2018), which is crucial for maintaining morale under challenging conditions.

Democratic/participative leadership

This approach emphasizes involving team members in decision-making, encouraging open communication, and seeking consensus (Yukl, 2013). Based on a foundation of mutual respect, democratic leaders welcome suggestions, actively listen to diverse viewpoints, and empower team members to take initiative and contribute to problem-solving (Choi, 2007). This style of leadership fosters trust, respect, creativity, and cooperation, often leading to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions by leveraging collective intelligence (Yukl, 2013; Choi, 2007). It assumes participants share a stake in the outcome of decisions and possess relevant expertise (Rukmani et al., 2010). In scenarios involving persecution, targeted community violence, and infrastructural collapse, where formal hierarchies flatten and trust is paramount, this style can be vital for community cohesion and resource mobilization, fostering the emergence of solidarity knowledge and networks.

Adaptive leadership

This style is crucial in dynamic and rapidly changing situations, enabling leaders to manage uncertainty and make critical decisions (Hayashi & Soo, 2012). Adaptive leaders maintain openness and consistency while navigating turmoil, serving as pillars of stability. They prioritize achieving outcomes despite obstacles, emphasizing resilience and excellence. Adaptive leaders excel at developing the potential within their teams, utilizing collective intelligence and varied perspectives to address complex challenges efficiently (Hayashi & Soo, 2012). They act as catalysts for transformation by fostering conditions for creativity and problem-solving. Effective adaptive leadership requires combining knowledge, appropriate behavior, and timely action, evolving as the environment changes (Hayashi & Soo, 2012). This style is almost a prerequisite for survival under constant, unpredictable threats, demanding responses to immediate dangers related to persecution, community attacks, and infrastructural failure.

Some frameworks suggest female leadership combines competence, initiative (“creative aggression”), and “woman power”—a blend of strength and nurturing focused on societal good (Asher-Greve, 2006). Despite historical patriarchy, women’s participation in social movements and

leadership roles is increasingly gaining recognition (Collier et al., 1982). The female CDM participants in this study exemplify leadership emerging during crisis, utilizing transformational, democratic, and adaptive styles as necessary responses to navigate multifaceted challenges and support their communities.

Methodology and data collection: Working with the CDM

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically using narrative inquiry within an ethnographic framework to understand interpretations of experiences at particular points in time (Creswell, 2011; Merriam, 2002). Data was gathered through in-depth individual interviews with female CDM participants, focusing on those who have taken leadership roles in collective actions. The narrative or storytelling approach provides rich, detailed information about respondents' motivations, thoughts, and feelings, capturing the lived experience central to anthropological studies of violence (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996). These methodological adaptations are not merely improvised responses to constraint. Rather, they constitute what the editors of this volume term a form of “resilient methodology”—an epistemological innovation developed under the conditions of institutional collapse, surveillance, and persecution. Trust-based sampling, encrypted interviews, and participant-led storytelling are not only ethical necessities in high-risk research; they are also generative practices that reshape how anthropological knowledge is produced. In conditions where fieldwork carries political risk, these approaches offer models for conducting rigorous, ethically grounded research that persists through—and because of—shared danger, directly enacting the framework's epistemological claims about knowledge emerging from risk.

Narratives were derived from conversations and transcripts of in-depth interviews. Narrative analysis was used to understand how participants construct stories from their personal experiences. This involves a dual layer of interpretation: first, the participants interpret their own lives through narrative, and second, the researcher interprets the construction of those narratives.

The targeted respondents are primary, middle, and high school teachers who joined the CDM and ceased teaching in the state education system following the 2021 coup. Interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024, primarily online and via telephone due to security constraints. Recognizing the infeasibility of a nationwide study, the research focuses on western areas of Sagaing Region. Ten respondents were interviewed: eight women and two men (the men were included to provide broader community context and perspectives on the women's leadership roles) from five villages, selected as witnesses to or participants in the events described.

Trust was established with potential participants through the assistance of a key informant, who is also a CDM member. Working with local informants, respondents were selected from among female CDM leaders known to be articulate and outspoken, particularly those who have experienced significant loss (family members, property, or homes).

In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide with open-ended questions, allowing for follow-up questions tailored to individual responses. Respondents were encouraged to share their feelings, daily crises, and experiences. Secondary data included reviews of relevant literature and interpretations of historical materials.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling. In the absence of formal infrastructure, trusted personal networks functioned as the frame of this research. Without such networks, access and establishment of trust and safety would have been impossible. Purposive sampling is effective for identifying specific cases or individuals with particular knowledge or experiences relevant to the research questions, especially those not easily observable in the broader population. This method was chosen based on the need to adapt to safety, security, and political conditions in the targeted region, a core component of “resilient methodology” under the circumstances.

Research under surveillance

Conducting research in a highly surveilled environment has required significant methodological adaptations, directly reflecting the context of persecution, targeted community violence, and infrastructural collapse. Trust-building became particularly crucial, as many female CDM

participants exhibited initial reluctance to disclose their experiences without prior knowledge of my background and commitment to the movement. My own status as a CDM participant facilitated access but required careful navigation of shared vulnerabilities, embodying the principle of the collapsing researcher/researched boundary. As a researcher and activist within the CDM movement, I confronted the dual challenge of protecting my own well-being while ensuring that my study elevates the voices of women leaders in a politically unstable environment.

Remote data gathering techniques were employed due to the significant risks associated with in-person interactions in active conflict zones. To protect participants, I use pseudonyms, rehearsed coded language before interviews, and ensured deletion of call logs and applications immediately after. This tactical adaptation, developed with respondents, became a core part of our shared strategies for survival. I utilized encrypted communication channels including Viber, Telegram, and Signal for interviews and data collection, implementing rigorous confidentiality protocols and anonymizing participants to prevent potential retaliation. These security measures were not peripheral considerations but central components of the research design itself—practical applications of “security-embedded ethics.”

These protocols, developed jointly with respondents, reflect not only risk mitigation but a shared ethical stance: survival and solidarity as foundations of research integrity. This research has required a fundamental rethinking of traditional ethical frameworks. Even when certain data might serve to strengthen academic arguments, the potential risks to participants necessitated difficult decisions about what knowledge could be safely documented and shared at this time, exemplifying how security concerns must supersede conventional research priorities in conflict zones.

Technological obstacles presented considerable difficulties throughout the research process, highlighting the impact of the collapse of Myanmar’s infrastructure. In numerous study domains, access to electricity, internet, and telephone connections were frequently interrupted. During online interviews, respondents often encountered imminent threats from armed personnel, compelling them to escape and delete applications to avoid discovery. Respondents frequently needed to travel to locations with internet

access to participate in interviews, thus exposing themselves to additional hazards. This precarious communication context necessitated significant flexibility in scheduling, documentation, and follow-up procedures—key features of resilient methodology.

I employed participatory research methodologies that enabled respondents to influence the narrative while safeguarding their voices from exploitation for academic purposes. Using oral histories and community-driven storytelling techniques enabled respondents to shape the narrative. This participatory mode, rooted in mutual trust, allowed women to speak for themselves and safeguard their dignity. This approach involved collecting oral histories, personal testimonials, and community-focused narratives to chronicle women's experiences while protecting their dignity and mitigating risks. By emphasizing interactive methods, I sought to ensure that the research would serve as a means of empowerment rather than mere exposure, aligning with the principles of solidarity knowledge.

Ethical dilemmas under fire

Securing informed consent in a high-risk environment necessitated alternative methods, including verbal consent agreements and encrypted documents. I consistently prioritized participant safety, implementing protocols to ensure no identifying data could jeopardize informants' security or that of their communities. This practical application demonstrates the core tenets of security-embedded ethics, where ethical decisions are inseparable from immediate safety concerns. The emotional burden carried by participants was evident in powerful testimonies like: "After the weapons of the junta killed my brother, our family is not perfect anymore. Our future is lost. Sometimes I feel depressed, so, when the army comes to the village, I don't want to run away anymore" (personal communication, 2023). Such expressions of trauma and defiance simultaneously shaped both the content of the research and the methodological approach, as emotional protection became equally as important as physical security. During the research process, I confronted difficult decisions regarding which findings to include or withhold. Although some findings represented key insights that merited presentation, ethical considerations sometimes necessitated their exclusion.

As a researcher operating under harsh conditions, I needed to conduct thorough risk assessments to identify potential harms and develop mitigation strategies for respondents, research areas, and myself. This sometimes meant sacrificing analytical completeness for participant protection, a common dilemma within security-embedded ethics.

I engaged in ongoing ethical reflexivity, recognizing the emotional burden and moral quandaries associated with conducting research in a conflict zone experiencing “existential shock” (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, p. 13), amplified by my own status as a target. Ethical decisions required constant reassessment due to evolving threats, where concerns for participant safety outweighed all others. This process required acknowledging the feelings of CDM members and activists involved in the research process and seeking ways to contribute to their resilience, well-being, and self-determination rather than treating them solely as sources of data. My position as a researcher is further complicated by my identity as a CDM participant. This dual role requires me to balance my commitment to the movement with the need to conduct rigorous research, while also navigating the ethical and methodological complexities inherent in studying a community to which I belong and with whom I share a common cause.

These ethical considerations reflect security-embedded ethics, in which decisions about research design, documentation, and representation emerge not from abstract principles but from immediate concerns for collective survival and protection. The research thus progresses through continuous negotiations between scholarly objectives and the paramount need to ensure no further harm comes to participants already facing extreme risk. Some participants wished to be named to assert their defiance of the military regime. However, in weighing recognition against risk, I often chose anonymity, where silence became its own form of care. This process itself becomes a site of knowledge production, yielding insights into ethical practice under duress.

Women leading through crisis

This section presents an analysis of the interview data, exploring the lived experiences of female CDM participants in western Sagaing Region amidst the ongoing crisis. Key themes emerging from the narratives include the

pervasive nature of daily crisis and violence, the transformation of gendered roles and moral authority, and the diverse leadership styles employed by these women—all viewed as phenomena shaped by the context of persecution and community violence.

Daily crisis and violence

Since the 2021 coup, the primary crises confronting individuals in the research area revolve around livelihood and security. Participants describe constant threats encompassing direct, structural, and cultural violence. Direct violence includes arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings by SAC forces. Structural violence manifests as the confiscation of property, burning of villages, extortion, and the disruption of livelihoods. Cultural violence involves attacks on religious sites and personnel. These experiences are reported as daily occurrences affecting communities in both western Sagaing and ethnic areas of the country, illustrating the “everydayness of war” under extreme conditions (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, p. 3). Security risks are intensified for residents of Sagaing (ID prefixes “5/”) and Magway (“8/” prefixes) regions because the military uses these prefixes to profile people from resistance strongholds. The imposition of martial law in townships like Shwebo, Wetlet, and Ayadaw in early 2023 (The Irrawaddy, 2023, February 23) severely restricted movement, imposing curfews (6 p.m. to 6 a.m.) often enforced by lethal force. Participants report arbitrary shootings, street arrests, home invasions, and robbery by military personnel. One participant, Kyi Thar (personal communication, 2023), noted, “After the military imposed a curfew, it became more difficult in [terms of] security, health, and the economy.”

Transportation has become increasingly difficult and dangerous due to checkpoints where military personnel conduct checks, make arrests, and demand exorbitant sums of money. These conditions of restricted movement hinder the flow of goods, leading to scarcity, rising prices, and exacerbated food insecurity. Increased fuel costs have further impacted transportation and commodity prices. The appointment of SAC-aligned ward administrators and the enforcement of the military conscription law (The Irrawaddy, 2024, January) have created further insecurity, leading to attacks on administrators

and widespread fear of forced recruitment and extortion under the guise of the law. The pervasive fear and restrictions have severely impacted daily life, including access to healthcare. As one participant (personal communication, 2023) describes, people face difficulties even attending to health issues due to fear of encounters with military authorities. This constant uncertainty and threat environment exemplifies the “slippery” and “confusing” nature of violence described by Nordstrom and Robben (1996, pp. 3-4).

CDM participants and their families face specific targeting. Interviewees report family members being arrested or imprisoned, killed by military ordinance even while inside their homes, and having their homes burned down. Ei Than (personal communication, 2023) shared a harrowing account: her elder brother was killed by a missile strike while working inside his home, and a neighboring woman also lost her life as a result of the military's bombardment. In total, there were more than 20 casualties in her village as a result of military action. This constant exposure to violence and insecurity forms the backdrop against which women's leadership and resilience are enacted as responses to these harsh conditions.

Gendered authority and resilience

The informant interviews reveal a shift in gender roles and the emergence of a distinct form of gendered moral authority among CDM women, driven by the crisis conditions of persecution, targeted community violence, and infrastructural collapse. Widespread resentment and indignation towards the military regime were palpable in participant narratives. The regime's brutality has solidified the resolve of many CDM participants to resist, despite the immense risks. In my research region, nearly all educators joined the CDM, deliberately shutting down schools to deny the regime legitimacy, while students continue to pursue their education independently through CDM-organized networks. The crisis conditions have dramatically altered family dynamics. With men often forced to flee due to targeted arrests, torture, or fear of conscription (direct consequences of persecution and community attack), or joining PDFs, women increasingly shoulder the responsibility for family survival and safety.

These women are not merely stepping into gaps created by the absence of men—they are actively redefining leadership. Their agency, rooted in both traditional caregiving and political defiance, challenges gender norms and builds new moral authority in crisis. This shift imposes immense burdens but also positions women centrally within household and community resistance efforts. As the primary caretakers and often sole providers for their families, these women navigate daily struggles for livelihood and security, demonstrating remarkable resilience. One participant, Toe Toe (personal communication, 2023), reflects this sentiment: “Normally, I would think that I cannot stand in this situation. But I need to survive for my family, and I do not want to capitulate to the military regime.”

The women’s resilience is often framed in moral terms as a refusal to submit to injustice despite personal suffering. Trisa (personal communication, 2023) states: “Although I have declined in physical [health] a lot, my morale is still strong. I still do not regret [joining the CDM] and do not want [to] ever knuckle under the military regime because I do not want to live under the brutality of [...] military dictators.” Similarly, Susan (personal communication, 2023) asserts: “I believe that if there are any difficulties in the future, we will be able to solve them. I only give up my work, home, and property but some families have given up their lives. No matter how many difficulties there are, [I] do not regret [opposing the military].” This determination, rooted in a moral opposition to the regime and a commitment to their families and communities, forms the basis of the women’s transformed gendered moral authority, forged in the crucible of crisis.

Stereotypes casting women as physically vulnerable have been overturned by their proven resilience in the face of adversity. Participants describe transforming their professional roles—former teachers have become vendors or agricultural workers, for example, or have sought work in urban areas to support their families. Some have undertaken further studies online, navigating internet blackouts (an example of infrastructural collapse) by moving from place to place to find connectivity, demonstrating a commitment to personal and community development even under duress. Many have continued teaching CDM students outside the state education system, viewing their teaching as a moral responsibility despite the high

risks involved. This commitment to education and community well-being, coupled with their demonstrated endurance and refusal to bow to the regime, has contributed to their enhanced gendered moral standing within their communities—an authority derived directly from their actions in response to the challenging conditions in their communities.



Figure 3: A class led by a CDM teacher outside of the state education system

Women's leadership styles

The findings indicate that CDM women have employed diverse leadership styles—often blending components of transformational, adaptive, and democratic/participative approaches—as necessary strategies to navigate the complex, multifaceted challenges facing their communities. Their leadership skills have manifested in managing family needs, organizing community support, and sustaining resistance activities. These styles represent modes of response to the difficulties in their environment. Transformational leadership, characterized by moral inspiration and resilience, can be observed in practices like organizing “flower strikes,” continuing CDM teaching despite risks, and holding symbolic resistance events to sustain hope amidst persecution. Adaptive leadership, marked by flexibility under threat, is evident in situational responses such as evacuating family members during attacks, re-

routing communications to overcome collapsed infrastructure, and shifting livelihoods due to persecution and displacement. Finally, democratic/participative leadership, emphasizing collective care and horizontal organizing, has manifested in coordinating shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in response to attacks and loss of infrastructure, creating *parahita* (social welfare/charity) groups reflecting solidarity networks, and establishing informal education networks to resist state control and erasure. While the leadership styles often overlap, this typology reveals the diverse and context-sensitive ways leadership has been enacted specifically in response to the extreme uncertainty and layered threats in the study area.

Transformational actions

Evidence of women's transformational leadership has emerged in actions aimed at inspiring hope and maintaining morale despite the military's persecution and potential erasure of the women's communities. Despite the risks, some women have organized or participated in symbolic resistance activities, such as ceremonies held at the graves of fallen activists and singing of revolutionary songs like "*Thwe Thissa*" ("Blood Loyalty"); organizing "flower strikes" on significant dates like Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday; marking the anniversary of fallen comrades (martyrs); conducting secret night strikes; showing revolutionary films in villages; and sharing news of these activities via secure channels like Telegram to bolster community spirit.



Figure 4: Outdoor screening of a revolutionary film organized by CDM women

As both researcher and CDM member, the vulnerability I share with participants has allowed me to personally witness and participate in transformational activities like those detailed above. My own experiences with organizing secret educational activities mirror those of my participants, creating a dialogic understanding of leadership that transcends conventional observer-subject dynamics. This shared positionality generates insights into transformational leadership under fire that would be inaccessible through traditional research relationships, exemplifying experiential validity.

Furthermore, the commitment of CDM teachers to continue educating children outside of the state system serves as a powerful form of resistance and community building against the backdrop of institutional collapse. As Poe Poe (personal communication, 2023) shares, despite lack of formal support, she and her husband have continued teaching CDM students: “Both of us [...] have been living and working as volunteers to teach CDM students, but we received support only one time.” This labor is often performed voluntarily and at great personal risk, inspiring others and maintaining a focus on the future. Some women who have managed to find work in urban areas, such as Ei Than (personal communication, 2023), use their resources to support fellow CDM members: “After I joined as a CDM [member], I moved to the urban area and worked to transform my livelihood for my family. For some time, I could [also] support my friends who are CDM.” These acts demonstrate individualized consideration and inspirational motivation—key elements of transformational leadership enacted as a crucial response to the crises experienced by these women and members of their community.

Adaptive survival strategies

The need for constant adaptation in the face of unpredictable threats (persecution and community attack) and resource scarcity exacerbated by infrastructural collapse is a dominant theme of participant narratives. Adaptive leadership techniques are evident in how women have developed strategies to cope. These include the establishment of informal communication networks using phone messages (when possible) to warn neighboring villages of approaching military columns, thereby responding to threats of community attacks and surveillance. Women have also found ways

to access Wi-Fi or other internet connections for communication, further education (like the Bachelor of Education course mentioned by Kyi Thar (personal communication, 2023): “Now we can teach the CDM students and take online courses”), and information-sharing networks, thus overcoming effects of infrastructural collapse. Further adaptive measures have involved development of new transportation routes to bypass military checkpoints and maintenance of the flow of essential goods despite persecution and community attack risks. Female CDM leaders have organized systems for rapid evacuation, preparing emergency supplies and prioritizing the movement of vulnerable individuals, and built temporary shelters or camps for IDPs, collaborating to provide necessities in response to displacement and loss of infrastructure.

Women have also adapted their livelihoods, taking on new roles like selling lottery tickets or food, or engaging in farm labor. Such flexibility and proactive problem-solving in response to constantly changing, dangerous conditions exemplify adaptive leadership as a direct, necessary response to the multifaceted threats. Treza’s (personal communication, 2023) story highlights extreme resilience and adaptation even amidst personal health crises and devastating loss: “Before the coup, I got breast cancer ... Since the military coup, I cannot care for my health. When I heard the information that the soldiers were coming, I managed to get my family and my aging parents to flee [...] When I returned [...] almost the whole village was burnt including my house, my parents’ house, and my relatives’ houses [...] But I need to live for my family and my society.” Her experiences encapsulate the intense pressure faced by many throughout Myanmar, as well as the need to adapt for survival.

Democratic/participative resilience

While individual resilience is crucial, collaborative efforts underpin community survival and resistance, requiring democratic or participative leadership principles when formal structures have disappeared under conditions of persecution, targeted community violence, and infrastructural collapse. Women play key roles in facilitating such collaborative survival and adaptation efforts in communities of western Sagaing Region. They have, for

example, organized collective support for IDPs, often relying on informal networks and donations from relatives, community members, or urban contacts. Ni Ni (personal communication, 2023) emphasizes this reliance on mutual aid: “At the beginning we received support from relatives, civilians [villagers who are not CDM members], and urban and rural communities, but we have not received support from any formal organizations, including the NUG. Thus, I want to say that ‘people have only people.’” Si Si (personal communication, 2023) echoed this sentiment, noting support to her community has come via friends, not organizations: “I can connect with my friends and supporters who want to donate and support the IDPs, but not with formal organizations.” Khin (personal communication, 2023) describes her role in coordinating collective action: “I go to the IDP camp with the *parahita* group and donate supplies from donors. I can motivate people to participate in collective activities such as distributing pamphlets and organizing anti-authoritarian campaigns.”

Shwe (personal communication, 2023) described the scope of her coordination efforts: “Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, I have actively engaged in both clandestine and collective movements fighting the military government, notably in collaboration with youth organizations. I have taken a prominent role in coordinating multiple activities related to the Spring Revolution. These initiatives encompass the establishment of a mobile library to enhance education for youth, the construction of water wells and mosquito-proof latrines in IDP camps, and the coordination of essential supplies, including clothing, equipment, and food, for impacted communities. Additionally, I have partnered with medical professionals from the CDM to conduct monthly health assessments for displaced communities.”

Such reliance on horizontal networks is a hallmark of survival, embodying solidarity, knowledge, and action. Other collaborative actions have included coordination of security measures like sharing information about military movements (a vital participative response to community threats), organizing collective actions such as strikes or film screenings which require group coordination and shared risk (responding to persecution), and forming *parahita* groups to address community needs arising from state failure.

These collaborative efforts, often initiated and sustained by women,

involve shared decision-making (e.g., planning safe times/locations for activities), mutual support, and leveraging of collective resources, aligning with participative leadership models. The findings suggest that while facing immense hardships and limited external support, CDM women have fostered essential networks of solidarity and reciprocity, demonstrating leadership that is simultaneously adaptive, often inspirational, and collaborative—a testament to community resilience under multiple threats.

Knowledge under triple threat

The collapse of conventional boundaries between researcher and researched enables what the editors of this volume term “experiential validity”—insights validated not through institutional authority but through shared lived experience of persecution, as embodied in my own positionality. At the same time, the targeting of communities necessitates what can be understood as “preservation epistemology,” by which I refer to the systematic archiving of testimonies the regime seeks to erase—much like the covert wartime archiving projects in Spain and Bosnia. For me, research is also a form of resistance. Documenting women’s leadership in times of communal crisis is not only about recording change; it is also an act of defiance against the



Figure 5: CDM members paying tribute to fallen comrades

erasure of information and knowledge, and against the silencing of our shared struggle. Finally, the destruction of academic infrastructure requires resilient methodology—the adaptive, security-conscious research approaches detailed earlier which persist despite institutional collapse. Together, these elements constitute a distinct form of knowledge production that emerges only under conditions of triple vulnerability. This suggests that the TUF framework offers not just a description of research constraints but an alternative model for understanding how knowledge persists and evolves under authoritarian attack. This chapter, therefore, serves as a practical demonstration of the framework's utility and the unique insights it enables.

Conclusion

This research reveals how the TUF condition shapes both women's leadership during Myanmar's post-coup crisis and the knowledge produced about it. By documenting leadership from within the context of shared vulnerability, this study uncovers dimensions of gendered moral authority, adaptive strategies, and community resistance practices that external observation would likely miss.

The methodology developed here—involving trust-based sampling, security-conscious documentation, and researcher-participant solidarity—emerges directly from the joint vulnerability of the researcher and the research participants. When researcher, researched community, and research infrastructure face simultaneous threat, the boundary between academic and activist knowledge dissolves, creating solidarity knowledge forged through shared risk.

Documenting women's leadership serves as both scholarly work and resistance against erasure. Interconnected threats become sources of insight rather than mere obstacles, showing how knowledge persists despite deliberate attacks on its foundations. As female CDM leaders work to protect and transform their communities during this period of significant crisis, their resilient practices demonstrate how moral authority emerges precisely at the points where conventional power structures collapse.

The emotional toll of shared trauma has also shaped this research. As both participant and witness, I have worked through my own grief and anxiety,

drawing on resilience not as a research theme, but as a lived necessity. When my colleagues and I lose our jobs and our homes, and when our field collapses under authoritarian assault, new forms of understanding emerge. We face danger with care, urgency, and the stubborn insistence that knowledge, too, can be a form of resistance.

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Chapter 9

**Coping Under Fire:
Gender and Displacement in Sagaing**

Lwin

Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the intensification of armed conflict has resulted in severe consequences with the total number of displaced people in the millions. The largest concentration of displacement is in Sagaing Region, where junta forces have gained notoriety for employing extreme violence against civilians, including the burning of villages. Although men are often targeted as potential resistance personnel, women bear the brunt of indiscriminate violence, particularly the effects of displacement. Whilst rural households in Myanmar have well-documented resilience in relation to natural disasters, often relying on local, community-based welfare networks, the current crisis has undermined many of these normal coping mechanisms. Whilst a common (and false) assumption is that women may be less capable of coping with and overcoming crises compared to men, much of the challenge of resilience derives from structural inequalities, such as access to and control over resources, as well as particular gender-based vulnerabilities, such as assigned roles, vulnerability to threats or acts of violence, and limited legal benefits and protections, decision-making authority, and control of financial resources. This paper utilizes narrative interviews with men and women in conflict areas of western Myanmar to examine how gender influences the

construction and expression of resilience in conflict-displaced communities, both in terms of the gendered nature of the post-coup societal context and the forms of resilience emerging in response. The research suggests that, amid crisis, women exhibit highly adaptive and creative coping strategies that, in turn, can help displaced communities to develop greater resilience.

Keywords: coping strategies, displaced people, gender, resilience, violence, Myanmar, Sagaing Region

I was prepared to find bitterness and hatred among the women who had experienced such horrific violence and loss, and pervasive trauma, but in many places, I found strength. I met women who had transcended their sorrow and discovered in themselves the courage and will to rebuild their lives and communities [...] That is the deeper story I want the world to know.

(Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002, p. v)

After the coup d'état, I saw that most of the women were subjected to violence and abuse, and many of them died. I could not stand it anymore [so] I chose this path of armed resistance.

(30-year-old female People's Defense Force volunteer)

Introduction

My position as a researcher studying post-coup Myanmar is informed by personal experience of displacement and professional disruption. Prior to the coup, I worked in a university department as an associate professor. Like many of my colleagues, after the coup, I joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), refusing to work under a regime which had seized power by force. A key element of the CDM protest in education is not simply a lack of willingness to work under the military regime, but an unwillingness to be complicit in the reorientation of the education system to promote subservience to authoritarian rule and to reintroduce the gendered discrimination characteristic of decades of prior junta rule. Many CDM workers have been arrested, with women particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse while in detention. Facing the threat of arrest myself, I initially returned to my hometown. After finding I was still not safe there, I had to relocate to another place where I had more anonymity. This direct experience of displacement from professional life and exposure to risk has shaped the impetus for this study.

Indeed, the motivation for this research stems directly from my own experience as a woman participating in the CDM, facing the resulting

insecurity and fear. After the coup on February 1, 2021, like many civil servants, I joined the peaceful and non-violent struggle against the military dictatorship. Even after I relocated from my place of duty, I often heard about the arrest and imprisonment of CDM members in my township. In the township, everyone knows what activities others are engaged in, so I was worried that I might be arrested and felt very vulnerable. I could hear the gunfire of the military groups every day, and I had many sleepless nights. Due to the news that CDM members were being apprehended, I had to pack all my necessary supplies in a backpack to make a fast escape. This experience fostered a deep empathy and understanding of how displaced communities, particularly women, exhibit resilience in the face of extreme adversity, leading me to want to study and share the stories of displaced people living in the most affected conflict areas of Sagaing Region, and to understand how they manage to survive during difficult times.

The post-coup landscape and research

Violence against women, particularly in situations of conflict, has reached “epidemic proportions” (Elshtain, 1995; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Conflict and war tend to accentuate pre-existing patterns and structures of violence, often demolishing what flimsy social guardrails may have been in place and supercharging structural and cultural violence in which women are almost always those who suffer most severely. Yet within the wider context of violence and oppression, women also display a multiplicity of coping responses, illustrating a particular form of resilience. This moves beyond a portrayal of women either simply as victims of violence or as Hegelian “beautiful souls” somehow cultivating innocence in a tragic world (Elshtain, 1995). This inquiry into gendered resilience stems not only from academic interest but also from my own position as a woman navigating the insecurities of post-coup Myanmar after joining the CDM. The focus on gendered forms of resilience is further informed by my own positionality, recognizing that risks and insecurities within the post-coup landscape are often experienced differently based on gender, a reality faced both by participants and researchers operating in this context.

The post-coup landscape in Myanmar has been described as a civil war, a national uprising, or an insurrection, depending on the perspective of the interlocutor. Either way, evidence points to a disproportionate burden of suffering experienced by women, as the (re)militarization of society reinforces existing gendered hierarchy and reimposes a masculinization of public life. Initial resistance to the coup emerged in the country's larger cities. However, as this was violently suppressed, armed resistance against the Myanmar military from both pre-existing ethnic armed organizations and newly formed People's Defense Forces (PDFs) sought to protect civilians from military violence. The central areas of Myanmar have borne the brunt of post-coup violence, where ground raids by junta troops result in the destruction of houses, fields, and buildings, supported by air and artillery strikes.

Since 2021, tens of thousands of civilian properties have been destroyed, compounding the displacement crisis. Data released in mid-2025 by monitoring groups indicates that arson attacks remain a devastating tactic in the ongoing conflict, with Sagaing and Magway Regions continuing to be the most heavily impacted areas (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2025). At the time of publication, the displacement situation remains extremely fluid; there are reports of some displaced people returning home to uncertain conditions, while countless others have been forced to relocate multiple times to evade danger (UNOCHA, 2025).

As of mid-September 2025, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Myanmar stands at approximately 3.6 million (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). An additional 1.57 million refugees and asylum-seekers from Myanmar are hosted in other nations, bringing the total number of displaced persons to over 5.1 million. The latest data, updated on September 15, 2025, confirms that the Sagaing Region alone accounts for 1,269,300 of these IDPs (UNHCR, 2025).

Recent research (Livelihoods and Food Security Fund [LIFT], 2022) has also suggested that the impact of COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions and coup-related violence has also negatively affected female participation in public life, further undermining the capacity of women to effectively

employ coping strategies. In addition to posing “a direct threat to their lives, ‘disasters’ expose women to other protection risks, acute in displacement contexts” (UNHCR, 2022).

This study addresses a central research question: How does gender influence the building and expression of resilience in conflict-displaced communities, both in terms of the gendered nature of Myanmar’s post-coup societal context and the forms of resilience emerging in response? The research focuses specifically on people displaced through violence in Sagaing Region. Through an examination of gendered resilience and coping strategies, this paper explores the survival mechanisms, adaptation processes, and potential for transformative change within displaced communities. While existing research suggests that coping strategies may influence vulnerability outcomes, their effectiveness is likely to be constrained by the broader context of ongoing conflict and displacement in Myanmar.

This chapter proceeds as follows: first, it outlines the conceptual framework guiding the analysis, focusing on gender and resilience. Second, it details the methodology employed, including the research context in Sagaing and the narrative approach, acknowledging the challenges of research under duress. Third, it presents the findings, exploring the lived experiences of displacement, the structures of oppression faced, and the various forms of agency and resilience observed. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these findings and discusses their implications.

Resilience, coping, and gender

Gender fundamentally shapes how the “thrice under fire” (TUF) condition (described in this volume’s introduction) manifests. For female researchers like myself, gendered constraints compound political persecution, affecting mobility, security strategies, and field access. Similarly, the study of gendered resilience reveals how the same violence produces differentiated vulnerabilities and adaptive responses among members of displaced communities, challenging simplistic understandings of both oppression and resistance. The concept of resilience provides a useful framework for understanding how people respond to and overcome adversities. In the context of this research, “resilience” is understood as the capacity to endure and respond to shocks

such as conflict and displacement (Barrett & Conostas, 2014). The resilience of households is derived from, and affects, the resilience of individual household members, and operates across multiple domains, including health, economic capacity, decision-making, and emotional well-being (Griffiths, 2017, p. 13). Mallak (1998) defines resilience as “the ability of an individual or organization to expeditiously design and implement positive adaptive behaviors matched to the immediate situation while enduring minimal stress.” This definition highlights that resilience operates at multiple levels—individual, community, and institutional—raising important questions about who would benefit from what types of resilience, and why.

Although resilience is often presented as a neutral concept, it is deeply influenced by social factors, including gender, age, socio-economic status, and ethnicity (Abrams, 2002). A gendered analysis of resilience examines two critical perspectives: first, how hazards and threats are experienced differently through unequal systems of power and privilege; and second, how men and women employ different resources, strategies, and tactics in response to adversity. “Coping,” as a related concept, refers to the specific strategies through which demands appraised as taxing within the personal-environmental relationship are managed either through problem-solving or via emotional regulation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This distinction is important because while resilience describes a capacity or outcome, coping describes the processes and strategies that contribute to resilience. As Walsh-Dilley and Wolford (2015) argue, the conceptual flexibility of resilience creates “a unique opportunity and productive space of engagement for rethinking what really matters for development” (p. 175).

Gender significantly influences how resilience manifests. Mersha and Van Laerhoven (2018) found that male-headed households in Ethiopia have accessed various adaptation options in response to climate change and extreme weather events, including on-farm adaptation, temporary migration, storage, communal pooling, and crop diversification. In contrast, female-headed households have been excluded from these options and have primarily engaged in livelihood diversification through low-paying, unstable-wage labor and self-employment. These differences reflect broader structural inequalities that shape vulnerability and adaptive capacity.

In Myanmar, gender roles and hierarchies are influenced by the concept of *phon*, an invisible measure of power or spiritual potency that is culturally associated with men. According to a Burmese proverb, “In the household, the husband is the lord and the wife is the follower,” which reflects the culturally endorsed dominant role of men as breadwinners and decision-makers at household and community levels. The belief that women lack *phon* has historically reinforced the notion that they are inherently inferior to men (Hilton et al., 2016). There is a rich and varied literature on the nexus of gender and resilience, particularly in relation to peacebuilding and conflict (Aggestam & Holmgren, 2022). As Smyth and Sweetman (2015) point out, “A gendered view of resilience entails recognizing the reality of difference and inequality within the household ... Both productive and reproductive roles for women are likely to increase (often to breaking point) in a crisis” (p. 407).

Gender roles influence risk perception, prioritization, and responses to shocks and stressors. In a study conducted in Senegal by Tschakert (2007), women’s perceptions of the threats from disease and poor infrastructure—such as the threat to survival during childbirth due to lack of medical equipment at health centers—were more severe than men’s perceptions. These different perceptions matter because they strongly influence adaptation choices (Bryan et al., 2013). Crises such as armed conflict not only stretch capacities to their limits but can also reshape gendered boundaries. This can function in multiple directions: sometimes reinforcing existing boundaries, other times transforming them. As Hedström et al. (2023) note regarding counter-revolutionary leadership in Myanmar:

In Myanmar, where the state’s counterinsurgency campaigns have been aimed at destroying people’s connections with land, kin, and nation, women have been targeted: sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minority women living in rural communities is common and yet reports also show that women in these areas collectively mobilize against violence as head of villages and households. (p. 6)

This framing moves beyond the “continuing portrayal [of women] as victims” (Juncos & Bourbeau, 2022, p. 867) to recognize women’s agency in

response to conflict. However, while a crisis may bring about new possibilities for gender roles, these may be seen as temporary “women’s roles,” or definitions of women’s roles may expand to include them. Evidence of changing gender relations over the longer term is less clear. It is important to note that not all women have the same resilience capacities, and men also face significant capacity constraints. Narratives that depict women as perpetually vulnerable and men as inevitably antagonistic ignore how women act as agents of change and neglect opportunities to mobilize men as allies for gender equity (Doss et al., 2018).

Adapted methods in a conflict zone

The research site chosen for this study includes five villages in Myanmar’s Sagaing Region significantly affected by conflict. Sagaing Region, in the northwest part of Myanmar, has a population of over five million. Prior to the coup of 2021, this area had seen little sustained violence, apart from a few episodes of junta-organized violence against members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the early 2000s. However, since the coup, Sagaing Region has become an epicenter of anti-military resistance and violence. In Sagaing, at least 45,377 homes and buildings have been destroyed, accounting for a significant portion of the total number nationwide and representing the region with the highest number (ISP Myanmar, 2023).

Although the area had previously been affected during war against the British empire in the 19th century, in modern times it has been less affected by civil war than the border areas of the country. Today, however, local civilians in the region are suffering more from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and coup-related violence than in other areas. While the region is resilient in terms of natural disasters, it has little experience with the man-made disasters it is currently facing. Sagaing Region was selected as the field area for this research because it represents the epicenter of both conflict and displacement in post-coup Myanmar. In some villages, different groups—military council supporters, their opponents, PDF supporters, and even migrant workers who regularly send remittances—find themselves targeted by different sides in the conflict. Villagers face arson and destruction of their homes, forced displacement, and arrest based on name lists, making

Sagaing the region with the highest number of internally displaced persons in the country (UNHCR, 2025).

Conducting this research in Sagaing Region has necessitated navigating the inherent risks of a conflict zone experiencing intensified military activity. As a researcher who has participated in the revolution, it is challenging to travel to the field area, and I am not able to observe as freely as before. I have to pass the authorities' checkpoints on the way, avoid certain areas due to the danger of mines planted by military personnel, and attempt to maintain a low profile as an independent researcher. Access requires careful negotiation, discretion, and reliance on trusted local networks, reflecting the broader challenges faced by researchers operating in post-coup Myanmar. Specifically, I have had to contact PDF and People's Administration Force (PAF) teams through local relief volunteers. With their help, I contacted and attempted to interview respondents, although sometimes respondents were not able to travel to our designated meeting point due to insecurity in the area. Methodological adaptations included prioritizing secure communication methods and ensuring robust procedures for informed consent and participant anonymity, acknowledging the heightened danger associated with dissent or perceived opposition to the regime.

Narrative research methodology was chosen as particularly appropriate for studying gendered resilience. Narrative methodology allows for a deeper understanding facilitated by the researcher's shared context of risk and uncertainty as a CDM participant operating within the same repressive environment as the respondents. This approach not only allows analysis of resilience in relation to events and changing circumstances but also embraces the constructivist paradigm—seeking to understand how narrators construct their reality through language. Moreover, narrative research empowers the narrator, giving space for them to describe events, details, and emotions outside of the researcher's predetermined framework.

In total, I interviewed 10 respondents (five males and five females) selected from conflict-affected villages in Sagaing Region. The villages were chosen because of their experiences with forced displacement due to junta violence, and the respondents themselves were those who had been receiving assistance from social organizations to cope with their circumstances. I

conducted individual interviews with each respondent, either in person or by secure telephone link, seeking information about the difficulties they faced and their coping strategies. Each individual interview lasted 30-40 minutes. To capture how resilience develops over time and in response to different patterns of hazard and threat, I interviewed the same 10 people on three separate occasions between 2023 and 2024, resulting in a total of 30 interviews. I chose to interview both men and women to compare how hazards, coping mechanisms, and resilience are constructed differently across genders.

My own identity transformation—from university professor to CDM participant to at-risk researcher—mirrors the identity shifts experienced by the displaced communities studied. This parallel transformation creates a distinctive research perspective where analytical insight emerges not despite shared vulnerability but through it. When I reflect on myself, I see that those living in the field area are displaced because the military authorities invaded and destroyed their homes; I see the similarity with the fact that I have had to hide and keep a low profile to avoid being arrested by the authorities because of my CDM participation. This deep connection between my personal experiences and the broader cultural, political, and social context lends an auto-ethnographic sensibility to this research, allowing my own thoughts, feelings, and emotions to serve as data alongside the narratives of participants, helping to understand the wider societal factors reflected in both.

As I have adapted to new constraints and dangers, this lived experience has provided unique insight into how gender shapes both displacement experiences and research possibilities under authoritarian repression. Additionally, I visited the villages in the conflict area for the purpose of conducting direct observation and interviewed local relief workers to gain further insights into local challenges and coping practices. Before interviewing the respondents, I obtained their informed consent and assured them that their anonymity would be protected and all information they provided would remain confidential. Each interview was transcribed prior to coding, generating over 200 pages of text. After coding, I conducted thematic analysis, seeking input from other scholars familiar with the Myanmar conflict to strengthen my analysis and conclusions.

This approach represents what might be termed “mobile ethnography”—a research methodology wherein the researcher travels with communities as they flee violence, capturing experiences in real-time as displacement occurs rather than retrospectively. This method, born of necessity rather than academic choice, enables documentation of resilience as it develops rather than after it has formed, providing unique temporal insights unavailable to researchers operating from more traditional, stable positions. This research exemplifies the TUF condition described in this volume’s introduction: work conducted by a researcher personally at risk as a CDM participant, studying communities facing immediate existential threats, and operating without institutional protections or resources that would traditionally support academic inquiry. This triple precarity shapes not only how research is conducted, but the very nature of the knowledge produced.

Displaced lives

The 10 respondents interviewed represent diverse experiences of displacement and coping strategies in post-coup Sagaing Region. Most are agricultural workers whose homes have been destroyed by military authorities. Their backgrounds illustrate the varied demographic challenges faced by members of displaced communities:

- A 51-year-old man who lost his wife to junta violence and escaped with his son and daughter
- A 60-year-old disabled man working as a tailor
- A male agricultural worker in his 40s with two school-age children
- A 50-year-old man with three children, though only one lives with him as the others are displaced
- A 49-year-old man who earns supplementary income from carpentry work and is active in village social associations
- An 82-year-old grandmother still displaced after her house was destroyed
- A 30-year-old unmarried woman who left agricultural work to join the PDF
- A 52-year-old woman with an adult son whose house escaped arson

- A 37-year-old disabled mother of two children who also cares for her aged parents
- A woman in her 50s caring for her elderly parents and a younger brother

Their stories reveal how displacement disrupts every aspect of daily life and forces dramatic adaptations in livelihood strategies, family roles, and coping mechanisms. The representative narratives of Daw Buu and Ma Khine illustrate these challenges.

Daw Buu

Daw Buu lives with her two elderly parents, both in their 80s, and a younger brother. The family earns a living from farming a small plot of land and selling milk from their two dairy cows. However, when junta troops raided the village and set fire to it, she and her brother fled with their two parents and hid in a cave temple at the village monastery. At that time, she told her younger brother to run away to a safer place, as younger men are particularly targeted by junta troops for arrest, torture, and execution. Following the first raid, there was a continual threat of more raids, as well as explosions and fires from artillery or mortar strikes. This situation has destroyed all semblance of normal life and livelihoods for Daw Buu and her family:

Everything went up in the fire. I do not have a place [of my own] to live anymore, [so] I am living in a monastery. The children [PDF members] come to check on my parents' health. Right now, I do not even know what kind of business to do. There are no more cows for the farmers [to sell]. There is still land, but there is no one to work it anymore, as my younger brother has joined the PDF. My parents are old. We can just about get by selling some milk. Now, selling milk and other support is enough to support our family, but the debts have mounted up, and the economy is worse now. I am always listening out for the sound of army raids. When we run, we cannot really take anything. Listening to the sound of the column, if you run, there is nothing left to take. (personal communication, 2024)

Daw Buu's experience is complicated by the increased risk of arrest or abduction of her younger brother, and so she has had to assume greater responsibility for her family's livelihood, as well as learning to cope with displaced elderly family members. The monastery provides a place of shelter and refuge, and community groups, such as PDF units, extend support where possible. Life for the family, however, remains precarious.

Ma Khine

Ma Khine lives with her husband, two children, and an elderly father in poor health. Due to a birth injury, she has a deformity in one leg, making walking and other activities difficult. Her family farms a few acres of land, and in addition to the seasonal work of growing rice and beans on their land, they earn additional income as day laborers. Prior to the coup, they were self-sufficient. However, after the coup, their village was raided by junta troops and several homes were burned down, so Ma Khine's family fled to an island in a nearby river on someone else's boat. The people living on the island initially provided food and support for them. However, as time went on, Ma Khine's family sold their gold and cattle to be able to buy food for themselves. They are now living in a shelter in a rice field and do day labor in the fields to earn a little extra money, but they are far from self-sufficient: Because the island they live on is small, as is its population, residents are unable to support displaced guests for extended periods. Therefore, new arrivals work as day laborers on the island to support their families. However, day-wage labor itself is often scarce, according to Ma Khine (personal communication, 2023):

It is like this on the middle island. We live anticipating what other people give us. If there is someone who provides a daily meal, we can eat; if they do not, we are stuck. We have to eat what we have, and our livelihood is no longer sufficient.

Over time, the family's situation has become unsustainable. In addition, her father, who is in poor health, wanted to return to their village. More than a month after it was attacked, Ma Khine sought the help of a local organization to return. Sadly, her father passed away on the return boat journey, and when

they arrived back in their village, they found they had no home as it had been completely destroyed. The community helped the family to build a palm-leaf shelter, and Ma Khine tried to restart her agricultural work. However, because she had to flee the army raids, her planting was late and she was unable to collect a harvest. Now, military raids are a regular occurrence in the village, and with Ma Khine's disability, fleeing is very difficult. As a family, they have learned to be prepared to flee at any time: "When I hear the sound of a gun, I wrap my clothes and medicines. We have food prepared so we can run away quickly. I make preparations in advance. I take as much as I can" (Ma Khine, personal communication, 2023).

Like hundreds of thousands of others, Ma Khine has learned to adapt to a life of permanent uncertainty, with the threat of raids and displacement continually present. As a woman with disabilities, this has been a great challenge for her, but her experience has shaped a particular form of resilience in response to the disruptions and threats she and her family have faced.

Structures of oppression

Both Ma Khine and Daw Buu have experienced violence and displacement within a broader structure of gendered inequality. This does not simply translate to a greater risk of violence, although the use of sexual violence by junta troops is well documented. Rather, it is that, as women, their experiences of crises and their coping responses are further shaped by prior structural arrangements, which both define gendered roles and determine expectations of women. The expectation of a carer role for elderly parents has been assumed in the cases of both women, who then have also had to assume the role of livelihood provider and de facto household head. This situation is itself exacerbated by the targeting of younger men by junta troops, whereby it is the men in villages who are considered a threat as males contribute the bulk of armed resistance against junta incursions. According to a 51-year-old male respondent (personal communication, 2024): "They mainly arrest men, especially young men, [and] I am also a man, so I had to run away. If they catch men running away, they [junta soldiers] label them as PDF and kill them all."

Broadly speaking, gendered roles in this context appear to identify men as those who control the means of violence, and women as those who both continue their reproductive roles (child-rearing and care for the elderly) and also assume an increasing amount of responsibility for the productive roles (livelihoods) and adaptation (preparations for fleeing raids). The patriarchal concept of *phon* described in the conceptual framework manifests in Myanmar households as a hierarchical model of relationships. In this system, males belong to a superior group considered auspicious for both home and society, while females belong to a subordinated group often associated with ill fortune. This deeply embedded patriarchal structure provides the background for understanding the system that exercises domination over women both at home and in society (Aye Nwe, 2009, p. 131).

The pre-existing structure of *phon* also provides the framework for more violent manifestations of gender hierarchy in the post-coup context. Beyond physical and sexual violence, multiple forms of structural violence exclude and oppress women. In traditional Burmese society, men are responsible for the livelihood and decision-making of a household and must always be at the head. Household chores, childcare, and elder care are considered women's domain. As Wole Soyinka (2004) notes, humans create concepts of power and place that establish inequalities and hierarchies that can be used for the exclusion and oppression of others. The post-coup crisis has reinforced gendered oppression not simply through overt violence but through the institutionalization of violence in society. The brutality against women is illustrated by the following account of a 50-year-old female respondent (personal communication, 2024):

While a woman was giving birth in the village, they [soldiers] entered the village in a line. They opened fire and entered the village. At that time, the child was not yet born and was still pushing out of the mother's womb. A local traditional birth attendant was delivering the child. They [villagers] were afraid and ran away, leaving the mother of the stillborn child behind. At that time, the woman [the birth attendant] also ran away, thinking she would be saved. I never thought that such displacement would happen in our region. I did not

think that there would be such displaced people in our area. Now, the soldiers are burning houses and shooting people they see, so when the whole village hears the sound, they run to a safe place. The woman who was still in labor [still giving birth] could not run away, so she was left behind. When the soldiers were burning down the houses, they saw the woman who was still in labor and threw her into the fire of the house they were burning. It is so bad, so cruel. It is really sad.

Since the coup, junta violence has also reinforced particular gendered roles through deliberate humiliation. Women are often forced to cook for soldiers who are simultaneously torturing their family members, as described in this testimony from a female respondent in her 50s (personal communication, 2023):

When the fields were sown with rice, three family members returned to their homes and brought back the rice because they said there was no rice. When they were returning the rice to their homes, they encountered a military column and three members of the family were arrested. They [soldiers] said that if they listened to them and did what they asked, they would release the whole family of three. But when the man was first captured, they tied him up with ropes and left him in the sun for two days. The mother and daughter had to do nothing except cook for them [soldiers]. Only after they were released did they return to their families.

As the conflict intensifies, younger people of all genders face increasing vulnerability. According to a male farmer in his 40s (personal communication, 2023): “Young people are more vulnerable now, whether they are boys or girls. They [junta soldiers] just accuse them of being PDF and arrest them.”

Forms of agency and resilience

Within oppressive structures, different types of agency interact with existing conditions to produce distinct patterns of resilience. Analysis of the informants’ narratives reveals that resilience emerges from interactions between

structural constraints and three levels of agency: individual, community, and institutional. Individual agency is primarily expressed by women themselves and other actors, while community agency is derived from networks of individual agency and through the formation of emergent structures that can subvert established oppressive systems. Finally, institutional agency refers to actions of more visible, established groups such as PDF/resistance cells. These three distinct forms of agency produce three corresponding types of resilience.

Individual agency and passive resilience

Exhibited by both women and men, individual agency takes five main forms: running, returning, resuming, responding, and reorientating. These represent different strategies for navigating the immediate dangers of conflict and the longer-term challenges of displacement. Fleeing from raids (“running”) represents the most immediate form of individual agency. The first experience of flight is typically terrifying and chaotic. Those with transportation—motorcycles, bullock carts, boats—can escape with more possessions, while others must flee on foot, often leaving everything behind. The account of an 82-year-old grandmother (personal communication, 2023) illustrates this experience:

When they entered and set fire to the village, I had to avoid it. I reached all the places, I had to run twice in one day to see if I would escape. Now I have returned to the village and live in the village monastery. The house was burned down, so there was no other place to live and no food. Now I live in the monastery and eat what other people come and donate.

After the initial flight, many displaced persons attempt to return to their villages, only to find their homes destroyed. This “returning” phase often involves difficult decisions about whether to rebuild in the same location despite ongoing threats. Following return, many try to resume their livelihoods (“resuming”) despite the constant threat of further raids and dangers from mines or artillery. This restricts farming activities and

market access, as described by a 50-year-old male respondent (personal communication, 2023):

I have had to sell my cattle, land, gold, etc., to make a comfortable living. Because there are no more cattle, our men have to do random jobs. In addition, due to these difficult times, fewer people grow crops. This is because the war dogs [soldiers] also planted bombs in the plantation areas. In addition to this, it is not possible to plant in time while running. Also, when it is time to harvest, we start harvesting with fear, and we do not get as much as we should.

For several respondents, resilience has manifested primarily as persistent, passive submission to events and crises, acceptance of the new reality of frequent displacement, constant threat, and diminished circumstances. For some, particularly older respondents, this has led to a sense of resignation to a predetermined fate. An 82-year-old Buddhist woman (personal communication, 2023) who lost her house expresses this perspective:

I do not blame them for burning our village. It happened to us because of bad karma. We are old and cannot make preparations. If we have to run away from them again, we have to run away from them. If we cannot run, we will be killed. What can we do? It is unfortunate for us.

This form of passive resilience appears more common among females who are frequently expected to unquestioningly accept additional roles and responsibilities as providers while men have more scope to engage in active responses to military violence, including joining PDFs or forming community organizations.

Community agency and tactical adaptation

The narratives of displaced persons in Sagaing Region consistently highlight the crucial role of communities in helping rescue, restore, and rehabilitate lives. As junta troops raid villages, fire artillery, and burn houses, villagers often flee to nearby communities or fields where they construct temporary shelters.

Neighboring communities frequently help each other, with unaffected villages providing support to those experiencing violence, as related by a 52-year-old woman (personal communication, 2023) whose home was destroyed by fire:

Similarly, both those who have returned to the village and those who are still living in the forest go to the palm tree owners in the village to ask for help with building temporary huts, asking if they will give us one or two palm trees. They help each other because they are from the same village, and because they are in trouble.

Community organizations play a crucial role in these support networks. A 60-year-old disabled tailor (personal communication, 2024) describes how youth groups have helped rebuild homes:

Youths of my community gathered together and rebuilt the house using things provided by other villages—palm leaves, palm trees, wood, etc. In order to eat and drink, other organizations donate, and my friends also help. As for food, we only have a little to eat and drink, and now we only have the few fruits that we can get here to cook and eat with. Rice is the main thing to find. [...] If we have to change, it means that we have to share as much as we can.

Community agency thus emerges as the result of the collective benefit from people in displaced areas helping each other and working together. These community responses represent what Manuel DeLanda (2019) describes as “assemblages of bodies” that also include material components such as food, labor, tools, and physical spaces.

For many women, the assumption of new roles is accompanied by considerable adaptation. Women have modified their livelihood strategies to cope with danger, scarcity, and uncertainty. These adaptations have included selling assets, living in temporary shelters, and finding various forms of informal day-wage work to survive. Survival has come to involve learning to prepare for raids and knowing evacuation routes. According to a 37-year-old female respondent (personal communication, 2023):

Whenever I heard the news that the columns were coming in, I was already preparing to run to the other side of the river. From before, I had to prepare food, medicine, and water for one or two days in case I ran away.

The experience of displacement has led people to reassess what constitutes an important asset. Having experienced the need to flee quickly, many have realized they need transportation to escape more effectively. A male respondent in his 40s (personal communication, 2023) explains:

As soon as [we] heard the news of the column's arrival, we had to carry our prepared bags and flee on foot. Walking is slow when you are on foot. People who have a motorcycle or a car can dodge more quickly. So, we sold the cows, land, and gold we had and bought bicycles or motorbikes so we could flee more quickly next time.

Despite the constant threats, many have continued their agricultural work, learning to cultivate under the threat of raids. A female respondent in her 50s (personal communication, 2023) states: "As much as I can do the agricultural work, I sow seeds while running. The harvest is not going according to plan. Now that we can plant and harvest conveniently, we only need a little more to eat."

These actions constitute what Hedström et al. (2023) identify as a key component of resistance to the military junta's authority: "Women's work, often undertaken collectively and in households extending beyond the immediate family, helps to reimagine and recreate the relationship between land, kin, and nation in the midst of violence" (p. 16).

Institutional agency and transformative resilience

In the study area, institutional agency operates primarily through two key organizations: the PDF and Buddhist monasteries. The vital role of these alternative or non-state institutions arises directly from the context of state failure and predation, where official governance structures have either collapsed or become actively hostile towards the civilian population. PDF

units, organized under the National Unity Government (NUG), work alongside PAFs to provide protection, governance, and support. The PDF serves three overlapping functions: conducting armed operations (defense forces), providing village security (People's Security Forces), and assuming governance roles (PAFs). PDF units often coordinate responses to military raids, directing villagers to safe evacuation routes, as detailed by a 50-year-old female respondent (personal communication, 2023):

When we heard the sound of the column, our villagers did not know where to run. The children [PDF personnel] gave directions to everyone at once. For example, if the soldiers came from the west, they would only give directions to the empty area to the east, but if they were coming from the south, they would give directions to the north. No matter how far away they were, they had to quickly flee to the opposite side. In order to escape in time, we constantly received information from our children [PDF personnel].

Upon returning to the village, the PDF comrades helped the villagers tidy up their destroyed homes and build temporary shelters. An 82-year-old grandmother (personal communication, 2023) explains:

When we returned from fleeing, we no longer had a house or a tent. Everything was burned. Only burned remains were left for the villagers, and children [PDF] helped to clean up the remains. Now, they have built a small palm tent in the same place as my old house.

Monasteries have also provided places of shelter and support, particularly for the elderly or disabled who cannot easily flee to other areas. As described by a 60-year-old male respondent (personal communication, 2023):

As for the organizations in the village, the monk from our village has brought food and utensils. This monk is the main donor. He has many friends. If other organizations have food donations, they distribute it through this monk. The majority of villagers have to stay in the

monastery because we cannot afford to eat, so we have to rely on the monastery.

Institutional agency has typically been male-led and illustrates the gendered patterns in responses to violence. While men are more often specifically targeted for arrest, they also have more opportunity and social expectation to engage in specific responses, whether by joining PDFs, organizing relief, or directing evacuations during raids. For women, engaging with institutions is more associated with transformative forms of resilience and requires the navigation of male-dominated spaces and challenges with established gender norms. For a few respondents, circumstances have led to a form of resilience that involves, if not open confrontation, then at least a subtle subversion of both authoritarian violence and gendered hierarchies. This takes two main forms: joining armed resistance against prevailing gender norms, and organizing alternative education systems in the absence of government services. A young, unmarried 30-year-old woman describes her decision to join a PDF unit, motivated by witnessing escalating violence against women. Even within the resistance movement, however, she initially encountered gendered role assignments that limited her to support functions before she gradually managed to increase her frontline participation:

When I came here, most of them [PDF personnel] were men. In order to work side by side with them, I changed my clothes and wore a uniform. Although I stay in the background, I am no longer responsible for cooking. I participate in the production of gunpowder. Sometimes I am also involved in missions. (personal communication, 2023)

This woman's experience illustrates resilience capable of transforming traditional notions of what women can do in response to violence. For others, transformation has occurred within public domains such as children's education. Following the formation of the CDM, many government schools closed, extending the educational disruption that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. Villages responded by establishing alternative schools,

often employing CDM teachers who had left government service. According to a 49-year-old male respondent (personal communication, 2024) who is a charity worker:

A school has been opened in the village. It is under the education network started by NUG. My child is also in primary school. In order for this education system to operate, the teachers who teach are important. Without them, the education of these students is over. [...] We built small buildings with roofs. Some classes have to learn under trees. When they hear the sound of the [raiding], they all have to run and run [...] and they continue their education even when displaced.

While women's leading role in children's education is well-established in Myanmar, what distinguishes the current situation is the extent to which women are increasingly managing the education system and continuously adapting processes in response to violence. This represents not just a continuation of traditional roles but a transformed approach that demonstrates both the courage and ingenuity required to maintain educational systems amid contexts of displacement and conflict.

Conclusion

Chandler and Reid (2016) frame resilience in critical terms, suggesting that the concept promotes passive acceptance of injustice while suppressing individual and collective agency:

The resilient subject is a subject that must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world, not a subject that can conceive of changing the world, its structure, and conditions of possibility, but a subject that accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world, which will not question why he or she suffers. (p. 68)

This study suggests that, while such a form of passive, resigned resilience is indeed widespread in conflict-affected Myanmar, other more

transformative forms also exist. Women operating within the constraints of both restrictive cultural frameworks and extreme violence are developing coping mechanisms that involve adaptation and change, demonstrating what Nelson et al. (2007) describe as creative responses to adversity. This research illustrates how different forms of resilience emerge from different processes of interaction between agency and social structures. Where individuals have had little meaningful engagement with community groups or institutions beyond receiving assistance, their resilience tends toward passive acceptance focused primarily on survival. Those more engaged with community systems demonstrate greater adaptive capacity, employed not just for immediate survival but also for enhancing future coping abilities. Those directly engaged with institutions were most likely to develop resilience characterized by transformative potential, which often requires challenging established gender roles and stereotypes within those institutions.

Notably, many adaptive strategies employed by members of displaced communities—such as constant vigilance, reliance on informal networks, and the perpetuation of livelihood activities while living under threat—echo the necessary precautions and adaptations required by researchers attempting to document these realities within similar environments of pervasive insecurity. Whether these transformations will lead to permanent structural changes in gender hierarchies and gender-based violence remains uncertain. However, this research reveals how traditional norms and values established in a society can change when faced with hardship—an example being an increased fluidity in sharing of household responsibilities between men and women. This reinforces my reflective view that many traditional norms are established by society to differentiate and limit power based on gender.

Furthermore, engaging with the resilience of displaced people has profoundly affected me personally. While studying the resilience of those who have maintained their will to live despite loss of family members, homes, and basic necessities, I have gained a lot of strength for managing my own precarious situation. The determination of the research informants echoes the Burmese proverb, “If the paddle breaks, I will use my hands to paddle”—a refusal to give up despite overwhelming obstacles. Moreover, as Smyth et al. (2015) observe, such transformation is essential for post-conflict recovery:

Women [...] contribute massively to post-disaster reconstruction and recovery, often shouldering workloads and burdens of responsibility which tacitly challenge gendered roles, and which can potentially be built on to shift norms about women's capabilities to lead and instigate household and community responses to disasters and other threats to lives and livelihoods. (p. 416)

Supporting gendered resilience effectively requires close collaboration with communities and institutions to recognize and validate the new spaces created by women engaged in fostering transformative resilience. By supporting these emergent spaces, there is potential to expand them and push back against entrenched systems of gender-based discrimination and violence that have been intensified by Myanmar's post-coup conflict. Documenting these coping strategies, an act undertaken amidst the very precarity being studied, demonstrates the vital role of bearing witness even when research itself is imperiled. Ultimately, documenting these experiences of gendered resilience under extreme duress, undertaken by a researcher sharing the risks inherent in the post-coup environment, serves not only as academic analysis but as an act of witnessing and intellectual resistance against the erasure and violence perpetrated by the regime.

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Chapter 10

**Normalcy Under Fire:
Community Resilience and Everyday Resistance
in Post-Coup Ayadaw**

Ayadaw Thu

Abstract

This chapter explores how villagers in Ayadaw Township, Sagaing Region, have mobilized pre-existing social capital to sustain collective life amid the upheaval following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Drawing on immersive ethnographic research conducted under "thrice under fire" (TUF) conditions where the researcher, the researched community, and institutional infrastructure are all under siege, it examines how religious institutions, reciprocal labor traditions, local governance, and gendered roles are repurposed to meet both daily survival needs and political resistance imperatives. The analysis introduces the concept of "normalcy under fire" to capture how communities reassert routine and continuity as forms of resilience. It also reflects critically on the researcher's dual positionality as both a native ethnographer and a member of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), demonstrating how embedded knowledge-making emerges through shared vulnerability. This study contributes to broader debates on resistance, methodology, and the transformation of social structures under conditions of extreme duress.

Keywords: social capital, resistance, resilience, reciprocity, collective, normalcy, Myanmar, Sagaing Region

The sound of jets overhead is unmistakable. Work stops. Conversation halts. Every villager knows the routine: assess the direction of the incoming attack, grab the pre-packed bag, and run—not necessarily home, but towards the relative safety of the taw, the forest that has become both refuge and temporary workplace. This is daily life in Ayadaw Township, Sagaing Region, since the 2021 military coup transformed this historically quiet agricultural area into a frontline. Conducting research here means sharing this reality—the constant threats, the disrupted lives, the reliance on community networks for survival. It means operating as a researcher who is personally targeted by the regime, documenting a community experiencing direct military assault, within an academic landscape where formal institutions have collapsed. This is ethnography “thrice under fire.”

Introduction

Humans can be affected by natural or man-made disasters at any time or place. Myanmar is currently experiencing a civil war, a man-made disaster brought on by the February 1, 2021 military coup. Military takeovers have long-term negative effects on people’s socioeconomic lives, causing both physical and mental devastation. Understanding the struggles and resilience of Myanmar’s communities requires insight into the country’s current political climate. This study, situated within that climate, was conducted under the precarious “thrice under fire” (TUF) conditions encompassing personal risk to the researcher, the targeting of the research community by state violence, and the collapse of formal institutional support as described in this volume’s introduction and which has profoundly shaped the research process and the observed community dynamics.

This chapter begins by providing essential background on Myanmar’s political context and an overview of Ayadaw Township, the study site, before outlining the research framework and methodology that guides this ethnographic study. The chapter then examines the pre-existing social capital in the region, exploring village governance systems, religious influences, and economic patterns that have formed the foundation for community resilience. Following this, the analysis turns to the impact of the coup, documenting how local governance has changed and how communities have mobilized

their social resources in response to the crisis, navigating the complexities of life under TUF conditions. The chapter concludes by examining specific manifestations of community resilience, including evolving social roles, security adaptations, relationships with neighboring villages, and efforts to maintain education under duress, culminating in a detailed case study of a military raid that has tested community response mechanisms.

Ayadaw in the Myanmar context

Myanmar (formerly Burma), mainland Southeast Asia's largest country, is home to over 100 ethnic groups. The Bamar are the majority, and Burmese is the official language. Buddhism is the predominant religion. Independent since 1948, Myanmar suffered under direct military rule from 1962 to 1974 and a subsequent constitutional dictatorship until 1988. A succession of military juntas ruled until 2011, relocating the country's capital to Nay Pyi Taw in 2005 and drafting a military-centric constitution in 2008 after suppressing the Saffron Revolution of 2007. A quasi-civilian government led by ex-military figures took power in 2011. Despite the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victory in the 2015 elections, the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) retained significant control.

Following the November 2020 elections, where the NLD won an even larger majority and the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) lost seats, the military alleged widespread fraud. Despite domestic and international observers finding no evidence of significant irregularities, the military rejected the results. On February 1, 2021, the military seized power, detaining State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, shutting down communications, and declaring a state of emergency. This coup was met with widespread civilian rejection, sparking the ongoing Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), protests, and armed resistance across the country.

Historically, Myanmar's dry zone regions, including Sagaing, experienced little organized armed conflict after 1962. However, the 2021 coup plunged the entirety of Myanmar into crisis, with the military launching brutal attacks against villages in Sagaing and other regions, burning homes and destroying livelihoods. Sagaing Region, particularly Ayadaw Township, has become

a focal point of resistance and has consequently suffered intense military ground and arson attacks, exemplifying the “targeted community” dimension of the crisis.

Ayadaw Township, known for its production of *thanaka* (cosmetic paste made from ground bark), lies in southern Sagaing Region between the Chindwin and Mu Rivers. Predominantly rural, its economy relies on agriculture (cotton, sesame, groundnut, *thanaka*, and karaya gum). Beyond its agricultural base, Ayadaw Township serves as a vital resource hub for surrounding villages with its city market, hospital, and government bank. Cultural events like the *Chay-Daw-Yar* pagoda festival bring together people from different communities, fostering social bonds and collective identity. Educational infrastructure is concentrated in the township, requiring students from outlying areas to travel for schooling—a pattern that has historically strengthened interconnections between communities and fostered networks of support and collaboration that would later prove crucial during crisis.

Historically water-scarce, the township has faced new, devastating challenges since the coup. Following peaceful protests against the coup, the military’s violent crackdown led the local population to form self-defense forces which aim for liberation from army domination. Ayadaw has become a significant site of resistance, frequently subjected to military attacks, including aerial assaults, disproportionately affecting villages in the area.

Ethnography under fire

The study village is unusual in several respects: its residents assist neighboring villages attacked and torched by the regime, participate in revolutionary events, ensure students are able to study with minimum disruption to their education, and work to maintain the trust of their own neighbors and those living in other villages. These factors make it interesting for research. The villagers have attempted to adapt to their new, consistently precarious lifestyles following the military coup. Despite challenges, they are overcoming obstacles by uniting with fellow villagers and the People’s Defense Force (PDF). This research explores how people living in Myanmar’s dry central regions have used their preexisting forms of social capital to adapt to the new

political reality, how they have worked with the PDF to negotiate a new social structure, and how this has affected their day-to-day resistance.

Most studies conducted after Myanmar's 2021 coup have concentrated on the effects of the coup, which include psychological and physical harm, whereas ethnographic research rarely focuses on the conditions under which a strong form of community resilience arises. In this study, the population of Ayadaw Township is observed as having overcome obstacles with great resilience and comparatively less harm thanks to their social cohesiveness and their skills at adapting to new social structures following the military coup. The purpose of this study is to better understand how community members manage their daily lives with their pre-existing forms of social capital and how they have restructured their social organization, particularly under the control of the PDF in the period since the military coup. This study intends to make it possible to grasp how different aspects of community life have been impacted by and adapted to the new political situation.

The key questions guiding this study explore the challenges that have arisen and the impact of the military coup on residents' daily lives; how they deal with risk circumstances and the new social structure; and how community members understand and utilize concepts like "social capital" on a day-to-day basis to navigate times of crisis. The primary argument of this study is that the pre-existing social capital of the local populace plays a crucial role in fostering community resilience in the face of a changing social structure, specifically in the context of PDF control during a military coup.

This study draws on James Scott's (1989) concept of "everyday forms of resistance" to analyze how villagers navigate the new reality of their village being under the administration of the PDF. Additionally, I employ Bourdieu's (1985) notion of "social capital" to understand how pre-existing community ties are leveraged and transformed in the face of crisis. This theoretical perspective helps illuminate the complex interplay between local agency and broader political structures in shaping community resilience.

James Scott (1985) defines "everyday resistance" as an alternative form of resistance that is not as dramatic or apparent as organized, collective, or confrontational forms of resistance like revolutions, civil wars, riots, protests, or other similar events. Scott (1989) also recognizes moments when

hidden everyday resistance becomes public and collective. Therefore, this study reveals how the everyday resistance of the Ayadaw locals has evolved gradually following the military coup. From peaceful protests to voluntary armed revolution and military training, villagers have organized a systematic armed revolution, forming an alliance with residents of other villages to gain control over their territory. Locals rely on social capital for performance of their daily activities because they are engaged in daily resistance alongside their neighbors, alliances, and others involved in new social networks.

Bourdieu (1985) defines social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition. According to Bourdieu, the foundation of the solidarity that enables the formation of a group is the benefits that come with belonging to it. Individual agency transforms into collective agency as social capital grows and the group works together to achieve common goals. Thus, this study attempts to understand how locals' social capital is constructed and applied in the face of crisis. While community resilience throughout the entirety of Myanmar's central dry region is not thoroughly explored in this study, most communities in the region share similar contexts and events. Therefore, understanding daily resistance practices in Ayadaw Township can shed some overall light on the experiences of villagers living under PDF control in these areas.

This research, and the fieldwork it is based on, sets itself apart from routine fieldwork by being conducted in hazardous environments where I faced the perpetual threat of being detained. Despite these challenging circumstances, adapting research methods proved helpful in navigating the difficulties encountered during the study. This high-risk research context necessitated specific methodological approaches adapted to conflict conditions, as explained below.

Methodology and reflexivity

Ethnographic research allows for a detailed and immersive exploration of a specific village or locale, enabling researchers to gather information objectively and discreetly. This particular ethnographic study spanned six months, running from January to June 2024. By actively participating in

village activities and forming relationships with residents, I have been able to gather valuable insights that may not have been accessible through other research methods.

The study collects information about participant experiences through a range of qualitative techniques, including in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, participant observation, case studies, telephone interviews, and secondary sources. Practical research methods were severely constrained; internet cutouts hampered initial attempts at online data collection, while security risks prevented the use of standard tools like cameras or recording devices, forcing reliance on memory and handwritten notes compiled later.

Key informants, such as members of the PDF, *Pa-Ka-Pha* (Local Defense Forces), CDM, volunteers, and monks who have firsthand knowledge of the community, have been interviewed to learn and understand more about the difficulties encountered by locals following the military coup, how they have overcome these challenges, and how their social capital has affected the community during risky times. Ten people were interviewed as key informants, including three PDF soldiers, two *Pa-Ka-Pha* personnel, four CDM teachers, two volunteers, and two monks.

The purpose of conducting in-depth interviews is to grasp more about the perspectives, feelings, experiences, and points of view of locals in risky situations so that they can adapt their strategies to cope appropriately. Thirteen informants, six males and seven females, were chosen specifically to provide firsthand accounts of military attacks, how they have managed to overcome obstacles, and how they have prepared.

In addition, I employed participant observation, conducting over 50 semi-structured interviews with villagers across different age groups, genders, and social positions. Due to security concerns, I often had to rely on snowball sampling and conduct interviews in informal settings—a methodological necessity dictated by the TUF context. Methodological adaptation became hyper-specific: fear of military checkpoints prohibited the carrying of standard recording devices, necessitating reliance on memory and note-taking after the fact. Interviews often occurred spontaneously during daily activities, sometimes lacking privacy and involving interruptions from other community members, reflecting the deep immersion required.

The ongoing nature of the conflict presented challenges in accessing certain areas and individuals, potentially limiting the scope of my observations. The purpose of participant observation is to gain an understanding of local knowledge and practices from the native point of view within physical, social, and cultural contexts. Understanding locals' relationships among and between people, other social group networks and activities, ideas, norms, and events enabled a better understanding of what was happening in the community. Then, through participant observation, I collected data for interviews, which provided the necessary information for analysis. The case-study method includes in-depth and comprehensive empirical description. While traditional ethnographic approaches emphasize researcher detachment, my position as a native researcher operating under TUF conditions meant that shared vulnerability and embedded knowledge shaped the ethnographic account in ways that conventional fieldwork relationships do not permit.

While conducting fieldwork, I faced the constant threat of military attacks, regardless of the location or time. Evaluating safety conditions was of great importance, particularly when working independently at the research site.

In ethnographic methodology, data analysis includes description, analysis, and interpretation. First, I took field notes and photos, and recorded transcripts. When gathering data, field notes were a helpful tool for documenting observations, stories, and analyses of participant observation. The process of analyzing relationships, factors, and linkages throughout the data theme was followed by a description of the data facts. Finally, in accordance with the information, interpretation provided a detailed understanding of focuses and analysis. I considered the meaning of each theme and linked it to the literature review through critical analysis.

Combination of these research approaches has produced a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of how locals' social capital and acts of everyday resistance contribute to community resilience. Conducting research frequently presents difficulties brought about by a range of obstacles; however, utilizing a variety of research techniques can effectively address and surmount these challenges. Navigating the complexities of data collection and ethical decision-making in such high-risk situations has been significantly

aided by the guidance and support provided by experienced mentors, which helped ensure the integrity and robustness of the research process.

Ethical considerations

It is a most challenging time to conduct research in Myanmar. The unique context of researching under TUF conditions necessitates an expanded ethical framework that extends beyond conventional research protocols to address compounded vulnerabilities.

I requested verbal informed consent from locals prior to their participation in the research, explaining the potential risks in this highly politicized and dangerous environment. Before traveling to the study area, I planned to use the focus group discussion method, but when I arrived, this method was determined to be inappropriate because it was local harvest time and most locals were busy, highlighting the need for methodological flexibility under unpredictable conditions. After conducting in-depth and key informant interviews, I had the opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews and participant observation while crops were being harvested.

I am committed to safeguarding the identities of the participants involved in this study by upholding strict confidentiality measures, monitoring data access closely, and responsibly handling the distribution of personal information to uphold ethical standards throughout the research process. In order to maintain the anonymity of the informants, all names have been altered and certain identifying information has been withheld. Decisions about anonymity were complex, balancing the need for protection against some participants' desire for recognition, a common ethical dilemma in high-risk research noted in this volume's introduction.

I carefully selected essential data to achieve the research goals, sometimes leaving out certain details to prevent harm—not only to the local community but to others as well. Unlike conventional studies, this research required me to consider potential repercussions on different communities and individuals, rather than solely concentrating on the well-being of myself and of the local community.

In the present circumstances, it was imperative to safeguard not only myself and participants in the researched community, but also our families

and fellow researchers. For example, I participated in an online digital security training session arranged by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD). As I was listening to a lecture in my room, a member of the military intelligence service, known as *Sa-Ya-Pha*, showed up at my house looking for me. I immediately concealed myself along with my computer and phone when I heard him downstairs. A family member told the *Sa-Ya-Pha* officer that I was not living at that house and they had not been in contact with me. Fortunately, the officer did not look into it any further and simply left his phone number in case I came back home. I was worried about accidents happening and *Sa-Ya-Pha* possibly accessing the information on my computer and phone, especially information about other research fellows in Myanmar. Therefore, I sent a message to my mentor about what was going on, gave him the *Sa-Ya-Pha* officer's phone number and asked him to notify the other fellows in case my devices were compromised (in Myanmar it is standard practice to negotiate payment for release and assurance of safety from military authorities). I also deleted some data and apps from my devices as a precaution. My neighbors were aware of this situation and they were also concerned about their families.

When conducting ethnographic research, it is crucial to adhere to ethical principles that prioritize the safety, well-being, and dignity of all participants. It is also necessary to take into account the potential negative impact that the research may have on other researchers, family members, and neighbors. Conducting research in dangerous situations, such as during a rebellion against the national military, is illegal under unjust conditions. Researching in unstable and hazardous environments thus presents everyday ethical and legal dilemmas.

Researcher's positionality

A unique aspect of navigating the TUF context is my dual identity as both a member of the CDM and a native of Ayadaw. This combined positioning was deemed indispensable—omitting either facet would have rendered the research impossible due to insurmountable barriers in access, trust, and security.

As a CDM teacher and anthropologist native to the field study site, I face significant movement restrictions. As CDM members are regularly detained by the authorities, traveling to the Sagaing Region or returning from my current residence is extremely difficult. Upon my arrival at the study area, the locals and I share relative security, apart from our constant fear of potential army attacks. Prior to this study, I maintained contact with residents via phone or in-person visits in order to understand their daily post-coup experiences. The high level of trust I established with locals proved essential. My positionality therefore allowed me to sustain strong bonds with the community while gaining firsthand knowledge of the challenges experienced in high-risk situations. The shared identity created a unique research dynamic where trust was a prerequisite rather than developed through conventional fieldwork approaches.

This situation aligns with the concept of the TUF researcher as articulated in this volume. The TUF framework highlights the compounded risks faced by scholars such as myself in post-coup Myanmar:

Individual persecution

As a CDM participant, I face direct threats from the regime, including potential arrest and the consequences of being blacklisted. While my native connection to the researched community has fostered deep trust, my position as a partial outsider (due to living away) has required me to critically verify community narratives, particularly those related to resistance efforts. Personal travel involves navigating numerous PDF checkpoints and the constant anxiety of potential military stops, especially when carrying sensitive research data. This status shapes my access to—and interactions with—informants, and necessitates constant vigilance. The persistent risk I face has contributed to serious mental challenges, including periods of seclusion and difficulties with concentration that have continued even after leaving the field, highlighting the enduring psychological toll of such research on the TUF researcher. During these difficult times, my personal faith and engagement with literature have provided crucial grounding and helped mitigate stress. Following the military coup, my daily routine has

become challenging as I am unable to work in public or visit certain places due to my background and involvement in supporting the revolution.

Targeted communities

This research is conducted within and about a community that is actively targeted by military violence, placing both me and participants in shared danger. Immersion in the targeted community has meant adapting to the sounds of nearby conflict, such as recognizing the source of daily gunfire and becoming accustomed to it over time. Documenting residents' daily lives has meant sharing their risks. Sagaing Region itself faces specific restrictions. For example, those with national identity cards from this region are not allowed to stay in other regions and face increased scrutiny at army checkpoints while traveling.

Destroyed infrastructure

The collapse of Myanmar's formal university system and the suppression of academic freedom means conducting research without conventional institutional support, resources, or safety nets, relying instead on alternative networks and methods developed under duress.

This TUF condition shapes the entire research process described herein, influencing methodological choices, ethical considerations, and my analytical perspective. In the case of this research, I am a native of the studied village who has lived and worked elsewhere. From an emic perspective, I am familiar with the community's everyday culture. However, as I had been living outside of the study area prior to the coup, I am unable to know and understand in detail how locals have been coping with daily challenges since the coup. Therefore, from an etic perspective, I have focused on investigating how locals' preexisting social capital influences their daily resistance and how they overcome obstacles in high risk situations.

I acknowledge that my own experiences and beliefs about the political situation in Myanmar may have influenced my interpretations of collected field data. While my familiarity with local customs has facilitated trust-building, I have had to constantly reflect on how my perceived alignment with the resistance movement might affect the information shared with me.

This reflexive process, heightened by shared risk, has become integral to the analysis. I have made conscious efforts to seek out diverse perspectives, including those that might challenge my preconceptions. At times, I questioned how my presence—as both researcher and CDM member—may have shaped responses. For example, some informants spoke with unusual emotion or detail, possibly because they viewed me as a witness who could carry their story beyond our village.

Following a military coup, various factors play a crucial role in determining the level of resistance expressed within local communities. The historical and social background of a region heavily influences the way people respond to such upheavals. When faced with challenges during a coup, a combination of traditional customs and new methods are often employed to navigate the precarious situation. Both old and new practices intertwine to devise strategies aimed at overcoming obstacles and safeguarding the interests of the populace.

The impetus of this research itself is a product of the TUF condition arising from my personal experiences in processing the coup's impact as a CDM member, hearing accounts from my native community, and identifying the specific research puzzle concerning the study village's unique resilience compared to that of its neighbors.

Pre-existing forms of social capital

Understanding the Ayadaw community's response to the coup requires examining the pre-existing social structures and cultural practices that form the bedrock of villagers' social capital. These have become crucial resources following the collapse of formal state structures.

Village governance systems

Traditionally, village administration has involved an elected administrator, 10 household heads, and numerous village elders. These mechanisms for local problem-solving, often involving face-to-face discussion and mediation sometimes including monks, proved essential for maintaining order when formal state administration became ineffective or predatory post-coup. Locals have preferred to resolve issues within the village by using social

pressure or compensation, reflecting strong internal social control. Pre-coup relations with the military were distant, unlike the post-coup reality of direct confrontation.

Family and kinship networks form the core of village social structure. Close ties are fostered through shared living arrangements and traditions. While detailed marriage customs like bride price (*tin-taun*) exist, their primary function in this context is reinforcing intra-village bonds and expectations of mutual support.

Central to daily life is the concept of *lu-mhu-yay* (social duties and responsibilities), encompassing participation in joyous and sorrowful community events. Practices like *wine-loat-wine-sar* (sharing work/benefits) and *lat-sar-like* (reciprocal labor, extending beyond farm work to social events) are fundamental. Close-knit connections foster trust and solidarity. Prior to the coup, the village collaborated with neighboring villages on various issues and shared resources like water, establishing inter-village ties that also proved valuable later. These deep-rooted traditions of mutual aid became critical survival mechanisms for the villagers post-coup, representing the community's reliance on its own social capital in the absence of state protections. Non-participation carries social shame, reinforcing collective responsibility, a factor that has strengthened village unity after the coup.

Religious influence

Theravada Buddhism deeply influences daily life and Bamar identity in Myanmar. Key practices include *Dana* (charitable giving), *Sira* (Buddhist ethics), and *Bhavana* (meditation). The belief in *Kamma* (actions and consequences) motivates charitable acts for social welfare and personal merit. This religious emphasis on generosity and mutual support has reinforced the community's social capital.

The study village has a historical reputation for strong *Dana* and solidarity, inspiring other villages. Monasteries serve as crucial locations in village life, acting as centers for religious and social matters, and providing refuge. The relationship between monks and locals is reciprocal; monks offer guidance and support, while villagers maintain the monasteries. This mutual trust has been vital post-coup, with monasteries serving as safe havens and distribution

points, even for people from neighboring villages. Monks have also taken on expanded roles, including mediating with soldiers, caring for refugees, and sometimes having to flee themselves due to danger, demonstrating their adaptation within the context of state failure.

One 45-year-old *Pa-Ka-Pha* personnel (personal communication, 2024) states:

Many of the neighboring villages also run to the monastery in my village [...] The monk gives what food he has [...] the villagers also give and prepare food for other villagers [...] It is not wrong to say that the monastery saves lives.

A local monk (personal communication, 2024) describes needing to evacuate monks from multiple monasteries during a period of intense fighting:

After evacuating the villagers, I was forced to flee [...] some monks had already arrived. I wanted to call the remaining monks [...] Every monk had to stay the night in Kyaw's hut [living in the countryside, outside the village]. To reach the irrigation canal in the early morning, we had to push the car west [...] then fly to Myitkyina, where we spent a month and 10 days [...] Everything was ready thanks to our village.

This reciprocal relationship between villagers and monks, extending beyond spiritual matters to material support and refuge, highlights how religious institutions have become key components of the community's resilience infrastructure when other systems have failed. Older villagers often frame the present period as more terrifying than that of the 2007 Saffron Revolution or earlier military eras, not only because of the violence, but because "even the monasteries are not safe this time" (group discussion, 2024). This collapse of assumed sanctuaries marks a rupture in villagers' historical memory of conflict.

Economic adaptations

The local economy in Ayadaw Township is primarily based on agriculture, with the primary crops being *thanaka*, peanuts, sesame, and karaya gum. Farm ownership defines traditional social strata, but mutual dependence is key. Labor shortages are common, addressed through hiring laborers from other villages and reciprocal labor systems like crop-share payment reinforcing social ties. These cooperative labor practices represent another facet of the villagers' social capital mobilized during the crisis.

Post-coup instability, attacks, and displacement have severely disrupted income-generating agricultural activities in the community. Approximately half the locals initially relocated to the nearby forest for safety, adapting both their living and working practices. Fear of attacks has forced other changes as well: locals sold their harvests quickly rather than waiting for better prices, increased their vigilance over crops left in fields, and altered crop storage practices, often hiding goods outside the home or in multiple locations.

While several forms of local mutual aid predate the coup, they have gradually taken on political purpose—not just helping neighbors, but sustaining the infrastructure of resistance itself. Crop-share payment systems, for example, now function as a method of both survival and silent defiance. A 50-year-old widow (personal communication, 2024) explains her decision to sell her crop of pigeon peas quickly despite rising prices:

I am worried about military attacks and village fire. Money can easily carry me [...] As a result, I rarely do anything beyond my means. One source of consolation is that the situation in our village [the study village] is less shocking than in burned villages.

Resourcefulness has increased in the township, with more people gathering wild foods (like chaste fruit, a small, dark berry with a peppery taste) or gleaning crop remnants. Shops that have faced supply chain disruptions due to the conflict and travel restrictions (an example of compromised infrastructure) have adapted by storing goods separately and relying on sellers with local approval or recommendations. New informal taxes have sometimes been levied on outside sellers by local administration

groups. Access to formal credit has vanished; villagers have become fully reliant on private loans from within the community, often based on existing social ties. These adaptations demonstrate economic resilience heavily reliant on local resources, social networks, and risk mitigation strategies developed in response to state failure and direct threats.

Impact of the coup

The 2021 coup has devastated Myanmar. In Ayadaw, previously distant from conflict, the impact has been acute, representing the experience of a “targeted community.” The military imposed communication blackouts (internet, phone lines) in the days following the coup, hindering information flow and isolating villages before attacks. Military operations have involved arson, looting, the destruction of livelihoods, arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings, often based on suspicion of involvement with resistance forces or information received from *dalan* (military informants). Ayadaw Township ranks high in the number of homes destroyed by the military. Martial law was declared, yet most villages remained outside direct military administration, falling under the de facto governance of local resistance forces (PDF and *Pa-Ka-Pha*), creating a contested and dangerous environment.

Despite internal political differences (there were supporters of both the NLD and USDP living in Ayadaw prior to 2021), the village has largely united in opposition to the coup, initially through peaceful protests and CDM participation, mirroring the national movement. Children learned resistance slogans from adults. When peaceful means of protest were met with lethal force, the community, like many across Myanmar, shifted towards armed self-defense, drawing on its sense of belonging and social cohesion.

Around April 2021, local youth, many with no prior experience with conflict or arms, decided to form defense forces. This initiative was initially met with hesitation from elders but quickly gained momentum. The first Local Defense Force (LDF) was self-funded by volunteers. At the same time, some elders began keeping handmade guns for self-defense, reflecting a community preparing for conflict. According to a 70-year-old farmer and village elder (personal communication, 2024):

At my age, I am not going to fight with a handmade gun. I keep it to protect myself and our village in the case of an attack. The bullets are also expensive, costing 10,000 kyat each.

A 25-year-old male final-year university student who is now in the PDF (personal communication, 2024) describes his motivation:

I began to protest [after] protesters were brutally killed [...] I determined that this was the only way [...] through an armed revolution [...] My friend who stepped on a landmine passed away in the village. For the rest of my life, I will defend the village against any attacks by the army. As long as we are human, there is nothing to fear.

Reflecting sharp social divisions, new terms have emerged to distinguish between different political alliances: *phyu* (pro-military militia), *sit-khwe* (military dogs) versus PDF, *ka-lay* (young fighters), and *kou-lu-twe* (our people).

In late 2022, under the guidance of township-level groups and aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG), villages formally established *Pa-Ka-Pha* (People's Defense Teams [PDT]) and *Pa-Ah-Pha* (People's Administration Teams [PAT]). Existing LDFs were largely integrated into this structure. *Pa-Ka-Pha* members received various training, including basic combat and healthcare. Starting with homemade firearms, these defense groups have gradually acquired better weapons, sometimes through connections with ethnic armed organizations (EOs). However, they remain heavily outgunned by the military, facing significant risks due to their inexperience and inferior equipment.

A 19-year-old LDF member (personal communication, 2024) describes his first combat experience: "Military dogs (*sit-khwe*) were able to overcome our people's intervention attack [...] They moved forward and shot continuously [...] our people have no prior experience [...] Fighting ability varies [...] We will die if we do not move [...] We ran for our lives!"

Funding various defense groups has become a major challenge, met through community donations and sometimes by fighters undertaking

risky work like transporting bullets. The defense forces and villagers have developed a relationship of mutual dependence, collaborating for the safety of the village—a key adaptation necessitated by the collapse of state security.

Local governance changes

Following the military coup, there has been a shift in the village's governance systems, leading the locals to embrace a new structure in order to enhance community resilience and engage in daily acts of resistance. The coup effectively replaced state administration with local governance structures led by resistance-affiliated bodies (PDT, PAT) working alongside traditional village elders. Village leadership has continued to be selected through community consensus. These new bodies manage local justice (using negotiation, compensation, security, community affairs, and social punishment, including the use of shackles), demonstrating local agency in filling the power vacuum left by the state's failure.

Community security has become a collective responsibility, with mandatory sentry duty organized for individual households. Rules have been established for participation, notification, and penalties (fines or shackles) for non-compliance, enforced by the local defense teams. Locals rely heavily on neighbors for safety cues and mutual support, especially when some households are sheltering in the forest. Households unable to provide manpower contribute snacks. While compliance varies, the system reflects shared responsibility for village safety.

Funding for defense, refugee support, and allies has come from household contributions, collected transparently based on perceived ability to pay (land ownership), supplemented by contributions from villagers living elsewhere. This collective funding mechanism has been vital for sustaining resistance and mutual aid. A 53-year-old farmer (personal communication, 2024) notes: "Our village can claim unity despite being less wealthy [...] If anything happens in the village, we will collect in this way. Defense supplies are now required, and locals must provide support wherever they live."

Since the military's takeover, some elements of the old system of governing continue, allowing local leaders the power to govern the community directly. The community handles most problems internally and agrees on how

decisions should be made, without requiring outside help. Furthermore, issues within the community are typically resolved in a way that avoids causing physical harm. In addition, local leaders focus on protecting the security of the community in order to oppose the military's takeover, rather than using armed forces and collaborating with other armed groups. Responsibility for security lies with the local leaders, residents, and others in case of a military attack. Community activities depend on the PDF to maintain security, with communication about security coordinated with neighboring villages.

These new governance and security arrangements, accepted by the majority as necessary for survival, represent significant social transformations driven by the coup and the community's resistance efforts. Nevertheless, even though the structure of local government has undergone changes, the power of local residents continues to be influential in maintaining community resilience.

Mobilizing social capital

The community's resilience stems not only from its mobilization of pre-existing social capital, but also its ability to adapt to situations of extreme duress through collective action. This section explores how these dynamics have unfolded, focusing on resource mobilization, changing social roles, security adaptations, relationships with neighbors, education, cultural continuity, and a key case study illustrating collective responses during a village raid.

Following a military takeover, using social connections can provide both tangible and intangible advantages in obtaining information, opportunities, and valuable resources that can affect local people's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Post-coup, villagers have actively leveraged and expanded their social networks. Existing trust with neighboring villages has facilitated learning arms-making and receiving initial defense training. Connections were forged with EAOs for better weapons and advanced training (e.g., laying of landmines), funded by collective village donations. Local youth have taken significant risks by participating in weapons training and production, often under secretive conditions due to the threat of *dalan*. This mobilization of external ties alongside internal resources and personal sacrifice has been

crucial for developing defensive capabilities in the township. A 25-year-old CDM student involved in early landmine efforts (personal communication, 2024) states:

We started working on land mines [...] Raw materials were extremely expensive [...] Nobody in the rural areas knows what will happen next. We could not show up and go during the day because *dalan* were still in the village [...] we only lived with our small group [...] only go out at night.

Changing social roles

The crisis has prompted significant shifts in social roles. With many men focused on defense duties, women have taken on increased responsibility for agricultural work, household survival, and maintaining community life. Women also play vital roles supporting defense efforts (cooking, logistics, etc.), running households by themselves when men are away or displaced, handling necessary travel to insecure towns, and providing care to those sheltering in the forest.

Women in particular have adapted quickly, shouldering both care and economic roles. But they have also quietly shaped resistance, balancing household survival with logistical support for the PDF—a form of agency often overshadowed in dominant narratives. A 43-year-old married CDM woman (personal communication, 2024) explains the determination to stay:

If our village can make a living for a day, the men can earn at least ten thousand [*kyats*] [...] The watchman allows us to sleep well. The more family members take part in a revolution, the worse the household's financial situation becomes [...] If the village burns down, we will move to the forest [...] Every villager can be connected to the city.

Youth involvement has been central, driven by revolutionary fervor but also entailing personal sacrifice and tension. Young people, including students, have joined defense forces, sometimes prioritizing the revolution over education or parental concerns. They face the dangers of combat, risking

logistical tasks like carrying bullets and the psychological toll of conflict. Some youth express frustration with community expectations or lack of understanding about the demands of resistance work. A 25-year-old LDF leader (personal communication, 2024) reflects:

If I go to the campaign, I said we could repay our parents' gratitude later. The revolution must be done immediately. I know how tired moms are [...] I know parents are tired. When the time comes, I will help my parents.

A 32-year-old defense member (personal communication, 2024) speaks of the challenges:

Some parents are becoming dissatisfied [...] When some young people make a mistake [...] some people are told this mistake, and they lose motivation [...] I do not like being told that I work for the village. We are doing this willingly [...] Resilience is still visible in our village, where many people are willing to help.

Changing the social roles of locals involves shifts in expectations, behaviors, and responsibilities within and outside of the community. Before the military coup, locals focused on improving their future prospects, but since the coup, they have engaged in acts of daily resistance with other communities. It is apparent that prior to the military coup, locals' social roles were mainly confined to the community and neighboring areas, whereas since the coup, their social roles now extend to the entire township, region, and throughout the country.

Security and psychological toll

To live as part of a "targeted community" necessitates constant adaptation for survival. Fleeing to the nearby forest has become routine for Ayadaw villagers, evolving from short stays to longer periods, with villagers establishing semi-permanent huts and support systems there. Constant anxiety, fear, and lack of sleep are among pervasive psychological impacts, affecting residents of all

ages. A 57-year-old widow (personal communication, 2024) describes the daily anxiety she experiences:

Even the sound of dogs barking strains one's ear. I do not sleep well every day [...] Even when nothing happens, I am worried. I always wear a jacket with pockets to keep money in. If I run away, I will have it to use.

A 73-year-old man currently sheltering in the forest (personal communication, 2024) reacts to distant gunfire:

I am not sure where they are fighting. It sounds extremely close [...] You are worried about knowing when to flee if you stay in the village. I am afraid. I live in the forest [...] I just want to sleep well every day.

A 65-year-old woman (personal communication, 2024) contrasts the current reality with past media portrayals of conflict

Such gunfire and battle scenes have only [previously] been seen in television and film series. I have now seen it put into practice [...] now I am scared they are coming.

Villagers have developed elaborate strategies for protecting their assets, hiding valuables and essential goods in monasteries, buried underground, or in dispersed locations outside homes. Accepting the risk of loss is seen as unavoidable. Many have prepared “go-bags” for quick evacuation. Travel has become restricted, with locals avoiding military-controlled towns and relying on local defense forces for information about safe routes. Propaganda and disinformation spread by regime supporters, sometimes distributed as leaflets warning against resistance, adds another layer of complexity. Children's play and reactions to stimuli like airplanes have changed, reflecting their absorption of the surrounding fear and violence. For example, toddlers who once waved at planes now cry, while older children incorporate themes of conflict into their games.

Direct experiences with conflict have included aerial bombardment, forcing villagers to take cover under beds or trees, and intense ground battles, such as a prolonged 10-day battle in February 2022 involving the military's brutal Ogre Column, which resulted in local casualties and destruction. During such battles, strategic decisions have to be made, sometimes involving tactical retreats to preserve lives when outgunned. A 52-year-old *Pa-Ka-Pha* leader (personal communication, 2024) explains the decision to retreat during a major battle:

[...] all of the elders had a face-to-face discussion at night in the forest [and decided to] let them [Ogre soldiers] go into the village if they want to because we do not want to lose young fighters for no reason. We all decided to move back.

Community members coordinate support during battles, with designated cooks preparing food for fighters and displaced persons. A 50-year-old *Pa-Ka-Pha* cook (personal communication, 2024) describes the 10-day battle:

The worst battle was in the last month of the year [...] The long battle lasted about 10 days in the forest [...] *Sit-khwe* (military dogs) had not even arrived in the village yet, so I quickly moved the steamer from the house to the forest. I prepared the rice by cooking it [...] People fleeing the war ... and our people needed to eat, so we prepared [...] I deliver food to the PDF's ambush position.

These adaptations required for survival illustrate the constant negotiation of risk and the reliance necessary for collective vigilance, mutual aid, and information sharing for survival in a high-threat environment, highlighting the severe psychological and material costs borne by the community.

Neighboring villages

Resilience is not solely village-based. Relationships with neighboring villages are crucial, though sometimes complex. Information sharing about troop

movements is vital for timely evacuation. Mutual aid is common, with residents of the study village assisting villages that have been destroyed and hosting refugees and displaced monks based on principles of reciprocity. A 43-year-old *Pa-Ka-Pha* member (personal communication, 2024) states:

Our village also helps neighboring villages. If the neighboring village is safe, our village is also safe [...] Some villages have been burned down, no homes or drinking water. To live, eat, and dress, both the villagers and *Pa-Ka-Pha* need as much help as possible from our village.

Collaboration has extended to sharing resources like training areas or communications equipment. However, tensions occasionally arise, with some neighbors reportedly resentful that the study village has suffered less damage, potentially forgetting the aid they have received. Proximity to militia-controlled villages pose a constant threat, severing pre-coup relationships and requiring vigilance against infiltration or attack.

Collective action following the September 2023 raid

Resistance in Ayadaw Township has manifested in various ways, evolving from peaceful protests and CDM activities to armed defense and sophisticated community coordination. Early protests fostered solidarity and expanded social networks beyond the village. As military violence escalated, fleeing to the forest became a routine collective action. Villagers developed systems for mutual support to those experiencing displacement and requiring assistance with food, shelter, and information. This adaptation highlights resilience built on reciprocity and shared experience.

The following case study examines an incident in September 2023 that tested the community's resilience mechanisms and mobilization of social capital. This event marked the first time since the coup that the military's soldiers successfully managed to enter the village by force. Bypassing minefields by entering via the community's farmland, soldiers captured initial hostages, which triggered warnings and prompted mass flight from the

village. The military contingent then advanced in three columns, capturing more hostages, among them monks and villagers who had been delayed in their escape.

At one village monastery, the presiding monk negotiated with soldiers, attempting to protect villagers while providing food to both captors and captives, demonstrating the monastery's continued central role even while occupied. Hostages supported each other, intervening collectively to prevent soldiers from harming villagers who were unable to understand their commands. Simultaneously, other villagers were captured or made narrow escapes, highlighting the chaos and individual survival decisions within the collective crisis.

Local defense forces, though outnumbered and unable to directly engage the soldiers due to the hostage situation, monitored the army's movements and maintained communication lines, receiving updates from hostages. A defense leader confirmed they held back to prevent civilian casualties, ready to act only if hostages were harmed, demonstrating calculated restraint informed by community protection norms.

Soldiers used pro-military collaborators from other villages and attempted psychological tactics, such as blaming village leaders with information likely gleaned from captured phones to sow discord. The army eventually withdrew at midnight, taking several villagers as guides/human shields, threatening retribution if attacked.

The experiences during the raid—the initial panic, individual escapes, collective support for hostages, the monk's mediation, restraint of local defense forces, and the eventual withdrawal without mass casualties or village destruction (despite looting)—underscore the complex interplay of fear, agency, social capital, and resistance tactics employed by members of a targeted community operating with destroyed infrastructure and facing personal risks. This case exemplifies how forms of pre-existing social capital, particularly the role of monks as mediators and established communication networks, were mobilized and transformed during crisis in ways that align with Bourdieu's (1985) approach to social capital. The incident also had immediate practical consequences, such as the local defense forces' request to villagers to quickly harvest their pigeon pea fields that had been used by the

military for cover, demonstrating the tight link between security concerns and daily life/economic activity.

Normalcy under fire

Maintaining education and cultural practices has become an act of resistance against the regime's attempts to control daily life and erase opposition in the village. The determination of residents to maintain daily rhythms—from harvesting crops to organizing school assemblies—reflects what might be termed “normalcy under fire,” a reassertion of routine as a form of resistance and psychological survival.

Post-coup, with formal schools closed and teachers often occupied with CDM activities, the community established its own school within a monastery, relying on local CDM teachers and volunteers, and aligning with curricula frameworks of the NUG. This required significant community effort: securing space (sometimes facing monks' fears of reprisal), locating resources (desks, supplies), ensuring security for students (including barring outside students due to fears of military informants), and adapting education to constant disruptions, trauma, and threats from the military council. A 27-year-old local NUG-appointed teacher (personal communication, 2024) describes the challenges and motivations:

I currently work as a teacher because there are not enough teachers [...] I go to the farm in the morning. Next, I return to the village to teach [...] When the army arrived [...] they displayed my NUG training and graduation certificates alongside a single bullet that threatened me. However, I am not afraid at all [...] I can do what I can to support my village.

The principal of the new community school (personal communication, 2024) describes efforts to create a sense of normalcy:

Students think that studying at the monastery is not like real school [...] The choice of red, brown, and white school uniforms was made by teachers and students [...] There is a student assembly festival to

consider giving it [the monastery] a school-like atmosphere. It is not easy.

Cultural traditions like pagoda festivals have continued, but are adapted to improve security, often held privately or with minimal attendance, yet still serving to reinforce community bonds and identity. Youth activities such as sports competitions are organized to provide positive outlets and build solidarity amidst the conflict, fostering mental well-being and transmitting community values to the younger generation under difficult circumstances.

Community support

Mutual support systems are vital for navigating the TUF condition. The community collectively funds defense efforts, education, and aid for displaced people or those who have lost family members (e.g., covering funeral costs for LDF members killed in action). Trust and transparency are key, with leaders emphasizing accountability. Practical support, like the organization of collective labor for families whose members are away on defense duty, demonstrates ongoing reciprocity. The community also manages internal tensions, navigating relationships with the few remaining army supporters or non-CDM individuals through social pressure and appeals to shared village identity in the sense of “one’s co-villagers,” largely maintaining unity against external threats. A 55-year-old *Pa-Ka-Pha* leader (personal communication, 2024) discusses managing internal differences:

[...] two teachers are non-CDM. I did not say anything and maintained a normal relationship [...] The local defense team sent an anonymous letter [...] stating that they would no longer be responsible for security, so they did CDM [...] Non-CDM believe that our villagers will not harm each other, but they are concerned that others will come and kill them.

Trust counters disinformation attempts, as one *Pa-Ka-Pha* leader (personal communication, 2024) noted after the army tried blaming local leaders for the September 2023 raid: “Our villagers knew what we were doing

for the community, so no one believed them. They [the military] want bad blood among us.”

The mother of an LDF member injured during mine production (personal communication, 2024) describes the support her son has received: “My son’s face is burned [...] Patient care [location] cannot be changed [...] Lwin Lwin as the leader [takes care] of my son. It is completely free [...] When my son was released from the hospital, villagers inquired about his condition.”

Support from the community serves multiple essential functions beyond immediate material assistance. It creates psychological resilience by fostering belonging, expands access to resources that would be unavailable to individuals acting alone, and strengthens collective identity—critical elements for maintaining community cohesion under sustained pressure.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the crucial role of pre-existing social capital in fostering community resilience within the specific context of Ayadaw Township following the 2021 military coup. Conducted under challenging TUF conditions, the research highlights how deeply embedded local traditions, social networks, and cultural practices have provided a foundation for collective action and adaptation. The TUF conditions have necessitated constant negotiation of risk, ethical considerations in data collection, and resilience from me as the researcher.

As argued through the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu’s (1985) social capital and Scott’s (1985, 1989) everyday resistance, the village’s pre-existing resources have been actively mobilized and transformed. Villagers have leveraged established trust networks, reciprocal practices, and traditional leadership and Buddhist institutions to organize defense, share resources during displacement, navigate new hybrid governance and defense structures, and engage in resistance. The detailed case study of the village raid vividly illustrates how collective agency, communication networks, and shared norms have enabled the community to mitigate harm and maintain cohesion while under direct attack. The adaptations in economic activity, education, cultural practices, security protocols, psychological coping mechanisms, and

the management of internal relations further underscore the community's dynamic response to sustained crisis.

The findings suggest that community resilience in this context is not merely a reaction to crisis but an enactment of historically and culturally grounded social relationships, adapted to extreme circumstances. Understanding these dynamics—how social capital is built, maintained, and deployed through everyday practices and resistance, particularly when formal state structures fail or become predatory—is essential for grasping the complexities of local responses to political upheaval in Myanmar. The resilience observed in the study village, therefore, underscores the significance of local social fabrics in navigating periods of profound instability and violence, especially under the compounded pressures faced by those living and researching under fire.

This study contributes to broader academic debates by demonstrating how theoretical concepts of social capital and resistance must be understood as dynamic rather than static phenomena, particularly in rapidly evolving conflict settings. The findings suggest that researchers should pay greater attention to the transformation of pre-existing social structures during crises rather than assuming these structures have either been preserved or destroyed.

In Ayadaw, resilience is not only strategic—it is lived as a form of normalcy under fire, shaped daily in the quiet defiance of continuity.

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