

# Examining psychosocial support interventions and resilience-building in Myanmar:

## A case study of female teachers working with parallel education providers



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### Abstract

Evidence shows that most of the teachers in conflict areas in Myanmar are female (MoE, 2013). Due to the protracted crisis after the military coup in 2021, female teachers from parallel education providers in Myanmar are struggling with unique challenges and risks. Understanding their personal experiences and their sources of resilience are essential for establishing targeted psychosocial support interventions for their wellbeing. Within the protracted crisis of Myanmar, this article emphasises interrelations among gender, conflict, resilience, and education. Drawing on interviews with ten female teachers from parallel education providers, this paper reports that female teachers from revolutionary schools in Myanmar struggle with inadequate income, insufficient human capacity, lack of emergency funding and psychosocial support. Instead of professional psychological support, they rely on self-healing activities, peer relationships and encouragement. This article urgently calls for the establishment of formal psychosocial support mechanisms in the parallel education system for the wellbeing and resilience of female teachers.

### Key Words

resilience, female teachers in Myanmar, psychosocial support mechanism, resilience Attributes, parallel education providers.

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## Introduction

Following the military coup in 2021, schools run by 'parallel education providers' have expanded their provisions to accommodate students who either refused to attend schools operated by the military regime or who lived in areas affected by armed conflict. The sources of these parallel education providers are revolutionary groups and other institutions that oppose the military regime and its controlled education system. Thus, the teachers working within these educational provisions, a majority of whom are female (MoE, 2013), are at risk of being under surveillance, targeted and attacked by the regime at any time. Within the given context, this article discusses female teachers' paths to resilience and the importance of psychosocial support for them. Existing literature reviews examine the resilience of teachers in situations of conflict (Sharifian *et al.*, 2023). However, a specific approach is also needed to understand the unique challenges in resilience building of female teachers in contemporary Myanmar in terms of gender, conflict, resilience, and education. In this article, the Resilience Activation Framework of Abramson (2014) is employed to analyse four dimensions of capital: human, economic, social, and political. This study argues that leaders and administrators of parallel education providers should prioritise the wellbeing of teachers as a strategic focus for an effective education system, and consequently, psychosocial support should be formally provided. The study is conducted through interviews with ten female teachers from six revolutionary schools and two online independent schools operated by parallel education providers. It emphasises individual experience, coping mechanisms, and available support; and reveals how female teachers maintain their resilience through personal attributes and networks, despite challenges and risks within the revolutionary context of Myanmar after the 2021 coup.

## Teacher wellbeing in conflict and crisis settings

The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights wellbeing as 'a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions (WHO,

2024). Teacher wellbeing is essential even in situations of low resources, crisis, and conflict (Falk, *et al.*, 2019). Teachers in conflict zones typically encounter trauma and stress due to challenges ranging from human rights violations, financial instability, displacement, and safety concerns for family members (Frisoli, 2013). Verona (2024) also highlights interrelated factors, including insecurity and lack of protection for teachers from targeting and threats. In addition to these factors, teachers' resilience is also strongly correlated to their economic conditions (Blustein, 2008) – inadequate payment is a major issue for teachers in conflict zones, and it affects teacher wellbeing (INEE, 2009). In situations of conflict, psychosocial support is essential for the wellbeing of teachers (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2018). 'Sustainable Development Goal 3.4' calls for promoting mental health and wellbeing through prevention and treatment (WHO, 2024)). Mansfield *et al.* (2016) also point out that wellbeing is important in building resilience. Therefore, these discussions imply that schools in conflict zones need to prioritise the wellbeing of teachers.

## Resilience-building of teachers

The argument that teacher resilience-building is not the sole duty of the teachers themselves challenges the traditional conception of teacher resilience (Oldfield and Ainsworth, 2021). The social-ecological approach to understanding teacher resilience (Ungar *et al.*, 2013), outlines the process of developing resilience (Oldfield and Ainsworth, 2021). Two levels of the socio-ecological approach -- the school level and the individual level -- are directly related to our research. Similarly, Johnson and Down (2013) argue that teacher resilience is based on the individual level as well as the organisational level, which includes environmental factors where the teachers work. The idea that there are many pathways to resilience (a concept in developmental psychopathology known as 'equifinality' (Cicchetti and Rogosch, 1996)), indicates that there is no one-size-fits-all model to help teachers achieve resilience.

Evidence shows that most of the teachers in conflict areas in Myanmar are female (MoE, 2013, cited in Maber *et al.*, 2019). Building the resilience of female teachers in the conflict setting is more complex than for male teachers due to the family obligations culturally placed on women (Febrianto

*et al.*, 2022). Moreover, female teachers in the conflict areas experience gender-based violence and sexual harassment at higher rates than male teachers (Celumusa and Mabuza, 2020). The rapes of teachers committed by soldiers from the Myanmar army in Kuang Kha in Shan State in 2015 are disturbing precedents (GCPEA, 2018). These risks of violence and sexual harassment highlight the urgent need for gender-specific support services — psychosocial, medical and legal — whether in formal or informal centres (Albizu-Garcia *et al.*, 2001). Teacher resilience emerges from multiple ecological levels, including school and organizational environments, especially for teachers working in conflict zones.

## Theoretical framework

Teachers' resilience is discussed in the context of their ability to manage professional and personal interactions. Resilience is defined as a capacity for recovery and adaptive behaviour (Garmezy, 1991), and as the capacity, process, and outcome in dealing with adversities by using personal and ecological resources (Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). In approaching resilience, an ecological dimension is agreed as a protective factor of resilience (Garmezy, 1987; Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). This intrinsic link of protective factors to promote resilience has also been reflected in the discussions on individual ability to adapt to internal and external stresses (Werner, 1982, cited in Shean, 2015). Mansfield's (2012) teacher resilience framework discusses social, motivational, emotional and professional dimensions as influencing factors to teacher resilience. However, this discussion focuses much on the teacher education context which constrains understanding the unique nature of teachers' resilience under the conflict context. In this paper, we apply Abramson's Resilience Activation Framework as a dynamic concept in relation to multidisciplinary perspectives of individual resilience attributes to understand the teachers' resilience in crisis situations (Abramson *et al.* 2014). Using concepts of individual resilience attributes of human, economic, social and political capital from the Activation Framework, the barriers to resilience for the journey of female teachers are traced through qualitative interviews.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) identifies psychosocial support as local or external support for promoting and protecting the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals or groups of persons. Combining current psychosocial interventions in the school and using resilience attributes as measures provided a framework for our findings, reflecting the current levels of resilience of female teachers and the capacity of interventions to increase those levels. This study has focused on two major questions:

1. What are the existing psychosocial support measures arranged by the parallel education schools in Myanmar?
2. How do 'resilience attributes' (i.e., human, economic, social, and political capital) contribute to the resilience of female teachers who are working in schools operated by ethnic education providers?

Revolutionary schools in Myanmar after the 2021 coup have expanded to meet the emerging needs of the students due to the collapse of the junta-managed education system. They are mainly operated by revolutionary groups: National Unity Government and ethnic revolutionary organizations (Saito, Zahkung and Lwin, 2024). Education institutions managed by private young leaders are also part of the new alternative education system (Metro, 2021). These providers represent a range of goals: from alignment with democratic aspirations (Spring University Myanmar, 2025) to aiming for educational justice (Ah Nyar Institute, 2025). They coexist with revolutionary schools to shape the parallel education system.

Ten teachers who are currently working in six revolutionary schools and in two online independent schools were interviewed online in July 2024. The interviews were conducted in Burmese with one main interviewer and one notetaker. Interview notes and information were encrypted with limited access to the researchers only. The teachers were selected through trusted connections. This paper's authors do not have direct relationship with respondents nor the school administrators. The data is categorised under core concepts as per table 1:

Table 1. Resilience attributes and coding

Resilience Attributes	Preliminary code	Final code
<b>Human Capital</b>	Personality type and characteristics	Self-reflection
	Personal well-being (mindfulness)	Self-care activities
	Stress management	
	Care and support for dependents	Caregiving responsibility
<b>Economic Capital</b>	Remuneration and Under waged	Financial support
	Inadequate salary for basic needs	Economic insufficiency
	Multiple odd jobs, unable to feed all family members	Survival necessity
<b>Social Capital</b>	Co-workers' support, communication friends	Relations with peers
	Safe school compound, swift mobility in time of attack	Working environment
	Access to health care, family bond, community provisions	Social wellbeing (health)
<b>Political Capital</b>	Surveillance, monitoring from the junta's side, personal information and privacy, online leakages	Insecurity
	Smooth discussion with supervisors about hardship and problems, supportive community, encouragement	Open communication with decision makers

## Findings

### Psychosocial support mechanisms

Existing psychosocial support mechanisms for education providers are categorised into three types: Formal, Semi-formal, and Informal (Lauzier-Jobin and Houle, 2022; Bridson *et al.*, 2021; NHS, 2023). Here, we define 'Formal' based on the availability of professional services and formal institutional arrangements while 'Semi-formal' is defined having an occasional arrangement and non-institutionalised support mechanisms (ad-hoc services). 'Informal' involves support from friends, family, colleagues, and social community.

**Table 2. Psychosocial support arrangements in schools providing parallel education**

Type of schools	Region	Formal	Semi-Formal	Informal
Six Revolutionary Schools	Magway	None	None	None
	Karen	None	None	Religious Belief Encouragement from seniors
	Sagaing	None	None	Encouragement from the principal
Two Online Independent Schools	Nationwide	Referral System, Psychiatrists, Psychosocial Support on request	Referral Mechanisms for Case support, Consultation by volunteer counsellors	Mutual Encouragement from peers and colleagues

The above table shows the disparity in available support systems revealed by the interview with ten female teachers from six revolutionary schools and two online independent schools. No formal and semi-formal mechanisms were reported to have been available in the revolutionary schools in Magway, Karen and Sagaing regions, apart from occasional encouragement from the community (such as practising one's religion and receiving encouragement from colleagues and seniors). However, the teachers from online independent schools reported that they had access to all three types of psychosocial support mechanisms, with limited availability of professionally trained counsellors. In the absence of professional counsellors, online independent schools have the provision of referral mechanisms carried out by volunteer counsellors from the respective counselling organisations where they have a connection with.

## Individual resilience attributes

### Human capital

In terms of human capital, most of the common problems encountered by the teachers in conflict areas relate to insufficient capacity, for example the lack of qualified teachers, leading to stress from unfinished work. One respondent from Magway Region reported:

We have 21 teachers in total, but nine are those who joined the civil disobedience movement [CDM] while the rest are volunteers who are trained by us. So, the problem is that we cannot cover every class and take care of all children.

The volunteer teachers are not that experienced, and the tasks are not finished as expected. (KII from revolutionary school in Magway)

Moreover, according to the teachers in conflict areas, it is hard to access up-to-date professional development training, and they fear being left behind. A respondent from Karen lamented that:

I paused my university student life due to the coup. I also want to continue my study abroad and improve my capacity. But it's so hard and almost impossible. (KII from the revolutionary school in Karen)

Here, the respondent points out that her aspirations for further academic development and career progression are shattered by the ongoing political crisis. Additionally, another teacher highlighted gendered disadvantages as a female in their professional settings. Female teachers face more challenging situations involving dual responsibility than their male counterparts. One of the respondents who has two children said:

I feel exhausted as I have extra work like household chores while still earning money. In the long run, I am becoming impatient with my children and shout at them for some minor disobedience. Later, I feel a sense of guilt and sadness for not treating the children right. (KII from revolutionary school in Magway)

Not only at home but also at schools, teachers become caregivers. One teacher from online independent school reported:

Instead of schools supporting teachers, teachers have to support the needs of the local students and families. (KII from online independent school)

We found that teachers had mostly relied on self-healing practices such as saying prayers and talking to friends about their challenges as a way of coping with the distress. However, even in desperate situations without enough support, teachers have a strong sense of determination and positive temperament. Nine out of ten teachers (all of them except for one teacher from the Karen revolutionary school) showed strong commitments to their 'revolutionary journey' as a member of the civil disobedience movement. For them, the motivation to stay in the teaching profession came from their deep feelings of responsibility towards creating a better Myanmar society. So, most of the teachers were proud of their choice to stand with justice and did not regret being part of the struggle despite facing various hardships.

## Economic capital (financial sources of teachers)

Financial hardship is a significant challenge for teachers working in schools in conflict settings. Female teachers have extra expenses, ranging from buying sanitary pads, to sometimes being the sole breadwinner in the family. However, the salaries they receive are insufficient to cover even their living expenses. In addition, due to the scarcity of jobs for females in conflict settings (most jobs available are manual labour), all women can usually do for extra income is selling food and handmade items. For example, one of the respondents mentioned:

The salaries from the school are not entirely enough. Therefore, I have to work farming for living expenses. (KII from a revolutionary school, Sagaing)

Because of dependency on public support, schools' financial resources are limited. A respondent from a revolutionary school in Karen State noted that the salary was just enough for her personal expenses, and in the event of any illness, she would need to rely on the support for medical care from her family.

Another respondent revealed that she had to entirely depend on her family for living costs and health expenses, as revolutionary schools lack funding for major health and displacement issues when they face emergencies or airstrikes.

## Social capital

Teachers from the revolutionary schools are vulnerable to psychological distress and trauma due to the direct exposure to conflict environments around them. For instance, a teacher from a revolutionary school in the Magway region explained that the village in which their school is situated is often a target of military operation, and, during a recent operation, the junta troops killed her colleague, a pregnant woman, who was unable to escape. A teacher from Karen State also shared her own experience that she could not sleep at night when she heard cannons firing and explosions. These teachers mostly rely on traditional methods of dealing with emotional distress and vulnerability, such as saying prayers and connecting with peers and family to become more resilient at times of adversity. A teacher from Sagaing described the strength of solidarity and collective feeling of struggle as being part of the revolutionary school.,

I'm not choosing the winning side, but justice. My peers, colleagues, and persons I admire are standing with us. Although I have difficulties, I decide to stand firmly with justice according to my belief. (KII from Revolutionary School, Sagaing)

The above quote provides a powerful message about how teachers in conflict and crisis settings defend the agenda of justice and social change. For this teacher, staying in the profession is part of the much larger vision for her society rather than simply being a teacher with teaching and learning duties. It is that futuristic vision of political transformation and the importance of 'standing together' against injustices that defines her role as a teacher. This is, however, not without risks, and teachers are constantly facing insecurity and struggle for their survival in conflict settings. For example, the teachers from online independent schools are also concerned about surveillance and other potential risks. In addition to the traditional methods of self-healing that most teachers from revolutionary schools mainly rely on, teachers from online independent schools reported

the availability of professional psychological support from their schools.

## Political capital

Teachers from both revolutionary schools and online independent schools revealed that they feel insecure because they face security concerns, such as being under surveillance and monitored by the regime. A female teacher from a revolutionary school in Magway said that she suffers from eye problems, but she feels unsafe going to an eye clinic in the nearest township because she is afraid of being arrested by the regime's soldiers on the way. This reveals a unique challenge of teachers working in politically oppressive settings. In our study, female teachers from revolutionary schools said they received encouragement from the school leaders (principals, seniors, administrators). However, formal channels in terms of regular engagement and checkups on the wellbeing of teachers were lacking.

In the online independent schools, the teachers can speak to their superiors about their problems and can (for example) request a referral to a psychiatrist, according to one teacher. Another teacher from a different school explained that they had to fill out an evaluation form. Then, the administration office of their schools would arrange counselling service with professionals, based on the evaluation result. Both female teachers said that they regained their inner motivation and strength to continue after receiving counselling from professionals. This indicates that supportive school leadership is essential in these teachers' paths to resilience.

## Conclusion

Findings of this study highlight the unique situation of female teachers' resilience in the multifaceted crisis situation of Myanmar while focusing on the lack of adequate psychosocial support mechanisms within the parallel education systems. We would argue that understanding teachers' resilience through socio-ecological lens can promote policy debates around the importance of teachers not only in the parallel education system in Myanmar but also provide insights into how to strengthen teacher wellbeing within education systems in conflict and crisis settings. This study revealed that teachers had scant support for their wellbeing (relying on self-

healing activities) as well as inadequate resources for capacity-building and household responsibilities. Teachers from revolutionary schools were found to be struggling with inadequate salaries, and taking extra jobs for their household, health, and personal expenses. This highlights the need for targeted formal psychosocial support mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, teachers from both revolutionary schools and online independent schools maintain their resilience within their available capacity. In those situations, social capital, political capital, human capital and economic capital are vital for their continuity in enhancing their resilience. Balancing these capitals – by establishing designated funding for teachers' wellbeing, facilitating peer networks, creating supportive educational atmosphere, inclusive educational governance and workplace culture and implementing mental health programs – can contribute to teachers' resilience. Therefore, this article calls for attention to this issue and recommends school leaders, relevant administrators and education policymakers to prioritise psychosocial support mechanisms for resilience of female teachers in parallel education – because teachers are the patrons of future generations and the guardians of national resilience.

## Author bios

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