



“The revolution might be a start ...” – gender norm change amongst Chin refugees in Mizoram, India

Henri Myrntinen & Lal Rin Sangi

To cite this article: Henri Myrntinen & Lal Rin Sangi (29 Dec 2025): “The revolution might be a start ...” – gender norm change amongst Chin refugees in Mizoram, India, *Development in Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2025.2605173](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2605173)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2605173>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 29 Dec 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




Article views: 518



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Forthcoming in the Special Issue: Gender norms change for gender justice: rethinking theory and practice  OPEN ACCESS



“The revolution might be a start ... ” – gender norm change amongst Chin refugees in Mizoram, India

Henri Myrntinen^a and Lal Rin Sangi^b

^aUniversity of Bremen, Institut für Interkulturelle und Internationale Studien (InIIS), Bremen, Germany;

^bIndependent researcher, Aizawl, India

ABSTRACT

Mizoram currently hosts the largest population of Myanmar refugees in India, mostly from neighbouring Chin State, who have predominantly fled in the aftermath of the 2021 coup d'état. Chin society has traditionally been marked by patriarchal and gerontocratic norms, but these have been increasingly questioned by activists in the aftermath of the Spring Revolution, as the opposition movement to the coup is locally called. Drawing on interviews with Myanmar women refugees and women's rights activists conducted in 2024 in Mizoram, we argue that while there has been a perceived change among women toward more gender-equitable and inclusive norms, patriarchal and heteronormative practices continue to dominate. While the previous and current work of women's rights organisations has been a key driver of change, faith-based spaces may also offer entry points for gender equality work.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2024
Accepted 22 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Gender; Myanmar; Mizoram; displacement

Introduction

The 2021 military coup d'état and subsequent upsurge in fighting in Myanmar have caused an unprecedented displacement of civilians both internally and across the borders into neighbouring countries, including to India. The majority of the approximately 50–60,000 Myanmar refugees in Mizoram State, Northeastern India, are either from neighbouring Chin State in western Myanmar and/or identify as ethnically Chin. Our research, conducted in 2024 in Mizoram, sought to capture the experiences of diverse Chin refugee women – based on age, dis-/ability, marital status and sexual orientation, gender identity and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) – to explore to what degree gender norms have shifted in the wake of the Spring Revolution, as the opposition movement to the coup is called locally.

The coup ended decades of relative peace in most of Chin State. As elsewhere in Myanmar, the military takeover was initially met with non-violent protest movements in which women and youth played a disproportionately large and visible role. However, as the Myanmar military responded to these with increasing violence, the opposition movement became more militarised and more male-dominated, though women and persons of diverse SOGIESC have also taken up arms (on the diverse roles of women in Myanmar armed opposition movements, see Hedström 2025). Chin State was one of the first areas of the country where the crackdown escalated into a full-scale armed conflict, with widespread abuses and war crimes committed especially by the Myanmar military, including sexual violence (OHCHR 2024).

CONTACT Henri Myrntinen  henrimyrntinen@gmail.com  Institut für Interkulturelle und Internationale Studien (InIIS), University of Bremen, Mary-Somerville-Straße 7, 28359 Bremen, Germany

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

The Spring Revolution has been notable for combining opposition to the junta, at least rhetorically, with calls for fundamental changes to dominant gender norms and gendered power hierarchies, including increased women's participation, a questioning of male entitlement, and the advancing of diverse SOGIESC rights¹ (Chambers and Dhu Da 2024; Khin Khin Mra and Hedström 2024; Marlar, Chambers, and Elena 2023). While calls for greater gender equality had been made by activists in the decades prior to the coup, they gained far greater prominence with the Spring Revolution, as women, younger people in general, and persons of diverse SOGIESC visibly participated in the unarmed and armed opposition, including in Chin State. As Rebecca Haines (2025) importantly points out more broadly for Myanmar, the gendered opportunity structures for advancing these goals are dynamic and have shifted over the years since the coup, with increased opportunities opening up in some areas of the anti-junta political movements and a narrowing of spaces in many others. While gender norms govern all aspects of life, we focus here specifically on perceived changes to women's social and political participation, changes in gendered power dynamics, as well as SOGIESC rights.

We next briefly summarise the current state of the literature on gender norms and displacement, outline our research methodology, and give a background to Chin society and Mizoram. We then engage with our respondents' perceptions of changes in gender norms and practices, followed by a concluding discussion. Our main argument is that while especially women refugees, and to a lesser extent activists, felt that there had indeed been a shift towards more gender equality, this was not reflected in their everyday practices.

This work was supported by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research program, funded by UK International Development from the UK government, as part of a broader study examining gender and displacement from Myanmar to Mizoram and Thailand.² However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

Literature review

Gender norms, the political and socio-cultural precepts that guide how persons of a certain gender are expected to act in given situations, are a key factor in determining a person's access to political and social participation, to resources, to justice, and social status, amongst other things. They are thus central factors influencing refugees' needs, vulnerabilities, and possibilities for agency in situations of displacement (Daigle 2022). As Cislighi and Heise (2019, 415–416) define the term (note that references to gender diverse persons were added by ourselves):

Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men [and gender diverse persons] in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women and men's [and gender diverse persons] (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self.

Conflict, displacement, and other crises precipitate and accelerate complex changes in gender norms, but these shifts are often ambiguous, neither linear nor unidirectional, and vary between contexts and different norms and practices (Brück et al. 2024; Daigle 2022, 10–13). While some gender roles, attitudes, expectations, and everyday practices may change, often due to material needs, this can either be situational or more sustained, while other norms and practices may remain unchanged or even be strengthened, including less gender equitable ones (Culcasi 2019; Rubiano-Matulevich 2024). Practices that commonly change include increasing acceptance of women's work outside of the home and women's increased participation in decision-making. External actors, such as humanitarian aid providers, have often sought to promote gender equality, in what Katarzyna Grabska (2011, 88) has described as an "accelerated modernity project" to change what are cast as refugees' "backward" gender norms (Olivius 2016). Michelle Lokot (2022) cautions, however, against focusing on displacement as being the main driver of these changes, as this may lead to ahistorical and undifferentiated assumptions which overlook longer-term processes that were already in motion.

In the Myanmar context, much of the research on gender and displacement has focused either on the Thai-Myanmar border or on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, with displacement to Mizoram receiving far less attention. Research on displacement to the Thai-Myanmar border, with its network of diaspora women's rights organisations (WROs), has often identified this as a politicising space for many refugee women, including for embracing more gender equality and women taking on new societal or political roles (Olivius 2019; Olivius and Hedström 2025; Pepper 2018). However, other studies, for example amongst internally displaced Kachin (Hedström 2025) and amongst Rohingya in Bangladesh and Nepal (Coyle, Jainul, and Sandberg-Pettersson 2020; Keeni and Takashino 2024), have noted the simultaneous shift of some gender practices, such as women's participation in socio-economic activities previously primarily undertaken by men, with the continuance of patriarchal practices, or even pushback against efforts to increase gender equality.

Background to Chin State and Mizoram

Chin society and gender roles

Before the coup, mountainous Chin State was the poorest state in Myanmar. Gender dynamics in Chin State are marked by patriarchal and gerontocratic cultural norms, privileging men and masculinities over women and femininities, and older people over younger ones (Ninu 2017). Among Chin communities, of whom 90 per cent identify as Protestant or Roman Catholic (Loong 2022), Christianity has tended to further reinforce these norms. Women's subordinate position vis-à-vis men is underpinned through bride price practices, lack of access to inheritance, and attitudes that tend to normalise and regard domestic and intimate partner violence as a "private" issue (Mawi Te 2024; Ninu 2017, background interviews). Prior to the 2020 elections, the Chin State parliament was amongst those which had no women members (Minoletti 2016). The 2020 elections marked an improvement in women's representation in Chin State, though this was below the national average and the coup prevented elected parliamentarians from taking office (Mawi Te 2024). Post-coup, Chin State, like the rest of Myanmar, has a plethora of competing governance actors especially at the local level, with differing degrees of openness to women's participation (Myanmar Research Initiative 2025; Sang 2023).

Gender-unequal practices have for years been challenged by Chin civil society actors, WROs and by some Christian congregations (Ma 2018). However, as amongst other ethnic minority political movements in Myanmar, issues of gender equality were often seen as secondary to other demands, such as for increased autonomy, cultural rights, and broader human rights concerns (Expert interview, 2021). Social conservatism is also reflected in attitudes toward diverse SOGIESC. While diverse SOGIESC rights have been championed by some activists prior to, and especially after the coup, and persons of diverse SOGIESC played a small but visible role in the anti-coup protests in Chin State, attitudes continue to generally be negative (Expert interview, 2021).

Chin refugees in Mizoram

Mizoram hosts the largest Myanmar refugee population in India, though as the country is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, they are classified as "displaced Myanmar nationals". Historically, Mizoram state governments have welcomed Chin refugees during periods of severe repression in Myanmar, often invoking cross-border ethnic and cultural ties (Alexander, Arnett, and Jena 2017; McConnachie 2018; Pum Khan Pau 2020). This contrasts with the more restrictive policies of neighbouring Indian states and at the national level.

Successive Mizoram state governments have provided administrative, logistical, and material support to Myanmar refugees, though this has often been limited due to a lack of resources. Most of the refugee aid comes from local Mizo community-based and civil society organisations, local and international faith-based organisations (FBOs), Chin diaspora groups and, to a far

smaller extent, from international non-governmental organisation. Most refugees live either in the approximately 100 camps built and run by local organisations, with some direct support from district administrations; in family homes in rural communities; or in rented accommodations and family homes in urban areas such as the state capital Aizawl (Myey 2024). Many with the financial means have also relocated to bigger Indian metropolises.

Language barriers were mentioned by most of our women interviewees in Mizoram, impeding their possibilities for participation. While refugees from northern Chin State were able to more easily converse in Mizo, refugees from southern Chin State, who make up most of the refugees, often struggled. These challenges are often more pronounced for rural women, as men are more likely to speak and read Burmese as a lingua franca. Church-based groups helped overcome some of the barriers between women from different parts of Chin State in the camps and were also an important avenue for participation and mutual emotional and material support. Despite generally cordial relations, tensions exist between Mizo host and refugee communities, especially around the economic impacts of hosting refugees and a fear of crime (Satapathy and Lalthansiami 2021). Local communities have often placed restrictions on refugees' economic activities, fearing that these might undercut prices for local produce on local markets.

Methodology

Data collection with refugee women was conducted in March–May 2024, with 24 interviews conducted in refugee camps as well as one in Aizawl, the state capital. Snowball sampling was used, with the aim of interviewing a diverse group of women of different age categories, occupational backgrounds, marital statuses, women living with disabilities, as well as persons of diverse SOGIESC. The length of time for which the respondents had been displaced ranged from a few weeks in the case of one respondent to up to three years. A further nine interviews were conducted with Mizoram-based Chin women's rights activists in September–October 2024, in person and online (Table 1). The WRO activists mostly had a higher educational background than the refugee women. Interviewees were 18–70 years of age, gave either informed verbal or written consent, and were all anonymised. Participation was fully voluntary, and the respondents did not receive any financial compensation but were provided with refreshments as well as sanitary pads, as these are hard to access in the camps, a practice the primary data collector (one of the authors) has been applying previously in her work with the refugees.

The decision to focus on camp-based refugees was based on most refugees being based in these; that respondents would be more representative of refugee women's needs than middle-/upper-class interviewees in private accommodation; and camps allowing for a larger number of interviews to be conducted in the limited timeframe available. Access to the camps was mediated by local camp administrators, with whom the primary data collector had established working relationships through previous engagements.

Depending on language skills, the semi-structured interviews were conducted directly in Hakha Chin, Mizo, or Burmese by the primary data collector (one of the authors) and her assistant, transcribed manually only, and then translated into English. The semi-structured questionnaire was

Table 1. Breakdown of research participants.

Category	Number of interviewees
Age 18–25	7
Age 25–70	11
Women with disabilities (both middle-aged)	2
Persons of diverse SOGIESC	1
Widowed women/ FHH (middle-aged)	3
WRO activists	9
Total	33

designed by the authors but explicitly left space for respondents to raise other issues as well. Respondents were asked directly about whether they had perceived changes to gender norms and everyday practices (e.g. in terms of political participation, decision-making, greater women's and diverse SOGIESC rights, and livelihoods opportunities since the 2021 coup and since arriving in Mizoram), amongst other issues. The data collectors were given a research ethics refresher training before commencing data collection and were instructed not to probe for potentially traumatic experiences such as possible experiences of gender-based violence; though if these did arise, research participants were given contact numbers of service providers. The manual coding and analysis of the data was conducted jointly by both authors.

All primary data was collected by one of the authors and her research assistant, both of whom are Chin and based in Mizoram. The primary data collector has been engaging closely with Chin refugees through her work with an Aizawl-based grassroots WRO. The second author, a European researcher based in Thailand, did not participate in the data collection but helped design the research tools and participated in the coding, analysis, and write-up.

The research methodology, research ethics, safety and safeguarding measures were reviewed and approved by XCEPT.

Limitations and challenges

The identification of research participants was complicated by internalised gender norms and language barriers. Although the author conducting the interviews is a young Chin woman herself, many women, especially younger ones, were nonetheless shy or reluctant to speak on issues with which they felt that they were not knowledgeable or were generally uncomfortable expressing their views. In Chin societies, public participation and speaking out on political issues are traditionally viewed as the purview of (older) men, as is access to information and further education. Despite her age and gender, the primary data collector's educational background and social status as a researcher may have created a perceived barrier for some respondents. Although our research was specifically interested in women's and girls' experiences, potential respondents nevertheless felt that they would not have much to contribute. Language was a further barrier, as not all women were fluent in Falam/Laizo Chin, Mizo, or Burmese, and even where they did speak these languages, questions often needed to be simplified or explained at length.

A further challenge, which we were aware from the outset, was the difficulty identifying persons of diverse SOGIESC who were willing to be interviewed, given widespread discrimination. One gender-diverse refugee interviewee did agree to participate, but they did not reside in the camps.

While this article focuses on gender norms rather than the refugees' precarious socio-economic conditions, all respondents stressed the very limited support available, their struggles with livelihoods, and a wish to return to Myanmar as soon as possible.³ As most of our respondents are living in refugee camps, this precarity was likely more pronounced than it would have been if we had interviewed those living in rented accommodations, who are more likely to be within higher income brackets. The refugees' need to focus on livelihoods by necessity reduced the time, energy, and possibilities available for broader political and social participation. This was further exacerbated by the continuing double burdening of women, i.e. of having to contribute to household incomes and managing most of the household care work.

Research findings

Our findings here focus first on refugee women's views on perceived gender norm changes after the Spring Revolution, in decision-making and attitudes towards persons of diverse SOGIESC, as well as the role of faith-based spaces as platforms for women's participation. These are then followed by the reflections of Chin WRO activists on these changes.

The responses we received were often not entirely straightforward. While most refugee women interviewees stressed that in their opinion, there had indeed been marked shifts in gender norms thanks to the political mobilisation after the coup. Yet, often their answers simultaneously showed how little had changed for them in their everyday lived practices. WRO activists tended to be more circumspect, identifying some positive changes but also stressing the continued predominance of patriarchal values and practices, including within the opposition movements.

Overall, three-quarters of refugee respondents felt that the post-coup Spring Revolution had, at a minimum, created new opportunities for women's participation in politics and in the armed opposition, especially for younger women, and several stressed that there had been "lots of changes". Beyond women's increased political participation, respondents also noted a greater – though still not equal – sharing of household labour between women and men, as well as more solidarity between women. Two older women refugees stated that if they were younger, they would have taken up arms for the revolution.

The perceived changes in mindsets did, however, not necessarily change the privileging of men fundamentally:

After the coup, men's and women's expectations changed. [...]. Our vision broadened after the coup – but the men are still given priority, as I noticed. (FL4MNN13)

A minority of respondents, however, saw no or little change, stating that "men led in the past and also lead now", and "women [are] taking lower positions than men, before the coup and after the coup" in political organisations.

Women's participation

The degree to which women participate – or felt that they could participate – in social and political discussions and decision-making varied, depending especially on age, education, and societal position. Most participants stated that there are no formal barriers to women's participation. Nonetheless, and sometimes in direct contradiction to this, internalised cultural norms were raised by respondents, whereby men dominated decision-making. Women were seen as "not educated enough", not having confidence or public-speaking skills, and being used to "relying on their husbands" for decision-making. In part, refugee women attributed this to a lack of educational opportunities in Chin State in general, but also to parents prioritising their sons' education. Others, however, stressed that there was "no discrimination" while also stating that women were not always invited into decision-making bodies by men, or that women wanted to join but were not articulating this to their husbands.

Women's participation, where it occurs, is more likely in traditionally feminine-coded roles, such as care work or teaching, in supporting rather than leading positions, or limited to preparing tea and snacks for men in the meetings. Beyond internalised norms and active favouring of men, some respondents also noted that women "cannot spare the time" to participate, given their workloads.

There were, however, individual cases where women – due to their abilities, education, charisma, and/or social capital – had achieved leading positions in their community, such as being a pastor or school headteacher, or taking on a family leadership role due to being the eldest or after having lost their husbands. One of the widows, who was now the matriarch of her household, lamented:

I don't think much has changed in our society. [...] Chin people have had customary laws that are different for women and men. For example, women do not have the right to receive the parental inheritance and they do not have the opportunity to make decisions in the family. There are lots of educated women in Chin state and in Myanmar, but at the higher levels in politics only the men have a seat. (FL4MNWN21)

Roughly a third of respondents were reluctant to actively participate in political discussions as they felt that they lacked knowledge, were "too young" or "too old", faced difficulties following discussions due to hearing and/or sight impairments, lacked access to information and funds to access the internet, or had to focus on childcare and managing the household. Some distanced themselves

from the realm of politics, which they perceived as a source of their current predicament. Others, however, vociferously demanded more equality:

I did not like it if the women did not sit in the important seats, because God does not want men and women to be treated differently. Men and women must have the same rights. And I want [women] to have the rights of decision-making and I want to put women first. I want women to be involved in problem-solving because some women have very good ideas when the men do not. (FL4MNN1)

Diverse SOGIESC rights

Post-coup, many younger opposition activists, including those in Chin State, have advocated for diverse SOGIESC rights. Of the interviewees who answered questions on the issue, however, around half, even if they may otherwise have had progressive views on gender equality, firmly rejected LGBTIQ+ persons, whether “before or after the coup”. Of the others, three stated that they had been accepting already before the coup, and the other respondents were roughly evenly split between those who felt that societal attitudes had changed towards more acceptance with the Spring Revolution, even if they themselves did not share this, or that they themselves had become more accepting after the coup, even if the community had not.

[In the past] I did not accept LGBT, as I thought that a man should live as a man and woman should live as a woman. [However] LGBT lives are their choice and we cannot correct them. We did not support much [in the past] but we should understand them. (FL4YNNN5)

Two of the respondents who were personally accepting highlighted the tensions between human rights and Christian dogma:

It is difficult to say. According to Christianity we did not accept them but now [post-coup] there are more who accept them and now we do not see them as sinners. We treat them as normal people. (FL4MNNN16)

I accepted them and they did not cause problems for others. Some accepted them and some did not. [...] After the coup, something changed and the people are more accepting than in the past. When we look at it from human rights, this change is good. But when we look at it from the religion, it is not good. (FL4MNNN7)

The one person of diverse SOGIESC whom we were able to interview, who was assigned male at birth, spoke of discrimination, internalised shame, rejection by friends and family, and challenges in being more politically active:

I interviewed to be a camp school teacher [...] they asked, “Will you perform like a woman in front of the children?” And they did not choose me. [...] I could not get involved in politics because we have to work for our family. If we do not work my family will face difficulties because of financial problems. [...] I am LGBT and I accept myself and other LGBT but I do not accept overt action. We cannot change our existence but I do not like overt action. In this generation many people understand and accept us. I can say things are improving. (IL4MNNL 24)

Alternate spaces: faith-based groups

While perceptions about the degree of gender norm change varied, refugee respondents were unequivocal about the importance of Christian FBOs and churches in the camps for women (Alexander, Arnett, and Jena 2017). These were named as a major source of communal and individual spiritual and (limited) material support, as well as being a space in which women could easily participate and meet with each other, including in weekly prayer and fasting groups:

There is no women’s group in our camp. But 4–5 women members organised a prayer group. We pray without eating every Friday. We collect some rice and donate it to the people in the camp who ran out of rice. Yes, our prayer group is very important. Last year we celebrated the new year and surprised the elders of over 60 years old in our camp with gifts. We bought something that cost 10 Rs and gave it to them. They were very happy. I think it was precious to me. (FL4MNNN14)

Given the lack of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), the faith-based groups also act as an important emotional support system for the women. A woman pastor mentioned getting fulfilment from giving what emotional and material support she could as part of her pastoral care:

I am very happy visiting other camps and doing this job. They gave me feedback that when you came to us it was very supportive for our spirit. When people feel sick, I pray for them and I love helping others and I am happy when I help others. [...] I could not give them much when I visited the camps. [...] When I arrived in Mizoram at the beginning the local people asked me: "what are you doing?" I answered that I am a pastor and they were so surprised. They asked me if women could work as a pastor. When they asked me that, I did not feel good. I think that the participation of women in decision making is still very low here. (IL4MNNN9)

WRO activists' views

WRO activists interviewed similarly noted increased political and military participation of women, and to some persons of diverse SOGIESC. However, they cautioned that women were mostly relegated to supporting roles, such as fundraising or administration, and even those with combat experience could not move into leadership positions (see Hedström 2025 for similar dynamics in Kachin State).

Although we see an increase in women's participation in political organisations, their roles are more focused on supporting men, and they are not the main players. In fundraising events, women are mostly singing or presenting the program, but they are rarely seen in key roles where they actively participate in discussions. (WRO2)

The same respondent, however, also noted an increasing role of refugee women in negotiating with host communities, as they were seen as more adept at this than male leaders.

In terms of drivers of change, one activist highlighted the role of younger women as well as of volunteer teachers, who had left the state bureaucracy in protest against the coup, as potential catalysts. Another activist also stressed the longer-term impact of previous groundwork done by WROs in the decade before the coup, which laid the foundation for changes seen now.

The limited degree of overall change, on the other hand, was attributed to the persistence of traditional norms. The ongoing privileging of men, a women's lack of self-confidence, men's greater mobility, and women's preference for focusing on more traditionally female-coded tasks were seen by WRO respondents – as by some of the refugees – as barriers to more meaningful participation in political movements and decision-making. Beyond these structural challenges, some respondents also noted active resistance by men – but also by women. One interviewee (WRO3) stated that when women seek to participate more actively in decision-making, men "accuse them of talking too much or seeking conflict". Another WRO respondent noted that some women also resisted change, including viewing women pastors as "inappropriate" (WRO1).

WRO respondents noted how many refugee women felt more at ease participating in FBOs that reflected more traditional understandings of women's roles, such as in social welfare, education, and youth work. Thus, while not radically challenging gender roles and norms, these spaces allow women to engage, find meaning and solace, and support others. They are also potential platforms for advocating for greater women's participation elsewhere, and for coalition-building between WROs, women pastors, and those engaged in prayer groups and FBOs.

Conclusions

The revolution might be a start, but changing these norms is a long-term battle requiring both men and women to advocate for and support gender equality. (WRO3)

Although care needs to be taken to not over-extrapolate from the comparatively small sample size, the research findings point at the ambiguities around perceived versus material changes in gendered power dynamics and practices since the 2021 coup in Myanmar. The Spring Revolution has, in the eyes of many respondents, increased spaces for women's participation in Chin society and,

to a more limited degree, increased acceptance of persons of diverse SOGIESC. However, despite these perceived shifts, patriarchal and heteronormative practices prevail. Women continue to be sidelined from decision-making and information-sharing, and face multiple burdens. In many interviews, women's exhaustion and depletion were palpable (Johnston and Lingham 2020). As often in situations of displacement, the resultant vulnerabilities are greatest for those in the structurally weakest positions in society, such as women with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or women caring for those with disabilities; those lacking financial, social, and cultural capital and facing language barriers; widows and women heads of households; and persons of diverse SOGIESC. The latter especially continue to face persistent discrimination despite the perceived greater acceptance among heterosexual respondents.

Our findings concur with other studies on gender and displacement, which point to the simultaneous changes in some practices and norms, and continuity of others, often linked to having to respond to the lived realities of displacement (Culcasi 2019; Keeni and Takashino 2024; Rubiano-Matulevich 2024). In our case, the experience of displacement did lead to some shifts in gendered practices, such as limited changes in care work and mutual support, as well as to new arenas for women's engagement, including in faith-based spaces or in camp committees. However, respondents attributed a greater role to the socio-political developments linked to the transformative moment of the Spring Revolution than to displacement, even if many respondents noted limitations to the degree of overall change. Echoing Michelle Lokot (2022), displacement did not necessarily play a causative role here in terms of gender norms change, as much of the groundwork for the shifts that were perceived had been laid in the years prior to the coup by Chin WROs. Nonetheless, the combined effects of displacement and the post-coup socio-political dynamics have created new, if limited spaces for change, catalysed by the visible gender-equality activism especially of younger women and of politically active women teachers in the camps post-coup.

Unlike in some other contexts, international humanitarian actors are largely absent in Mizoram, and barring any major policy changes by the Indian government, are unlikely to become directly involved. Rather, the drivers of change come from within Chin society, especially from underfunded local WROs and activists, with varying buy-in from the male-dominated political elite, and often in the face of continued patriarchal norms and practices, including among pro-democracy leaders (Haines 2025). Nonetheless, Grabska's (2011) notion of gender equality work in displacement as a "modernity project" transforming Chin patriarchal traditions holds true to an extent, and can be seen – paraphrasing Grabska – as part of a broader "accelerated democracy project" that at least some in the Spring Revolution are pushing for. It is these local organisations and individuals which can and do affect gender norm change, and require unbureaucratic external support (see also Haines and Buchanan 2023). More broadly, the relief efforts of the Mizoram state government should also be better supported financially by external actors, as should efforts to reduce tensions and barriers between refugees and host communities.

Taken as a whole, our respondents' perceptions of gender norms change were, to a degree, contradictory and ambiguous, thereby underscoring that processes of profound societal change do not follow simple, uncontested, teleological trajectories. Perceptions of gender norms and role changes were not shared universally, uniformly, or unequivocally by our respondents, with those who were most invested in the change processes often being the most critical in their assessments. The findings of limited and qualified change may seem like a dampener on expectations that the revolutionary spirit and fearlessness shown by the Myanmar opposition would rapidly lead to more fundamental gender norm shifts in society. However, as the activist quoted at the beginning of this section rightly states, gender norms change is a long-term process. In spite of the caveats raised by many respondents, the Spring Revolution was nonetheless perceived by most of them as a watershed moment, one with a before and after, and during which changes in attitudes and, to a lesser degree, practices were seen to have occurred. While this has not led to an immediate, full-scale transformation, it is still noteworthy.

The research underscored the key role of FBOs and churches, both as providers of aid and of spaces for women to participate. While these tend not to challenge traditional gender roles, they

are easily accessible for women and socio-culturally uncontroversial. Engaging more with these structures on gender equality issues, further supporting them and the support which they provide to women, may offer an avenue for WROs to address gender-based inequalities and discrimination in ways that would face less resistance, but may be more incremental.

Notes

1. In Myanmar usage, the term "LGBT" (often pronounced in English) is commonly used as an umbrella term for all persons of diverse SOGIESC, e.g. as "I am LGBT" rather than "I am lesbian/non-binary/trans/gay/other gender identity." It is often used as if it were a third gender category separate from women and men, despite the considerable overlap between the categories, as not all identifying as LGBT would identify as non-binary but rather as a woman or as a man (see also Chua 2018)
2. See Myrntinen et al. (2025)
3. Livelihoods questions were, however, part of the overall research, and around half of the respondents stressed the disadvantaging of women in the limited labour market and gender pay gaps.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by XCEPT Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends: [Grant Number n/a]; XCEPT: [Grant Number n/a].

References

- Alexander, A.J., J.J. Arnett, and S.P.K. Jena. 2017. "Experiences of Burmese Chin Refugee Women: Trauma and Survival from Pre- to Postflight." *International Perspectives in Psychology* 6 (2), <https://doi.org/10.1037/ipp0000068>.
- Brück, T., L.C. Hanmer, J. Klugman, and D.J. Arango. 2024. "Gender Dimensions of Forced Displacement: A Brief Review and Introduction to the Special Issue." *The Journal of Development Studies* 60 (12): 1839–1851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2024.2376145>.
- Chambers, J., and S.N. Dhu Da. 2024. "'Living With.' Revolution: The Everyday Experiences of Myanmar's Generation Z Revolutionaries." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 54 (5): 781–800. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2359373>.
- Chua, L.J. 2018. *The Politics of Love in Myanmar: LGBT Mobilization and Human Rights as a Way of Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cislaghi, B., and L. Heise. 2019. "Gender Norms and Social Norms: Differences, Similarities and Why they Matter in Prevention Science." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42 (2): 407–422.
- Coyle, D., Md.A. Jainul, and M.S. Sandberg-Pettersson. 2020. *Honour in Transition: Changing Gender Norms among the Rohingya*. Dhaka: IOM & UN Women.
- Culcasi, K. 2019. "'We Are Women and Men Now': Intimate Spaces and Coping Labour for Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44 (3): 463–478.
- Daigle, M. 2022. *Gender, Power and Principles in Humanitarian Action*. London: ODI.
- Grabska, K. 2011. "Constructing 'Modern Gendered Civilised' Women and Men: Gender-mainstreaming in Refugee Camps." *Gender & Development* 19 (1): 81–93.
- Haines, R. 2025. "New Opportunities, Rising Constraints: Assessing the Gendered Opportunity Structure of Myanmar's Resistance Movement." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5 (1): ksaf004.
- Haines, R., and C. Buchanan. 2023. "The localisation discourse in post-2021 Myanmar: implications for conflict sensitivity." *Development in Practice* 33 (5): 648–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2200909>.
- Hedström, J. 2025. *Reproducing Revolution – Women's Labor and the War in Kachinland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Johnston, M., and J. Lingham. 2020. *Inclusive Economies, Enduring Peace in Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Field Report*. Melbourne/Warwick, Monash University/University of Warwick.
- Keeni, M., and N. Takashino. 2024. "Between Tradition and Change: Impact of Displacement on Gender Norm Perceptions among Rohingya Refugees in Nepal." *Women's Studies International Forum* 103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102869>.
- Lokot, M. 2022. "Unravelling Humanitarian Narratives: Gender Norm Change during Displacement?" *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 4 (2): 22–31.

- Loong, S. 2022. "Northwest Myanmar: A Quiet Corner Transformed by Resistance, IISS Myanmar Conflict Map." <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/northwest>.
- Ma, J. 2018. "Chin Women Live Under a Cloud." *BNI Online*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/chin-women-live-under-cloud>.
- Marlar, J. Chambers, and Elena. 2023. "Our Htamein, Our Flag, Our Victory' The Role of Young Women in Myanmar's Spring Revolution." *Journal of Burma Studies* 27 (1): 65–99.
- McConnachie, K. 2018. "Boundaries and Belonging in the Indo-Myanmar Borderlands: Chin Refugees in Mizoram." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31(3):314–333.
- Minoletti, P. 2016. *Gender (in)Equality in the Governance of Myanmar: Past, Present, and Potential Strategies for Change*. Yangon: The Asia Foundation.
- Mra, K.K., and J. Hedström. 2024. "'This Bra Protects Me Better than the Military': Bodies and Protests in the Myanmar Spring Revolution." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 54 (5): 759–780. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2344117>.
- Myanmar Research Initiative. 2025. *Emerging and Interim Governance – An Assessment of Alternative Governance in Post-Coup Myanmar*. Yangon: Myanmar Research Initiative.
- Myey, Z. 2024. "Factors Influencing Refugee Settlement to Urban Areas: The Case of Chin Refugees in Mizoram, IDRC Displacement." <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/954c6efb-564c-40e2-867c-01bb78743261/content>.
- Myrntinen, H., L.R. Sangi, P.N. Chi, and K. Lwin. 2025. "Impact of Displacement on Gender Norms: Experiences of Women Refugees of Myanmar." XCEPT Policy Brief, March 2025, https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-03-27_XCEPT-policy-brief_Impacts-of-gender-norms-on-displacement.pdf.
- Ninu. 2017. *Women as the Others – Chin Customary Laws & Practices from a Feminist Perspective*. Yangon: Ninu Women in Action Group.
- OHCHR. 2024. *Courage amid crisis: gendered impacts of the coup and the pursuit of gender equality in Myanmar. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, A HRC56/8*. Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Olivius, E. 2016. "Constructing Humanitarian Selves and refugee others: Gender equality and the global governance of refugees." *International feminist journal of politics* 18 (2): 270–290.
- Olivius, E. 2019. "Claiming Rights in Exile: Women's Insurgent Citizenship Practices in the Thai-Myanmar Borderlands." *Citizenship Studies* 23 (8): 761–779.
- Olivius, E., and J. Hedström. 2025. "'On the Border, I Learned How to Advocate': Borderlands as Political Spaces for Burmese Women's Activism." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 38 (2): 326–339. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead030>.
- Pau, P.K. 2020. *The Indo-Burma Frontier and the Making of the Chin Hills*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Pepper, M. 2018. "Ethnic Minority Women, Diversity, and Informal Participation in Peacebuilding in Myanmar." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13 (2): 61–75.
- Rubiano-Matulevich, E. 2024. "Do Gender Norms Relax with Displacement?" *The Journal of Development Studies* 60 (12): 1932–1963.
- Sang, J.N. 2023. "Resistance and the Cost of the Coup in Chin State, Myanmar." XCEPT. https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AW_Report-Resistance-and-the-Cost-of-Coup-Final-02082023.pdf.
- Satapathy, R.K., and P.C. Lalthansiami. 2021. "Chin Migration to Mizoram Ethnic Affinity and Changing Perceptions." In *Linking India and Eastern Neighbours: Development in the Northeast and Borderlands*, edited by H. Srikanth and Munmun Majumdar, 278–295. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Te, Mawi. 2024. "The Unnoticed Ones: Political Participation of Chin Women in Myanmar Spring Revolution." *Mizoram Educational Journal* 9 (3–4): 104–112.