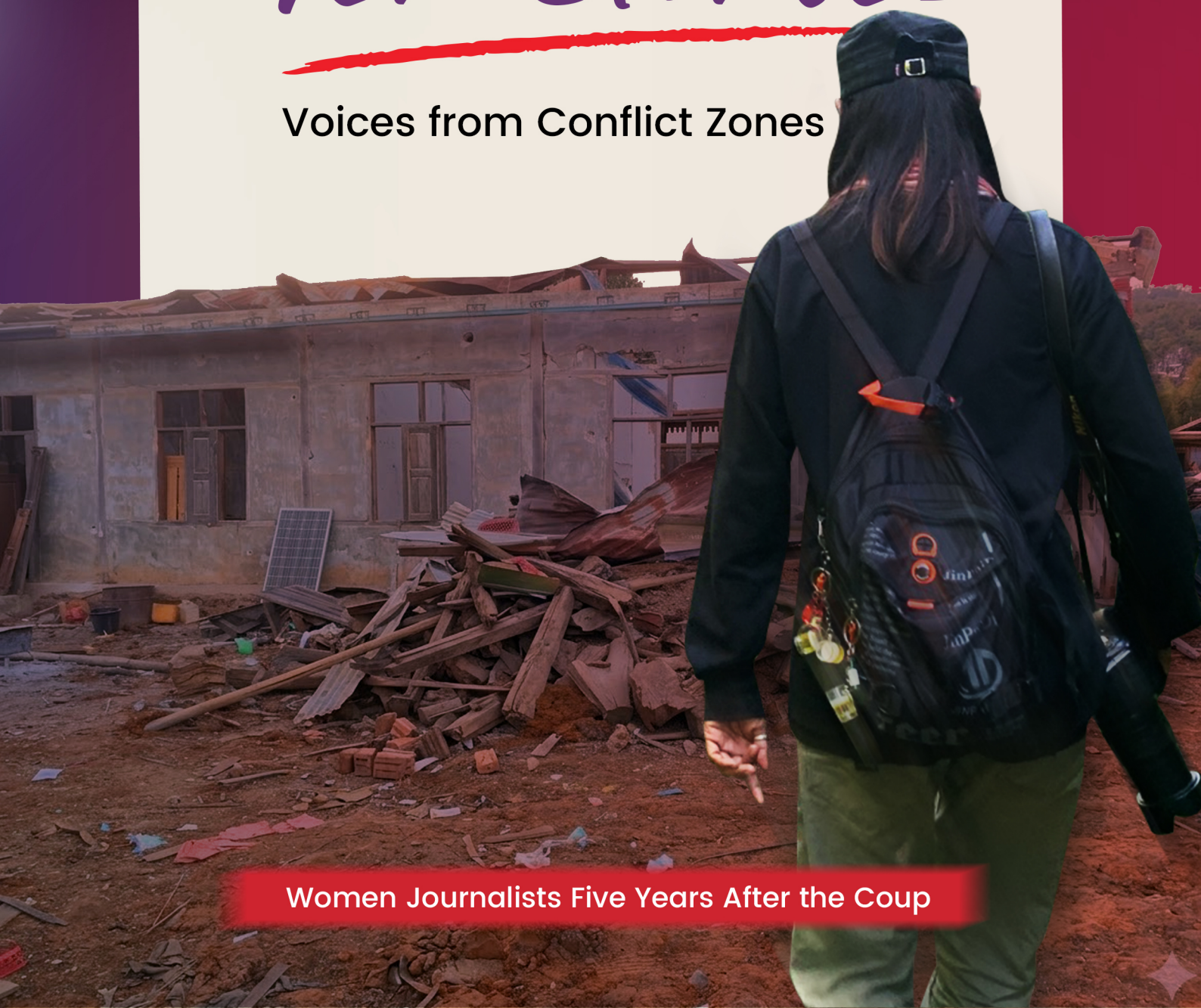




Myanmar
Women
in Media

FRONTLINE *Her Stories*

Voices from Conflict Zones



Women Journalists Five Years After the Coup



Acknowledgements

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We believe their voices will serve as vital documentation for the safety, security, and rights of women within the Myanmar media landscape.

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Abstract



This study presents an in-depth qualitative analysis of the multiple challenges faced by female media professionals covering news in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar. The data used in this study were collected using integrated methods, including in-depth individual interviews with 30 female journalists from various conflict zones, interviews with 7 key stakeholders in the media sector, and focus group discussions. The findings are presented in the form of a thematic analysis.

The findings of this study reveal that, although women working in the media strive to treat life under the constant threat of airstrikes and heavy artillery as normal, they suffer significantly from severe psychological trauma and chronic anxiety. Regarding gender-related challenges, they face sexual harassment at checkpoints and in the workplace, online threats targeting their families, as well as “protective discrimination” from editorial teams that limits their career prospects. Furthermore, physiological challenges, such as water shortages and rising costs of feminine hygiene products, directly threaten their physical health and their ability to remain in the field long-term. From a management perspective, the 2025 financial crisis has led to a weakening of the practical implementation of security and gender policies. The analysis highlights that current psychological support processes are disconnected from “survival support,” which corresponds to the concrete needs of journalists on the ground.

This study therefore suggests that the media and donors should implement concrete gender-sensitive safety policies, build capacity, and prioritize a comprehensive healing process that goes beyond mere psychological support by providing health insurance, income security, and emergency funds for survival. Furthermore, the study highlights the urgent need to engage in political negotiations with armed groups to ensure that they recognize and respect the dignity of journalists as well as their right to information.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background of the Study

The political and military conflicts that emerged in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup have had a profound impact on the country's independent media landscape. For journalists reporting from areas of armed conflict following a coup d'état, safety and security have become a significant professional challenge. In this demanding situation, female journalists are facing "gender-based challenges", multifaceted impacts that affect them more severely than their male counterparts. Although these challenges range from physical dangers and physiological needs to sociocultural barriers and policy gaps, systematic research documenting these conditions remains very rare in Myanmar's media sector.



Most studies to date on media safety have focused primarily on physical threats and legal reprisals against journalists. However, a preliminary analysis shows that, given the unique conditions of the conflict in Myanmar, female journalists face a dual crisis: the general risks associated with war, as well as gender-based discrimination, targeted online sexual harassment, and shortcomings in editorial policies. Although these overlapping risks represent major obstacles to creating a safe working environment for women, the practical implementation of gender-based policies to effectively address these issues remains insufficient on the ground.

Given these circumstances, three major challenges have emerged for women working in the media who are reporting from areas of armed conflict in Myanmar:

Firstly, at frontlines and checkpoints, women face the additional threat of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) simply because of their gender, in addition to the standard risks of combat. However, existing Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) and safety guidelines are mostly designed with men's physical and safety conditions in mind. As a result, there is a lack of gender-specific safety training in the field and protective equipment tailored to the female physique (e.g., body armor specifically designed for women).

Second, neglecting basic physiological needs, such as difficulties in obtaining menstrual hygiene products and a lack of sanitary facilities in conflict zones, has a direct impact on journalists' physical health and work performance. The near-total absence of these considerations in newsrooms' safety policies represents a significant gap in policy.

Lastly, alongside the decline in global funding and the ongoing economic crisis, the trend of experienced female journalists being forced to leave the profession is leading to an irreplaceable loss of voices and human resources for the Myanmar media sector.

Research Objectives

The aim of this research is to listen to the voices of female media professionals directly in the field and to systematically document the physical, psychological, and practical challenges associated with fieldwork. The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify the gender-based risks and unique challenges faced by female media professionals reporting from conflict zones.
2. To analyze how physiological barriers, such as health and personal hygiene issues, affect the professional sustainability of women in the media.
3. To develop practical, gender-sensitive safety recommendations for news agencies and organizations engaged in policy-related work in various regions, based on the identified current challenges.

Chapter 2

Research Methodology

This research is a **qualitative analysis** conducted to gain a deep understanding of the safety, security, and challenges faced by female journalists reporting from conflict zones in Myanmar.

To uncover the detailed firsthand experiences and perspectives of female journalists on the ground, an **exploratory approach** was used. Rather than focusing on numerical data, this methodology prioritizes the underlying "reasons" and "contexts" behind each individual case.

Data Collection

The data required for this research was gathered through secure online communication platforms, including Zoom, Signal, and Telegram, utilizing secure voice call systems. The collection process integrated the following three methodologies:

In-depth Interviews (IDI)

Detailed individual interviews were conducted with **30 female journalists** from various conflict zones. This method aimed to create a safe and transparent environment for deep discussions regarding personal safety, unique gender-based health requirements, and specifically, the threats and experiences related to **Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)** prevalent in such conflict areas.

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

Interviews were conducted with **7 stakeholders**, including editors from media outlets, personnel from media development organizations and women's rights activists. This stage focused on analyzing institutional policies and funding conditions.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Two small-group discussions were organized, involving a mix of female and male journalists and media personnel. The inclusion of male colleagues allowed for the process of **triangulation**, verifying the challenges faced by women from multiple perspectives.



Data Analysis

The collected data was systematically analyzed using **QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis)** software through the **Thematic Analysis** method. To ensure structural integrity, audio recordings were transcribed into text, followed by the assignment of codes to key terms. These related codes were then categorized into primary themes, and the resulting findings were cross-referenced with the original raw data for the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Given the current situation in Myanmar, the safety of respondents is very important. Therefore, the following ethical protocols were strictly followed:



Anonymity

The names, affiliations, and locations of respondents are kept confidential and replaced with pseudonyms.



Informed Consent

The objectives of the research were clearly explained to the participants, and interviews were conducted only after obtaining their voluntary agreement.



Data Security

All interview files and recorded data are stored systematically within secure systems, ensuring that no one outside the research team has access to the information.

Research Limitations and Challenges

During the data collection process, interviewers encountered the following operational difficulties, which also constitute the limitations of this study:

Some respondents were junior journalists or individuals who had transitioned from being PDF fighters. Due to their concerns regarding personal security and the risks of **sexual violence or harassment**, there was a hesitancy to openly disclose certain firsthand experiences.

Participants responding from liberated areas were under constant threat of air strikes during the interviews. This persistent sense of danger disrupted the momentum and flow of the data collection process.

Frequent internet and mobile network blackouts and weak signal strength in conflict areas caused delays in the interview process. Furthermore, because communication was conducted entirely online, managing the digital security of the respondents required extraordinary caution and specialized handling.





Chapter 3

Research Findings and Discussions



Survival and safety challenges in the armed conflict

The situation of women working in the media who report from conflict zones in Myanmar reveals a complex interplay of physical safety, gender barriers, and physiological needs. Their daily lives involve adapting to constant fear under the threat of airstrikes and heavy artillery fire through psychological defense mechanisms. While these female journalists have chosen to remain in dangerous zones to document events, driven by the belief that “where there is danger, there is news”—even as local residents flee to safety—they inevitably suffer from severe emotional trauma and chronic anxiety, which pose a long-term threat to their mental health.

On the other hand, they face difficulties in establishing relationships with local armed groups, where they must balance press freedom with military security policies. Specifically, suspicion or accusations of being “informants” (Dalan) not only undermines their psychological safety but also hinders their ability to establish contacts with informants. From a gender perspective, being female leads to restrictions on travel to frontline battlefields for reporting purposes, as well as gender-based harassment when interacting with security checkpoints. Furthermore, it was found that most news agencies rely more on reactive “we’ll deal with it later” approaches than on systematic policies that would coordinate and support their reporters in the field in advance.

In addition, the destruction of infrastructure and the lack of water sources in conflict zones have a direct impact on the physiological needs and personal hygiene of female media professionals. The lack of menstrual hygiene products and clean water, coupled with exorbitant prices and medical shortages, leads to urinary tract infections and other physical ailments, creating significant barriers to their professional performance. Therefore, the safety of female media professionals in armed conflict zones depends on more than just physical protection; it fundamentally relies on psychological healing, respect for gender sensitivity, and the fulfillment of basic physiological needs.

Experiences with Aerial Threats and the Normalization of Fear

For female journalists working in areas of active armed conflict, the daily routine has come to include airstrikes and heavy artillery fire. Constant exposure to these life-threatening dangers led to gradual changes in these journalists' psychological coping mechanisms. While they initially experienced symptoms such as severe shock, crying, and insomnia, prolonged exposure to these situations resulted in fear becoming a normal part of their lives. One of the respondents described this transition based on her own experiences: **"At first, I was terrified and I'd cry, laugh, and couldn't sleep. But over time, when I find that I'm still alive after they come and bomb us, I just think, oh, I haven't died yet, and carry on with things I need to do" (IDI-005)**. This entails the development of a psychological defense mechanism that enables a person to function in a dangerous environment.

An analysis of the relationship between professional duty and danger suggests that journalists are driven by the belief that "where there is danger, there is news." Whereas local civilians are able to flee to safety when threatened, journalists, in order to accurately document events, must remain in the danger zone. According to respondent IDI-005: **"Because I am a journalist, if artillery strikes hit a location, I can't avoid going there just because I'm scared of the scene. I need to go there to report the news. ... While locals flee, I cannot just follow them."** They prioritize reporting over their own lives, often live alongside soldiers on the front lines, and have come to terms with the fact that they could be targeted at any moment.

However, efforts to normalize these conditions do not mean that there is no psychological strain. Living in a constant state of alert for air attacks brings enormous stress. One respondent, his voice trembling, spoke of the fighter jets' short response time: **"As soon as a fighter jet takes off, it's here in just seven minutes. By the time we hear it and**



start running, the plane is already right above us.” (IDI-013). The first thing that comes to their minds when they hear a plane is: “Where should we run?” This anxiety accompanies them even in everyday situations and affects them psychologically to an extent that they may mistake the sound of a passing car for an approaching plane.

Furthermore, the trauma a person carries with them from what they have seen and heard remains a long-term burden. The sight of scattered human remains and children’s bodies after the bombings triggers indelible nightmares. **“I saw four schoolgirls killed. We see bloodshed all the time... I still see the faces of those Grade 12 students,” (IDI-030)** one respondent shared mournfully. This study shows that although women working in the media in conflict zones try to accept fear as a normal part of life, deep trauma and chronic anxiety remain deeply ingrained in both their daily lives and their professional work.

Relationships with Armed Organizations and Gender-Based Challenges in Covering News

For female media professionals covering events in conflict zones, contact with armed groups is a highly sensitive matter that requires extreme caution. These relationships are often limited by the need to control the flow of information due to military and security requirements. According to respondent **IDI-013**, journalists are forced to align their work with the military security policies of the armed organizations based in the territory rather than prioritizing press freedom.

In analyzing perceptions of “trust” in journalists, misunderstandings regarding the link between the presence of journalists and airstrikes have become a serious security issue. Respondent **IDI-014** described the psychological toll: **“One time, the plane almost bombed our exact location... later, a resistance fighter told us, ‘People are saying you are Dalans (informants),’ and that caused me trauma.”** Furthermore, **“They accused us of being Dalans because we reported on the mistakes made by the resistance side” (IDI-001)** while working in an armed group’s territory. Such instances not only raise serious security concerns for the journalists but also hinder their ability to build trust with news sources.

From a gender perspective, female media professionals face challenges stemming from a mix of traditional cultural views held by local groups and military procedures. When reporting from the front lines, they face restrictions due to security concerns regarding their gender, as well as disagreements over the nature of their profession. **IDI-002** noted, **“It is harder because I am a woman. I have to work harder to prove myself... Being a woman doesn’t**

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doesn't give me
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It makes things harder.**

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give me more opportunities. It makes things harder.” At the same time, interactions at checkpoints and with certain armed groups often involve teasing and uncomfortable social encounters. For LGBTQ+ journalists specifically, **IDI-005** shared that **“there are times when we are not even treated with the basic respect due to a human being.”** While in some cases being a woman might lead to more flexible interactions, this depends more on the reporter’s personal negotiation skills rather than any systematic, well-planned on-ground policy.

Navigating the balance between journalistic ethics and the reality of the struggle for survival is an inevitable part of life in conflict zones. For their own safety, journalists often practice “self-censorship” when it comes to the activities of groups operating in the area. Respondent **IDI-008** stated, **“I don’t dare write about human rights violations... I got so unsettled that I had to say: let someone else write that story.”** Additionally, being asked to alter information (**IDI-005**) and having their media equipment controlled (**IDI-001**) show that female media professionals in conflict zones must carefully balance local security policies against their own professional ethics.

This study reveals differences in attitudes toward safety between news agencies and their field reporters. Some editors believe that presenting their media outlet’s accreditation (an ID card or a letter of recommendation) guarantees sufficient protection; in reality, however, journalists must handle difficult situations with local armed groups on their own. Most news agencies rely on a reactive approach and use official channels to resolve issues only after an arrest or in an emergency, rather than negotiating security clearance for journalists in advance. **KII-004** shared: **“Arrests have occurred while covering the news. Media outlets have had to send letters to Karenni leaders confirming the journalist’s identity. When first crossing the border, arrests happened due to a lack of recognition. There have been two or three such instances. When problems arise, the outlet negotiates with the leaders, but there is never any prior coordination before entering the territory.”** In some outlets, the editorial team does intervene directly if they perceive a risk for the on-ground reporter. **KII-006** explained: **“It depends on the situation. If the editor and reporter discuss potential risks, the editor doesn’t have the reporter make direct contact. If they inform the management, we handle the communication as an organization through official management emails.”** However, even these protections are largely reactive, addressing problems only after they arise.



Health and Physiological Challenges

For female media professionals operating in conflict zones, basic healthcare and female physiological needs represent a major challenge in daily life. Due to the conflict situation which requires fleeing from heavy artillery fire nightly and carrying only limited clothing, personal hygiene has significantly deteriorated. According to respondent IDI-001, the female journalists travel with only three sets of clothes and must always wear pants instead of traditional sarongs (htamein) so they are ready to flee to safety at a moment's notice. Furthermore, the lack of water sources, which often means they go without washing for five days to a week, and the necessity of using stagnant water from streams and fields lead to frequent outbreaks of rashes and skin diseases. Furthermore, the lack of water, which means they go five to seven days without washing, and the necessity of using stagnant water from streams and fields contribute to frequent outbreaks of rashes and skin diseases.

Economic blockades and transport difficulties have caused the price of feminine hygiene products to surge between three to five times the normal rate, depending on the location. In some remote villages, these products are entirely unavailable, forcing people to resort to using old cloths. When menstruation occurs while traveling or fleeing attacks, the lack of private spaces and clean water forces them to use tissues or wear products for prolonged periods. This is identified as the primary cause of frequent urinary tract infections among these professionals.

In terms of access to healthcare, clinics and hospitals in conflict zones are often located in remote, safe areas to avoid military attacks, and they strategically prioritize the treatment of frontline combatants. While journalists suffer from health issues such as deteriorating eyesight, nervous weakness, and hearing impairments caused by artillery explosions, they lack access to specialist consultations. In addition, restrictions on the transport of medical supplies lead to shortages of medications for long-term treatment and to disproportionate price increases, posing a serious threat to people with chronic illnesses.

Analyzing the link between physical health and the news-gathering process, challenges such as suffering severe menstrual cramps while pushing a motorcycle through rugged jungle terrain or being forced to postpone or cancel important interviews due to health issues, hinder professional efficiency. Nevertheless, female journalists continue to struggle to overcome their physical hardships through personal resilience and self-preparation.



Exposure to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

While covering news within Myanmar's conflict zones, female media professionals face multifaceted threats that extend beyond physical, life-threatening danger to include sexual and psychological violence. The study finds that their safety is constantly compromised by Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). According to the research, female journalists have to skillfully navigate challenges ranging from targeted verbal and physical harassment at security checkpoints to sexual exploitation stemming from power imbalances with news sources and armed groups. This includes being subjected to inappropriate, non-professional conversations. Furthermore, online threats on social media, which weaponize the names and addresses of family members, force female journalists to practice self-censorship or self-restriction in their professional roles. On the newsroom management side, while trust in women's professional capabilities has grown, significant barriers remain due to weak implementation of prevention sexual violence policies and a lack of dedicated emergency funds to protect and support female journalists.

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

For female media professionals reporting on the ground, sexual violence and gender-based threats are primary factors infringing upon their psychological and physical safety. Exposure to these dangers creates significant limitations on the mobility and information access of journalists. In particular, checkpoints are identified as the most dangerous locations where female media professionals encounter the highest frequency of harassment. One respondent explained, **"We have to avoid military checkpoints; the way they look at us is disgusting. I've experienced them shouting teases at us and touching us inappropriately"** (IDI-013). Similarly, at border crossings, abuses such as, **"Saying you Khon Pha Ma (Burmese girls) are beautiful while looking with leering eyes"** (IDI-025), constitute a constant form of insult for female media professionals.

Analysis of the security tactics of journalists shows that they often have to travel with male colleagues or pretend to be "husband and wife/couples" to avoid dangers they might face due to being women. According to respondent IDI-003, **"If I go alone, I might encounter these things... a man always goes along."** This situation reflects a gender inequality where female media professionals are forced to seek the protection of a male to carry out their duties freely. However, a more severe condition

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is the existence of physical harassment even within (resistance) armed groups that are supposed to provide protection. According to the disclosure of respondent IDI-027, “When I was a soldier, the battalion commander took advantage of me. When he was drunk, he physically assaulted me about 10 times within 5 months.” Furthermore, some armed groups use pressure to restrict the news-gathering of female media professionals, such as: “The resistance armed group forced me to attend a month-and-a-half training for security reasons. They confiscated our phones, and in that way, prevented our news about gold mining from getting out. We could only report as much as they permitted” (FGD_Mae Sot).

While female media professionals have advantages in gaining the trust of news sources and building close relationships, such proximity is often accompanied by sexual harassment. One respondent said, “If they try to flirt, I have to be cautious... if they suggest going somewhere just the two of us without their wife knowing, I have to refuse” (FGD_CNX). Lower-ranking fighters, say degrading remarks toward female media professionals, such as, “instead of saying ‘be careful getting off the car,’ they say ‘be careful not to fall; if you fall, I won’t give you back (referring to the person), I’ll keep you for good” (FGD_Mae Sot). In addition, there are instances where they take selfies without the consent of the female journalists and threaten to post those photos online. On the other hand, while some editors still limit travel because of gender, some have begun providing protection during current conflict situations by “specifically arranging for female journalists to stay overnight with female community leaders when sleeping at



IDP camps" (KII-007).

Furthermore, difficulties regarding private living spaces and personal hygiene within conflict zones exacerbate sexual insecurity. When staying at armed group camps or in villages, having to sleep in the same room as men causes psychological tension. **"Because there were so many men and I was alone, I didn't dare to sleep soundly,"** (IDI-010) expressed one respondent. Similarly, online threats are severe, including **"sending pornographic images and threatening by mentioning the names and addresses of family members"** (FGD_Mae Sot), causing female media professionals to restrict their personal information online.

Incidents of rape and murder of women that occur in these areas also instill deep fear among journalists and lead them to reduce their activities for their own protection. To address these issues, it is proposed that newsrooms, **"Sexual Harassment policies need to be implemented in practice, not just on paper; the perpetrators themselves need to be aware that this is an infringement on human dignity"** (KII-005).

Women working in the media in conflict zones struggle to continue their reporting while avoiding danger as much as possible, despite external life-threatening risks, authoritarian practices in the workplace, exploitation by sources, and online attacks targeting their families. This study concluded that there remains an urgent need within Myanmar's media sector to implement specific protective measures, such as dedicated budgets for women's safety and complaint mechanisms developed in collaboration with armed groups and women's organizations.

Digital and Online Violence

For female media professionals reporting in conflict zones, digital security has become a challenge as critical as physical safety. Systematically targeted attacks and defamation based on gender, particularly on social media platforms, have a profound psychological impact on journalists.

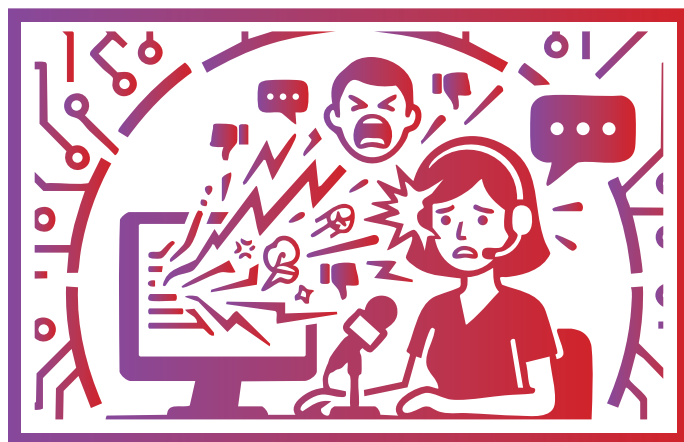
According to this study, there is a new phenomenon of using digital means to exploit personal data for the purpose of psychologically intimidating journalists. One of the respondents explained that a member of her editorial staff received **"a message stating that even though you've fled, your mother is still here. We know where your family and your sister are and what their names are."** (FGD_Mae Sot). Furthermore, female broadcast presenters are more frequently targeted, facing daily harassment such as receiving pornographic images and messages. The statement, **"They send pictures of their genitals... Those who commit these acts systematically with fake accounts do so with the mindset that no action can be taken against them"** (KII-006), highlights how perpetrators are taking advantage of the lack of rule of law.

From a governance perspective, systematic policies and support mechanisms for responding to digital

violence remain inadequate. Even in some major news media outlets, these issues are addressed based on general ethical principles rather than on gender-specific policies. **“Gender-specific policies must be a formal document... Policy cannot exist only on paper. When something happens, it must be possible to take action based on these policies,”** said KII-006. When online attacks occur, the measures taken by news organizations are limited to basic steps, such as temporarily suspending accounts, and they are not yet able to provide long-term psychological support.

Despite the availability of numerous training programs on digital security, insufficient compliance in practice remains a significant shortcoming. One person in a management role pointed out that: **“Many attend Digital Safety trainings, but do they follow them? No. ... Although they were told to use Password Managers, compliance is still weak even now”** (KII-007). In addition, sexual harassment also occurs in relationships between journalists and sources, which editors must systematically monitor and prevent. The statement **“We can hear the sources flirting with each other while answering questions in the interview... the reporter has to keep an eye out for these things”** (FGD_Mae Sot) demonstrates the need for organizational ethics.

Current economic pressures, such as high commodity prices and low income, exacerbate the



impact of digital violence. Struggling for survival while facing online threats pushes journalists to resign from their jobs. According to the observation that **“Everyone is experiencing trauma right now; it’s called Collective Trauma”** (KII-001), online violence is not just an individual problem but a danger threatening the survival of the entire media industry.

Newsroom Management and Policy Challenges

Within the newsroom management mechanisms of the Myanmar media industry, gender equality and safety policies suffer from significant organizational weaknesses. While most news organizations impose basic ethical codes and security guidelines for journalists to follow, a "Gender Policy" that protects the specific needs and safety of women remains weak in practice. Regarding this situation, respondent KII-001 stated, **“If you ask whether there is a gender policy, I’d have to say no... I don’t think there is a practice of establishing and implementing such policies in newsrooms.”** Although some news organizations do have PSHEA (Prevention of Sexual Harassment, Exploitation, and Abuse) policies, these are found to be limited to the internal newsroom environment. A female participant in the Mae Sot focus group discussion noted, **“There are only policies that can provide protection within the newsroom itself,”** reflecting the insufficiency of policy-based protection for risks encountered while covering news on the ground.



2025 Funding Cuts and The Impact on Safety

Since early 2025, the suspension and reduction of funding within the Myanmar media sector have been found to have a direct impact on the safety and professional opportunities of female media professionals. Due to the financial crisis, news organizations have been forced to prioritize day-to-day survival over long-term planning, leading to a situation where the "gender-based needs" of female media professionals are being sidelined. As respondent KII-004 stated, **"When considering survival, one has to think about the whole entity. We cannot afford to think by dividing into gender groups."** Similarly, a person in a management role at a media outlet expressed their long-term uncertainty: **"Is it sustainable? No... we only have enough resources for the next three or four months; we don't know what will happen beyond that."**

The insufficiency of safety equipment has become a primary factor restricting the reporting rights of female media professionals. When there is an inadequate supply of equipment, news outlets become reluctant to send women to dangerous locations. Regarding this, a management official from one media outlet said, **"We had to leave [the women] behind because of the lack of protective gear. Even if we were to do a stand-up report, we wouldn't consider sending them."** This highlights how the lack of funding causes female media professionals to lose opportunities for frontline reporting and career advancement. Some journalists are coping by networking across different outlets to share equipment for free.

In terms of economic impact, the decline in writing Fees and wages threatens both the daily lives and financial security of female media professionals. For women who are also responsible for supporting their families, the reduction in income places an even greater burden on them: **"Writing Fees decreased; it stings. It affects my livelihood. I have to look after my younger brothers, and it becomes a struggle."** Furthermore, the fact that management positions in some newsrooms are operating without taking salaries themselves to keep operations running demonstrates how deep the financial crisis in the media sector has become in 2025..

The 2025 funding crisis not only causes female media professionals to lose access to safety gear and health insurance but also makes it a challenge to even remain in the profession due to livelihood hardships. This study finds that how news organizations will balance the safety and equal opportunities of women through policy amidst limited resources remains one of the greatest management challenges of the current era.

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

The primary challenge regarding gender policies within news organizations is that while they may exist on paper, they lack effectiveness in practical implementation. Organizational statements and policies fail to provide psychological security for journalists, especially when they travel to dangerous field locations. Regarding this gap, a female participant in the Mae Sot focus group discussion criticized: **“Protection only exists online... they just issue a statement, but the victim doesn’t feel safe just by looking at a piece of paper.”** This indicates a lack of success in the practical implementation of policies.

There is also a significant gap between managers and staff in terms of policy awareness. While some news organizations are found to provide practical rights such as menstrual leave and maternity leave, many journalists are unaware that a complaint policy even exists at their own outlets. A female participant in the Chiang Mai focus group discussion remarked, **“I have been working for about ten years, and I’ve never heard of it; I’m only finding out now,”** demonstrating how weak policy communication is within the newsroom.

Furthermore, policies such as PSHEA are only effective at the organizational level and their inability to deter misconduct by low-ranking soldiers on the ground remains a major challenge. A female participant in the Mae Sot focus group discussion pointed out: **“PSHEA has low implementation capacity... it cannot deter low-level soldiers; it only deters the top levels.”** In addition, some news organizations adopt policies



borrowed from external sources that do not fit their specific context, and a lack of budget to explain these policies so that every staff member understands them further deepens the gap between policy and practice.

The study finds that in 2025, policies within Myanmar media organizations remain largely on paper and have yet to provide effective protection for female media professionals on the ground. There remains a persistent need to explain policies clearly to all staff, adapt them to fit field realities, and build mechanisms that can provide practical protection for those who file complaints.

Decision-Making and Discrimination

In conflict zone reporting, numerous gender-based discriminations and challenges exist regarding decision-making and access to opportunities. While newsroom managers primarily cite "security concerns" as the reason for deciding whether to send female media professionals to the frontline, this acts as a "protectionist discrimination" that limits professional career opportunities for women on the ground. Regarding this situation, one respondent shared her experience: **"Because I am a woman, editors don't send me to the frontlines. If you're a woman, don't go. Stay behind. Even if an IDP camp is being bombed, if male colleagues are free and available, they don't really send the women"** (IDI-019). Although newsroom managers claim that sending male reporters into the field is based solely on security concerns, in practice, there is gender-based discrimination. Decisions about whether to send female journalists into the field are often accompanied by lengthy discussions or the mandatory requirement that they be accompanied by a male colleague, reflecting a lack of trust in women's abilities. Such excessive restrictions under the pretext of safety not only limit female journalists' independence but also prevent them from gaining new and essential field experience.

Regarding access to information, women are viewed to have a "Soft Power" advantage, as they can obtain more information from sources through empathy. A participant in the Mae Sot focus group discussion



“

Because I am a woman, editors don't send me to the frontlines. If you're a woman, don't go. Stay behind.

”



noted: **“It seems like women get more news; whether it’s the PDFs or EROs, the leadership answers more readily when a woman asks.”** Similarly, the fact that most female media professionals are more patient in building trust with sources is an advantage over their male counterparts. However, this advantage is accompanied by ethical and security challenges. Sources often **“transition from emotional vulnerability to confessing romantic feelings” or “discuss non-professional matters”** with female media professionals, which not only causes significant psychological stress but also creates difficult situations for maintaining journalistic ethics.

When gathering information directly in the field, particularly in areas controlled by armed groups, women are often labeled as “vulnerable,” which results in their access to documenting important events being restricted, or they are told, **“Don’t go yet because you’re a woman. If you want photos, we’ll take them for you” (IDI-030)**. These prohibitions undermine the professional skills and professional dignity of female journalists. Furthermore, the fear of potential sexual violence in conflict zones is so deep that one respondent noted: **“I even carry condoms when going into the jungle. I have to take precautions thinking of begging them to at least use this if I am raped” (FGD_Mae Sot)**, demonstrating the depth of the security threats.

In newsroom management, a lack of understanding of women’s physiological needs also leads to workplace pressure. The failure of editors to acknowledge and support the health issues women face during menstruation, coupled with a lack of basic infrastructure in the field, presents barriers that make it difficult for women to remain in the media industry. Similarly, in areas controlled by certain armed groups, the failure to recognize reporters’ freedom and the imposition of punishments such as flogging or forced push-ups in accordance with military discipline not only undermines reporters’ dignity but also constitutes a form of gender-based violence.

The study finds that female media professionals in Myanmar’s conflict zones are struggling to report the truth while facing multilayered challenges: protectionist discrimination within the newsroom, sexual harassment by armed actors on the ground, and a lack of understanding across various organizations.

Psychological Impacts and Limitations of Workplace Healing Mechanisms

Female media professionals who report on events in conflict zones in Myanmar face multifaceted and severe trauma caused by the direct effects of war. Since most media workers are directly exposed to atrocities, they exhibit clear signs of severe trauma, such as emotional numbness and sensory disturbances.

Respondent **IDI-020** shared in interviews,



“Every time I close my eyes, I see decapitated heads and severed limbs,”

while **IDI-003** stated,



“The smell of gunpowder and the stench of blood are always in my nose,”

illustrating the intensity of sensory trauma. This fear causes even normal sounds to be misinterpreted as sounds of war.

IDI-022 noted,



“I can’t sleep because my heart races while listening to whether a sound is a ceiling fan blade or a drone,”

and **IDI-010** added they experience



“the urge to run into trenches even when hearing the sound of a passenger plane,”

showing that their psychological safety has been completely shattered.

On the other hand, female media professionals bear a double burden: on the one hand, secondary traumatization stemming from the suffering of their sources, and on the other, the effects of online violence.

IDI-014 remarked,



“After interviewing about five people regarding a school bombing that killed over 20 people, I was very exhausted and my spirit collapsed.”

IDI-007 expressed feelings of guilt over being unable to help the injured, saying,



“I can’t sleep because of the feeling that I failed my duty.”

Similarly, a participant in the Chiang Mai focus group discussion shared, **“They circulated photos where they photoshopped a regime officer cap onto my head and sat me next to dogs (regime soldiers) ... Because they even found my private account to call and message me, I no longer want to continue this work.”** This suggests that online sexual harassment and targeted attacks are driving women to the point where they want to resign. Most news organizations are unable to provide effective protection against these attacks and offer only institutional responses, such as: **“The office doesn’t know how to solve it either. They just offer words of encouragement. It’s a common occurrence and nothing can be done,”** which further damages the journalists’ psychological security.

There are major gaps in institutional healing, and respondents demand practical “survival support” rather than professional counseling. Regarding professional counseling, IDI-014 expressed skepticism: **“There are counseling sessions, but I don’t want to do them. I don’t want to tell my story to a stranger who doesn’t understand the news media. How are they going to comfort me?”** IDI-003 shared the concern that counseling feels like re-triggering the trauma rather than healing it: **“I feel that taking counseling hurts the psyche more; it’s not okay to have to retell it and sit there crying.”**

One participant in the focus group in Mae Sot pointed out that support for survival is more important than similar interventions: **“These things (safety equipment) aren’t a priority on the ground; we need health insurance and financial support. The main problem is securing a livelihood.”** Another participant added: **“Money is the second god; only with a full stomach can one keep the commandments (honesty),”** suggesting that economic security is the most fundamental therapy for mental health.

These points suggest that, for female journalists working in conflict zones, mental health care is not merely a matter of counseling; it is most effective only when provided in conjunction with physical safety, financial security, and a supportive environment.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

According to this study, female media professionals covering conflict zones across Myanmar face multiple challenges, including life-threatening risks, gender-based violence, and institutional weaknesses. Although they strive to “normalize” airstrikes and heavy artillery fire by treating them as a daily reality, the resulting severe trauma and constant anxiety inevitably take a toll on their physical and mental well-being.

While being a woman offers certain advantages in building trust with sources in conflict zones, in practice, they lose professional opportunities due to restrictions imposed by armed groups, accusations of being “informants” (Dalans), and “protection-based discrimination.” In particular, sexual harassment at security checkpoints and in the workplace, as well as online threats targeting their families, put such pressure on women journalists that they are driven to consider leaving the profession.

Regarding newsroom management, due to the 2025 financial crisis, policies on safety and gender equality exist only on paper, and the capacity to address the physical and safety needs of women in the field remains limited. Furthermore, current psychological support practices fall far short of meeting journalists’ actual need for “survival support”. In summary, the analysis shows that the safety of women working in the media depends entirely on a balanced integration of physical safety, economic security, and institutional protection policies.



Chapter 5

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to ensure the safety and survival of female media professionals covering news in conflict zones across Myanmar.

Media organizations and editorial managers must implement policies to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (PSHEA), not only on paper but also in the form of concrete standard operating procedures, including by establishing safe complaint mechanisms and effective disciplinary rules against perpetrators of such acts. Media organizations must assume institutional responsibility for the safety of women journalists when coordinating their activities in advance with



ground. Rather than restricting female journalists' access to field reporting under the pretext of safety, we must put an end to this "protective discrimination" by strengthening their digital security capabilities and their survival skills in dangerous areas. Particularly during the 2025 financial crisis, striving to pay regular salaries and writing fees, while providing safety allowances and health insurance, constitutes the most fundamental survival support for mental health.

Rather than settling for the current practice of offering only psychological support, donors and international supporters should allocate funds for comprehensive psychological support tailored to journalists' actual needs. This should include peer support groups, temporary leave for those who have experienced severe trauma, and specialized programs to address secondary trauma. Similarly, long-term project planning must include a dedicated fund for purchasing essential physical health supplies, safety equipment tailored to women's body types, and the establishment of safe spaces for emergency relocation.

Armed groups and media networks should collaborate through constructive negotiations to ensure that the codes of conduct of local armed groups include respect for journalists' freedom of information and human dignity. It is particularly important to conduct awareness-raising efforts at the frontline soldiers to prevent sexist harassment and accusations of being an "informant" (Dalans) against women. At the same time, it is recommended that emergency response and protection networks be established as a matter of urgency in collaboration with women's organizations, thereby providing a platform for immediately reporting incidents and offering concrete protection in the event of a health emergency or sexual violence in the field.



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