

Change for Peace Fellowship

The Impacts of Coup on Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing in Myanmar: A case study on CDM Students



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Introduction

In Myanmar, youths are increasingly experiencing hopelessness and helplessness because of the coup. They have witnessed that activists and human rights defenders are imprisoned on dubious charges and sentenced to death in unfair trials. Besides, they have been exposed to violent crackdowns and survivor guilt under the autocratic rules of General Min Aung Hlaing. Due to chronic stress, fear, and feelings of powerlessness, they become vulnerable to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A [survey](#) conducted by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) found that 63% of respondents reported experiencing anxiety, 55% reported experiencing depression, and 23% reported experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

To explore further how political unrests affect mental health status of youths, we conduct a focus group discussion with five students who joined in solidarity with their comrades in Civil Disobedience Movements. To better understand the students are found to be suffering from severe mental disorders and struggling with day-to-day activities under the burden of social pressures and uncertainties of their future. They emphasized the urgent need for the civilian government, National Unity Government (NUG), to prioritize the establishment of mental health services and community support groups to address their needs.

Background

The discussion began by asking the students about their perception of mental health. All students unanimously acknowledged the significance of good mental health in enabling individuals to function and contribute effectively to society. Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines [mental health](#) as a state of psychological well-being where individuals can effectively cope with life's challenges, realize their potential, achieve academic and professional success, and help their communities. In essence, good mental health is characterized by the ability to navigate life's obstacles in a balanced manner. However, it is important to recognize that mental health is not solely a personal matter. It is influenced by biological, psychological, social, cultural, and particularly political factors. Studies conducted in [Egypt](#) and [Ukraine](#) have revealed a correlation between exposure to political violence and an increase in symptoms of severe mental illnesses. The students also expressed their belief that political upheavals negatively impact their mental health by diminishing their agency, isolating them socially, and hindering their pursuit of life goals.

As a disclaimer, the specific details and severity of mental health problems would require further information or clarification. Each individual's experience with mental health challenges can vary, and a comprehensive understanding of their specific circumstances and conditions would be necessary to fully assess the extent of the impact on their mental health. But the findings presented in this article are based on interviews with five university students who shared their experiences and perspectives, which reflect the overall mental health challenges faced by youths in Myanmar.

In general, the mental health problems caused by the five CDM university students were enormous, it suggests that the impact of mental health challenges experienced by these individuals was significant, severe, and extensive. In most extreme cases, some even considered suicide. Based on their discussion, we categorize them into four issue areas: **sexual abuse, LGBT discrimination, pressure from society, and disruption of academic activities.**

1. Sexual Abuse

The interviews revealed that some students experienced sexual abuse and assault following the coup. Participants reported feelings of anxiety, fear, and difficulty concentrating on their studies because of these traumatic experiences. One of the CDM students who participated in the interview went into hiding for a period of time after the military coup. During her time in the forest, she was sexually harassed by people in her group. During that time, she became very fearful and felt insecure, and wanted to return to her place of residence. The leader of her group was also known as a perpetrator of sexual abuse regarding the sexual abuse case, so she was unable to return home and her mental health deteriorated.

After that, she decided to go to a new environment to receive medical treatment and left from the hiding. Therefore, she crossed the Thailand-Myanmar border and lived in Thailand as an illegal resident, taking mental health-related drugs and receiving treatment. At the time being, while being treated, she was arrested by the Thai police as an illegal resident in Thailand. She was able to return to her home country after paying a fine to the relevant police but was not released and was sexually harassed again by the Thai police. She was subjected to a thorough interrogation by touching the private parts of her body. After that, she became afraid of strange people and community, her mental health became worse than before, and she suffered men trauma. She became distrustful even of the different sexes from her closest community, was very shy, and her mental health was affected to the point of committing suicide. She worked as a women's activist during the Covid period before the coup. Being a female activist before the Coup, she experienced a lot of sexual abuse against women. But, when she was sexually abused herself, she learned to empathize with other girls, and her mental health ended up falling due to her insecurities. However, she was able to bounce back from those bad cases and has been receiving treatment with the environment and taking drugs until now. After the coup, these incidents created a hostile and unsafe environment for students, leading to profound psychological distress.

2. LGBT Discrimination

Another challenge that causes mental health issues is LGBT discrimination. K (name changed for security reason) was a university student studying international relations who confronted not only political instability but also gender and sexual orientation discrimination. She self-identified as LGBT and participated actively in the civil disobedience movement. However, as she became more outspoken, she encountered discrimination based on her gender identity during the movements.

In her pursuit of justice and liberty for Myanmar, she joined the defense forces in the jungle. Within the training camps, she confronted prejudice. Despite her abilities and willingness to contribute, her fellow soldiers constantly doubted her. The discriminatory treatment she received was disheartening, especially when her coworkers exploited their positions of authority and power. As she moved from one military camp to another, hoping for a change, she encountered the same

prejudices repeatedly. She questioned herself whether her sexual orientation made her devoid of trust and esteem due to their ill treatment. She made the courageous decision to abandon those camps and return home. However, her own family did not welcome her. Their societal prejudices-based doubts about her abilities caused her more depressed.

3. Pressure from Society

In a series of interviews with CDM university students amidst the turmoil of the coup in Myanmar, a common narrative emerged, highlighting the immense societal pressures they faced. Many students expressed how students' parents, driven by concern for their safety, relentlessly pressured them to return to the university campus, where CDM students believed would be relatively shielded from the volatile environment. However, rather than receiving understanding, these courageous individuals found themselves subjected to ridicule from their peers who had pursued higher education.

In addition, CDM students were stigmatized for their lack of formal education and perceived as outsiders who had not attended university like the rest. Moreover, the chaotic circumstances of the coup prevented CDM students from engaging in regular work, leading their parents to accuse them of being unproductive and useless. All of the interviewees encountered significant challenges in their job search due to the lack of a formal degree, which greatly hindered their employment prospects. The constant fear of arrest loomed over CDM students, adding to their already overwhelming anxiety and distress. Consequently, they experienced deep depression, burdened by the perception that their parents and society at large saw them as individuals who could not contribute meaningfully to the betterment of their society.

4. Disruption of Academic Activities:

The students also expressed their difficulties in maintaining connections with some of their friends have joined insurgent groups in remote jungle areas, while others reside in rural regions with unreliable access to electricity and transportation. Some have even left the country to pursue studies abroad. Among the students, there are some who were unable to pursue their career aspirations abroad due to financial constraints. They experience feelings of depression and envy towards their peers who were able to study in foreign countries. In an extreme case, one of our interviewees took drastic measures and severed all ties with her closest friend who is currently studying abroad, driven by a mix of jealousy and feelings of inferiority. These circumstances, the students find themselves in social isolation, completely cut off from their only source of supportive community.

Furthermore, in the past, they had the opportunity to meet new friends by engaging in student clubs and organizations at the university. However, since boycotting the junta's education system and refusing to return to college, their chances of socializing and networking have diminished. Extracurricular activities, which are crucial for personal growth, identity formation, and building self-esteem, have been lost. As a result, the students participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) are now experiencing a mental health crisis, characterized by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about their own abilities.

Discussions

The focus group discussion revealed the profound challenges faced by university students in Myanmar in terms of their mental health and overall well-being. The coup has generated fear and uncertainty, resulting in severe mental health issues among young people. Participants spoke of experiencing various disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. They also shared instances of sexual violence, harassment and discrimination based on gender identity. These experiences left them with a sense of regret for not being able to complete their education and feelings of helplessness and despair regarding their future prospects. Despite these difficulties, participants expressed their determination to overcome their mental health struggles and create a brighter future. They relied on coping strategies such as reading, writing, cooking, listening to music and engaging in housekeeping chores to alleviate anxiety and hopelessness. One of the participants said, “I continue to live my life with only one hope— hope that I would see my mother once more in my life. I want to see my mother. It had been around three years since I last saw my mother, and that was the glimmer of hope that I had.” The participants emphasized the need for immediate assistance and mental health services for university students in Myanmar, suggesting that the National Unity Government(NUG)should take action despite concerns about data breaches and also recommended a community-based approach to address the impact and raise awareness about mental health at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

This research has shed light on the significant challenges faced by CDM students regarding their mental health and overall well-being. The findings from this study have underscored the prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among this population. Moreover, various factors such as academic pressure, social interactions, financial constraints, and long-term prospects for success are the impact of mental health after the coup have been identified as key contributors to these struggles.

In conclusion, addressing the mental health and struggles of CDM students requires a collective effort from academic departments, counseling services, and the broader communities of other relevant stakeholders are crucial in developing a holistic approach to CDM students well-being. By integrating mental health support, providing faculty training on identifying and responding to CDM students' mental health needs, and establishing partnerships with local mental health organizations, can create a comprehensive support system for CDM students. By prioritizing mental health support, implementing proactive measures, and fostering a culture of well-being, can significantly contribute to the overall success and flourishing of CDM students. It is crucial for the community and the civilian government, NUG to recognize the importance of prioritizing CDM student mental health and well-being. Ultimately, investing in CDM student mental health is an investment in the future well-being of individuals and society as a whole.

Statement of Permission

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