Education Challenges Faced by Chin Refugee Children in Mizoram State, India

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Abstract

The education of thousands of people in Myanmar was interrupted when the 1 February 2021 military coup forced them to flee their homes. Many Chin people, including children, crossed into India and sought refuge in the north-east state of Mizoram. The right to education is a fundamental human right and education is essential for children's social and emotional development and wellbeing. Although India has not ratified the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention, the Mizoram State government recognizes the right to education as stipulated in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Indian government's 2009 Right to Free and Compulsory Education of Children Act. Chin refugee students can attend schools in Mizoram, but still face many difficulties related to their education. This study investigates how students cope with and/or overcome these challenges. It discusses the role of state schools, education policies, and civil society organizations in helping refugee children access education in Mizoram. The study used qualitative methods and generated its data from interviews with 17 research participants displaced from Chin State, including 12 students. The main reported challenges were language and curriculum barriers, financial issues and a lack of documentation. Chin refugee students cope through self-study, maintaining positivity, and with the support of peers and teachers. Their right to quality, inclusive education should be guaranteed by local governments of host communities.

Introduction

Thousands of people are still being forced to flee their homes in Myanmar due to war, persecution, and human rights violations. The political crisis and violence following the 1 February 2021 military coup led to many people seeking refuge in neighboring countries, including in India, where many Mizoram State residents share a close cultural and linguistic bond with the Chin people of Myanmar. The central government of India ordered borders close to refugees from Myanmar, but the Mizoram National Front government led by Mr./Pu Zoramthanga ignored the decree, citing "common tribal lineage" and "deep ethnic bonds" with Chin people fleeing violence.[1] Many Chin people that moved to Mizoram came from Chin State townships such as Tonzang, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Thantlang, Matupi, and Mindat.

The Chin people are a large and diverse ethnic group with many rich cultural traditions and several distinct linguistic and clan groups. The Chin people's ancestors are generally understood to have migrated into the territory of what became Burma from the north along the Chindwin River. In today's Myanmar, Chin people mostly live in Chin and Rakhine states, and Bago, Magway, and Sagaing regions. They also live across other countries: Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, and there are major refugee diaspora communities as far away as the United States.

Chin ethnic groups are sometimes divided by Myanmar authorities into 53 'sub-tribes.' Others also say there are six major groups under the Chin banner: the Asho, Cho or Sho, Khuami or M'ro, Laimi, Mizo (Lushai), and Zomi.[2] One prominent Chin researcher and politician claims Chin tribal groups can be divided into 69 smaller groups.[3] The areas where most Chin people originally settled are mountainous and remote, with a lack of communication between groups leading to the development of numerous mutually unintelligible languages. One scholar claims

[1] Choudhury, 2021.
[2] Vomson, 1986, p. 40.
[3] Sakhong, 2003.

Chin languages can be divided into eight types: Zomi, Laizo, Laipi, Cho, Matu, Khami, Ashao, and Mizo languages.[4]

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agency, which works to ensure refugee children and young people can access quality education, as of 1 May 2023 over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar lived in the state of Mizoram.[5] This number included many children, who are most vulnerable and impacted by displacement. Refugee children face many challenges, but perhaps none are so important as the general precarity, lack of knowledge and documentation, language barriers, and financial difficulties hindering access to education.

This is a tragedy, as education is vital if children are to reach their full potential. They are the future, the treasures who will one day lead and build a better world. Since the United Nations' (UN's) 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), education has been more often recognized by governments as a fundamental human right, with every child having the right to access safe, quality education. The UN's global Sustainable Development Goals also aim to ensure inclusive, equitable, quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The UNHCR has identified four reasons why education is essential for refugees.[6] First, education is a human right. Second, education is a tool of protection. Third, education helps to meet psychosocial needs, and fourth, education promotes self-reliance and social and economic development by building human capital.

Although India has not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR), it is a party to the CRC, so it is obliged to take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refuge in India, or who is considered a refugee, shall receive protection and humanitarian assistance, just as any other child born there.[7] The Mizoram State government has

[4] Bunei, 1976, p. 3.
[5] ACAPS, 2023.
[6] Dryden-Peterson, 2003.
[7] Stipulated in Article 22 of the CRC.

extended humanitarian assistance to Chin refugees and allows refugee children to attend school, waving their tuition fees and giving them lunches the same as local students. However, challenges remain for Chin refugee students when they try to access and benefit from education in Mizoram.

This study aims to better understand these challenges and trace the measures taken by Chin refugee children to thrive in local Mizoram schools. It details government education policy in Myanmar and Mizoram State and asks how Chin refugee children cope with difficulties accessing education. The article continues in four sections: an explanation of methodology, analysis of relevant education policies, and then the paper's findings on students' challenges and coping methods, with a brief conclusion.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods allowing for in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of refugee children in Mizoram State. In addition to interviewing refugee students, I also talked with their parents, teachers, and a school principal and social worker. Qualitative methods were best suited for this research project involving vulnerable populations. They enabled the research project participants to express their feelings and opinions in their own words.[8]

[8] Liamputtong, 2007.

Table 1

List of student research participants with their demographic information.

Number	Age	Education	School	Mother Tongue	Township
P-1	9	Class 3	Private/ Neuhof	Falam	Falam
P-2	11	Class 3	Presbyterian	Zomi	Tedim
P-3	12	Class 4	Presbyterian	Zomi	Tedim
P-4	13	Class 4	Government	Falam	Falam
P-5	13	Class 6	Presbyterian	Matupi	Matupi
P-6	12	Class 6	Government	Khualsim	Falam
P-7	12	Class 6	Private/Home Mission	Thantlang	Lai
P-8	16	Class 7	Presbyterian	Matupi	Matupi
P-9	16	Class 9	Private/ Neuhof	Zomi	Tedim
P-10	17	Class 9	Government	Falam	Falam
P-11	17	Class 10	Private/Solomon	Cho	Mindat
P-12	17	Class 10	Government	Lai	Thantlang

Table 2

List of non-student research participants with their demographic information. "CDM" refers to a participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Number	Position/Relationship	School	Remark
P-13	Teacher	Presbyterian	
P-14	Principal	Government School	
P-15	Parents	-	CDM
P-16	Parents	-	CDM
P-17	Social Worker	-	CDM

Data was collected through 12 individual interviews with refugee students in Aizawl city (eight in primary school and four in

elementary school, a mix of government and private schools), complemented by data collected from two parents, a teacher, school principal, and a social worker.

Student participants were randomly selected from Aizawl's community of students that fled Chin State, Myanmar, after the February 2021 military coup, with weighting based on their different mother tongues. The other non-student, adult participants were purposefully selected to comment on the children's challenges to education. They each had different roles and expertise: the principal and teacher were responsible for accepting, declining, and communicating with refugee children at their school. The international non-governmental organization (INGO) social worker gave advice to refugees and suggested ways for them to attend school in Mizoram.

All participants gave their voluntary informed consent before taking part in the research. They were introduced to the process of the research, its objectives, when, where, and how the results would be used, as well as the risks and benefits of the work. Children's parents and guardians were asked for their permission to interview their children. Oral agreement was obtained from all parents and guardians.

All participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, the children's dignity was respected, and trust was developed throughout the research process. I employed pseudonyms to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and anonymous data handling. Questions were open, neutral, and understandable, and focused on generating qualitative data. The interviews were held in June and July 2023 in the Zomi, Mizo, and Burmese languages. Depending on the age and maturity of the children, the length of each interview varied. It took two weeks for the researcher to transcribe the interviews into English, the language in which the original draft of this article was written.

As mentioned, these interviews were supplemented by document analysis, to examine education policy for refugee students in Mizoram. Important documents analyzed included Myanmar's 2014 National Education Law, the 2015 National Education Amendment Law, and the 2016–2021 National Educational

Strategic Plan (NESP). In order to investigate the education policies of the India Central Government and Mizoram State, documents analyzed included the Mizoram Education Act, 2003; the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE); the 2013 Education Policy of Mizoram (EPM); and the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP).

The Relevant Education Policies and Their Impacts

This section discusses the education policies of Myanmar and Mizoram State and explains the impacts of these policies on Chin refugee children.

Education Policy in Myanmar

The education system in Myanmar was guided from 2016–2021 by the NESP, a plan developed through a participatory and consultative process involving various stakeholders during a period of civilian control over the education ministry.

Myanmar authorities have long recognized only 135 ethnic groups with distinct languages and cultures. The official language of the country is Myanmar (Burmese), the language of the majority Bamar ethnic group. For decades, the military regime that ruled Myanmar suppressed the use and teaching of ethnic languages as part of its policy of assimilation and centralization.[9]

Following the 1962 military coup, schools were nationalized, and the use of Burmese as the medium of instruction increased. The new regime placed no consideration on education through other languages.[10] Between 1962 and 2011, the Burmese language became the de facto sole language of governance and education, with minority (or "ethnic nationality") languages suppressed and marginalized.[11] In contrast to formal state-controlled schooling, ethnic nationality civil society actors in

[9] Takeda, 2020, pp. 103-125.
[10] Thein Lwin, 1999.
[11] Smith, 2011.

government-controlled areas—particularly faith-based networks, for example, Karen and Kachin Christian churches and Mon and Shan Buddhist monasteries—long struggled to provide ethnic-language teaching, by necessity outside of school hours, and often in informal settings under threat of state suppression.[12]

After political reforms beginning in 2011, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) was introduced, allowing languages other than Burmese to be taught and used for basic education. The implementation of MTB-MLE depends on the availability of resources, such as textbooks, teachers, and funding, which are often scarce or unevenly distributed.[13]

In Myanmar, the National Education Law was passed in 2014, and it was further strengthened with the passing of the National Education Amendment Law (NEAL) in 2015. These provided a national framework and recognition of the rights of all citizens to free and compulsory education at the primary level; expansion of the basic education curriculum in line with the new "Kindergarten +12" structure with a focus on 21st century skills; support for the learning of ethnic languages and cultures; and decentralization of the education system.

Because Chin people do not have a single majority common language like some other large ethnic groups in Myanmar, the teaching of Chin languages in China State is still considered extra-curricular. There are insufficient numbers of teachers and teaching hours, and there is a lack of capacity to enshrine MTB-MLE. Although the 2015 NEAL provides for support of learning ethnic languages and cultures, the right to use Chin mother tongues is still a work in progress and requires more political will, dialogue, and cooperation among all stakeholders, and needs the support of the government.

Since the 2021 military coup, the future of MTB-MLE in Myanmar has become extremely uncertain. The coup has put ethnic people's aspirations at risk, increased violence and repression,

[12] Lall & South, 2014.
[13] Takeda, 2020, pp. 103-125.

and interrupted the most basic education of children, let alone MTB-MLE and the exercising of their language rights. However, ethnic communities are determined to preserve and promote their own languages and cultures, and most communities demand a federal political settlement to the current crisis that recognizes their rights.

Education Policy in Mizoram State, India

India is one of the world's largest functionally multilingual countries, with "forty-seven languages used in education as mediums, eighty-seven in the press, seventy-one in radio, thirteen in cinema, and thirteen in state-level administration" and no single national language: the 1950 Constitution of India states that Hindi and English are both official languages.[14] The 2002 Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act inserted Article 21-A into the Constitution of India asserts the right for all children aged six to fourteen years old to receive free and compulsory education (in such a manner a state may by law determine). The 2009 RTE gave every child the right to full-time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality, in a formal school matching essential norms and standards. The RTE incorporates the words "free and compulsory"—free means that no child admitted to a school supported by the appropriate government shall be liable to pay any kind of fee, charge, or expense that may prevent them from pursuing and completing elementary education. "Compulsory" obliges the appropriate government and local authorities to provide and ensure admission, attendance, and completion of elementary education. If a child above six years of age has not yet been admitted to any school, they can be admitted to a class appropriate to his or her age. A child so admitted is entitled to free education until the completion of elementary education, even if they are by then over fourteen years old. The government of Mizoram State later confidently formulated the

[14] Annamalai, 2001, p. 35.

2013 EPM, a comprehensive document reflecting the aspirations and needs of the people of Mizoram, in line with the RTE.

Under the India government's 2020 NEP, the curricular and pedagogical structure and the curricular framework for school education is meant to be guided by a "5+3+3+4" design consisting of four stages. A strong foundation of early childhood care and education from age three is also included, which is aimed at promoting better overall learning, development, and wellbeing.

The NEP emphasizes the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary level and the introduction of English and Hindi as additional languages from upper primary onwards, taking into account the conviction that a child learns best when they actually understand what they learn (memorize). The first choice for medium of instruction will undoubtedly be the home language, mother tongue, or first language of the child in the first years of schooling. Nevertheless, there is no chance for refugee students to learn in their mother tongue due to the lack of teachers skilled in those languages in Mizoram schools.

India does not have a specific law or policy on refugee education in particular and its approach is based on charity rather than rights.[15] Tibetan refugees born in India are entitled to Indian citizenship and education, but this right is not extended to other refugees. India has made significant progress in universalizing primary education, but it has not addressed the specific needs of refugee children.[16]The Mizoram government has extended humanitarian assistance to the refugees from Myanmar, despite the center's directive to seal the border and deport them, citing "deep ethnic bonds" and a common tribal lineage. The Mizoram government has helped Chin refugees by providing them with education opportunities, but all refugee children in Mizoram still face difficulties and challenges accessing education due to the lack of a detailed education policy relating directly to refugees.

[15] Balaji, 2015.
[16] Jayasankar & Jawale, 2017.

Policy Impacts on Refugee Students

Under the direction of the Mizoram School Education Department and its Director, James Lalrinchhana, refugee children have the right to be admitted to a school class appropriate to their age[17] without showing any document such as a birth certificate or migrant letter, in line with the RTE. There are various types of schools catering to different educational needs and preferences and refugees have the right to choose which school they attend, but most attend government schools, receiving free school uniforms, textbooks, and midday meals, similar to local pupils.[18] According to Lalrinchhana, there were 6,195 children from Myanmar enrolled at schools in Mizoram in 2021. Of these, 5,221 were enrolled in government schools, 184 in government-aided schools, and 790 in private schools.[19]

Although the Mizoram government officially allows refugee children to attend basic education, access to education for refugee children may change depending on updated or new government policies. Moreover, if the central government issues an order to evict Myanmar refugees from Mizoram State or does not allow them to stay in Mizoram, the children could have their right to education restricted, one research participant noted.[20] India's Union Ministry of Home Affairs instructed the Mizoram government to collect biometric and biographic data of Myanmar refugees by the end of September 2023. The Mizoram government refused, with the Mizoram State Minister for Information and Public Relations citing it would amount to "our blood and kindred brothers and sisters" facing discrimination.[21]

There is no doubt that education policies ensuring refugee students have access to quality education aligning with the national and international frameworks and standards for refugee

[17] Pandey & Choudhury, 2021.
[18] Agarwala, 2021.
[19] Rochanhlu, 2022.
[20] Participant 17, personal communication, 2023.
[21] Zoramsanga, 2021.

education, such as the RTE, the Mizoram Education Act, the 2013 EPM, the 2020 NEP, the 1989 CRC, the 1951 CRSR and Refugee Education Strategy 2030 of UNHCR, would benefit Chin refugee students in Mizoram.

Education Challenges as Related by Students

Refugee children have diverse national, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, which present unique challenges and require different educational responses.[22] The education challenges that refugee students discussed when interviewed related to language and curriculum, culture, and documentation.

Language and Curriculum

A major challenge is language barriers, especially for refugees who do not speak the language of instruction in the host country.[23] This mirrors challenges of refugee students elsewhere—for example, further afield, Syrian refugee students in Turkey struggle learning Turkish as a second language.[24]

Language barriers were consistently reported by research participants interviewed for this article, except from those students who were already familiar with or were neighbors of Mizo people before their displacement. Children from northern Chin State have more exposure to the Mizo language than those from southern Chin State. As mentioned in the methodology section, the 12 students interviewed were from a range of townships, community and language groups. Some of them had a hard time adjusting to the new language and culture in Mizoram State. Participants from Falam Township did not face as many language difficulties as others, except for one Falam participant who identified as Khualsim.

[22] Dhawan & Parameswaran, 2022.
[23] Shohel, 2022.
[24] Aras & Yasun, 2016.

One participant from Tedim Township, who identifies as Zomi, claimed:

> *I was very upset because I didn't understand the language. My family also worries about my education. I miss my friends and my country, Myanmar, and I want to go home. When I started school, I couldn't keep up with my studies, I even thought about dropping out or going to a lower grade.*[25]

Another participant from Tedim Township, who identified as Zomi, said, "I was afraid because I didn't understand the language. I couldn't follow the lessons, and I was ashamed to attend the school of another country as a refugee".[26] A participant from Matupi Township, who identified as Matu, mentioned that:

> *In the classroom, all subjects, even math, are taught in English and explained only in English and Mizo. So, it was very difficult to understand, and I was so confused. I couldn't read (either language), so I didn't know what others were doing.*[27]

A participant from Thantlang Township, who identified as Lai, asserted, "When I started school, I was so frustrated because I didn't understand the Mizo language".[28] Another participant from Mindat Township, who identified as Cho, maintained:

> *I felt like I was in another world because I didn't understand the language when I first arrived. I was depressed. There was no happiness. When I was feeling down, I longed for someone speaking to me in Burmese or Chin*

[25] Participant 9, personal communication, 2023.
[26] Participant 3, personal communication, 2023.
[27] Participant 5, personal communication, 2023.
[28] Participant 7, personal communication, 2023.

> *languages. I was very tired because I didn't understand what or how to study at all.*[29]

In general, language barriers can affect the social integration of refugee children, as they may feel isolated or excluded from their peers and teachers. Learning in their mother tongue helps refugee students cope with trauma and stress, learn the language of the host country, and preserve and promote their cultural and linguistic diversity.

According to the education policy in Mizoram, all school curricula are printed and published in English, except the Mizo and Hindi language subjects. The Mizoram Board of School Education publishes bilingual (English and Mizo) science and math textbooks for higher classes. Speaking Mizo is not as difficult as reading it and studying with it. Although Chin refugee students can sometimes understand and speak a little bit of Mizo, they have difficulty studying Mizo literature.

One third of participants interviewed reported facing specific curriculum-related barriers, especially in the Mizo and Hindi subjects. Those attending private schools and studying in ninth and tenth grades have the option to choose an alternative English subject, so they are free from this difficulty. Generally, alternative English courses cannot be offered in government schools and some private schools due to a lack of teachers.

Culture

Refugee students experience culture shock or adjustment difficulties when they encounter different values, beliefs, norms, and practices in Mizoram. They also face challenges in adapting to the local customs, traditions, and expectations, especially relating to dress codes, class activities and religious practices. The school uniform in Mizoram is "Western style" and it is very different from the Myanmar school uniform. Therefore, Chin refugee students reported being uncomfortable because they had to

[29] Participant 11, personal communication, 2023.

wear a skirt, belt, necktie, and school shoes which they were not familiar with. One of the participants recounted:

> *I wore my school uniform incorrectly, and the security guard helped me put on the school belt and necktie on my first school day. When it was my turn to be class monitor, I was excited because I had to take the lead in matters such as recording attendance, submitting homework books, waking up early to clean, reading the Bible and praying.*[30]

Although the religion and social norms of Chin refugees and residents of Mizoram are quite similar, the differences in visual cultures, such as dress, traditional practices, and also language put Chin refugee children into uncomfortable and challenging situations.

Documentation

Institutional recognition is also one of the challenges facing refugee children. A refugee identity certificate is a document that refugees use as proof of identity. It is either issued by the UNHCR or by the government of the state of asylum. Most refugees in Mizoram do not have any documentation from UNHCR since there is no UNHCR branch office in Mizoram State. The state government issues cards to refugees which are used for identification (ID) and travel in Mizoram State but provide no access to government services. Even then, only some Chin refugees hold this card.

One of the participants expanded on the importance of documentation for refugee students.[31] First, the government awards 20,000 Indian rupees to those who pass tenth grade with high marks, but if a student does not have an Aadhaar state-issued ID card, then they cannot receive the award. Second, those who

[30] Participant 9, personal communication, 2023.
[31] Participant 12, personal communication, 2023.

excel in twelfth grade, and therefore may have high aspirations, such as attaining a scholarship or studying in another state or abroad, cannot do so without an ID card.

On 2 October 2023 the School Administration Board announced that people who do not have Aadhaar cards can apply for them, except for refugees from Myanmar and those from Manipur State. Regarding this announcement, one of the refugee students said, "I felt like I was discriminated against because I'm a refugee".[32] Therefore, some kind of certificate of recognition should also be issued to refugee students who are attending school in Mizoram.

Education Challenges for Students as Related by Their Parents

Two parents who fled from Myanmar to India were interviewed for this study. They chose to flee to Mizoram because it is close to Chin State, where most of the Chin people live, and is more convenient to reach overland than other destinations—but the journey is still stressful and difficult. This section highlights the legal and financial challenges these parents discussed. The social worker interviewed for this project contextualized these challenges by claiming that the main barrier to refugee children's education is the problems faced by their parents, who often do not have work opportunities or documentation and therefore struggle to fulfill their children's needs, even for basic things like maintaining suitable accommodation. It is not easy to send children to school when one relies on donations just to eat.

The first parent, a mother of two students and a former government officer who joined the CDM, stated:

> *I fled to Aizawl for my children's education and to find a job. My children go to a private school with a good reputation for nurturing students and where there are other Myanmar refugee students. The main difficulty my kids*

[32] Participant 9, personal communication, 2023.

> *have is the language of instruction. My younger son has to attend private tuition ... There's no organization that (financially) supports us. Mostly, we depend on my eldest daughter's work. My brother lives abroad and sometimes helps us with education expenses.*[33]

The other parent participant is a father of three students who lived in the Leitan camp.[34] He is a former policeman in Myanmar that joined the CDM. He also stressed financial difficulties:

> *When we first arrived, locals helped us orient ourselves. But as time goes by, fewer people help. My children go to a government school where they don't have to pay school fees or bring lunch. However, there's financial pressure to provide school uniforms and stationery. Ther's no major support organization. I work on construction sites day in, day out (to support my children).*[35]

Education Challenges for Students as Related by Teachers and a Social Worker

Three further participants were interviewed: a teacher from a Presbyterian private school, a principal from a government school, and a social worker from an INGO. This section reports their concerns regarding education challenges for refugee students.

The teacher from the Presbyterian private school said there were about 10 refugee students in their school facing major Mizo language barriers.[36] The teacher offered to support them as a communication channel between teachers and students,

[33] Participant 15, personal communication, 2023.
[34] The Leitan camp is a refugee settlement in Dutlang Ward of Aizawl. At the time of writing there are 48 people staying at the camp, in a large building donated by an Aizawl resident.
[35] Participant 16, personal communication, 2023.
[36] Participant 13, personal communication, 2023.

teachers and parents, and students and students. The teacher said they translate and explain school and student affairs. The school does not offer alternative courses for refugee students, who face significant difficulty in the Mizo and Hindi language subjects. As a result, they received poor grades in those subjects but achieved higher grades in English and mathematics.

The principal of the government school stated that there were about three refugee students at their school which did not face any noteworthy challenges.[37] The principal gave them motivation and moral support. The school does not offer any alternative courses for the refugee students, and they in fact turned out to be the top students in their class. The principal communicated with their families easily.

The social worker participant said that one of the difficulties with improving refugee children's education is electoral politics and government policy.[38] At the time of research, an upcoming election was thought to potentially change the direction of policy, which could affect access to education for the children. The other barrier was cooperation and/or agreements between the Indian government and the Myanmar military's State Administration Council. India issued a statement saying that the two countries were discussing the incidents between Myanmar and India but did not specify what agreement they reached. If the central government issued an order that did not allow Myanmar refugees to stay in Mizoram, the children could lose their right to continue their education.

Coping with the Challenges

No matter how many difficulties they face, all refugee students have their own ways to overcome them. They do not let adversity overwhelm them, but neither do they exaggerate it. They overcome it with optimism and perseverance.

[37] Participant 14, personal communication, 2023.
[38] Participant 17, personal communication, 2023.

When confronting language barriers, they often ask their friends, teachers, and family members for help. One of the participants affirmed:

> *I ask other students from Myanmar for help at school, when they can understand what I can't. At the hostel, I can ask the warden and my friend, even if they're asleep, I just wake them up. Praying and reading the Bible gives me strength. It took me six months to understand the Mizo language.*[39]

Concerning the curriculum, students also ask their friends, teachers, and family members for assistance. Some of the refugee students try to do homework and assignments by themselves and memorize the lessons. Some use dictionaries and Google applications. Some take alternative English courses to overcome the Mizo and Hindi subject barriers. One of the participants said, "I study alternative English by myself using a dictionary and Google because there's no one teaching this subject at my school".[40] However, most teachers encourage the refugee students not to give up and most local students welcome them.

One of the participants said that when his friends at school started teasing him about being a refugee, he replied that if there was a war in their home, they would come to his own country for refuge.[41] The refugee students overcome difficulties in their own way and have strong hope and ambition for the future, they are not giving up and have good resilience and self-esteem. One student wants to be a doctor, another an engineer, a child specialist, an astronomer, a painter, a football player, a K-pop idol, and a social worker. The one who wants to become a social worker said, "I want to construct a home for the homeless and provide food for those who are hungry, so they are not troubled like us".[42]

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[39] Participant 11, personal communication, 2023.
[40] Participant 12, personal communication, 2023.
[41] Participant 4, personal communication, 2023.
[42] Participant 4, personal communication, 2023.

The social worker interviewee gave encouragement concerning financial difficulties; the major problem is the lack of job opportunities.[43] They said that refugees depend on donors and need a louder voice to inform the UN and the Indian government about their situation. As mentioned, almost all refugees face language barriers. Even home in Chin State, students must contend with most education being in the Burmese language.

The social worker also said that while there is no need to pay monthly fees at government schools, parents have said they cannot send their children to local schools because of language and financial difficulties and prefer them to learn a curriculum set by the Myanmar National Unity Government (NUG) and CDM teachers, where each student collects 500 rupees per month. The social worker said that instead of doing that, children should attend a local school with guaranteed education, and with certified results that are recognized abroad, and study Mizo and Burmese at home at night. That would be more effective. Moreover, some schools offer alternative English instead of Mizo. The social worker said that advocacy by the NUG is needed for those who hope and rely on that alternative government.

No one can say how long the current Spring Revolution will last. If it takes 20 or 30 years, children will miss out on even more education. After a revolution in a country, a lost generation always appears. When the revolution succeeds, Myanmar will need a lot of experts from all sides to reconstruct it. Therefore, in order to prevent multiple lost generations, we must all do our best to help students advance from basic education to higher education, and even onwards, to doctorate degrees. We must continually review the rights that are provided for by the Mizoram government.

Conclusion

Under the RTE, refugee children who fled Myanmar for Mizoram have the right to education, but they face various obstacles in

[43] Participant 17, personal communication, 2023.

terms of language, curriculum, finances, and legal recognition. They overcome the language barrier by learning with perseverance and the curriculum barrier by independent self-study. Refugee students have the right to a free government education in Mizoram, with a daily provided lunch, but do not receive help for school uniforms, textbooks, notebooks, and stationery. Therefore, financial issues will continue to be a big challenge for refugee students, compounded by limited job opportunities and a lack of support for livelihood and education expenses.

Regarding legal recognition, India is not a signatory to the 1951 CRSR or its 1967 Protocol, so there is no official mechanism for providing protection or benefits to refugees living in India. Although the UNHCR has a presence in India and registers, recognizes, and resettles Chin refugees in Delhi, it is not operational in Mizoram. Therefore, obtaining refugee status through UNHCR is very difficult for most Chin refugees in Mizoram. For these reasons, this paper recommends that a branch office of UNHCR be set up in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, to provide protection and assistance to refugees living in Mizoram State.

Moreover, another recommendation is that various stakeholders, such as the India government, the Mizoram state government, local authorities, civil society organizations, the UNHCR, and other international agencies, should collaborate on an education policy for refugee students that aligns with the national, international, and internal frameworks and standards, such as the RTE, the EPM, the NEP, the CRC, and the CRSR.

This new education policy should ensure that refugee students have access to quality education and should address their specific needs and challenges, such as language and curriculum barriers, financial difficulties, documentation, trauma, discrimination, and integration. It also should support the opportunities to use mother tongues as a medium of instruction at the primary level for all refugee students.

To promote equal education for Myanmar refugees in Mizoram, cooperation between non-governmental organizations, civil society, teachers and educators, communities, families, youth, children, and volunteers must improve. The right to

education is a fundamental human right, regardless of one's status or background. It is imperative to ensure that no refugee child is left behind in accessing inclusive and quality education.

Finally, further study should be conducted to explore the mother tongues most in use among the Chin community and to support their literacy—and teaching. Establishing a common language among all Chin society, even an official language for Chin State, would assist young Chin students with their education.

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