Experiences of Chin Refugee Women Accessing Livelihoods in Mizoram State, India

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the livelihood experiences of Chin refugee women who migrated from Myanmar to Mizoram State, India, due to political violence and persecution after the 2021 military coup. It asks: How do Chin refugee women access livelihoods in Mizoram? The study used qualitative methods and generated its data from interviews with four women. The article argues these women face several multifaceted challenges, including language barriers, discrimination, lack of legal status, exclusion from receiving identification cards, and having their Myanmar professional accreditations ignored. The high cost of living in Mizoram State, coupled with low wages, further exacerbates these challenges. Through these findings and insights into their lived realities, this article aims to amplify the voices of this new wave of refugees and contribute to studies of refugees, gender, and development. To help improve their situation, policymakers and organizations should provide legal work permits, job training, and social support. These steps can help refugees earn a living and contribute to the local community.

Introduction

The Chin people are an ethnic minority group who largely inhabit the Chin Hills of Myanmar. The Chin have faced decades of oppression, discrimination, and human rights violations by successive military regimes in Myanmar. As a result, many of them have fled their homes and sought refuge in neighboring countries, especially India.

Mizoram State (henceforth: just "Mizoram") is in northeast India and shares a 318-kilometer border with Bangladesh and a

404-kilometer border with Myanmar. It is home to about 30,000 refugees from Myanmar and about 300 refugees from Bangladesh, most of whom are Chin, Kuki, or Mizo people. Mizoram has a history of hosting refugees since the 1980s, when it welcomed thousands of Mizo refugees who had fled from Bangladesh during the Mizo insurgency.[1]

However, the situation for refugees in Mizoram is precarious and complex. They lack legal recognition or protection from the Indian national government, which considers them illegal immigrants. They also face social and economic challenges in accessing livelihood opportunities, such as language barriers, lack of education and skills, discrimination, harassment, exploitation, abuse, and limited resources and support. Moreover, they must cope with the trauma and stress of displacement, loss, and uncertainty.

Refugee women are particularly vulnerable and marginalized. They often bear the burden of household responsibilities, childcare, and income generation. They also face gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and trafficking. They have limited access to healthcare, education, legal aid, and social services. They have low participation and representation in decision-making processes and leadership roles. Despite these challenges, refugee women also demonstrate resilience and agency in pursuing livelihood opportunities and coping with their situations. They engage in various economic activities, such as petty trade, domestic work, tailoring, weaving, and farming.

There is a dearth of research on the experiences of Chin refugee women accessing livelihoods in Mizoram. Most studies on refugees in Mizoram focus on the political and legal aspects of their situation or on their general socioeconomic conditions. We need a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of how Chin refugee women navigate their livelihood opportunities and challenges in Mizoram.

[1] Hasnat, 2023.

Literature Review

The gendered dimensions of refugee livelihoods have been studied by several international organizations, including the World Bank and the United Nations (UN).[2] The World Bank's "Gender Dimensions of Forced Displacement" research program aims to understand how forced displacement affects women and men differently and how policy and program design and implementation should reflect these differences.[3] It notes how during displacement, families are often separated, assets and livelihoods are lost or disrupted, and people face language barriers, legal constraints, and discrimination. The nature of these impacts, barriers, and opportunities may differ between women and men. This is also explained by a UN Women manual providing guidance on designing and implementing gender-sensitive refugee response programs.[4] These World Bank and UN Women resources provide valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of displacement and refugee livelihoods in general.

The specific experiences of Chin refugee women trying to access livelihoods in Mizoram is less well understood, but there are two useful studies focusing on refugees from Myanmar in Delhi. The first, by Mallick, discusses the livelihood challenges of refugees from Myanmar. While the article does not specifically focus on Chin refugee women in Mizoram, it does highlight some of the issues that may be relevant to their experiences. Mallick describes the poor economic conditions faced by Myanmar refugees in Delhi, who often rent rooms in peri-urban areas with polluted environments, cramped living conditions, and poor healthcare access, and contextualizes this within the informal economy and the challenges faced by informal workers more broadly, including lack of social security and government

[2] UN Women, 2022; World Bank Group, 2023.

[3] World Bank Group, 2023.

[4] The manual highlights the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women, who often face additional challenges in accessing livelihood opportunities due to their gender, as well as opportunities particular to refugee women (UN Women, 2022).

intervention. Refugees often face issues with identity and citizenship complicating them finding formal work in Delhi. This can make them vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.[5]

The second useful article by Paula Jops focuses explicitly on the experiences and livelihood challenges of Chin refugee women in Delhi.[6] It highlights the importance of social networks and community support in helping women access livelihoods, and notes the general context of risk they live in. This includes incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination.

While more research is clearly needed to understand the experiences of Chin refugee women in Mizoram, these two articles on the situation in Delhi are still valuable. They note the historic and cultural ties between the Chin and Mizo ethnic groups, who have a common ancestry, language and religion. These ties facilitate cross-border migration and the hospitality of Mizoram host communities, especially during times of political turmoil and armed conflict in Myanmar.[7] However, these ties have also created tensions and ambiguities over the identity and status of Chin refugees, who are often seen as "brothers" but not as "citizens" by Mizo people.[8] Moreover, these ties have not prevented the discrimination and harassment of Chin refugees in Mizoram, especially from authorities, who view them as illegal immigrants and potential threats.[9] Most articles also highlight the barriers facing refugee women in particular, such as sexual harassment, exploitation, violence and stigma in their workplaces and communities.[10] On the other hand, Chin refugee women also demonstrate resilience and agency in pursuing livelihood activities that suit their needs and preferences, such as domestic work, petty trade, handicrafts, tailoring and teaching. They also participate

[5] Mallick, 2014.
[6] Jops, 2017.
[7] Choudhury, 2021.
[8] Lungchuang, 2023.
[9] Bahn, 2022.
[10] Hasnet, 2023.

in social and religious activities that provide them with support, empowerment and wellbeing.[11]

This brief literature review shows that research to better understand the experiences of Chin refugee women accessing livelihoods in Mizoram requires the collection of primary data from Chin refugee women themselves, as most writing is based on secondary data or only brief interviews. There is a need for more in-depth and participatory research that captures the voices, perspectives and stories of Chin refugee women, as well as their coping strategies, adaptations and aspirations, to better understand the complexity and diversity of Chin refugee women's livelihoods in Mizoram, raise awareness of the challenges faced by these women, and inform policy and practice. This short article is an attempt in that direction.

Research Design and Methods

This study's research question has been designed with three sub-questions in mind. Primarily, it asks: How do Chin refugee women access livelihoods in Mizoram? Within that, what are the main livelihood opportunities available? What are the main challenges and barriers that Chin refugee women face in accessing these livelihood opportunities? And how do Chin refugee women cope with these challenges and barriers?

In order to answer these questions, I employ qualitative methods and a case study design. A case study design enables examination of a given phenomenon in detail, using multiple sources of evidence, such as interviews, observations, etc., and also allows for exploration of the interactions and relationships between a phenomenon and its context. Within my case study of Chin refugee women who migrated from Myanmar to Mizoram, the unit of analysis is individual refugee women. The context is the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural environment of Mizoram, and its impact on refugee women's livelihood experiences.

[11] Choudhury, 2021.

I generated my data through semi-structured interviews with four individual Chin refugee women who were engaged in different types of livelihood activities. Interviews are a common and effective method for qualitative research, especially for exploring personal experiences, opinions, feelings, and meanings. Semi-structured interviews involve a set of open-ended questions that guide conversation but also allow for flexibility and follow-up questions. Using semi-structured interviews enabled me to elicit the richest and most detailed data from my research participants, while also giving them space and voice to express themselves freely.

My sample size of four was based on the principle of saturation, which means that data collection continued until no new or relevant information emerged from the interviews. The sampling strategy was purposive, with participants selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research question and objectives. The exact criteria was: Being a Chin refugee woman who migrated from Myanmar to Mizoram, with an education and work experience in her home country, being engaged in any form of livelihood activity in Mizoram, and being willing and able to participate in the interview.

My four research participants were a diverse group of women with varying levels of education and work experience. Participant 1 was 37 years old with a bachelor's degree in law. She used to work for a law firm in Myanmar before fleeing to Mizoram. Participant 2 was a 27-year-old elementary school teacher. She has a degree in education and taught in Myanmar for several years. Participant 3 was a 24-year-old nurse. She has a nursing degree and worked at a hospital in Myanmar before the coup. Participant 4 was a 40-year-old university lecturer and taught at a university in Myanmar for many years. Participants 1-3 were single but participant 4 was married. The participants all fled to Mizoram in 2021.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in safe and convenient locations in Mizoram. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. I took notes during and after the interviews to

capture important points and impressions. Interview questions covered the following topics: Demographics (age, marital status, education level, migration history, legal status); livelihood activities (type, duration, frequency, income, both before and after coup); opportunities (availability, accessibility, suitability); challenges (personal, interpersonal, structural); and coping strategies (individual, collective).

The shared experiences of the respondents reflect the common challenges and resilience of Chin refugee women in Mizoram. Their narratives emphasize their collective ability to adapt to a new environment and actively participate in livelihood activities despite significant hardships.

Results and Discussion

All research participants had stable incomes in the Myanmar public sector before the 2021 coup and have been forced to use a variety of livelihood strategies to navigate their economic realities in Mizoram. They each lamented that earning opportunities are very limited, and even when they do identify an income source, making enough money from it alone to cover living costs is difficult.

Participant 1 started a small business, selling the traditional Chin dish *sabuti*, a kind of corn and meat soup. Participant 2 took up part-time work as a salesperson and street vendor. For these two participants, lacking regular, predictable income is a major concern they grapple with daily. Somewhat more fortunate, participants 3 and 4 secured stable jobs that provide them with regular monthly incomes. These four women's stories highlight the resilience of Chin refugee women in the face of economic challenges and the urgent need for comprehensive policies that support economic integration and empowerment.

This need is all the more important as, despite their best efforts, participants 1, 2 and 3 found that their new monthly incomes were not enough to meet their basic needs. At the time of interview, these three participants were financially dependent on family. Participant 2 noted that the average monthly income

of a salesperson in Mizoram is between 4,000-5,000 Indian rupees which is not even enough to cover monthly rent:

> *Opportunities are very rare. As a salesperson in a cloth shop, my salary is around 4,500 rupees, which doesn't even cover my rent. It's completely unrealistic to survive on it over the long run, so I have to rely on relatives.*

The high cost of living, including costs related to food, housing and transportation, is a major factor contributing to financial strain. In the words of participant 2:

> *Before the coup, I was an office worker with a stable monthly income, which gave me enough money to buy what I wanted. However, the revolution turned my world upside down. Now I find myself having to cling to my aunt to survive in Mizoram, and fulfilling my wishes has become a challenge.*

Respondents also mentioned other short-term wage labor opportunities such as rice paddy work, farmhand work, sewing, domestic service, and more. Participant 4:

> *When I arrived in Mizoram, I found shelter at a private high school with the help of a church elder. As a former university lecturer, I was hoping to find a teaching opportunity here, but I didn't get one. I know ex-government employees like me who now work as farm laborers. I know former engineers who now rely on sewing to make a living. Earning opportunities for women are few and often out of reach.*

Participant 4 pointed out that although government salaries in Myanmar are not high, the cost of living there is low, so before 2021 she could support her family. In Mizoram she is actually lucky enough to earn a higher income than she did in Myanmar, but the cost of living is also higher, making life more difficult.

Participant 1 highlighted a related barrier to improving Chin refugee women livelihoods in Mizoram. She said:

> *We refugee women don't have the opportunity to initiate business activities. Even if we have the capital, we can't get started without an identification card, which leaves us with very few options.*

This shows how women face administrative difficulties in improving their lot even if they are lucky enough to service their basic needs and save money for investment.

Their general lack of legal status also affects their ability to secure livelihood opportunities in Mizoram. Participant 3 shared: "Here, my nursing certificate isn't recognized, which greatly affects my professional career." Participants 1 and 3 put it more baldly, intimating that "as refugees, we have no right to do anything." These statements highlight the legal obstacles faced by refugees in Mizoram. Refugee status not only limits their rights but also hinders their career development because their qualifications and skills are not recognized.

A major challenge augmenting all these difficulties faced by my research participants in accessing livelihoods is their difficulty in understanding and being understood in the local languages. "I think not understanding the local language is a big barrier and my views and priorities are different to those of the locals," said participant 3. Language barriers can lead to communication problems and misunderstandings, making it difficult for individuals to fully integrate into the community and access available resources. It can also lead to discrimination and prejudice, common problems in Mizoram permeating daily life. Participant 2 admitted:

> *Following news reports of seizures of drugs coming from Myanmar, the locals became more contemptuous of us and our humiliation deepened. When I was employed part-time selling fruit, I was forced by my boss to do*

> *demeaning tasks unrelated to my job, like cleaning people's shoes.*

Another participant said:

> *For us refugees from Myanmar, maintaining a livelihood in Mizoram is tricky, because as soon as we reveal ourselves as coming from Myanmar, local people immediately change the way they communicate with us and treat us.*

As we can see, there are substantial challenges for Chin refugee women to access livelihoods in Mizoram. These challenges are multifaceted and include language barriers, discrimination, lack of legal status, including exclusion from receiving identification cards, and the misrecognition of their professional accreditations and qualifications. The high cost of living, coupled with low wages, further exacerbates these challenges, often forcing these women to rely on their relatives for support. Despite these challenges, Chin refugee women demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. My four research participants were generally uncertain about the best way to tackle their hardships or manage them effectively. Participant 1 just focuses on getting on with things: "I just make *sabuti* at home." But another participant reflected:

> *There's no systemic solution (to these challenges). Sometimes I confide in and ask for advice from the Myanmar people around me. I go to church, find solace in prayer, and maintain contact with my family in Myanmar.*

In this way, social networks and community support are important coping mechanisms.

Limitations of this Research

1. Small Sample Size – This study is based on interviews with only four women, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all Chin refugee women in Mizoram.
2. Limited Generalizability – Findings are specific to Mizoram and may not apply to Chin refugees in other regions of India or beyond.
3. Reliance on Self-Reported Data – This study relies on personal narratives, which may be influenced by memory biases or individual perspectives.
4. Lack of Longitudinal Analysis – This research provides a snapshot of current experiences but does not track changes in accessing livelihoods over time.
5. Legal and Policy Constraints – This study does not explore the broader legal and policy frameworks that impact refugee status and livelihood access in India in any detail.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Broaden the Sample Size – Future research should include more participants from different age groups, occupations, and educational backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive analysis.
2. Comparative Studies – A comparative study between Chin refugees in Mizoram and other Indian states or refugee populations from different backgrounds could offer deeper insights.
3. Longitudinal Research – Conducting follow-up studies over time would help assess long-term adaptation strategies and economic integration.
4. Policy Engagement – Findings should be shared with local policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations to advocate for improved

legal recognition, work permits, and social protection for Chin refugees.

5. Skill Development Programs – Organizations working with refugees should focus on vocational training, language courses, and professional accreditation recognition to enhance livelihood opportunities.

Conclusion

The political instability in Myanmar has had a profound impact on the economic situation for women, highlighting the importance of political stability for economic prosperity. The experiences shared in this article underscore the urgent need for more inclusive policies, recognition of refugees' qualifications, language training programs, and measures to combat discrimination. As mentioned above, further research is necessary to better explore more specific aspects of these experiences and to develop effective interventions to improve economic wellbeing. We need more research attention and policy intervention aimed at improving the livelihood opportunities of Chin refugee women in Mizoram. The economic and legal challenges they face require comprehensive and systemic solutions. By addressing both the economic and systemic challenges they face, we can help them regain economic independence and improve their quality of life.

Despite the hardships Chin refugee women have faced since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, they continue to show remarkable resilience and agency in navigating their new lives in Mizoram. But without more structured support and resources, they will continue to struggle to cope with their situation and make little economic progress.

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