

Myanmar: How to Survive a Coup

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Four young women share stories of survival under military rule in Myanmar.

When the military seized power from Myanmar's elected civilian government in February 2021, the coup sparked an unprecedented human rights and economic crisis. Within weeks, millions of people had joined [nonviolent protests](#) and hundreds of thousands had gone on strike, joining a [civil disobedience movement](#) that quickly decimated military-administered systems across the country.

By April 2021, the military had shot hundreds of protesters dead, driving young people across the country to [take up arms](#). Many joined newly-formed groups which became known as local defense forces or people's defense forces (PDFs), while others enlisted in ethnic armed organizations which were already fighting for autonomy in the country's border areas before the coup. Together, these groups have since been waging a shared struggle to end military dictatorship and establish a federal democracy. The military has [retaliated](#) with arson, airstrikes, mass killings and other atrocities, killing [more than 4,200 people](#) according to a local rights documentation group, and committing what U.N.-appointed investigators have [identified](#) as intensifying war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The fighting has only [escalated](#) since late October, when three of Myanmar's strongest ethnic armed organizations launched [coordinated attacks](#) on military positions on Myanmar's eastern border with China. The operation, codenamed 1027, sparked a wider resistance-led offensive across the country. Resistance forces have since seized hundreds of military posts, [overtaken](#) the criminal enclave of Laukkai at the China border, and pushed the military to its [weakest point](#) since the coup, analysts say. The military, in turn, has [scaled up](#) its attacks on civilians, driving around 628,000 people to flee their homes in addition to nearly 2 million people already internally displaced before the recent surge in fighting, [according to the United Nations](#).

For Myanmar's youth, the consequences of the post-coup turmoil have been devastating. Millions refused to attend school under the military, while employment opportunities in the formal sector have severely diminished. Tens of thousands of young men and women have taken up arms, while others have been swept up in a boom in illicit economies including mining and cyber-scramming, the latter of which has exploded in autonomous militarized zones along Myanmar's eastern border with China and Thailand since the coup, and is run by Chinese criminal networks. According to the UN, an estimated [120,000 people](#), both from Myanmar and abroad, have been trafficked into the industry, where they are commonly forced to assume fraudulent online identities and convince people around the world to invest in false cryptocurrency schemes.

We spoke with four young women from Myanmar's Kachin and northern Shan States, which share a border with China and contain a disproportionate share of the country's resource wealth and illicit economies, about how the coup has impacted their lives and the particular vulnerabilities experienced by young women. Those interviewed have all been given pseudonyms due to the risks of military retaliation for speaking to the media.

Lum Nan, age 30, civil society worker in Lashio, northern Shan State, Myanmar

I had once planned to study abroad, but that plan fell apart with the coup, which also affected my mental well-being. It has been almost three years, and I don't feel like studying anymore, but I'm trying my best to stay positive. Although I feel dissatisfied in many ways, at least I'm working to serve my community.

My sense of safety has totally disappeared since the coup. Although I initially participated in protests, I don't even dare to [post](#) anything about the political or humanitarian situation on social media anymore, and when I go out, I always have to be cautious and vigilant. As a young person, I could be targeted. I don't carry any documents related to my work when I travel, or even talk openly with people I meet.

Young people in Lashio face many difficulties. After the coup, many stopped going to school because they didn't want to study under the military's system. Many families also struggled financially. Commodity prices [skyrocketed](#), but employment options [decreased](#). Young people also had to worry about [forced conscription](#).

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There aren't many options for young women in the formal economy, besides working in phone repair shops or tailor shops, which only pay around 100,000 or 200,000 kyats (\$47 to \$95) a month. So, many young people lost their way. Some started spending time in karaoke bars and nightclubs commonly known as KTV, and using K [Ketamine]. Many young people have also sought work in illicit sectors, especially in Laukkai, Wa and Mong La [autonomous militarized areas on Shan State's border with Yunnan province, China], where there are many scam centers, casinos and hotels. The *ja pyen* [cyber-scam] industry was not very well-known before the coup, but now, it seems like there are more young people who went to work in areas where it operates than who stayed in Lashio.

But while many people knowingly seek out work as scammers, the reality often turns out to be different than what they expected. Some are sold to traffickers, and some are even sold multiple times. Although some of the victims are able to contact their parents, the ransom can be high, and if no one can pay it, the victims become trapped like slaves and can even be tortured or killed [by cyber-scamming bosses].

Both women and men are affected, but they are likely to face different experiences. Females, including teenagers, are commonly forced to do sex work or serve as mistresses for Chinese bosses, while men are often drugged and forced to serve in local militias [business-oriented armed groups operating under the military], where they have to work as security guards in front of cyber-scamming compounds or even fight against their will. When they return home, their characters are changed.

Since Operation 1027 started, I have had to be even more careful than before. I only go out when necessary, and I try to avoid crowded places. There are explosions every night, and I'm always alert. Now, many young people, including me, are more concerned about whether we will live tomorrow than what we will do in the future. Until the fighting stops, all we can think about is where to hide and how to survive.

Ze Nyoï, age 22, unemployed in Myitkyina, the Kachin State capital

I started working as a croupier at a casino in Laukkai in 2019, two years after finishing high school. I worked 12 hours a day, sometimes all day and sometimes all night. I was paid in daily wages, so I worked for several months without a day off, and then I came home to rest. I've been doing that on and off ever since.

In July 2021, I decided to go to Wa State [an autonomous area on Myanmar's eastern border under the control of the United Wa State Army, an ethnic armed organization]. I had hoped to find work in retail, but it was hard because I don't speak Chinese, so I took a job in a massage parlor instead. I worked twelve-hour shifts, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. or 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., with no days off. As a worker from Myanmar, I earned less than the workers from China, but still, at 3000 to 4000 yuan a month (\$411 to \$548), it was more than I could make back home.

Wa and Laukkai are all about gambling and online scamming. Many people connect with agents who promise to find them a job there, but who are actually human traffickers.

But I always had to be really careful there. If you don't control yourself in a place like that, you can get into very bad business. Many people are trafficked into sex work, and drugs are everywhere. I felt that it wasn't a good place for me to stay for long, so after five months, I told my boss that I wanted to take a day off, and I came home.

Wa and Laukkai are all about gambling and online scamming. Many people connect with agents who promise to find them a job there, but who are actually human traffickers. The agents can sell people to Chinese bosses, who force them to work in massive buildings which they can't leave. The bosses usually make men work as scammers, but for women, they decide on what kind of work they have to do based on their looks. If a woman is pretty, she might be forced to do sex work or serve as a mistress to the bosses.

There are many risks for women. In some cases, women even pawn themselves to their bosses. The way it works is that they borrow a certain amount of money, and they can spend it however they want as long as they pay it back within three days. For example, they might borrow 50,000 yuan, send 30,000 home to their family and gamble the rest. If they win and can pay everything back, they will be OK, but most of the time, they don't win. Then, they become the property of the bosses, who might lock them up and demand a ransom from their families. If no one pays it, then they become slaves. The bosses can use them for scamming, sex work, or whatever they want.

Some of my own friends were trafficked, and one of them told me that she was forced to do sex work before she was able to escape. Still, I plan to go back to Laukkai and return to the casino where I used to work. I can earn good money, and my friends are doing it too.

[Editors' note: in December 2023, resistance forces surrounded Laukkai, causing most of its residents to flee and many of its businesses to shut down or relocate. Military forces [surrendered](#) the city earlier this month].

Tsin Tsin, age 25, civil society worker and volunteer teacher in an internally displaced person (IDP) camp in Wai Maw township, Kachin State

Before the coup, I was pursuing a master's of education. I was planning to open a study center and boarding house for high school students with some friends and to work at a university when I graduated. I had many plans, but all of them disappeared because of the coup.

I don't feel safe physically or mentally. Military jets often fly over my camp. As a CDM (civil disobedience movement) student and as a youth, I know that I could be targeted [with arrest] anytime and anywhere. Military personnel often come into the camp, and when I go out, there are arbitrary checkpoints. Before the coup, we could freely go outside, even at night, but now our anxiety increases as darkness falls.

Life for young people has become very difficult since the coup. Many stopped going to school because they didn't want to study under the military regime. Some have since found other ways to continue their education, like through church-based schools, and some people went back to school under the military despite the poor quality of education. But many young people also lost their desire to study or were unable to study anymore. When they tried to work, they realized they lacked many skills. As IDPs we've always struggled to find work, and now, it's even harder. Even some of my friends who are university graduates couldn't find a job.

In Pangwa, men can do mining, but women are expected to serve as cooks or in other non-labor roles, as well as to serve as mistresses for Chinese bosses. Some of my friends who went there didn't want to sleep with their bosses, so they came back.

The options inside the camp are to work for the camp office or as a hired hand during harvesting season. Some people work as tailors, but only around one in ten succeed. To get a job with an NGO or civil society organization, you need skills and education, and the compensation isn't enough to survive, especially since food and commodity prices increased after the coup. Many young graduates also serve at church-based schools where they might earn 100,000 to 170,000 kyats (\$47 to \$81) per month, but due to funding constraints, sometimes months can go by without any pay. Many teachers, like me, are serving entirely on a volunteer basis.

Many girls work in KTV bars and nightclubs. Many got married early, or are just living without a clear plan. Some went to Thailand, Singapore or Malaysia to work in the pedicure, manicure and hairdressing industries. Many also went to China to work or marry.

Many also went to Pangwa [an area on Kachin State's border with Yunnan province, China, under the control of military-linked armed groups, where rare earth mining has [boomed](#) over the past decade]. In Pangwa, men can do mining, but women are expected to serve as cooks or in other non-labor roles, as well as to serve as mistresses for Chinese bosses. Some of my friends who went there didn't want to sleep with their bosses, so they came back.

Young people also go to Laukkai or Wa, where almost all of the jobs are illegal and relate to scamming and sex work. And whether women do sex work or not, people make assumptions and look down on them when they come back. As for me, I'm currently working part-time for a civil society organization and also volunteering as a tenth-grade teacher through my church. I don't dare to dream or plan for the future anymore, but I still have goals which keep me going forward. I want to earn enough to build a house for my family and provide for them. If I can, I want to run a small business. I also want to serve and lead in my community. But my plans are still very vague. Even if we win this revolution, nothing can compensate for the loss of education that the youth have

endured.

[Editors' note: In October 2023, the military [bombed](#) another IDP camp in Kachin State, killing 28 civilians.]

Waw Mee, age 31, undocumented massage worker in Kuala Lumpur

The coup turned my life upside down. When it happened, I was teaching at a government elementary school in Myeik [a city in Myanmar's southernmost Tanintharyi region]. I joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and returned home to Putao [a town in Kachin State's far north], where I joined the protests. Soon, I started to worry that military informants had photographed me during the protests and that they would find and [arrest](#) me for my participation in the CDM. I didn't feel safe at home anymore, so I started staying at other places, sometimes even in the forest.

After two months, I found a job at a massage parlor. I never expected I would have to do this kind of work, but I don't have much of a choice.

I was always worried about whether I might be arrested or even killed. Because I no longer felt safe in my hometown or country, I decided to come to Malaysia. As a member of the CDM, I couldn't apply for a passport to enter Malaysia legally, so I had to cross the border over land. It was a terrifying journey, and when I arrived in February of 2022, I knew no one. I felt like a tree that had been uprooted from the ground.

Through a friend of a friend, I made contact with the Lisu church, where I stayed while I was searching for work [Lisus are an ethnic group living predominantly in northern Myanmar and Yunnan province, China]. While I was staying at the church, the pastor's family helped me to get by. After two months, I found a job at a massage parlor. I never expected I would have to do this kind of work, but I don't have much of a choice.

I work six days a week, from 11 AM to 12 AM. When I tell customers I'm from Myanmar, the way they treat me changes. Sometimes they treat me inappropriately, like touching my private parts or asking me to touch theirs. When that happens, I tell them that we don't offer that kind of service and that they should look elsewhere. I even warn them that we could be arrested or that our shop might have to shut down. Luckily, our employer is on our side.

I thought that when I got here, I would be free, but it wasn't what I imagined. I face so many difficulties. I don't speak the language or know how to go from place to place. I feel like I have eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear. But the most challenging thing is that I don't feel safe anywhere. Because I'm undocumented, I'm constantly worried that I might be arrested. If so, anything could happen, and I could even be deported.

For now, I don't have much of a plan. All I want is to be safe. If I get a UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] card, I want to study English and maybe learn how to do manicures and pedicures. And if my country becomes safe, I want to go home. But as long as it's not safe, I'm afraid to go back.

Emily Fishbein

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