

From Displacement to Learning: Education for Myanmar Refugees in Mizoram Post-Coup

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Abstract

Mizoram, located on India's border and surrounded by Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Indian state of Manipur, is increasingly becoming a hub for refugees, offering refuge to displaced populations from these regions. This paper examines the educational situation for refugees in Mizoram, with a particular focus on those from Myanmar who were displaced due to the military coup in 2021. The influx of refugees has significantly raised the population in various districts, potentially leading to higher school enrolment rates. The study also highlights how teachers and community leaders in refugee camps are facilitating education by establishing makeshift schools and classes that follow the Myanmar curriculum. Drawing on statistical data, newspaper articles, journal reports, and direct observations from relief camps, this paper explores the number of Myanmar refugees in each district and statistical information on relief camps, gender distribution, and enrolment rates. Additionally, the research discusses the legal frameworks and refugee status determination processes that influence the support refugees receive in the host country while addressing the educational challenges and needs of these displaced populations based on existing literature.

Keywords: Refugee Education, Relief Enrolment, Educational Challenges, Refugee Educators

Introduction

The military junta, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, seized power in neighboring Myanmar on February 1, 2021, resulting in widespread unrest and displacement, with many seeking refuge in surrounding countries. Mizoram, owing to its shared ethnic ties with Myanmar's Chin community, has welcomed a significant number of refugees. This influx presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly in the field of education. Understanding the educational responses and needs of these refugees is vital for effective policy formulation and humanitarian support.

Methodology

A qualitative review of secondary sources was conducted, including news reports, government records, academic articles, and UNHCR assessments. Direct observations from refugee camps and NGO reports operating in Mizoram complement the analysis.

Refugee Influx And Demographics

Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and subsequent civil resistance, the New Zealand Myanmar Ethnic Council (NZMEC) and Global Action for Myanmar Peace & Federal Democracy (GAMPFD)

reported on 22nd January 2022, that "several thousand" individuals had recently fled from Chin State in Myanmar into Mizoram, where they are housed in nine temporary refugee camps. This number has significantly risen over the years, as detailed in Table 1.1. As of data collected by the Mizoram Police on March 4, 2025, the current refugee population in Mizoram stands at 32,604. The district-wise population data is given in the table below:

Table 1: Report on Myanmar Refugees residing in Mizoram as of 4th March 2025. (Source: Mizoram Police Report)

Sl.No	DISTRICT	Total Number of Refugees
1	Aizawl	3391
2	Champhai	13586
3	Hnahthial	702
4	Khawzawl	314
5	Kolasib	129
6	Lawngtlai	5922
7	Lunglei	2330
8	Mamit	463
9	Saitual	188
10	Serchhip	603
11	Siaha	4976
	TOTAL	32,604

The report reveals that Champhai district hosts a significant refugee population, accounting for roughly 41.7% of Myanmar's total state population. Additionally, it suggests that districts adjacent to the Indo-Myanmar border have a higher concentration of refugees than other areas. In the state capital, the refugee population is also notably larger, possibly reflecting urban migration driven by the search for employment and improved living conditions.

The Weekly Report on Myanmar Refugees on the status of the situation of Myanmar refugees identifies the number of relief camps in each district of Mizoram, along with the number of persons in the relief camps and the number of persons living outside the relief camps. The data also collects information on the number of males, females, and children (Below 18 years) refugees residing in each district. The numbers change often due to the refugees traveling back and forth between the state and their home

country, because of which it may be difficult to give a definite number of refugees residing in Mizoram. Hence, this data can be claimed to be complete only for the week of the report, i.e., 4th March 2025.

Table 2: Status of Myanmar Refugee situation as per report of DCs for the week ending Date 04.03.2025.

Sl. No.	Name of District	No. of Relief Camps	No. of Persons in Relief Camps	No. of persons outside Relief Camps
1	Aizawl	5	363	3028
2	Champhai	19	6650	6936
3	Hnahthial	14	450	252
4	Khawzawl	0	0	314
5	Kolasib	0	0	129
6	Lawngtlai	38	4026	1896
7	Lunglei	10	1287	1043
8	Mamit	2	157	306
9	Saitual	0	0	188
10	Serchhip	0	0	603
11	Siaha	38	4062	914
	Total	126	16995	15609

The provided table indicates that seven of the eleven districts in Mizoram have established relief camps for refugees escaping Myanmar. Lawngtlai, located in the southwestern part near the Indo-Myanmar border, has the highest number of 38 relief camps. Currently, 16995 refugees are housed in these camps, while 15609 remain outside.

Table 3: Status of Myanmar Refugee situation as per report of DCs for the week ending Date 04.03.2025.

Sl. No.	Name of District	No. of Refugee			
		Male	Female	Children (Below 18 years)	Total
1	Aizawl	1132	1041	1218	3391
2	Champhai	4364	4226	4996	13586
3	Hnahthial	198	239	265	702
4	Khawzawl	79	55	180	314
5	Kolasib	38	40	51	129
6	Lawngtlai	1850	2059	2013	5922
7	Lunglei	689	820	812	2330
8	Mamit	183	145	135	463
9	Saitual	54	49	85	188
10	Serchhip	182	156	265	603
11	Siaha	1162	1439	2375	4976
	Total	9940	10269	12395	32604

The above data lists all refugees below the age of 18 years as children, regardless of gender, and the male and female population data is only for those above 18 years of age. Based on the available data, there are 12395 children under 18 in need of education, which means that Mizoram schools have to welcome numerous students from Myanmar. Additionally, there are 9940 male refugees aged 18 and over, and 10269 female refugees in the population.

ENROLMENT AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

According to data from news journals on 9th August 2023, 8119 refugee children have been enrolled in Mizoram schools (The Free Press Journal, 2023). Out of this total, 6366 students are from Myanmar, 250 are from Bangladesh, and 1503 are from Manipur (Choudhury, 2023). This indicates that a majority of 78.4% of refugee students in Mizoram are of Myanmar nationality. The news articles stated that these refugee students received free uniforms, textbooks, and mid-day meals, ensuring parity with local students (India Today, 2023).

Table 4: Data from The Free Press Journal as of 9th August 2023.

Home Country/State of Refugees	Number of children enrolled in Mizoram schools
Myanmar	6366
Bangladesh	250
Manipur	1503

According to Pu Lalchhandama Ralte, the former State School Education Minister of Mizoram, 44 refugee children had registered for the class 10 board examinations in 2022, out of which 31 had appeared. Of these 31 students, 28 have successfully passed the board examinations, resulting in a pass percentage of 90.32. (The Free Press Journal, 2023). In an article by Hindustan Times, 6,195 Myanmar refugee children were enrolled in Mizoram schools in 2021, with 5,221 in government schools, 184 in government-aided institutions, and 790 in private schools (Lalhlimum, 2022).

A study by Taylor and Sidhu emphasizes the critical role of educational institutions in the effective resettlement of refugee children within a country (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011). For humanitarian reasons, the Mizoram government has urged all district education officers to enroll Myanmar refugee children in state-run schools. A circular issued by James Lalrinchhana, the Director of the Directorate of School Education, highlights a decision rooted in Chapter 2(4) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act 2009). This act states that "children aged 6 to 14 years who belong to disadvantaged communities have the right to be accepted to a school in a class appropriate to his or her age for the completion of primary education." Consequently, officials are instructed to facilitate "admission to migrant/refugee children" so they can "continue their schooling" (Agarwala, 2021).

In addition to formal schooling, refugee communities established makeshift schools within camps, often following the Myanmar curriculum. Volunteer teachers, including former educators and community leaders, played a pivotal role in these initiatives (Northeast Today, 2022). For instance, in the Thazawl camp, a multi-purpose hall has been converted into a part-time school, accommodating over 263 children and following the Myanmar curriculum. Textbooks are sourced from Myanmar, and 18 volunteers, including former teachers, facilitate classes from kindergarten to Class 11 (Hindustan Times, 2023). These grassroots initiatives aim to ensure continuity in education, preserving cultural and linguistic ties.

However, challenges persist, including financial constraints, lack of infrastructure, and the need for trained educators.

CHALLENGES IN REFUGEE EDUCATION

Every child possesses an inherent right to education, irrespective of their migratory status. Sadly, the type, quality, and length of education accessible to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant children largely depend on their location when seeking asylum rather than on their educational needs. Recent UNHCR statistics indicate that nearly half (48%) of all refugee children are completely lacking education. Moreover, enrolment rates for pre-primary, primary, secondary, and higher education among refugees fall significantly short of the global average. In Mizoram, the state government offers free school enrolment for children from Myanmar for humanitarian reasons. However, without sufficient support from the central government and considering the vast number of displaced children, it is uncertain how much assistance the state can realistically provide.

The educational situation for Myanmar refugees in Mizoram reflects a broader global trend: while humanitarian instincts drive immediate responses, sustainable and equitable education for displaced populations remains an immense challenge. Mizoram's efforts to integrate refugee children into government schools under the Right to Education framework demonstrate an important model of localized, community-driven refugee assistance (The Indian Express, 2021).

1. Resource Constraints

UNHCR has pinpointed various barriers that hinder refugee and migrant children in their pursuit of education. A primary challenge is the lack of school capacity, which encompasses limited resources and insufficiently trained educators for these children. Moreover, students from refugee or migrant backgrounds, particularly those unfamiliar with the educational system, may experience academic struggles due to insufficient support. Complications with enrolment procedures and transportation to remote asylum facilities exacerbate these issues. (UNHCR, 2019). In Mizoram, community halls and makeshift structures have been repurposed into learning spaces, but these often suffer from overcrowding, poor ventilation, and unsafe conditions (Hindustan Times, 2023).

Moreover, learning materials such as textbooks, teaching aids, and technology are insufficient. In the Thazawl camp, for instance, volunteers must rely on photocopied textbooks and donated stationery (Hindustan Times, 2023).

2. Lack of Trained Teachers and Pedagogical Support

Many refugee schools depend on volunteer teachers, who are often untrained and lack formal pedagogical skills (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Although their commitment is crucial, the absence of structured teacher training affects instructional quality, curriculum delivery, and classroom management. Additionally, teachers themselves face burnout and financial instability, given the voluntary nature of their work and the emotional demands of teaching trauma-affected children (UNHCR, 2023).

In response to the influx of refugees, the Chinland government has established over 40 schools within Mizoram's relief camps, staffed by approximately 300 teachers. Notably, 67% of these educators are volunteers, while the remaining 33% are members of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) who left their government positions following the 2021 military coup (Times of India, 2024). While these volunteers play a crucial role, many lack formal training in pedagogy, limiting their ability to address the diverse educational needs of refugee children.

3. Curriculum Discrepancies and Accreditation Issues

Globally, curriculum mismatch is cited as a major barrier to refugee education access, affecting mobility and future opportunities (UNESCO, 2021).

Education provided in Mizoram's relief camps often follows the Myanmar curriculum, a choice made to preserve cultural continuity and help displaced children maintain a connection to their homeland (The Indian Express, 2021). This method, however, poses many challenges. Refugee students struggle to adapt to the Indian educational framework because their education does not correspond with the national curriculum. Many are at risk of becoming "curriculum-orphaned"—having learned in a system that Myanmar no longer officially recognizes due to their displacement, and which India does not formally accept because they lack official refugee status. Because their education is not formally recognized, many young learners face difficulties when they try to move on to higher studies. This lack of accreditation also makes it harder for them to find jobs in their host country (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

4. Language Barriers

Language barriers pose significant challenges for refugee children, particularly those who are not proficient in the language of instruction in their host countries. Limited language skills can hinder their understanding of lessons, communication with teachers and peers, and integration into the school community.

Although many refugees belong to the Chin ethnic group and share some linguistic similarities with the Mizos, notable dialectical differences persist (Hindustan Times, 2023). Refugee students who have primarily been educated in Burmese or Chin languages often find it difficult to adapt to learning in English and Mizo, both of which are essential for broader integration into the host society. This language gap not only hampers their comprehension and academic performance but also contributes to feelings of social exclusion within local communities. Moreover, limited proficiency in English significantly reduces their access to higher education opportunities, where strong English skills are often a critical requirement (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

6. Cultural Shock and Trauma

Refugee children often experience cultural shock and adjustment difficulties when transitioning to new educational settings in their host countries. Differences in teaching styles, classroom norms, and cultural expectations may lead to feelings of alienation and disconnection from the learning environment. Moreover, refugee children may face discrimination, prejudice within educational environments (Dryden-Peterson, 2015), harassment, gender-based inequality (Gilhooly & Lee, 2016), and discrepancies based on social class and race (Blocha & Hirsch, 2017). Negative attitudes and stereotypes towards refugees may create hostile learning environments, impacting refugee children's sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic motivation.

Research shows that children who have experienced violence and displacement often struggle with attention disorders, PTSD symptoms, and impaired memory functions, all of which make learning significantly more difficult (Betancourt et al., 2013). In many cases, teachers and volunteers lack the training or resources needed to support students dealing with such complex psychological challenges, placing an additional strain on an already fragile educational environment. For many refugee children, the trauma of war lingers long after they have found physical safety, manifesting in anxiety, depression, learning difficulties, and behavioral struggles (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Unfortunately, in Mizoram's refugee camps, structured psychosocial support programs remain scarce, leaving many of these children's emotional and mental health needs unmet.

7. Economic Pressures Leading to Dropouts

Many refugee families in Mizoram rely on informal labor to survive, which often pushes children into the workforce at an early age. Among adolescents aged 14 to 17, dropout rates remain particularly high, driven by a combination of economic necessity, gendered expectations such as early marriage for girls, and the lack of clear educational pathways for continued learning (Lalhlimum, 2022). In the refugee settlements, teachers frequently observe that older students attend school irregularly or eventually leave altogether to work in local agriculture, construction, or other forms of manual labor, sacrificing their education to support their families.

8. Legal Barriers

The *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (commonly known as the Refugee Convention), adopted in 1951 and entering into force in 1954, defines a refugee as someone who is outside their home country and unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Although India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, it has historically provided asylum to large numbers of refugees, particularly from Afghanistan and Myanmar, while respecting the UNHCR's principle of non-refoulement (UNHCR, 2019).

However, because India lacks a formal refugee protection framework, refugees from Myanmar are not officially recognized, limiting their access to many rights and services. In Mizoram, local authorities have responded by issuing temporary identification documents to refugees, helping them access basic amenities and education (The Indian Express, 2022). This informal system, rooted in ethnic solidarity and humanitarian concern, reflects a unique approach within India, but it also leaves refugees vulnerable.

Without official recognition, refugee children often face major barriers to education. Many struggle to enrol in schools beyond the primary level due to a lack of proper documentation (The Wire, 2022), and they are excluded from scholarships, vocational training, and other programs designed for Indian citizens (UNHCR India Report, 2022). While Mizoram's support has been generous, the absence of national-level protections means that much of the assistance remains ad hoc and insecure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Legal Recognition at the central level through the adoption of a national refugee law, along with a state-level refugee education policy framework, should be considered to ensure refugees gain access to education, healthcare, and employment.
2. Provide certified training programs for refugee teachers.
3. Provide Educational Programs focusing on bridging the learning gaps faced by refugee students.
4. Establish trauma and mental health support systems in schools staffed by social workers and trained counselors.
5. Integrate trauma-informed teaching approaches into teacher training programs.

CONCLUSION

Mizoram's compassionate response to the Myanmar refugee crisis highlights the power of community-driven humanitarian efforts. By prioritizing education even in times of upheaval, Mizoram has offered displaced children not just shelter but hope for a better future.

Yet transforming these emergency efforts into a sustainable education system requires more than goodwill. Deliberate investment, strategic partnerships, and systemic reforms are essential to ensure lasting impact.

Makeshift schools must evolve into recognized, well-supported institutions capable of addressing the complex needs of refugee learners.

Above all, education must be upheld as a fundamental human right, regardless of nationality or legal status. Refugee children are not only survivors of conflict but future contributors to society. By ensuring their right to learn, Mizoram and regions like it invests in resilience, peace, and a shared, hopeful future.

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