



Crisis under the coup

Gender-based discrimination, violence and sexual harassment against Myanmar women media professionals

March 2024

By Myanmar Women in Media

Acknowledgment

This Myanmar Digital Research paper was produced for the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative, with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and with support from The SecDev Foundation. Views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of either organization.

K4DM was launched in 2017 by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC. It fosters a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar. Making use of online courses, fellowships and research on digital spaces, the initiative supports diverse students and researchers primarily in the Myanmar diaspora and research institutions outside the country.

The Myanmar Women in Media organization would like to express our gratitude to the research team members who contributed to the successful completion of the study. Their dedication, expertise, and commitment were instrumental in realizing the research objectives.

We extend heartfelt thanks to the "Tea Leaf Center" for their invaluable contributions to the data collection and analysis process. Their meticulous efforts ensured the accuracy and reliability of our research findings. We would also like to thank all those who participated in the Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews in media professions for providing valuable answers that helped us obtain factual findings.



Executive summary

Women media professionals around the world face gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. Following the coup in 2021, many women media professionals relocated from Myanmar to Thailand, specifically, Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. To date, there is limited research on gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence and sexual harassment specifically targeting women in media in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. The data that does exist has remained unpublished or with limited access.

The research used a qualitative research methodology. Methods for this piece consisted of targeted focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The focus group discussions consisted of 36 women and 20 men across Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. While this piece focuses on the experiences of women as the primary sources of data, men and LGBTQ members provide important insight and perspectives through their personal experiences, as witnesses to their women colleagues' experiences, and in obtaining diverse input addressing these problems. LGBTQ members were included because their sexual orientations and gender identity are often underrepresented in women focused research. LGBTQ members participated in the groups they self-selected and felt most comfortable participating. Safety and security were the highest priorities. Therefore, the study used purposive sampling to ensure respondents had the strongest fit for the study. We then used snowball sampling to add additional focus group discussion members and key informant interview connections.

The study was based on three research questions. First, what are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals? Secondly, in confronting these challenges, what strategies do women media professionals use when facing these challenges? Thirdly, what are the current needs to overcome these challenges according to the interviews?

Findings

Our initial findings suggest that the terms 'gender-based discrimination', 'gender-based violence', and 'sexual harassment' were inconsistently applied. Due to this inconsistency the findings are arranged by most common experiences found in the focus group discussions and key informant interviews. In answering the first research question, we found identity theft and identity fraud to be a primary area of concern. Participants reported that women journalists had their names or their reputations used without consent by media houses and those seeking grant funding. Many reported unequal opportunities to conduct field reporting. They also reported unsafe interactions with men while on the job and during other formal as well as informal work-related activities. This included requests for personal contact information, unwanted staring at their bodies, unwanted touching, requests for sex, and unsafe travel, such as shared sleeping arrangements or

inappropriate sexual conversations while riding to field sites with men. Unequal representation in field reporting, especially compared with an over-representation of women presenters, was commonly reported. Revenge was commonly described as a result of women rejecting the sexual advances of men colleagues and seniors. This took the form of reduced salary, refusal to publish women written articles, and harassment until being driven to quit. One particular case of revenge took the form of online harassment, which then turned into sexual harassment and physical violence. Another case of concern saw a media house publicly go through the formal process of removing a senior manager accused of sexual harassment, but in reality, kept the manager on because he was 'too valuable to lose'.

Coping strategies

In answering the second question, the reality faced by many women in media was that limited strategies exist for coping with gender-based discrimination, violence, and sexual harassment. The main response was to ignore the situation because of fear of losing their jobs. Other strategies included quitting their job and sharing their experience with their close network of women friends – however the latter was less common due to the fear of losing their jobs and risk for revenge.

Needs

The needs identified by both women and men centred overwhelmingly on creating multiple reporting mechanisms within media houses, including an independent third-party mediator and an enforceable mechanism tied to donor funding. It was unclear whether mechanisms already exist with donor organizations, but a second common request was for media houses and their donors to create and enforce policies, especially firing perpetrators and protecting those who speak out. Participants also requested the formation of a community support network with both men and women allies that would allow a safe space to speak out. The focus group discussions revealed that better, more targeted gender training for media houses and journalists is needed that is organization-specific and highlights the mechanisms that may, or may not, be in place. Equality in positions of responsibility, authority, and qualified hires was suggested in the key informant interviews. Finally, mental health support that is context specific and independent as well as external to Mae Sot was mentioned as a need.

The findings suggest women media professionals face significant gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment on a regular basis. These are not new and not unique to the post-coup environment. However, the lack of formal legal mechanisms for filing complaints has increased their insecurity in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. The normalization of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace, among peers, and informal settings suggests that measures need to be in place to support those who experience them and hold perpetrators accountable.

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Terminology note: We use the terms ‘man’ or ‘men’ and ‘woman’ or ‘women’ instead of the terms male or female throughout the paper to respect the gender identity of our participants. Some of the women quoted in this piece are members of the LGBTQ community and are quoted based on their identity preferences as women. However, footnotes and quotes remain unaltered if the terms ‘female’ and ‘male’ are used to preserve their meaning in context.

In this report we use the term ‘media professionals’ to include a range of professions including journalists, presenters, editors, podcasters, etc. The term is intended to be inclusive and recognize the roles of all levels of media support provided by women working in the field.

Introduction

The prevalence of gender-based discrimination (GBD),¹ gender-based violence (GBV),² and sexual harassment³ is increasing among journalists and media professionals worldwide. This issue is particularly significant in post-coup Myanmar and in cross-border locations such as Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand, where there has been little comprehensive research on the experiences of women media professionals. In response to this challenge, Myanmar Women in Media (MWiM) in October 2023 conducted research focused on understanding GBD, GBV, and sexual harassment experiences among women journalists and media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. The research explores their experiences, obstacles, and potential remedies. The study's outcomes will serve as a foundational step for MWiM to support these women by identifying the distinct forms of discrimination they face. Moreover, evidence-based recommendations will support efforts to address their specific challenges. The research findings will be publicly disseminated to raise awareness among stakeholders and decision-makers about the critical situation. MWiM, consisting of experienced media professionals, is well-equipped to undertake this research initiative, which was conducted in collaboration with the Tea Leaf Center (TLC), a social enterprise in Thailand focused on research and research training. This endeavour strives to ensure that women journalists and media professionals not only excel in their careers but also experience safety and security in their work environments. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to their effective participation in the field while advocating for human rights and justice.

In the aftermath of the military coup in February 2021, many women journalists and women media professionals fled into Mae Sot along the Thai-Myanmar border, into Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, or are in hiding within Myanmar. These women face sexual harassment, exploitation, and gender-based discrimination and violence, both offline and online. A global rise in GBV against women journalists has

¹ Gender-based discrimination, often referring to the loss of opportunities based on gender, can be understood as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field" [United Nations. (1979). 'Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women,' Article 1].

² Gender-based violence, often containing elements of power inequality, can be defined as "violence against women" as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." [United Nations. (1993). 'Deceleration on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women,' Article 1]

³ Sexual harassment is "any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders." [United Nations Secretariat. (2008). Prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority. Secretary-General's bulletin.

<https://hr.un.org/content/prohibition-discrimination-harassment-including-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-authority>

been documented since 2021.⁴ One in five journalists reported physical assault in connection with online abuse.⁵ In Myanmar specifically, violence against journalists is well-documented,⁶ however women journalists in Myanmar have less representation in the research data and within the field as a whole.⁷ The Myanmar Women's Journalists Society (MWJS) suggests gender-based discrimination as a barrier to entry into the field, and those who do work in the industry face continual discrimination.⁸ This is then compounded by the military coup and the violent crackdown on free speech. A few women journalists and media professionals have received emergency funds under the Safety Title,⁹ an emergency fund for journalists made available by a collection of donors, but many others continue to struggle. In Thailand women journalists face numerous daily gender-based discrimination challenges that prevent them from working professionally in their field. These women have no legal recourse to address these issues, as they must remain undocumented or hold only partial legal status in Thailand.

To date, only a handful of academic articles have explored gender-based discrimination in Myanmar media.¹⁰ These have all been published either pre-2021 coup or as part of broader regional or global studies. The only publicly available comprehensive research conducted on women journalists in Myanmar is a UNESCO meta-study and an MWJS piece based on early 2022 data. Other data sources exist but are currently unpublished.

At present no organizations are publicly conducting research focusing on GBV, GBD, and sexual harassment with these specific stakeholders. This research will be the first to specifically target women media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. This is significant because this group faces added risks and challenges created by being in this profession, being a woman, being in exile, and having precarious

⁴ The Chilling a report produced by UNESCO, is a comprehensive global study on online GBV against female journalists. UNESCO. (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223>

SecDev Foundation. (2022). Female Journalists Organize Against Online Violence. <https://secdev-foundation.org/female-journalists-launch-response-to-online-violence/>

Secdev Foundation. (2023). Unpacking Women's Experience of Digital Violence: New Research. <https://secdev-foundation.org/new-research-dvaw-mena/>

⁵ Free Press Unlimited. (no date). Photo exhibition: Safety of women journalists. <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/photo-exhibition-safety-women-journalists>

⁶ Reporters Without Borders reported by the end of 2021, 115 journalists were arrested while covering news stories, 57 were detained arbitrarily, three were killed, and seven were confirmed to experience extreme torture. They also report that, as of January 1st, 2023, 68 journalists and 1 media worker are currently detained. <https://rsf.org/en/figures-past-year-s-persecution-journalism-myanmar>, <https://rsf.org/en/country/myanmar>

⁷ Development Media Group reported in February 2023 "A gender gap persists among Myanmar media, with fewer women being employed in ethnic media and fewer women's voices being represented in media reports, according to journalists and women's rights activists. <https://www.dmediag.com/news/5811-mratm>

⁸ Myanmar Women's Journalists Society reported on 62 female journalists throughout Myanmar. The report is the first research targeting female journalists in Myanmar independent of the global research conducted by UNESCO.

⁹ The Safety Title was an emergency fund made available by a collation of donors. However, few female journalists were able to secure support through this joint fund.

¹⁰ Handunnetti, D., & Phyu Lin, N. P. (2016). Gender in the Myanmar Media Landscape: Full report: Yangon, Kayin, Saggaing, Shan and Across Myanmar. Fojo Media Institute.

Aung, K. K. (2019). A Study on Journalism Culture at the Dawn of Democracy in Myanmar (Doctoral dissertation, MERAL Portal). Tun, A. L. (2017). Gender Representation for Development in Myanmar Media (2010-2014).

legal status. Unfortunately, this vulnerable situation has further marginalized women media professionals and has made them an easy target for those seeking to take advantage of them.

The purpose of this study is to support Myanmar Women in Media to enhance the status and well-being of women media professionals from Myanmar by conducting comprehensive research and awareness-building activities that address their challenges and advocate for their rights within the media industry. Myanmar Women in Media conducted preliminary research in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai to capture a snapshot of the current state of women in media, their challenges, and coping strategies as they relate to gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment to create actionable recommendations. This is not intended to be an academic review. Rather this is intended to be accessible with a focus on findings and recommendations based on the findings.

Methods

Myanmar Women in Media used a mixed methodology approach, focused on key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). While the study focused on women in media professions, those selected for KIIs and FGDs were men, women, and LGBTQ members. Men and LGBTQ members were selected to participate in this study because gender-based violence against women does not occur in a vacuum¹¹—nor should men and LGBTQ allies who support an end to gender based violence, discrimination, and sexual harassment be excluded from the dialogue.¹² LGBTQ members were selected to participate because they are often omitted from women focused studies despite women being members of LGBTQ communities. Furthermore, those that are transgendered may face uniquely different situations. Focus group discussions were separated into men and women's groups, with LGBTQ members participating in the group they chose to identify with. Additionally, due to the high risk and nature of the research, the selection process began with 'free prior and informed consent' before any data was gathered. This took the form of verbal consent. We conducted 5 FGDs with a total of 36 women and 20 men participants between both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. We conducted 8 KIIs to verify data collected in the FGDs. The KIIs represented a wide range of positions and job types within the media profession.

Focus group discussions were used within networks and organizations where participants have a familiarity with each other. This helped to ensure their safety and encourage open and honest discussion. Key informant interviews followed a semi-structured interview process. This allowed for deeper data gathering and ensured key information from focus group discussions could be verified and validated through targeted questioning. We used purposive sampling for the selection process, to ensure the participants had a strong fit for the study. From there we employed snowball sampling as a method of

¹¹ Messner, M. A., Greenberg, M. A., & Peretz, T. (2015). *Some men: Feminist allies and the movement to end violence against women*. Oxford University Press.

¹² Tolman, R. M., Casey, E. A., Allen, C. T., Carlson, J., Leek, C., & Storer, H. L. (2019). A Global Exploratory Analysis of Men Participating in Gender-Based Violence Prevention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(16), 3438-3465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516670181>

expanding our sample size. These methods are supported by Zickar and Kieth (2023)¹³, Bakkalbasioglu (2020)¹⁴, and Parker, Scott, and Geddes (2019)¹⁵ as methods useful for hyper-targeted populations and where informant access may be difficult due to socio-economics, risks, or other factors.

Snowball sampling was chosen for two primary reasons: first, there is a security risk inherent to informants by identifying them as both media professionals and as non-Thai nationals who have precarious legal status in Thailand. This combination means they are at higher risk if publicly identified. These sampling techniques reduce the risk of exposing individuals who may fall within these categories. Secondly, this study does not seek to draw broad sweeping conclusions about the state of women in media generally. Rather, the target group is a subset of women media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai – areas that have become the focus for independent Myanmar journalism in the aftermath of the coup. This methodology allows for data collection and analysis with targeted recommendations intended for subsets of a population. Furthermore, this ensured that our selection process maintained the security and safety of participants as the selection was made through known and established networks and key informants.

Research questions

This research focused on three primary questions:

- What are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals?
- What coping strategies are currently employed by those facing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?
- What are their current needs that will allow them to overcome gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?

Findings

These findings are divided into the three primary questions for the research. We initially found that the definitions and application of the terms and the concepts ‘gender-based discrimination’, ‘gender-based violence’, and ‘sexual harassment’ were inconsistently applied by many participants in both the women’s and men’s FGDs. The terms are well defined by the United Nations and other international bodies, however, in practice these definitions are not well demarcated, and many descriptions of individual’s experiences and their colleagues often overlap in categories. In many cases what was described did not fall neatly within a single category but rather held elements of each. Because of this mixing of terms and experiences, we chose not to separate the findings into the gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual

¹³ Zickar, M. J., & Keith, M. G. (2023). Innovations in sampling: improving the appropriateness and quality of samples in organizational research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10, 315-337.

¹⁴ Bakkalbasioglu, E. (2020). How to access elites when textbook methods fail: Challenges of purposive sampling and advantages of using interviewees as “fixers.”. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 688-699

¹⁵ Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball sampling. SAGE research methods foundations.

harassment. Instead, we organized the paper around the initial questions of the research. Then we organize the report through the most common experiences found in the FGDs and KIs.

Forms of GBD, GBV, and sexual harassment

What are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals?

Identity

Identity theft and fraud were consistently reported from both women's and men's FGDs and confirmed during the KIs. We distinguish identity theft from fraud in this context because fraud focuses primarily on the action that occurred between the media house and the donor rather than the impact on the individual whose identity and reputation were taken. Participants reported that women journalists had their names or their reputations used without their consent by media houses and those seeking grant funding. These reputations, built over many years, are likely significant enough to be important factors in funding decisions. According to the participants, this occurred in two primary ways. One way identity theft occurred was through media houses and individual editors applying for funding without their knowledge. They would apply for grant funding that targeted women from Myanmar, that had women-based funding requirements, or funding where the reputation of the women could be used to increase the chances for grant acceptance. In these cases, the women were unaware that the applications were made in their name. In a specific instance, the participant was refused a grant because they were unaware that their name had already been used for an application. They were also unaware that the funds had been disbursed to a media house using their name as the recipient. Fraud also occurs in a similar way. Women media professionals permit their name or reputation to be attached to an application with the understanding that they would be part of the project and receive funding for their work. However, when the grant is awarded, the women whose name was used on the grant are either removed from the funded projects or given less pay than originally agreed. The reason for this was often so the grant could fund other people rather than the women whose reputation was used.

“In Mae Sot all the media houses were trying to apply for grants to survive, [...] media houses applied for grants under peoples’ names without their permission” – woman FGD participant

Unequal opportunities

Many women reported unequal opportunities to conduct field reporting. Many participants acknowledged the inherent risk in reporting in conflict areas, especially the physical risks associated with crossing the border and engaging with a wide range of sources. However, many of the women participants described their requests to report on or follow leads across the border as actively rejected more frequently than their men counterparts. The KIs confirmed this practice as well. In many cases, the justification for rejecting these requests was that media houses had no protocol to protect the women in the field. Other reasons included concern for the reputation of the media houses or that of senior editors

if women were harmed in the field by their decision, therefore, rejecting women's requests were viewed as protecting them from harm.

"They should not go into conflict areas because it is not safe. People say that because a woman is undocumented in the field, they are unsafe, but this does not apply to men."

– woman FGD participant

"Sometimes going to the conflict areas, we depend on the armed groups, so sometimes these armed groups ride the motorbikes, and they have to carry someone on the back. This can be men. And before they get to the conflict areas, they sometimes need to spend a night someplace before they get there, and so it is better for men to do this." – man KII participant

Unsafe interactions

Many women reported unsafe interactions with men while on the job and during other formal and informal work environments. Many women reported instances of unsafe interactions with men informants that included requesting personal contact information, unwanted staring at their bodies, unwanted touching, and asking for sex or threatening rape. However, unsafe interactions were not limited to experiences with their sources in the field. Unsafe interactions also included their men colleagues, senior journalists, and editors. When traveling with men colleagues, women often reported traveling either one-on-one with a single men colleague or as the only woman among several men. It is important to note that in a few KIIs traveling in a pair was described as a policy necessary to reduce risk (in areas where men journalists have been frequently targeted).

Accommodations were also highlighted as a problem, as men and women were often expected to share the same spaces, including sleeping arrangements in the field. When traveling with men colleagues the conversation among the men was often inappropriate and included sexual harassment, comments about women's bodies, and conversations about sex. Furthermore, in at least three different FGDs, the participants mentioned they were traveling as the only woman in the group and the comments were either directly targeting them, their women colleagues, or women junior staff members in their media houses.

"While working at a new media house, because of the donor policy, they have to recruit women journalists, but the environment is not safe because men journalists are drinking alcohol and doing drugs, I stopped trusting those environments to work." – woman FGD participant

Other examples of unsafe interactions were unwanted sexual advances. In many cases, this occurred outside of work hours at the bar or in other informal settings with men colleagues. Many participants, including the men's FGD and some of the KIIs, mentioned that senior journalists and editors often engage in unwanted sexual advances. The participants reported that those in senior positions often try to persuade their women juniors to have sex with them or their friends in exchange for promotions, salary raises, or to have their work published. Others reported that their women junior colleagues have been asked for sex in exchange for being hired, as a payment for housing, job security, and in a few cases as payment for safe passage out of Myanmar. Another notable example from the FGD was where drinking with colleagues led to unwanted sexual advances from their men colleagues. In one instance, this involved the higher management of a media house as well as his friends. In another instance, senior journalists invited a junior journalist for drinks and then tried to force her into group sex. They were in a group that included men working as human rights defenders. Women media professionals therefore face unwanted

sexual advances from their colleagues and contacts, even among those who purport to support human rights and media freedoms. These threats are compounded by the fact that women are themselves in vulnerable positions; seeking to escape Myanmar or dependent on media houses for their employment in exile in Thailand.

“While meeting with a partner media group, they met at a restaurant. They were drinking, and the CEO of a media organization, despite having gender knowledge, was sexually harassing me. There was unwanted physical contact, like touching me intimately, and he said, ‘Can you get a motel with me?’”
– woman FGD participant

“They called a junior journalist to drink with them. After they were drunk, they verbally harassed her. They said, ‘if you sleep with us, we will try and promote you.’ One of them is an editor. He said you have to sleep with my friends too. They wanted to have group sex. They were in the field and were all senior journalists and human rights defenders” – woman FGD participant

These cases were also reported by the LGBTQ participants. Unsafe interactions were similar to the previously mentioned cases, with added insecurities of verbal and physical assault when advances were rejected. In some cases, the men’s responses to rejection included derogatory terms and public shaming. In other instances, these interactions forced LGBTQ participants to become publicly outed.

“Men [in the media sector] think ‘it is really easy to get [LGBTQ] especially for sexual activity’. They will send me pictures of their private parts. And ask if I will have sex with them... They would be polite to me but then use derogatory terms behind my back” – transgender woman KII participant

Representation

Under-representation of women in field reporting roles and leadership roles within media houses was another common theme. Throughout the FGDs, both men and women participants stated that there was a lack of women in leadership roles. Many participants said that leadership, especially in the senior editor positions and higher, was dominated by men. In the KIIs, some of the responses to this suggested a lack of qualified women to fill these positions. They suggested this is in part because more women have not been able to securely leave Myanmar. On the contrary, many women said their opportunities to leave Myanmar for Mae Sot or Chiang Mai were hindered by their media houses’ perception that men are more mobile. A common theme was that traditional gender-based responsibilities fell to the women, such as raising children or taking care of extended family, and thus men were freer to travel and leave the country. The gap then would be made more evident by the trend of prioritizing men’s mobility out of Myanmar.

“Media founders are mostly men... my suggestion is more women founders and more women at higher level [positions]” – woman FGD participant

“I have a child. My senior won’t allow me to do my job because I have a child. They would say ‘You shouldn’t go due to the conflict area and being a mother.’” – woman FGD participant

“Women are often asked ‘If your child gets sick, can you do the work?’” – women FGD participant

Participants also reported over-representation of women as presenters. There are multiple causes, with participants noting: a) the positions are lower paid and therefore given to women, b) women are selected

on the basis of objectification, for their looks, and c) men refuse these positions because they are more public-facing and thus more dangerous for them in the field.

“We encourage them, but they reject it. They say they do not want to be a presenter. The men say the position is for female not for males” – woman KII participant

“Management keeps sending me unqualified presenters to train because they are pretty. They quit soon afterward because the pay is so low” – man KII participant.

“The main thing is that presenters are on the screen, and they can be recorded by the military and added to a list [used by] the pro military supporters on social media and Telegram” – man KII participant

Revenge

Revenge was another prominent theme in the discussions, as a means by which men in senior positions harassed women who were perceived as overstepping boundaries. Revenge took many forms, primarily reduced salary, not publishing articles, or harassment until they were driven to quit. In most cases, revenge against women in media was a direct result of women rejecting their senior’s sexual advances. In other cases, revenge was a result of calling out senior-level or colleagues’ behavior in public and to management. In the latter cases, the perpetrators are often friends with upper management. As a result of this victim blaming and being forced to quit their jobs, many participants were fearful to speak out. In more than one instance revenge was a result of women being in relationships that their colleagues did not approve. Revenge also took the form of rumors and gossip by their co-workers.

“Another person [I know] was harassed every night about news then when her male boss saw them with a partner, they stopped communicating with them [completely].” – woman FGD participant

“This is about how the editors use power and physical control as punishment [...] The editor would check their phone and check for photos” – man FGD participant

“If a woman journalist has a good relationship with their editors, the male reporters will spread rumors about the female journalists” – woman FGD participant

One extreme case of revenge was reported during the FGD where harassment turned into sexual harassment and had elements of violence. The participant, a woman media professional, had become a target of online abuse that turned to sexual harassment and physically violent. She confronted a colleague for his inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace between the colleague and another woman. However, the colleagues involved did not perceive their behavior toward each other as harassment and accused the respondent of falsely pushing a narrative of sexual harassment. This led them and fellow journalists as well as their human rights defender friends to target this participant. The harassment included verbal and physical assault, online targeting, and a smear campaign against them. She was eventually forced to work from home and then when they identified where she lived, she was forced to quit for safety concerns.

Social media was a common tool for sexual harassment. Harassment in this manner was through stalking-like behavior, obsessive calling and messaging, requests for sex, requests for nude photos, or sending photos of genitalia. Participants experienced this from their sources and their men colleagues. In work-related group chats and private messages, many participants described being targeted in public forums.

Perpetrators would then use their contact information from these public spaces to private message the survivors. This situation is compounded by military propaganda, as the military has used Facebook and Telegram to spread misinformation about women media professionals.¹⁶

“Earlier the military has the propaganda page on Facebook. They posted a picture of me saying I’m pregnant in the jungle” – women FGD participant

“When we had to work from home, we had to create Facebook groups for work. My peers would send inappropriate pictures because they have my information from the group.” – woman FGD participant

A different extreme case that came up in the focus group discussions was where senior management (a man) was publicly called out for sexual harassment. He was publicly fired, and the donor was informed of the firing. In reality, the media house had not fired the perpetrator because they considered him too valuable to lose. He was also close friends with his superiors. The survivor was forced to continue working with the perpetrator until she quit for security reasons.

Coping strategies

What coping strategies are currently employed by those facing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?

Very few strategies exist for coping with gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. The primary response from most of the women participants was simply to ignore the situation or allow a business-as-usual mentality. There is a huge fear of repercussions if they speak out. The same is true if they make a public scene. Furthermore, the participants made it clear that the priority was survival, losing their jobs was not an option for many women because job opportunities are already scarce in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, while returning to Myanmar as a journalist would entail living in extremely dangerous conditions.

“Here it is really difficult to get job opportunities. That is why I must say that some people are compromising their professionalism... for the survival of their work. Even though they do not like what is happening, they do not have the opportunity to say they don’t like the situation. They still have to work because they need the job.” – man FGD participant

While being fired from their job is a common worry that prevents people from speaking out, many of the participants have mentioned quitting their work as a way to cope. In nearly all instances of quitting their work, the cause was because the participants continued to feel unsafe in their work environments, either due to victim blaming or the continued employment of the perpetrator.

¹⁶ Myanmar Witness with Sisters to Sisters published a report highlighting abuse and violence against women from Myanmar through the use of social media platforms. The military, as well as pro-coup, individuals were responsible for documented online harassment and offline physical attacks. Myanmar Witness. (2023). Digital Battlegrounds: Gendered hate speech report on the politically motivated abuse of Myanmar women online https://www.myanmarwitness.org/_files/ugd/e8f7c0_48cd6d5a341b490b843d05baf7f8d0a7.pdf

“After reporting the situation, the violence experienced was not investigated. Instead of the perpetrator being investigated, the [survivor] was.” – woman FGD participant

Another strategy used by some was to share their experiences within their network of close women friends and colleagues. However, this appears to be limited in use according to the FGD participants and reported infrequently in the KIIs. The infrequent use of this coping strategy may partly be because of the growing difficulty of getting paid positions and the fear of revenge against them.

“My senior management (a woman) is always gossiping about me using derogatory terms. She’ll say things like “I can fire this bitch at any time”. I was shocked. I had to ignore it and keep working. I cannot move to other organizations, and I can’t go back home.” – woman FGD participant

According to the FGDs in both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, the experiences of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment were similar in both geographic spaces. However, there were significant differences in their sense of security. Chiang Mai participants faced underlying concerns of deportation, police threats, and job insecurity. However, in Mae Sot there appeared to be greater concern for deportation due to their inability to travel outside of Mae Sot as well as their physical proximity to the border; greater worry for interaction with police; and an increase in competition for jobs due to the city being both a staging point and final location for many leaving Myanmar. In Mae Sot specifically, these concerns appeared to be compounded by the risks of speaking up about experiences related to gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment.

“[Compared to those Chiang Mai] especially in Mae Sot, there are no mechanisms in Mae Sot [to report these] because they are mostly illegal” – woman FGD participant

Current needs

What are their current needs that will allow them to overcome gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment? The following recommendations are based directly from the KIIs and FGD inputs. During all FGDs these were the most commonly recommended responses to be addressed. These recommendations were also supported by the KII’s as strategies for addressing gender-based discrimination, violence, and sexual harassment.

Reporting mechanisms

Create multiple reporting mechanisms, including within media houses, an independent third-party non-media-connected reporting organization, and through the donor organizations that fund the media houses.

Participants stated that since the coup, there are no formal mechanisms they can use to address gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment within media houses nor for independent media professionals. The most-mentioned recommendation from the FGDs and the KIIs was to develop an effective reporting mechanism. Every FGD and KII provided this as a possible starting point for addressing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. The

recommendation was to have multiple avenues through which a complaint can be filed. Mechanisms need to exist within the media houses and be made known to all staff members.

*“[Solutions should include a] complaint mechanism in the media houses and to donors”
– woman FGD participant*

“Before the coup, you could go to the police. We could use the legal system. Now there is no mechanism.” – man FGD participant

Additionally, there was a near-unanimous agreement that an independent third-party reporting mechanism should exist. Many participants expressed concern that using any existing reporting mechanisms carried the risk that the local staff and local human rights defenders would be too closely connected to the perpetrators to be effective. Their recommendation was independent third-party organization not connected to the media sector as necessary to address the uniqueness of the current situation.

“Create an independent body (3rd party). You can send the information to donor and Media house and also have a check and balance in human resources.” – woman FGD participant

“Having [a] 3rd party is the best, in our internal media house the conflict is not resolved, they just stick on the wall, but the issue is not actually addressed.” – man FGD participant

Finally, the participants requested a means to report discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence directly to donor organizations that was clear and understandable. This was especially requested for donors who have given money to projects where identity theft occurred and for donors who fund media houses where inadequate internal mechanisms exist. In nearly every instance of this recommendation, the participants are unaware if any mechanism already exists. Importantly, in two different FGDs, the participants who gave this recommendation had implicated the local staff members, through which the donors worked, as perpetrators of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and/or sexual harassment.

“Create a mechanism and policy for complaints specifically to the donor and the donor should have a [communication] channel” – woman FGD participant

Enforce policies

Media houses and their donors should create and enforce policies to prevent gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment including firing perpetrators and protecting those who speak out.

The second-most mentioned recommendation was for accountability within media houses. Many of the participants, both men and women, described a lack of accountability within their media houses. The KIIs suggested that some media houses had policies before regarding discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence before the coup, but restructuring and renewed insecurity have made existing policies secondary to other priorities and, in some cases, non-existent within the current operating environment. Responses in the FGDs suggest that the few media houses that have policies have failed to enforce them. Participants have recommended that media houses develop and enforce accountability

policies. For example, they would like to see mechanisms to sure that perpetrators are expelled and removed from the media houses.

“The media houses should have an anti-sexual harassment policy.” – woman FGD participant

“I have experienced this discrimination. [My] colleagues always harass us. The media house I used to work [with had] fewer women. They accept the women, but they don’t accept LGBTQ,”
– LGBTQ woman FGD participant

“The other thing is that after we complain, the person who commit the violation, sometimes they get fired from the media houses but sometimes they are not.” – man FGD participant

“The survivor was a reporter and spoke out on social media. Most people are watching this case and finally they had no choice but to announce that they fired the male editor. They said this on the news page, but he was not actually fired. Eventually the women quit the position. I think they want to keep the people as editors because they are powerful because they need senior roles. The senior team told the survivor that the senior position is important, and we can’t fire him.” – woman KII participant

Support networks

Create a community support network with men and women that allows a space to speak out.

There is legitimate fear from the women participants around the idea of speaking out publicly. This is also true for women speaking out specifically among other women. However, one of the frequent recommendations from the FGDs was to develop and support a network where discussions and experiences can be shared among those they trust. Furthermore, the responses during the men’s FGDs suggest that many are unaware to what extent gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment occur around them. Their participation in this research suggests a willingness to discuss and listen as well as an opportunity to find allies among the men media professionals. They also indicated a desire to better understand the situation and a wish for women to speak out more. For this to happen, there needs to be a safe space and a strong network where such discussions can take place among women media professionals and their allies.

“Check and balance within the community, if the case happens this group or the other groups [can] encourage them to speak out. To help other [survivors].” – man FGD participant

Trainings

Create targeted gender training that are context specific.

The FGDs suggested mixed opinions on the overall gender sensitivity knowledge of both men and women in the media sector. Many respondents did not have a specific definition of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, or sexual harassment. Both men and women participants used a combined definition of the terms and concepts. This would suggest two things: firstly, more awareness and targeted training is needed for both women and men. Many of the women participants suggested that men simply did not understand their women colleagues’ situations and they went on to suggest that men’s behaviors that qualified as gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment were simply done without their awareness. Others suggest that some men intentionally behave in this way as they

are known to have participated in gender training. Furthermore, some respondents suggested that their juniors, especially junior women staff members are often targeted but are unaware of the situation until well after the incidences occurred. Regardless of which combination of these situations is true, better more specific training is needed.

Secondly, separating the experiences into strictly defined categories may not properly capture the full experiences of women in media. Gender training generally is useful, but it is not enough to ensure the uptake of knowledge on how gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, or sexual harassment are understood on the ground. Organization-specific training is needed to also incorporate what these terms are and how they may appear in the field as well as how to address the problems, what mechanisms are in place to support survivors, and what the consequences are for violations.

“Some men need sexual harassment awareness because they [behave] without knowing it is that” – woman FGD participant

“Some women don’t know they are being abused, so [they] have to know about gender-based violence, discrimination, and harassment... [to learn] about women’s rights and to connect with other women’s organizations within the training” – woman FGD participant

Equality in hiring

Equality in position and authority as well as qualified hires.

Most FGD participants suggested more equality in the hiring process for upper management positions, including senior editors and editor-in-chief positions. It is important to note that some of our KIIs involved upper management women who oversaw teams of nearly 50% women-men. However, an overwhelming majority of participants in the FGDs suggest that this ratio of women to men is not commonly found in most media houses. Some participants suggested that they lacked hiring opportunities for higher level positions while others suggested that having women leadership would provide them with a mechanism to lodge complaints. In one KII, this strategy was confirmed where a senior-level woman functioned as the focal point for sexual harassment complaints.

One hiring complaint dealt with the misuse of the hiring requirements for grants. Some participants stated that many grants have a minimum women-to-men hiring ratio to receive funds. However, some media houses use this opportunity to hire unqualified women in lower-paid positions to save money.

“The new MH gave incentives such as we will apply for the grant for you [...] but after receiving the grant, [...] they only received small amounts per month because the pay range is too low. That is why those women complained and tried to quit from the job. The owner threatened them, saying if you leave no one will believe you.” – woman FGD participant

“Said they would get payment from grant, but then changed their mind after [receiving] the grant” – woman FGD participant

Mental health

Mental Health support that is context-specific and independent.

A few participants suggested mental health support needs to be given to survivors. This was especially true for the Mae Sot participants. Some participants stated they distrust mental health providers because they don't understand their specific contexts. Others stated that those who do know the context or who work with other Myanmar media professionals are closely networked with the perpetrators. However, many more suggested that they are simply unaware of this option.

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