

Access to Education of Burmese Refugee Children in Mizoram, India

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Key Findings

The study found the situation of the Burmese refugee children in Mizoram to get access to education under India education system which is different from Myanmar.

The barriers that hinder access to education are social stigma, language barriers, lack of documentation, and transportation.

The Central Government of India should adopt legal frameworks for refugee protection aligned with international commitments and collaborate with state governments and international organizations to monitor educational outcomes. The Mizoram Government, as a key host state, must implement inclusive local initiatives, promote integration and raise awareness within host communities. International Organizations such as UNHCR should provide technical expertise

Executive Summary

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, over 40,000 refugees have fled from Myanmar, particularly in regions like Chin State and Sagaing Region, to Mizoram, India. Many of these refugees are children whose education is disrupted due to displacement. The Mizoram government has granted access to public schools for more than 6,000 Burmese refugee children as of October 2022, however, numerous challenges persist. The purpose of the paper is to explore multifaceted dimensions of access to formal and informal education of Burmese refugee children in Mizoram from a phenomenological perspective. In the context of non-formal education, the study examines camp-specific initiatives offering Myanmar curriculum under the National Unity Government (NUG) interim education program that contribute to the educational landscape of Burmese refugee children. The study highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to address these challenges and ensure equitable access to quality education for Burmese refugee children from the host country. The qualitative phenomenological research approach was used. The primary data was collected through observations and in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including refugee children, teachers, parents and others involved in refugee education.

Introduction

An estimated 50,000 Burmese refugees are living in India. Among them, most of the refugees from Sagaing Region and Chin State are mainly concentrated in India's northeastern part of Mizoram state which shares a 510 km border with Myanmar (ACAPS, 2023). Since India has not ratified

the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Refugees and its Protocol, it is not legally obligated to recognize refugee status and to meet the needs of refugees. In addition, there is no clear policy provision for asylum seekers, refugees and migrant people. The India government defined the displaced people without documentation as “illegal migrants” however, this study refers to all those who fled from Myanmar as “Refugee,” due to their refugee-like situation under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Central government of India has ordered a prompt action for deportation process expeditiously to the illegal migrants, however, relating to access to education for children, Mizoram regional authorities, within his mandate, are opening schools to refugee families from neighboring Chin state in Myanmar. It arranges for admission of refugees at the schools by commending with the official letter that “children aged between 6 to 14 years of vulnerable communities have the right to be attended to school in a class appropriate to his or her age (Fanai, 2023). In a newspaper of Mizoram state, according to the education director, of the 6,195 students, 5,221 were enrolled in government schools, 184 in government-aided schools and 790 in private schools (Lalhlimum, 2022).

Different Education System

The Mizoram government has granted permission for refugee children to access education. Lower-grade students can transfer from their equivalent grades in Myanmar to Mizoram schools, allowing, for instance, a 5th grade student in Myanmar to attend the grade 6th in a Mizoram school. However, those who complete Grade 10 in Myanmar cannot directly enroll in Grade 11 in Mizoram schools. To enter Grade 11, they must possess a High School Leaving

Certificate (Grade 10 completion certificate) of India. Consequently, students who have completed Grade 10 in Myanmar are required to retake the same grade in Mizoram schools. As a result, the education level of the respondents show that some students experience barriers to enroll in age-appropriate grades. Due to the conflict in the home country, the children break at least for one year or two years, and some are unable to join immediately once they arrive in the host country.

Language Barrier

The interview results indicate that language poses a significant barrier for Burmese refugee students in Mizoram. All student's participants unanimously expressed that the language difference presents a major challenge in their education journey. The Mizo language is not only a compulsory subject in schools in Mizoram up to grade 8 but a medium of instruction in schools. At the higher school level, students who opt not to pursue Mizo have the option to select either an alternative English or a Hindi subject. Although many Burmese students choose the alternative English subject (Interview with Student-3, Student-4), however, some students are compelled to study Mizo due to unavailability of teachers in their schools (Interview with Student-2). Some NGOs and CSOs attempt to address these challenges in selected refugee camps with their limited resources. For example, the Institute of Chin Affairs (ICA) arranged Mizo language pre-enrollment programs for refugee students in refugee camps in Zokhawthar village along the Myanmar border, but similar initiatives are absent in other refugee camps across Mizoram state.

Social Stigma

The social stigma and discrimination faced by refugee children attending public and private schools in Mizoram were reported. Local students expressed jealousy and frustration over the academic achievements of refugee students, leading to feelings of depression and a desire to give up among the refugee students. These children are teased for their accentuation and cleverness in the classroom. In this regard, a student shared her experience:

“When the teacher assigned me as the class leader in turn, other students disrespected what I said, so I did all the works like cleaning the class by myself, at that time I feel like that would be because of my refugee status” (Interview with Student-1)

That may be related with the response of Central government policy against the migrant population. In Particular, although India had condemned the Myanmar military coup in 2021 and expressed concerns over military crackdowns and violence, it made a clear declaration that refugees fleeing the violence in Myanmar were not welcome in the country. However, Mizoram stands out as the only state with an open receptive policy towards Myanmar refugees. Due to the lack of clear policy of the Central Government, the Mizoram government is likely to run with the limited resources for Burmese refugee population. In this situation, local residents who appeared to be suffering expressed worries about the state's culture and demographics due to the growing number of Myanmar migrant population.

Lack of Documentation

Burmese refugee children in Mizoram have access to education, but some students encounter challenges related to documentation requirements. According to

official government statements, there are no documentation difficulties for Burmese refugees attending schools established by the state government. However, private schools may have specific document requirements for enrollment. The documentation challenges become more pronounced as students' progress through the education system. For instance, when reaching Class 10, students are often required to provide documents like an Aadhaar card, which is a unique identification document issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) under the Aadhaar Act 2016. As shared by the mother of an 8th grade student,

"My daughter's school frequently posts messages about applying for scholarships in the WhatsApp group. But we can't apply because we need the parents' Aadhaar card and the student's Aadhaar card, which we don't have." (Interview with Parent-1)

In 2022, the Mizoram state government has issued temporary identity cards to refugees to distinguish them from Indian citizens. However, these ID cards are not recognized as valid identification for accessing government welfare schemes or for use outside of Mizoram state (The Indian Express, 2022). The limited scope and recognition of these temporary refugee ID cards poses challenges for the displaced populations in accessing social services and benefits that require official proof of identity. This lack of valid documentation creates barriers for refugee children in particular when trying to enroll in schools and avail of educational entitlements provided by the government.

Transportation

Transportation may be considered one of the major obstacles of physical accessibility for

Burmese refugee children in accessing mainstream education provided by the Mizoram government. Most refugee camps are located far from urban centers, where the majority of schools are situated. While public transportation is available in the cities, it does not extend to the remote camp locations. For refugee children living in urban areas, commuting to school via public transit is relatively accessible.

As a male parent from Thaizawl camp located in Lunglei District said:

"I pay around 6,000 Indian Rupees (approximately 72 USD) per month for fares for my three children. I have to borrow money and sometimes I received financial support from my relatives abroad, but eventually they could not be able to support us anymore" (Interview with Parent-6)

As a result of these transportation challenges, some refugee communities have established their own camp-based schools that follow the Myanmar curriculum. These camp-based schools are set up in settlements where resources are available such as CDM teachers who are living in the camps. This initiative allows them to overcome the language and transportation barriers that hinder access to the government education system.

In sum, policy gap between the Central authority and Mizoram state government may be considered the significant barriers influencing Burmese refugee children's access to effective education in Mizoram state.

Recommendation

To ensure the education of Burmese refugee children in Mizoram, the collaboration between the central government, international organization, Chin diaspora and

the Mizoram government, as well as the local community, is important. This collaboration can involve:

- Ensuring protection and safety for Burmese refugee children
- Regular monitoring of the education progress is crucial to identify areas of improvement and ensure that they are receiving the support they need.
- Promoting resources and community engagement to raise awareness about the need for education for refugee children
- Providing language support and cultural orientation programs, including Mizo and English language classes and cultural orientation programs.

Mobilizing resources to support the education of Burmese refugee children in Mizoram, including fundraising campaigns, donations, and partnerships with local organizations.

Conclusion

The global statistics reveal a worldwide increase in migrant populations, and assuring access education for all children has become a concern for the international community, education systems are faced with the need to respond adequately to current migration trends and consequent demographic changes in school-age populations.

The primary data highlights that the Mizoram government has taken significant steps to provide education to Burmese refugee children, but there are challenges in practice. India's lack of a comprehensive national refugee policy, its close ties with the Myanmar military junta and the security concerns raised by the influx of Burmese

refugee have created significant barriers to education access for refugee children in India. The precarious legal status of refugees, threat of deportation and tensions with host communities have forced many refugee families to seek alternative education options using the Myanmar curriculum although the Mizoram government offers access to education for refugee children in its legal framework. However, these camp-initiated schools often lack official recognition, accreditation and resources. On the other hand, the burden on Mizoram state to host a disproportionate number of refugees children compared to its resources has also strained the accessing quality education. Overall, the uncertainty surrounding the future of Burmese refugees in India has severely impacted their children's access to quality and recognized education.

To address the complex refugee's situation in India, a comprehensive and rights-based approach is needed. This should include the development of a national refugee law that provides clear guidelines for the identification, registration and protection of refugees. Strengthening coordination between the central and state governments, as well as consistent and human approach to refugee management. Balancing security concerns with the humanitarian needs of refugee populations will be crucial in addressing India's refugee dilemma.

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