

**Conflict and Displacement in Pekon Township:
Navigating Educational Access in a Conflict Setting**

Working Paper Series [4/2025]

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Series Editing and Production:

Senior Research Adviser (YRI), Senior Legal Adviser, Research Institute Assistant and IT Officer.

Please cite this working paper as:

Tin Hla. (2025). *Conflict and Displacement in Pekon Township: Navigating Educational Access in a Conflict Setting*, YRI Working Paper No. [4/2025].

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Abstract

Pekon Township has transitioned from a relatively stable region into a conflict zone following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Frequent clashes between the Myanmar military and armed resistance groups have displaced thousands of residents and led to the closure of state-run schools. As of November 2023, approximately 40,000 individuals had been displaced, and all state schools remained closed. Using a navigational framework, this study examines how parents sought to maintain their children's educational access between 2021 and 2023 amid ongoing political turmoil. Drawing on twenty interviews with conflict-affected parents, educators, and education providers, as well as a review of relevant literature, the study highlights the role of parental agency in navigating crisis conditions. Parents relocated to safer areas, turned to homeschooling, or enrolled their children in community or monastic schools to ensure educational continuity. These efforts reflect parents' conceptualisation of education as an emblem of resilience and a critical investment in their children's futures despite formidable barriers such as security threats and economic hardship. The findings highlight the resilience of education in crisis contexts and offer critical insights for future policies and interventions aimed at supporting educational access in conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: *access, conflict, displacement, education, Pekon*

Introduction

Myanmar has been grappling with civil strife since 1948. The February 2021 military coup escalated this crisis, triggering widespread resistance, particularly in ethnic regions. In 2022, there were 7,855 recorded clashes nationwide, including 2,267 between State Administration Council (SAC) forces and People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and 925 between SAC forces and combined Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and PDFs (ISP Myanmar, 2022). The intensifying conflict poses a direct threat to the well-being, future, and survival of the entire population, including a whole generation of children (UNICEF, 2023). Businesses are grappling with numerous challenges, household incomes remain fragile, and concerns about food security are on the rise (World Bank, 2023). Over 16,500 homes and buildings have been demolished since the coup (RFA, 2023). The coup has also amplified the number of displaced individuals. According to the UNHCR's report of January 9, 2023, approximately 1,545,000 people are internally displaced in the country. Pekon Township exemplifies these dynamics.

Pekon Township shares borders with Pinlaung Township to the north, Nyaungshwe Hsihseng to the south, Loikaw and Demoso Townships in Kayah State to the east, and several other townships to the west. The township comprises 211 villages with a total population of 103,590 (Department of Population, 2017). Pekon remained peaceful until May 2021, when clashes between the military and resistance groups intensified. The military's use of

airstrikes, bombings, and artillery shelling led to the displacement of an estimated 40,000 people by 2023 (Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC), 2024). Over 200 state-run schools in Pekon have closed due to insecurity. The collapse of formal education has compelled families to seek alternative methods of educating their children. Using a navigational framework, this study explores how parents in Pekon Township navigate their children's education between 2021 and 2023, why they prioritise their children's education amid political turmoil, and the challenges they face in ensuring their children's education.

The paper proceeds as follows: The subsequent section provides an overview of armed conflict, displacement, and educational disruption in Pekon Township. Following this, the methodology and conceptual framework are delineated. Subsequently, the findings section examines the pathways adopted by parents affected or displaced by armed conflicts, their motivations, and the barriers they face in navigating their children's education. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for policy and practice.

Overview of Armed Conflict, Displacement, and Educational Disruption in Pekon Township

Karenni State, also known as Kayah State, has become a hotspot of armed resistance following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. The Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) was formed on 7 May 2021 to counter the State Administration Council (SAC). A minimum of 48 armed resistance groups, including KNDF, People Defense Forces (PDF), and Karenni Army (KA), have sustained opposition across Karenni State, with hostilities commencing on 21 May 2021 in townships such as Loikaw, Demoso, Hpruso, Pasaung, Bawlakhe, and Pekon (ISP Myanmar, April 2023; Karenni Civil Society Network (KCSN), June 2021).

Pekon Township, situated in proximity to Karenni State, experienced a substantial escalation of armed violence following the SAC's imposition of martial law in February 2023 across Demawso, Hpruso, Shadaw, and Bawlakhe (Order No. 6/2023), which amplified offensive operations in the region (ISP Myanmar, April 2023). SAC forces have employed airstrikes, artillery shelling, and direct assaults targeting both resistance factions and civilian populations (Reuters, 2021). The violence has displaced thousands of residents, demolishing schools, homes, and religious buildings (Karenni Civil Society Network (KCSN), 2022; Progressive Karenni People Force (PKPF), 2023). The resistance-led 1111 Operation, initiated on 11 November 2023, further escalated hostilities, with SAC airstrikes displacing an additional 768 individuals in November alone (UNHCR, 2023; The Irrawaddy, 2024). Many IDPs remain within Pekon Township, seeking refuge in camps, villages, or monasteries, while others flee to nearby townships like Nyaung Shwe and Taunggyi (Center

for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), 20 June 2023). The displaced population has dispersed across various locations in Southern Shan State.

Table 1: Displaced Population from Pekon Township in Southern Shan State

Location	Number of IDPs	Accommodation Type	Support Source
Nyaung Shwe	-	Monastery	Abbot's support
Pinlaung	132	Nam Ho Monastery	-
Pinlaung	134	What San Tay Monastery	-
Taunggyi	35	Kan Gyi Orphanage	Local organizations
Hsihseng	-	Orphanages & monasteries	Local organisations
Pekon	3,000+	Various camps and villages	camps & villages
Pekon	488	Salung (1 & 2) camp	-
Pekon	239	LaEi Church camp	-
Pekon	338	Hle Taw (1) camp	-
Pekon	392	Loi Nam Pha	-
Pekon	76	Bei Thu Htet village camp	-
Pekon	173	Yaung Chi Oo camp	-
Pekon	226	Kyun Taw village	-
Pekon	3,000+	Phar Hlaing War Ri Khu village	-
Pekon	31	An Po village	-
Pekon	143	Yay Aye Kwin village	-
Pekon	214	Hla Tein village	-
Pekon	93	Kaw Yan village	-

Sources: Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)¹, 20 June 2023.

The armed conflicts and violence have ravaged infrastructure, livelihoods, and food security. Education has been particularly hard hit. The ongoing instability in Pekon Township has led to the closure of state-run schools. There were 216 schools, including state, monastic, and private schools in Pekon Township. The following table illustrates the distribution of schools, teachers, and students in the 2018-2019 academic year.

Table 2: Schools in Pekon Township (2018-2019)

¹ The Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) is a consultancy specializing in political risk and development. It provides assistance in designing and executing humanitarian and development initiatives in challenging and conflict-affected settings.

No.	Category	Schools	Teachers	Students
1.	Upper Secondary	7	228	6949
2.	Upper Secondary (Branch)	5	137	3708
3.	Lower Secondary	10	109	3007
4.	Primary	169	881	12815
5.	Preschool	20	29	479
6.	Monastic	3	16	320
7.	Private	2	27	250

Sources: General Administration Department, Pekon, 2018

State schools have not resumed in specific areas with intensified conflicts. Resistance groups within Pekon Township oppose the State Administration Council's (SAC) education system and prohibit the reopening of schools under their control. Only three state schools managed to open in June 2023, but they face disruptions due to attacks and escalating conflicts. For instance, No.1 Basic Education High School, which reopened on 1 June 2023, was bombed two days later, destroying the school building, measuring 210 feet in length, 30 feet in width, and 22 feet in height (Eleven Media Group, 5 June 2023). Following the attack, the No.1 Basic Education High School was closed for a week. Upon reopening, attendance decreased due to lingering fear, which took almost a month to normalise. Nevertheless, the said school, including two primary schools, has been closed again due to the escalation and persistence of the conflicts since November 2023.

Literature Review

Conflicts have detrimental effects on education through direct violence and cascading indirect effects, compromising access and safety. Attacks on schools using artillery, airstrikes, or arson endanger students and educators, often leading to closures, while displacement, child soldier recruitment, and mental health deterioration further impede learning (Jones et al., 2022; Baird et al., 2021; Shields & Smyth, 2020). The core challenge faced by schools in conflict settings is the constant threat of violence. Schools are vulnerable to attacks such as artillery shelling and airstrikes, which not only pose a risk to the physical safety of students and teachers but may also lead to the destruction of school infrastructure. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2024) documented 245 school attacks in 2022-2023 involving explosives and airstrikes, deepening closures amid pervasive instability in Myanmar. The attacks devastate physical infrastructure and undermine the

educational ecosystem, exposing schools' strategic vulnerability in conflict zones (Burde et al., 2017).

In conflict settings, education frequently yields survival imperatives despite its status as a fundamental right (Khan & Bhuian, 2019). International frameworks mandate that states ensure free, compulsory primary education and access to secondary and higher levels² in all circumstances, even during civil unrest, war, and emergencies (Bush, 2000). However, protracted conflicts often undermine this obligation, disrupting educational access for millions and relegating it behind immediate survival needs (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). In such contexts, severe human rights violations exacerbate the neglect of education, rendering its protection a low priority amid pervasive instability (Khan & Bhuian, 2019). Nevertheless, communities and families step in to provide emergency education where state systems falter (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

People displaced by war accord high priority to restoring education, seeing education as necessary for their children's and society's future (Sinclair, 2001). As observed in Tajikistan's civil war, parents emerge as pivotal agents, employing strategies like relocation or alternative schooling to maintain continuity (Shemyakina, 2011). Winthrop and Kirk (2008) highlight parental commitment as a key driver of resilience, although fear of violence and resource scarcity can constrain its efficacy (Kadir et al., 2019).

Existing literature predominately examines conflict's effects on displacement (South, 2006), education (Khan & Bhuian, 2019), and resilience (Sinclair, 2001), yet the agency of parents within Myanmar's post-2021 coup context remains insufficiently explored. Luyi No (2024) elucidates teacher adaptations and community initiatives in Pekon Township but provides limited analysis of how parents transition from state-administered education to alternative provisions, their underlying motivations, or the impediments posed by political instability. This study addresses this lacuna by exploring parental strategies, rationales, and challenges in Pekon Township, thereby enhancing the understanding of educational resilience in conflict-affected environments.

² Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); Article 10 of the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); Articles 5 and 7 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); Articles 12 (4), 30, 43, 45 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW); Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilising primary and secondary sources to examine how conflict-affected populations in Pekon Township navigate access to education. This study focuses on basic education, which is divided into primary, secondary, and high school education. Primary education is compulsory and consists of five years. Secondary education is divided into middle school, covering Grades 6 to 9, and high school, covering Grades 10 and 12. The country had 47,363 basic education schools in 2015-2016 (approximately 9.26 million students). In addition to state schools, private, community, and other schools also provide education in the country (Yamada and Matsushima, 2020). Myanmar has state and non-state schools with sixteen different types. State schools include primary school, branch primary school, post-primary school, middle school, branch middle school, high school, and branch high school. Non-state schools include private schools, monastic schools, other schools, individual learning homes with a teacher guide, NGO-run schools, community schools, religious schools, and non-state/ethnic schools. The majority go to state schools in the country. In 2023, approximately 92 per cent of students are expected to attend state schools, with the remaining 8 per cent attending non-state schools (World Bank, 2023). The study encompasses the types of schools providing basic education in Pekon Township.

Data were collected in two forms. Firstly, the researcher reviewed secondary sources, including reports, articles, and online databases. This analysis explores the broader political context of educational disruption in Pekon Township.

Secondly, the study used semi-structured interviews. The researchers interviewed 20 different groups of people in Pekon Township in 2023. Given the ongoing conflicts in several areas of the region, interviews were primarily conducted with participants in areas with fewer clashes, utilising both online and offline platforms. The study applied a purposive sampling method, selecting participants for diversity in geographic location, displacement status, and educational experiences (e.g., state, monastic, community, and homeschooling contexts), with educators, parents, and education providers serving as participants. The interviews explored individuals' perspectives, experiences, challenges, and roles in navigating and providing education for children during periods of political turmoil.

The analysis utilised narrative and interpretive methods: narratives captured participants' lived experiences and the nuances of their stories (Eastmond, 2007), while interpretation situated findings within Pekon's socio-political context. Limitations include the

small sample size and restricted access to conflict zones, though triangulation with secondary sources helps mitigate potential biases from self-reported data.

Research Ethics Protocol

The study obtained written and verbal consent before conducting the interviews. The study did not use identical participant information in written and recorded interviews and reports. Rules regarding confidentiality and anonymity were strictly adhered to throughout this study and communicated to all participants.

Conceptual framework

This study adopts Hassoun's navigational framework (2023), which positions internally displaced persons (IDPs) as independent decision-makers driven by aspirations beyond mere survival (Hassoun, 2023). The framework conceptualises navigation as overcoming barriers, pursuing goals, and making choices informed by individual contexts and personal beliefs about the purpose and accessibility of education (Sung & Wahl, 2021). Applied to this study, it frames how parents in Pekon Township navigate financial, logistical, and security challenges to secure educational opportunities for their children amidst political turmoil. Through this lens, the study examines the perspectives and experiences of parents affected or displaced by armed conflicts, exploring how they overcome barriers when state-provided education is unavailable and why they prioritise education as a critical goal.

Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup d'état have significantly impacted Myanmar's education system. Following the global closure of schools in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) closed all educational institutions in March 2020. The 2021 coup d'état prolonged the closures of educational institutions (Htut et al., 2022). Hundreds of teachers participated in strikes and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The Myanmar Teacher's Federation (MTF) reported that 19,500 Higher Education staff and 125,900 basic education teachers were suspended from their duties after going on strike and joining the CDM (estimated to be 55% of higher education staff and 31% of basic education teachers, respectively) (Reuters, 2021). Despite the staff shortage, the State Administration Council (SAC) reopened universities and basic education schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the commencement of school enrollment on 26 May, with plans to reopen basic education on 1 June 2022 (Ministry of Education, 29 April 2022). While some cities and regions with fewer conflict impacts were able to reopen state schools, those situated in areas with ongoing armed conflicts remained unable to resume educational activities.

In the conflicted areas, schools become contested spaces where armed groups vie for influence and control. Schools often become targets during armed clashes, instilling fear and insecurity among families and discouraging them from sending their children to school. Many families keep their children at home due to armed violence (The Irrawaddy, 2023). Reports indicate that safety issues, compounded by a general mistrust of government institutions in the post-coup period, have contributed to a detrimental impact on student attendance (Insecurity Insight, 2021; Frontier, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Worse, the ongoing armed clashes forced state schools to shut down in the conflict-ridden areas. In Pekon Township, where armed conflict has persisted, state schools have remained closed since 2020, with a brief reopening from June to November in 2023.

Navigating strategies and agency: Despite the closure of state schools in the Pekon region, parents employ various strategies to ensure continuity in learning: relocating to other safe cities for their children's education, sending them to other cities, and relying on community or monastic schools.

State school: Some parents opt to enrol their children in state schools open in Pekon despite not supporting the State Administration Council (SAC). Three state schools (primary and high schools) reopened in Pekon in June 2023. Despite living in rural areas, some parents send their children to stay with relatives in Pekon so they can attend these state schools. Alternatively, some send their children to Naung Tayar, Pinlaung, Aung Pan, or Taunggyi to live with teachers or acquaintances, where state schools are available. However, some parents, like Participant 2, who are unsupportive of the SAC, choose not to send their children to state schools.

Private schools: Families with slightly higher financial means are increasingly opting to relocate and enrol their children in boarding schools in different cities, thereby ensuring access to formal education. In the study, three parents sent their children to Taunggyi. One parent mentioned that during the heightened conflict, their family had to flee, and upon their return, they sent their daughter to a secure location in another city (Taunggyi). There, she stayed at a Catholic church with support from priests and sisters, receiving education, food, and shelter, albeit for 30000 MMK per month, which is a significant expense for them, but it is more affordable than other options. Despite the financial constraint, the mother continues to cover those expenses and prioritise education, considering it a pathway to a better future for her daughter.

Online learning/homeschooling: A few parents navigate their children's education through online learning. According to Participant 1, "Amid conflict, we sustained our child's

schooling by enrolling them in online schools. We prioritised a consistent internet connection and actively promoted online learning.” However, parents often resort to homeschooling or community education due to frequent interruptions in electricity and internet services, which can significantly impact online education. Some teach their children themselves, while others seek assistance from CDM teachers.

Monastic school: In areas where state schools have yet to reopen, monastic schools³ have a longstanding presence predating the coup and have become the preferred choice. Three monastic schools offer formal education with recognised certificates in the Pekon region. Monastic schools, which had operated before the coup and were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, resumed in 2022 and continued to operate thereafter. Typically, it caters to students in the 5th grade of primary school. Interviews were conducted with a teacher and parents at a monastic school that incorporates government curricula and provides formal education, with government recognition allowing students to acquire officially recognised degrees. The school has experienced a significant increase in its student population, growing from the initial 300 to approximately 330 students in the 2022/23 academic year. The teaching staff comprises 11 teachers who have undergone training in teaching. Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY) also provides a volunteer teacher. Although the government provides some financial assistance to the school, it depends on the support of the local community. Financial support for teachers and textbook purchases relies on collecting 10,000 MMK per month from students. As monastic schools typically offer education up to Grade 5, most enrol their children in community schools, which mainly provide education up to Grade 12.

Community school: In response to the educational vacuum, communities have taken the initiative to provide learning opportunities and emergency education in areas where state schools have not resumed operations. Communities establish makeshift classrooms and employ both formal and non-formal teaching methods. A community leader (also a parent of three children) says,

During the COVID-19 outbreak, schools in our village closed entirely. Since then, we have had to take charge of our children’s education without government assistance. We have established a committee to ensure education is self-sufficient. (P8, November 2023)

³ There are some Christian based schools operating in specific region. As interviews were conducted with parents and educators who are involved in teaching at or sending their children to state, monastic, and community schools, it does not articulate the schools initiated in Christian communities.

As recounted in the interviews, the communities held meetings, formed a school committee, and recruited teachers to provide education where state schools remained closed. Community schools have been operating in parts of the Pekon region since 2022. These community-based schools include schools initiated by the local community, some by Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY)⁴, some initiated by the Kayan National Education Committee (KNEC)⁵, and others affiliated with the National Unity Government (NUG). Several local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), such as Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS), Kayan Women Organisation (KYWO), and SEE-Support Essential Education Group, support these schools by providing stationery supplies and volunteer teachers.

The study interviewed teachers and parents from a community school affiliated with the National Unity Government (NUG). In the 2023 academic year, 350 students and 23 teachers are at the community school. The teaching staff comprises CDM teachers, volunteer teachers from civil society organisations, and village teachers. While NUG had minimal support (stationary) in the previous year (2022), the school received a small amount of support, amounting to 20 million, for student use in 2023. The school also relies on monthly student fees. The primary support for education comes from parents. Local communities also provide financial aid, rice, and oil for teachers' livelihoods. Civil society organisations provide financial assistance, school supplies, and volunteer teachers.

IDP camp-based schools were established after 2021, typically within the IDP camps. This study interviews an IDP camp-based school named Cherry Myae Education Center, founded by a priest and a teacher in 2022/23. The school has a dedicated team of 43 teachers, including volunteer teachers and CDM teachers. There are approximately 1,200 students from grades 1 to 12. The school's distinctive teaching and learning methods draw in numerous students. The school prioritises talent and skills over traditional class structures. Departing from conventional teaching methods, the school relies on textbooks for only 40% of its curriculum and prioritises students' diverse learning styles and interests, such as computer science, music, and the arts, during and outside regular class hours.

As noted by the school's founder, the primary contributors to the school's funding are Child Dream and those residing abroad. The local community supports the school by

⁴ KNGY, established in 2002, focuses on education, literacy, culture, and human rights, specifically supporting mother-tongue-based education for Kayan children. KNGY actively strengthens mother-tongue-based education by training teachers and deploying volunteer teachers to remote areas. Supporting Essential Education Group (SEE) also contributes by providing teaching and learning materials.

⁵ Established on March 3, 2022, KNEC comprises representatives from various local civil society organizations and associations. The committee aims to provide emergency education, enhance educational capacity, and contribute to the development of Myanmar's federal democracy. In line with its objectives, KNEC collaborates with local society to open schools (primary, middle, and high schools) in many villages in the Pekon region.

providing land. Local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), such as Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS), are involved on a smaller scale. The school also relies on collecting money from students to support teachers financially. A portion of this money serves as an honorarium fee for teachers, while the remainder is allocated to reopening the school, purchasing textbooks, and establishing a scholarship fund for the IDP children and those who cannot afford it. The school committee and parents actively contribute financial support and other resources. The school faces constraints in accepting additional students due to security concerns and limited space and resources.

Most rely on monastic, community, and state schools that are open within Pekon Township. Families prefer state-accredited schools, as they offer government-recognised certificates. Some families with the means to do so choose to relocate to safer cities for their children's education or send them to other cities where state schools are available. While some parents are concerned about whether switching schools will impact their child's classes, others know which school they prefer. For some parents, as long as their children can read and write, the specific class they attend is of little importance (Teacher Interview, 5 November 2023). The following is a list of parent interviews detailing the educational pathways they navigate for their children's education.

Table 3: Parental Educational Strategies in Pekon Township Post-2021 Coup

Parent	Displaced Status	Number of Children	School Type	Remarks
P1	Yes (3 locations)	1	Community school / Homeschooling	
P2	Yes (2 locations)	5	English/Computer classes, CDM tuition	One child dropped out due to financial constraints
P3	Yes (1 location)	2	Community School	
P4	Yes (1 location)	2	Private school	Relocated to Taunggyi
P5	Yes (2 locations)	5	Religious school (Taunggyi)	
P6	No	3	State school (Pekon)	Reopened in June 2023
P7	No	2	Community School	
P8	No	3	Monastic school	
P9	No	3	State school (Taunggyi & Nay Pyi Taw)	Children relocated
P10	No	4	State school (Taunggyi)	

Parents demonstrate significant agency by leveraging local, religious, and private educational resources, adapting to challenges, and making informed decisions to prioritise their children's education under varied circumstances.

A Beacon of Hope: The Role of Education in Conflict Settings

Amidst political turmoil, parents prioritise their children's education, employing a spectrum of strategies to restore educational opportunities. Most perceive their children's education as crucial for their future. Despite facing limited access to quality education and the additional obstacle of political instability, one parent dedicates ample time and resources to homeschooling and online classes for their child, with the view to providing better opportunities. He, who has been displaced three times, recounted:

A significant portion of our income goes towards our children's education. We did not have access to quality education in our time, and now, amidst political turmoil, our child's generation faces even more significant obstacles. We believe in providing our child with a better education than we received, so we support their education wholeheartedly. Despite numerous challenges, we remain committed to our children's education and strive to create a conducive learning environment for them, even in challenging circumstances. (P1, October 2023)

Another parent emphasises the transformative power of education, stating:

There is a notable distinction between being uneducated and educated. With education, our children will not be limited to farming like us; they will gain valuable knowledge to navigate their future. This is one of the core reasons I prioritise my children's education. (P8, November 2023)

Parents persevere in providing education, driven by the conviction that it prepares their children for future success. Amidst uncertainty and turmoil, one parent views education as a beacon of hope, instilling essential skills and values in guiding children towards a brighter future, articulating:

Education is a beacon of hope in times of uncertainty and turmoil, equipping our children with the essential skills they need for the future, regardless of the circumstances. Education nurtures academic abilities and instils values of resilience and civility, guiding our children toward a brighter tomorrow. (P4, October 2023)

These testimonies showcase parents' agency and unwavering commitment to securing educational opportunities for their children in the face of adversity. Parents not only navigate a complex political landscape but also invest resources to ensure their children receive a better education than they did. Despite facing numerous obstacles, they view education as a transformative tool that can provide their children with a brighter future. Their dedication underscores the role of education in fostering resilience and hope in the most challenging circumstances. While most prioritise their children's education, some struggle to navigate the challenges of providing it amidst frequent clashes and security threats.

Challenges to education in Pekon Township

As conflicts often intensify, various challenges arise for the education sector. The frequent clashes and security threats, such as bombings, air strikes, and artillery shelling, prolong the closure of state schools, which have detrimental effects on children's education. For instance, due to the prolonged closure of schools and the ongoing instabilities, some high school children drop out, opt for early marriage, seek employment abroad, or even participate in armed resistance. Moreover, the physical and psychological impact of armed conflict, including artillery shelling and ongoing instability, adversely affects children's well-being. Parents in the study are deeply concerned about the safety of their children amidst frequent clashes and the looming threat of heavy weaponry and airstrikes. For instance, a parent noted:

I try to stay in safe places to protect the child from mental harm during the frequent sounds of gunshots. Despite the absence of active clashes, the threat of heavy weapons and airstrikes looms and perpetuates a sense of insecurity. This continuous state of uncertainty leads to persistent mental anxiety among both children and adults. Unfortunately, there is no place safe in our region now. (P1, November 2023)

Such articulation conveys the fear and stress experienced due to the ongoing conflict. Security concerns emerge as a paramount concern directly or indirectly affecting children's

education. The opening and closing of schools are contingent upon the prevailing conflict conditions. When conflicts escalate, schools are forced to close. While community schools grapple with the looming threat of artillery shelling and airstrikes, state schools face potential attacks. As discussed earlier, the No.1 Basic Education High School (state school) in Pekon Township endured a violent assault just two days after reopening on June 1, 2023. Such an attack compels the school to shut down for a few days, disrupting the regular school routine. A teacher at the state school in Pekon recounted that security issues compelled schools to reduce daily hours, typically from 9 AM to 3:30 PM, to a shortened schedule ending at 12 or 2 PM.

Similarly, community and monastic schools grapple with the constant threat of artillery shelling and airstrikes. The precarious situation often forces monastic and community schools to shut down temporarily when conflicts escalate nearby. A parent of three children who sent his children to monastic school recounted:

In our village, there has not been any conflict nearby, but we have experienced four instances of artillery shelling. Whenever aeroplanes and heavy weapons are spotted, we temporarily close schools as a precautionary measure. (P8, November 2023)

Another parent of two children, who sent his children to community school, said:

The primary obstacles to children's education stem from the closure of community schools, often resulting from security concerns. About 70% of the time, it is considered safe when there is no conflict. However, if a conflict occurs within 10 miles, aeroplanes often come. Consequently, classes for children are limited to mornings only in July due to these circumstances. (P3, 8 October 2023)

The testimonies of village leaders and teachers also provide insights into the daily struggles faced by community schools in conflict zones. The head of the village articulated:

The school remains closed due to the fighting in our region. It is unpredictable when schools will resume. Still, we will continue to run schools and provide education if everything remains calm. However, if

things are not peaceful in our region, we must halt. Security is our biggest challenge.

A teacher teaching at the monastic school recounted:

Our main challenge is heavy weapons. If the fighting continues and we hear the sounds of heavy weapons or aircraft, we have prepared a place for the children to hide under the monastery next to the school. We have constructed sturdy shelters near the monastery, adjacent to the school building. Children are called to quickly run and shelter under the temple when the alarm bell rings.

The articulations highlight how security challenges in conflict zones disrupt educational routines. Due to threats such as airstrikes and bombings, student attendance has noticeably declined. In a community school, despite expanding to include grade 12, there has been a significant decrease in student numbers. Whereas there were approximately 600 to 700 students in the 2022 academic year, the 2023 academic year saw only about 350 students with 23 to 24 teachers, reflecting the scourge of security concerns.

The security concerns make parents hesitant to send their children to school. A parent (P2) emphasised the unpredictability and peril associated with incidents such as mines on roads and weapons being thrown, which endanger the lives of children on their way to school. Consequently, safety takes precedence over risking lives when attending school. Similarly, another parent (P1) opted for homeschooling due to concerns about airstrikes and bombings. These testimonies illustrate the complex interplay between security concerns, parental decision-making, and their children's education in conflict-affected regions.

In addition to security concerns, economic constraints also present a significant barrier to children's education. High commodity prices and limited job opportunities in Pekon Township make it challenging for families to afford school fees and other educational expenses. While some organisations offer partial assistance to community schools, the burden of children's education still largely falls on parents. School operations rely on support from the state, monastic institutions, or the community itself, further exacerbating the financial strain on families. Consequently, many struggle to provide their children with an education.

A parent of two children expressed their concerns, "Paying the school fees of 4000 MMK per month is a significant challenge for families, especially with the rising cost of living. If the crisis continues, more families will find it increasingly difficult. While some

parents work tirelessly to ensure their children's education, others are simply unable to afford it. We had approximately 350 students this year but anticipate even fewer next year due to the high costs. One potential solution could be reducing the monthly school fees and providing free books to attract more students.”

Another parent (P5) shared, “We cannot afford the fees despite the desire to support our children's education and have them attend school. Meanwhile, a parent (P2) with five children endeavours to support their two high school students with computer and English lessons, incurring a monthly cost of approximately 100,000 MMK for the siblings. The two youngest children require an allowance of 30,000 MMK per month, totalling 60,000 MMK for both of them. Unfortunately, the middle child is not enrolled in school due to financial constraints. For some parents, education takes a backseat to survival. As one parent articulated, “No jobs are available anymore. If someone needs help with farming, I enlist my son, even a 10-year-old who is asked to pretend to be 15, to work in the fields.” These narratives highlight the financial constraints families face in supporting their children's education.

Moreover, displacement compounds these challenges. Families struggle to find secure living spaces, often relocating to different villages multiple times. Participants in the study were relocated 2 to 3 times. Participant 1 relocated to different places three times. He noted, “When we move to new places, we often rely on community-based schools, which often lack resources like stationary. Since we relocate frequently, we mostly resort to homeschooling”. The instability impacts their employment and financial stability, rendering parents unable to afford school fees, which consequently affects their children's access to education. The challenges and disruptions caused by conflicts highlight the difficulties faced by families in Pekon Township.

Discussion and Implications

The findings underscore the agency of parents in Pekon Township. In the absence of state-provided education, parents have adopted diverse strategies to ensure their children's learning continues, including enrollment in monastic schools, community-based schools, and educational programs within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. These choices reflect a complex interplay of factors, including safety, financial capacity, displacement status, and the availability of options. For instance, some parents prioritise schools offering recognised formal education and relocate accordingly, while others opt for community schools due to shared values or logistical constraints. These decisions demonstrate adaptability and agency,

consistent with Hassoun's (2023) navigational framework, which views displaced individuals as active decision-makers striving for aspirations beyond mere survival. In this context, education becomes both a necessity and a symbol of hope and investment in the future.

However, this agency coexists with pronounced disparities in access, reflecting more profound structural inequities in conflict settings. The inequalities in accessing education stem from multiple factors. Families in remote or high-conflict areas face greater barriers due to school closures, destruction, or safety concerns. Displacement further widens the gap, as frequent relocations disrupt children's education and limit access to stable schooling. Economic constraints exacerbate this inequality: children from wealthier families can often secure private or state-accredited education in urban areas like Taunggyi, while those from low-income or displaced households depend on community-led initiatives. Although vital, these community schools often face limitations, including insufficient funding, a lack of trained educators, and inadequate infrastructure.

To narrow this gap and make community-led initiatives more reliable, practical policies must adopt a multifaceted approach. Ensuring safe learning environments is paramount. Armed clashes, artillery shelling, and airstrikes not only interrupt education but also instil fear among students and teachers. Schools must be protected as safe zones, as advocated in the Safe Schools Declaration (GCPEA, 2015), and should be equipped with makeshift shelters and emergency preparedness training. Financial barriers should be alleviated through school fee waivers, provision of essential supplies (e.g., textbooks, uniforms, stationery), and livelihood programs to ease economic strain. Community schools, serving critical educational lifelines when state schools are inaccessible, must be strengthened through investment in operational costs, teacher salaries, professional development, and infrastructure improvements, including mobile classrooms for IDP camps. Crucially, formal recognition and accreditation of these schools will enable students to transition into the national education system when conditions stabilise.

These measures address safety, economic, and structural obstacles while empowering local efforts. A coordinated response among policymakers, NGOs, and community actors is essential to uphold the right to education for all children in Pekon Township. By doing so, education can remain a source of resilience and opportunity, even in the most challenging circumstances.

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