

# Religious Fundamentalism in Myanmar

## Post-Coup Repression of Gender Rights



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Asia Centre

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**Asia Centre**

65/168, Chamnan Phenjati Business Center Building,  
20th Floor, Rama 9 Road,  
Huai Kwang, Huai Kwang,  
Bangkok, 10310, Thailand

[contact@asiacentre.org](mailto:contact@asiacentre.org)

# PREFACE

This report forms part of a five-report series examining the impact of religious fundamentalism on gender rights and civic space in Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, alongside a regional overview report.

The reports are produced under the project, *Civic Space & Religious Fundamentalism in South & Southeast Asia: Defending Women's Rights, Feminist & LGBTQI+ Movements & Organisations*, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Insights from this report series contribute to the project's capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening the resilience of organisations and movements advocating for the rights of women and gender and sexual minorities (WGSMS).

As baseline studies, the reports analyse how religious fundamentalist actors weaponise narratives of morality, religion and social legitimacy to oppose advocacy for WGSMS rights. Each report also provides targeted recommendations for key stakeholders, including governments, the international community, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local civil society organisations.

The Asia-Pacific region is characterised by significant religious diversity. However, in each of the four countries examined under this project, historical and contemporary developments have contributed to the rise of religious fundamentalism, whereby religious doctrines are interpreted and mobilised to advance political and ideological dominance.

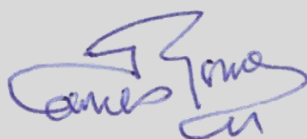
Across the region, this trend has enabled fundamentalist actors to exert greater influence over public life while undermining democratic values, pluralism and human rights. One consequence of this growing influence has been repeated waves of backlash against individuals and groups perceived to "deviate" from dominant religious norms. WGSMS rights advocates and organisations have been particularly targeted.

While religious fundamentalism and WGSMS rights have often been studied separately, the specific vulnerabilities faced by WGSMS rights defenders in the context of religious extremism remain under-researched. The impact of religious fundamentalism on WGSMS rights advocacy is especially concerning, given the persistence of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms throughout the region.

This report series seeks to address this gap. The four country baseline studies and the regional overview identify the methods used by anti-rights actors engaged in religiously motivated backlash, including harassment, intimidation and restrictive measures. The studies also assess the effectiveness of protection strategies employed by WGSMS rights organisations and movements. In doing so, the series contributes to a deeper understanding of how advocacy strategies can better respond to the persistent threats posed by religious fundamentalism.

Asia Centre hopes this report series will serve as a valuable resource for civil society organisations, governments, INGOs, the United Nations and other stakeholders working to safeguard civic space, strengthen resilience and advance gender and sexual rights in South and Southeast Asia.

Sincerely,



**Dr James Gomez**  
Regional Director  
Asia Centre

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1 February 2021 military coup d'état marked a major rupture in Myanmar's democratic trajectory, accelerating the collapse of civic space and entrenching authoritarian and militarised control. Civil society organisations (CSOs), including defenders of women's, gender and sexual minority (WGSM) rights, have since faced escalating repression, surveillance and criminalisation.

Within this landscape, Buddhist fundamentalism has re-emerged as a central ideological force. Rooted in decades of Burmanisation and Buddhisation policies, it has increasingly been mobilised post-coup to amplify state violence, legitimise discrimination and institutionalise a centralised and patriarchal Buddhist-Bamar national identity as a mechanism of political control. In this context, WGSM rights advocacy is increasingly portrayed as a threat to "traditional" Buddhist morality, national culture and social stability.

While existing studies have examined Myanmar's post-coup humanitarian and democratic crises, the intersection between military authoritarianism, Buddhist fundamentalism and civic repression, particularly against WGSM rights advocates, remains underexplored. This report addresses this analytical gap by examining how military-aligned Buddhist fundamentalist backlash contributes to the suppression of civic space in post-coup Myanmar, with a specific focus on its impacts on WGSM rights defenders.

The report makes three main contributions. First, it examines how Buddhist fundamentalist actors, often operating in alignment with military structures, contribute to the repression of WGSM rights advocacy through the following means:

- Legally, the junta weaponises both existing and newly introduced laws to criminalise advocacy, expand surveillance and suppress dissent. Many of these laws are reinforced through moral narratives rooted in fundamentalist interpretations of Buddhism that frame gender and sexual diversity as threats to religion and national identity.
- Digitally, online spaces have become key sites of repression. Pro-military and Buddhist fundamentalist actors use social media and messaging platforms to spread hate speech, incite violence and conduct doxxing campaigns against WGSM activists; while the military structure has imposed Artificial Intelligence-enabled surveillance mechanisms. Such abuse is used not only to intimidate defenders but also to delegitimise them publicly and justify further violence.
- Physically, a range of actors – from the security apparatus to non-state militias and civilian mobs – often encouraged or legitimised by fundamentalist monks, have carried out targeted assaults, arbitrary arrests, intimidation and sexualised violence against WGSM rights defenders. These attacks are frequently framed as acts defending religion, morality and social order.

Second, the report maps the adaptive strategies developed by WGSM organisations, networks and informal collectives to sustain their work under increasingly hostile conditions.

- Security measures, both physical and digital safety practices, include encrypted communication, emergency relocation mechanisms, safe houses, early-warning systems and security training. While these practices improve short-term survival, they remain fragmented, reactive and under-resourced relative to the scale of military and religious fundamentalist backlash.
- Support networks within the civil society sector continue to provide vital coordination, resource-sharing, advocacy and emergency support for WGSM defenders. However, these networks remain weakened by internal fragmentation, uneven inclusion of GSM actors and the presence of state-aligned women's organisations that undermine trust and cohesion.

- International aid and support provide important protection, visibility and humanitarian support. Nevertheless, shifting donor priorities toward emergency relief, declining democracy and rights-based funding, and donor modalities that favour formally registered or urban-based organisations have reduced long-term support for grassroots actors.
- The National Unity Government (NUG) provides WGSM organisations with symbolic legitimacy and limited operational support. However, its lack of territorial control, unstable funding base, limited enforcement capacity and inability to adequately support exiled activists constrain its role as a meaningful protection mechanism.
- Long-term advocacy efforts remain active through alternative governance experiments in resistance-controlled areas, exiled activism and growing recognition of WGSM leadership within pro-democracy spaces. Yet these efforts are heavily constrained by militarisation, institutional collapse, displacement, economic precarity and shrinking educational and civic pathways.

Third, advances recommendations for multiple stakeholders.

- United Nations human rights mechanisms should strengthen monitoring, coordination and protection responses by integrating analysis of Buddhist fundamentalism, gendered repression and shrinking civic space into Myanmar-related human rights frameworks while expanding practical support for at-risk WGSM defenders.
- The NUG should institutionalise protections for WGSM rights defenders within future governance and justice frameworks; and at present, improve operational protection and funding mechanisms.
- International aid organisations should restore long-term investment in democracy and civic resilience, simplify restrictive funding modalities and ensure that aid delivery does not reproduce existing inequalities or exclusionary power structures affecting WGSM organisations.
- International non-governmental organisations should provide sustained legal, psychosocial and protection support for WGSM defenders, strengthen monitoring of religiously motivated backlash and mainstream intersectional approaches across all Myanmar programming and advocacy.
- WGSM rights advocates and organisations should strengthen collective protection systems, documentation and solidarity networks, while investing in leadership development, institutional resilience and counter-narratives that challenge Buddhist fundamentalist interpretations used to justify repression.

Together, these measures envision a civic space that is rebuilt on the principles of pluralism and protection for all defenders at the intersections of gender, faith and human rights.

Understanding this nexus between Buddhist fundamentalism, civic repression and gendered violence is essential to grasp the complex realities shaping Myanmar's post-coup landscape. Strengthening the analytical and operational capacity of rights groups – particularly those advocating for WGSM – is therefore critical. Only by building such capacity can local actors anticipate and counter religiously motivated backlash, sustain inclusive advocacy under repression and lay the groundwork for a democratic and pluralistic future in Myanmar.

# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>CDM</b>	Civil Disobedience Movement
<b>CRPH</b>	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>EAO</b>	Ethnic Armed Organisation
<b>ERO</b>	Ethnic Revolutionary Organisation
<b>FoRB</b>	Freedom of Religion or Belief
<b>GSM</b>	Gender and Sexual Minority
<b>HRC</b>	Human Rights Council (United Nations)
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-governmental Organisation
<b>KII</b>	Key Informant Interview
<b>NLD</b>	National League for Democracy
<b>NUG</b>	National Unity Government
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>PDF</b>	People's Defence Force
<b>SAC</b>	State Administration Council
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>USDP</b>	Union Solidarity and Development Party
<b>WGSM</b>	Women, Gender and Sexual Minority

# 1. Introduction

This report identifies the patterns of backlash from Buddhist fundamentalist, anti-rights movements in Myanmar and their impacts on activists, movements and organisations advocating for women, gender and sexual minority (WGSM) rights.<sup>1</sup> Following the 2021 military coup d'état in Myanmar, Buddhist fundamentalism is feeding the logic behind the tools of repression, which are being deployed against individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs) advancing WGSM rights. The intersection between the coup, religious fundamentalism and gender rights, which has been previously under-examined, is what this report seeks to evaluate. This Chapter traces the evolution of military control, analyses the corresponding rise of Buddhist fundamentalism and determines how both these developments impact civic space and gender rights.



**“Religious Fundamentalism”** refers to rigid, closed and anti-rights interpretations of religious doctrines. Religious fundamentalists seek to extend a particular interpretation of faith into governance, social norms and public life, often supporting authoritarian approaches and limiting democratic pluralism.



**“Backlash”** refers to the use of violence – direct, structural, legal or extra-legal – by religious fundamentalist individuals, groups or institutions to punish or suppress those perceived as threatening or undermining the authority, beliefs or social order of fundamentalist movements. These may include individuals or communities both within the religion – different sects or dissenting believers – and outside the religion. Human rights defenders and advocates are also targets of backlash.



**“Women, Gender and Sexual Minorities (WGSMs)”** is a collective term used in this report to refer to women and individuals of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, including those who do not identify with traditional LGBTQI+ labels or those who choose not to label their sexual or gender identity at all (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). The term **GSM** is also used in this report to exclusively refer to gender and sexual minorities whose shared discriminatory experiences and advocacy strategies may be different from women.

<sup>1</sup> This report adopts the term “WGSM rights advocates” to refer to this group.

## 1.1. Methodology

The research for this report consisted of three phases. First, desk research was conducted between March and September 2025 to map existing knowledge on how religion-based violence and harassment affect WGSM rights advocates. This phase helped refine the study's scope and identify knowledge gaps. It drew on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including international and national legal frameworks, government publications, reports by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), CSOs and the media. Special attention was given to reviewing post-coup reports published by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Second, during the field research phase, the research team conducted 12 online key-informant interviews (KIIs) between June 2025 and February 2026 to address the identified knowledge gaps (see Annex I for respondent profiles). Researchers also conducted two field research trips to Chiang Mai, Thailand (2 September 2025 and 30 January 2026) to consult directly with representatives from WGSM-rights organisations, to discuss preliminary findings and collect further insights into the advocacy strategies of WGSM communities.

A series of capacity-building activities were subsequently conducted in Chiang Mai, Thailand (26 February 2026 and 20 March 2026) and Yangon, Myanmar (19 May 2026) with WGSM rights advocates and other relevant actors, including Freedom of Religion or Belief advocates. During this period, participants further validated the report's findings and contributed additional perspectives, enriching the analysis and helping to shape recommendations.

Third, the Asia Centre team internally reviewed the draft before sharing it with IDRC colleagues for feedback. Following this review process, the report was finalised for publication.

## 1.2. Background

This section provides contextual grounding for Myanmar's post-coup repression and its implications for WGSMs by examining three interrelated developments. First, it outlines key political developments to trace the evolution and consolidation of military control. Second, it examines the historical roots of Buddhist fundamentalism and its trajectories, with particular attention to its alignment with the military. Third, it analyses the post-2021 coup environment, to show significant contractions of civic space, with specific consequences for civil society more broadly and for gender rights advocacy in particular.

### 1.2.1. Evolution of Military Control

Myanmar has experienced long stretches of military rule interrupted by brief quasi-civilian governments. The country entered a prolonged period of military control in 1962 under the Burma Socialist Programme Party ([Seekins, 2007](#)), marked by severe repression, international isolation and economic decline ([Than, 2001](#)).

A mass uprising in 1988 (8888 Uprising) led the way for the decline of the Burma Socialist Programme Party's grip on power and the 1990 general elections. However, refusing to recognise its outcomes, which produced a decisive victory for the opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD) ([Bunte, 2011](#)), the military seized power. This initiated a ten-year conflict involving the military on the one side and, on the other, the NLD and various ethnic armed and non-armed groups ([Ibid.](#)).

In 2003, the junta announced a seven-step "Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy" that promised to transfer power to an elected government again, though the process was widely viewed as a mechanism

to secure military control (*ibid.*). Key developments following this period included: a massacre of NLD-aligned individuals in 2003; the renewed detention of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi (*Human Rights Watch, 2005*); the crackdown of the 2007 Saffron Revolution; and the deeply flawed referendum for a draft Constitution, which led to its promulgation in 2008 (*Shen & Chan, 2010*). The Constitution (2008) is still in use and guarantees the Tatmadaw's (Myanmar Armed Forces) control over the parliament and key executive functions.

As part of the roadmap, the 2010 general election was held to mark a controlled transition to a nominally civilian government under President Thein Sein (*Kudo, 2012*). The election was boycotted by the NLD and widely criticised as fraudulent (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, under the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)-led government, a gradual reform process followed between 2011 and 2015 due to internal and external pressure (*ibid.*).

The 2015 general election marked a watershed moment, with the NLD securing a decisive victory and forming a civilian-led government (*ibid.*). However, the election was not fully free or fair. Key issues included criticism of the Union Election Commission for a lack of independence and transparency (*Tha, 2014*), as well as the widespread disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities and internally displaced persons in conflict-affected regions (*Win & Siriwato, 2021*). Moreover, the democratic transition was structurally limited. The military retained significant constitutional power through its guaranteed 25% of parliamentary seats (*ibid.*).

Between 2015 and 2020, the NLD government operated within these structural constraints. During this period, constitutional reform stalled, military influence over security affairs persisted, and serious human rights concerns remained inadequately addressed (*Crouch, 2021*). This incomplete and constrained transition was abruptly reversed on 1 February 2021, when the Tatmadaw overthrew the democratically elected NLD and its government, alleging electoral fraud (*Milko, 2021*).

The military's direct return to power in 2021 immediately reversed Myanmar's limited progress toward democracy made over the previous decade. Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, swiftly established the State Administration Council (SAC) junta regime and re-consolidated the military's grip on the nation (*Myanmar Times, 2021*). Throughout the post-coup period, the SAC issued multiple election timelines that were never implemented (*Arnold, 2022; Myint, 2023*). It routinely prolonged the State of Emergency under the pretext of maintaining national stability, and leveraged several crises – including the COVID-19 pandemic and its clashes involving the National Unity Government, which had established itself in exile as the sole legitimate government of Myanmar, as well as entities and movements aligned with it including Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)<sup>2</sup>, Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), People's Defence Forces (PDF) and certain Ethnic Armed/Resistance Organisations (EAOs/EROs) – to justify the continuation of military rule (*Selth, 2021; Loong, 2022*). These strategies enabled the junta to consolidate power while undermining democratic processes. Asia Centre has noted this in its article “Dismantling Myanmar's Election Integrity: A Post-Coup Review” (*Gathia, 2025*), in Issue 40 of the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, “Eroding Electoral Integrity: Reasons for Democratic Backsliding in Southeast Asia” (*Gomez, 2025*).

During this time, the junta systematically dismantled the conditions necessary for credible electoral competition: major opposition parties were banned, deregistered or forced to boycott, while many political leaders and activists remained imprisoned or in hiding (*Maung, 2023; Mizzima, 2025*). Electoral laws were amended to favour military-aligned actors. Compounding these issues, the national census – used to determine voter eligibility and constituency boundaries – was deeply flawed (*Ronnie, 2026*), as widespread fear of surveillance and reprisals led many citizens to avoid participation (*Westra, 2025*), further undermining the election's accuracy and legitimacy. Five years after the coup, elections were

<sup>2</sup> The legislative body.

eventually held between December 2025 and January 2026. The elections were widely characterised as a “sham” due to the lack of clear competition and the unevenly conducted process across the country (Sullivan, 2025), with large swathes of conflict-affected and resistance-controlled areas excluded from voting altogether (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2025).

Having reconfigured the electoral system, the “sham” elections served as a controlled mechanism through which the junta symbolically transitioned from a military back to a quasi-civilian government, with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing “elected” as President (Ratcliffe, 2026). The resulting parliament is dominated by military appointees and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) (Head & Cheetam, 2026). Institutional innovations such as the creation of the Union Consultative Council further entrenched military control, granting it oversight across both civilian and military domains while ensuring that loyalist leadership remains firmly in command of the Tatmadaw (Strangio, 2026; DVB, 2026).

This political backdrop has fostered a re-emergent role for Buddhist fundamentalism that fuels the logic for the continued military rule and crackdowns on civic space, in particular that of WSGM rights advocates, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

## 1.2.2. Buddhist Fundamentalism



“**Buddhist Fundamentalism**”, in the Myanmar context, is shaped by the joint processes of Buddhisation and Burmanisation, which promote the dominance of a singular patriarchal Buddhist-Bamar identity within the country, while marginalising minorities. This ideology aligns with and receives endorsement and support from the country’s military structures – and at times the Sangha order – reinforcing its influence over governance and social order.

The evolution of military control has paralleled the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism, which expanded in influence over time. By the late 2010s, Buddhist fundamentalist, anti-rights groups played a significant role in shaping public discourse and the military’s state policy (Thiha & Nilsen, 2023). This, in turn, fuelled the backlash against WGSM activism, in particular, following the 2021 coup.

Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar has its roots in the 1960s, specifically following the 1962 coup. The military-aligned Burma Socialist Programme Party sought to solidify national identity through policies of Burmanisation and Buddhisation (Bo, 2023). This led to a campaign of ethnic and religious homogenisation designed to forge an ethnically Bamar and religiously Buddhist state. As ethnic identities in Myanmar are often inseparable from religious affiliation, this approach stood in sharp contrast to earlier agreements and political debates<sup>3</sup> concerning the extent to which the newly established country would accommodate ethnic and religious diversity, particularly amid unresolved internal armed conflicts.

Burmanisation is defined as the systematic efforts by Bamar-majority governments and military regimes to erode the cultural, linguistic and political distinctiveness of non-Bamar ethnic minorities (Asia Centre, 2023). It operates as a structural process through which *Bamar*-dominated civilian and military authorities compel ethnic minority communities to relinquish their identities in favour of assimilation

<sup>3</sup> A central reference point in these discussions was the Panglong Agreement (1947), which laid the groundwork for deeper negotiations toward a political system acceptable to Burma’s diverse ethnic nationalities.

into dominant Bamar norms ([Ibid.](#)). Complementing this process, Buddhisation refers to state-driven initiatives to establish Buddhism as the normative national faith. This process uses legal, educational, and administrative mechanisms to pressure or incentivise religious conformity, thereby marginalising non-Buddhist communities and restricting their religious expression ([Husarski, 2017](#)). Together, these policies have institutionalised a centralised Buddhist–Bamar national identity, creating laws and governance structures that privilege the majority population while restricting the civil, political, and religious participation of non-Bamar and non-Buddhist groups ([Asia Centre, 2023](#)). Hence, by making Bamar identity and Buddhism core markers of national belonging, successive regimes normalised the idea that political authority’s primary role is to defend race and religion ([Aung, 2024](#)).

A significant shift emerged in the mid-to-late 2000s with the rise of influential Buddhist fundamentalist figures who began to shape national politics more directly. Prior to this period, fundamentalist interpretations of Buddhism had largely been confined to the military regime and certain sects within the Sangha ([Kyaw, 2024](#)). The broader monk community, by contrast, did not actively promote such views openly ([Wai & Frydenlund, 2024](#)). Instead, the Sangha was involved in and participated in pro-democracy movements, including the 1988 Uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution (named for the saffron robes worn by demonstrating monks), advocating for democratic reform and a more inclusive, pluralistic vision of Myanmar ([Clapp, 2007](#); [International Crisis Group, 2023](#)).

This landscape began to change in the early 2010s. The transition to a quasi-civilian government under NLD, the breakdown of peace processes in 2012, prompting renewed armed conflict and hostilities, and the rapid digitalisation of the media sector created fertile conditions for the expansion of religious fundamentalist networks, which opposed the NLD government and supported the military. Prominent among these were the 969 Movement and its organisational arm, the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (Ma Ba Tha) ([Perera, 2015](#)), alongside influential figures such as Ashin Wirathu and Sitagu Sayadaw ([Gunasingham, 2021](#); [Fuller, 2017](#)). Between 2012 and the 2021 coup, these actors played a central role in disseminating hate speech, inciting mob violence, and coordinating targeted campaigns against women, GSMs and their defenders ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#); [Kyaw, 2019](#)). Advocating for the continuation of Buddhisation and Burmanisation, they successfully lobbied for the passage of four “Race and Religion” laws, which significantly curtailed the rights of ethno-religious minorities, particularly women. In parallel, they mobilised against religious minority communities and openly supported the military’s genocidal campaign against the Rohingya ([Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2014](#); [Frydenlund, 2020](#)).

Following the NLD’s electoral victory in 2015, the government initiated a series of crackdowns on these networks ([The Irrawaddy, 2018](#)). Ma Ba Tha was formally outlawed, Wirathu was arrested ([Reuters, 2020](#)), and the movement was officially disbanded. In practice, however, these networks did not disappear; rather, they decentralised and became less visible as a single operation, with individual monks continuing to disseminate sermons and fundamentalist messaging through social media ([Ramakrishna, 2020](#)). By the 2020 general elections, these actors continued to advocate for the military-aligned USDP and the continuation of Burmanisation and Buddhisation policies ([Justice for Myanmar, 2020](#); [Banu & Zhang 2021](#)).

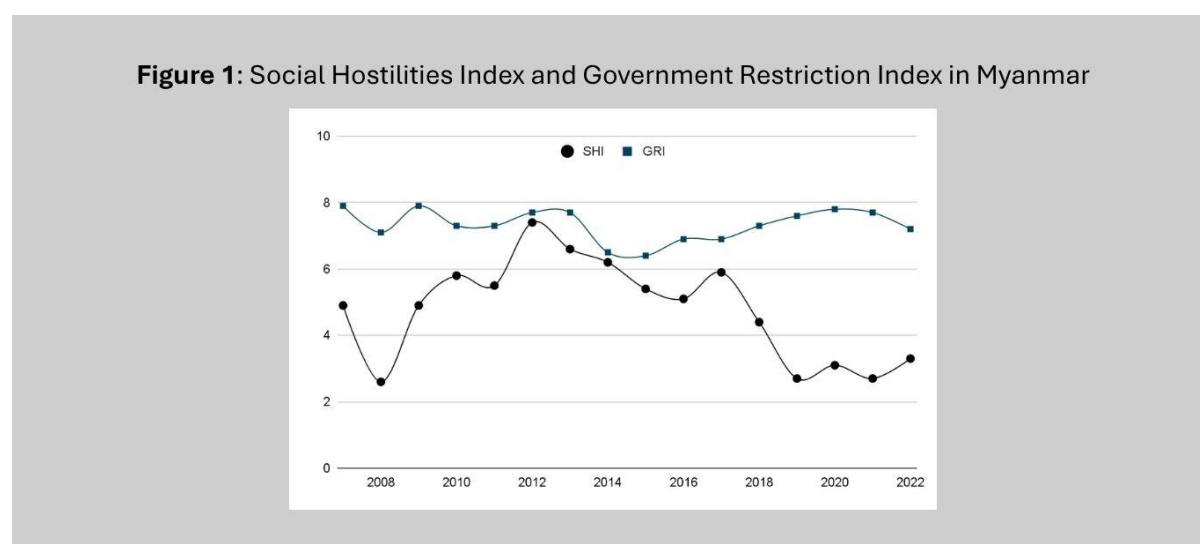
The 2021 coup marked another turning point, enabling the resurgence of Buddhist fundamentalist networks that had previously receded from public view. Buddhist fundamentalist monks previously detained under the NLD government were released, and figures such as Wirathu were rehabilitated and even honoured ([The Irrawaddy, 2022a](#)). The junta has since pursued a strategic alliance with such actors, seeking to consolidate control by embedding its authority within religious-nationalist narratives ([Rejwan, 2025](#)). Central to this strategy is the construction of a perceived “existential threat” to the Buddhist-Bamar identity ([Thiha & Nilsen, 2023](#)), used to justify repression and the rollback of democratic freedoms, including rights for women and GSM communities ([Mizzima, 2026](#)). As detailed

further in Chapter 2, their post-coup role in Myanmar has been to amplify the regime’s repressive actions and justify attacks on WGSN rights advocates by casting them as threats to the nation’s religious and cultural integrity.

Unlike earlier moments of crisis, however, the Sangha did not act as a unified political force against the dissemination of such ideologies. Many monks adopted a position of public neutrality, citing fear of repression or discomfort with the resistance movement’s increasingly secular and armed character ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). At the same time, others openly supported the junta – offering alms, legitimising the military as protectors of Buddhism, and framing the NLD government as morally corrupt and insufficiently Buddhist ([Banu & Zhang 2021](#)). Though this is not to suggest a complete absence of resistance within the monastic community. Some monks have continued to support pro-democracy movements and joined opposition efforts ([Lusan & JC, 2022](#)), even as the post-2021 resistance has been largely driven by youth and women ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#); [Giannini et al., 2022](#)). Nevertheless, their participation has come at significant risk, with reports documenting beatings, arrests and killings of clergymen who had joined mass protests or offered support for the movement ([RFA Burmese, 2022](#); [UCA News, 2021](#)).

The intensification of Buddhist fundamentalism is reflected in global indicators that measure the openness of religious environments. Pew Research Centre (2024)’s Social Hostilities Index and Government Restrictions Index reveal entrenched patterns of both state-sanctioned and societal discrimination. In the absence of a dedicated index on religious fundamentalism, these serve as useful proxies (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Social Hostilities Index and Government Restriction Index in Myanmar



**Source:** [Pew Research Center, 2024](#)

The persistently high scores on the Government Restrictions Index – ranging from 7.0 to 7.8 between the mid-2000s and 2022 – highlight how constraints on religious practice are systemic and institutionalised. In contrast, the Social Hostilities Index reveals periods of volatility, spiking in 2012 during the collapse of the Tatmadaw–Kachin Independence Army ceasefire and again in 2017 amid widespread anti-Rohingya genocide ([The New Humanitarian, nd.](#)). Notably, since the 2021 coup, there has been a renewed uptick, with the index rising to 3.3 in 2022, signalling persistent societal tensions and the continued vulnerability of religious minorities.

Yet, it must be noted that although government restrictions and social hostilities appear to have stagnated or declined under military rule, this masks a transformation in the locus of repression: violence has shifted from mass atrocity against Rohingya communities to broader targeting of civil society actors, including women, religious and gender and sexual minority defenders (which the indicator may not sufficiently analyse). What remains constant is the entrenchment of federal authoritarianism reinforced by Buddhist fundamentalism, which continues to structure exclusion and enable religiously justified backlash against pluralism. Together, these indicators demonstrate how both state and non-state actors sustain religious discrimination, with severe consequences for democratic participation and the safety of women and GSM rights defenders.

### 1.2.3. Shrinking Civic Space

The 2021 military coup and the accompanying Buddhist fundamentalism marked a decisive reversal of the limited democratic and human rights gains achieved during Myanmar’s quasi-civilian period. While pre-coup reforms were uneven and fragile, they nonetheless enabled a partial opening of civic space. This section examines how a combination of the military coup and religious fundamentalism contributed to the shrinking of civic space: 1) the erosion of civil and political rights; and 2) restrictions on gender rights.

#### 1.2.3.1. Civil and Political Rights

The post-coup environment in Myanmar has seen a severe deterioration of civil and political rights. International democracy and human rights indexes show a dramatic decline across multiple indicators between 2020 and 2025.

**Table 1:** Civil and Political Rights Indexes

Indexes	Score (2020)	Score (2025)
Civic Space (CIVICUS)	“Repressed” (CIVICUS, 2025)	“Closed” (CIVICUS, 2025)
Freedom in the World (Freedom House)	30/100 (Freedom House, 2021)	4/100 (Freedom House, 2026)
Freedom on the Net (Freedom House)	31/100 (Freedom House, 2021)	9/100 (Freedom House, 2026)
World Press Freedom (Reporters without Borders)	55.23/100 (Reporters without Borders, 2020)	25.32/100 (Reporters without Borders, 2025)
Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit)	3.04/10 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021)	3.04/10 (2024) (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025)

These indicators reflect the rapid shrinking of civic space across several dimensions, including freedom of expression, assembly, association, political participation, and media independence. The decline has been driven by, among others, violent crackdowns on protesters, increasingly restrictive laws and extra-legal violence and killings.

Peaceful protests in the months following the 2021 military coup were met with brutal force, mass arrests and widespread lethal violence (Lee et al, 2021). Security forces used live ammunition, arbitrary detentions and intimidation tactics to suppress anti-coup demonstrations and the broader CDM (Cheetham, 2021).

The junta introduced extensive legal measures aimed at consolidating authoritarian control. Emergency laws, expanded surveillance powers, internet shutdowns, censorship measures, and broad anti-terrorism provisions were used to criminalise dissent and restrict independent political activity (RFA Burmese, 2023; Burma Human Rights Network, 2021; Strangio, 2025; International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2023; Mizzima, 2025). Opposition groups were designated as unlawful associations, while political participation and civic activism became increasingly constrained. Election engineering, as discussed above, also falls under the expanded restrictions imposed on civil and political rights. Meanwhile, independent media organisations were shut down, journalists detained and reporting critical of the military heavily censored (Reporters Without Borders, 2025; Pyae, 2026). These restrictions significantly undermined media independence and limited access to information.

The military regime expanded wider campaigns of repression (PEN International, 2026), including systematic extra-legal violence against journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens critical of military rule (Htun, 2025). Reports of intimidation, enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings further contributed to the climate of fear.

### 1.2.3.2. Gender Rights

The coup has also reversed modest but important advances in gender equality and protections for women and gender and sexual minorities.

The military rule, in place since 1962, has historically adopted and entrenched patriarchal foundations with authoritarian and chauvinistic values (Mra, 2021). This inseparable link between the military and the perception of male supremacy makes discussions about advancing WGSM rights and their participation highly challenging (Ibid.). Under the military one-party state of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the civil and political rights of all citizens were smothered and women specifically endured violence, including the use of rape as a weapon of war (Tun et al., 2019).<sup>4</sup> During this period, there was no support for women's equality with men, nor was there encouragement for women to become leaders and politicians (Ibid.). The military dismantled independent women's organisations, arrested civil society leaders and replaced independent civil society groups with regime-aligned organisations to curtail civic mobilisation (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, United States Department of State, 2008), thereby entrenching a weakened civic space. Moreover, the society's rigid adherence to a male/female binary has led to substantial discrimination against people of diverse sexual orientations, resulting in heightened insecurity and a complete lack of official social recognition, including exclusion of their gender or sexual identities from national identification cards (Parami University, 2023).

During periods of limited democratic opening, such as 1988–1990 and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, there were modest expansions in civic space and expressions of political mobilisation. However, progress on women's rights remained limited, and there was little to no meaningful advancement in the recognition or protection of GSM rights.

Only with Myanmar's transition to a quasi-civilian regime following the 2015 general elections did civic space open modestly and create new opportunities for advocacy on WGSM rights (International Women's Development Agency, 2016; Ebead & Hirakawa, 2022). Parliamentarians and civil society

<sup>4</sup> These agendas will be explained in Section 1.2.3.

actors pushed for legal reforms, including the tabling of the Prevention of Violence Against Women Bill (2019), which aimed to criminalise domestic violence, sexual assault and marital rape ([The Asia Foundation, 2016](#); [Global Justice Center, 2020](#)).<sup>5</sup>

The period also saw GSM rights advocacy gaining momentum, in part with the increased cooperation with more established women’s rights organisations in the country. This has majorly reduced the stigmatisation of GSM individuals, firstly among the civil society sector, then the wider public. Efforts were seen in challenges ([ILGA Asia, 2021](#)) to discriminatory provisions such as Section 377 of the Penal Code (1861), which criminalises same-sex relations.

Despite these improvements, civic space indicators show that progress on WGSM issues has remained limited. Data from V-Dem (2025) offer insight into the structural barriers to equality, political inclusion and the distribution of power in Myanmar, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 2: Gender Rights Indexes**

Indexes	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023	2024	2025
Exclusion by gender <sup>6</sup>	0.74	0.58	0.53	0.48	0.54	–	–
Gender equality in respect for civil liberties <sup>7</sup>	1.1	1.5	1.6	1.85	2.45	–	–
Power distributed by gender <sup>8</sup>	1.26	1.82	1.93	1.89	1.38	1.38	1.38
Power distributed by sexual orientation <sup>9</sup>	0.27	0.27	0.56	0.61	0.37	0.37	0.37

**Source:** [V-Dem, 2025](#)

Despite some gains resulting from the opening of civic space and the expansion of public advocacy, V-Dem data indicate that gendered and sexuality-based exclusion remain deeply entrenched within Myanmar’s political and civic structures ([Kyi Phyu Oo, 2019](#)). Power and representation continue to be overwhelmingly concentrated in male-dominated, heteronormative institutions, leaving WGSMs with limited influence and insufficient institutional protection ([Sein Latt et al., 2017](#)). The stagnation – and more recently, the decline – of equality indicators underscores how post-coup conditions have not only halted fragile progress but actively reinforced longstanding hierarchies of exclusion.

The environment severely worsened after the 2021 coup, with physical violence spread by the military during mass protests and in detention settings ([Bynum, 2021](#)). The military and security forces have long fostered a climate of impunity for violence against civil society, a pattern that persisted even during the country’s brief quasi-civilian period ([Tun et al., 2019](#)). Post-coup, the junta has either sanctioned or

<sup>5</sup> Note that, due to delays in parliamentary processes, the completion of the Parliament’s term, the subsequent general election and the military coup that followed, the bill was not passed.

<sup>6</sup> Denial of access to services or participation in government spaces based on their identity or belonging to a certain group. The scale is from 0 to 1, from low to high (closer to 1 means more exclusion by gender).

<sup>7</sup> Answers the question, “do women enjoy the same level of civil liberties as men?” Scale from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates women enjoy “much fewer” civil liberties than men and 4 indicates women enjoy “the same level” of civil liberties than men.

<sup>8</sup> Answers the question “is political power distributed according to gender?” The index considers a scale from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates that men have a “near monopoly” of political power and 4 indicates that women and men have “roughly the same” political power.

<sup>9</sup> Answers the question “to what extent is political power distributed according to sexual orientation?” Scale from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates that LGBTs are “entirely excluded” from political power and 4 indicates LGBTs have “somewhat more” political power than heterosexuals.

tacitly permitted police and soldiers to target WGSM rights advocates, both for opposing military rule (Owen & Aung, 2021; Thang, nd.) but specifically also for promoting gender and sexual diversity (Aye, 2021), which are framed as threats to the status quo rooted in Buddhist fundamentalism.

During protest crackdowns, women and GSM individuals face brutality, including threats of violence and targeted harassment (Progressive Voice, 2025), and such violence often has a gendered and sexualised dimension, not manifesting when security forces conduct violence against men. Post-coup, women and transgender protesters have faced sexual harassment during arrests and deliberate stripping and beatings on the street to degrade and intimidate them in front of onlookers (Khan, 2021).

### 1.3. International Human Rights Mechanisms

At the United Nations (UN) level, human rights violations in Myanmar have been tracked by a range of Special Procedures.<sup>10</sup> Since the 2021 coup, these mechanisms have published reports documenting the sharp deterioration of civic space, the impact of the coup on WGSMS and the increased restriction on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

For context, Myanmar is a party to the following international treaties, which give rise to binding international legal obligations. International monitoring mechanisms assess the situation in Myanmar against the standards and obligations established under these treaties and the broader framework of international human rights law.

**Table 3:** International Human Rights Treaties

Treaty	Status (Year)
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	Not Ratified
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	Not Ratified
Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	Not Ratified
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	Ratified (1997)
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	Not Ratified
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	Not Ratified
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	Ratified (2017)
Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	Not Ratified

Over the years, UN human rights mechanisms have consistently raised alarm over the collapse of civic space in Myanmar. However, since the 2021 coup, these reports have recorded how fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, have been

<sup>10</sup> Each procedure engages with Myanmar to different extent. They include, among others: Special Rapporteurs on Myanmar, minority issues, freedom of expression, assembly, religion or belief, violence against women and girls; and Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity.

systematically dismantled by the junta. These post-coup reports have documented widespread killings (United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 2022), enforced disappearances (UNGA, 2022; Human Rights Council (HRC), 2023) and arbitrary arrests (HRC, 2021; 2025) of protesters and perceived opponents. The reporting during this period also highlighted the military's extensive use of digital authoritarian tactics, including surveillance (UNGA, 2022; HRC, 2024; 2024), internet shutdowns (HRC, 2023; 2025) and the criminalisation of online dissent (UNGA, 2022; HRC, 2022). In this environment, it was noted that CSOs operate under constant threat; forced to suspend activities, move underground, or flee into exile (UNGA, 2023; 2024; HRC, 2023; 2024). In addition, although the elections were held from December 2025 to January 2026 after years of postponement, the polls are widely regarded as lacking legitimacy (OHCHR, 2026). Reports referencing the elections state that the polls were conducted under conditions incompatible with free and fair participation and primarily served to consolidate military rule (Ibid.). Collectively, UN mechanisms characterise these developments as part of a deliberate strategy to entrench both direct and indirect military control.

Across the reporting, violations against WGSMS have emerged as a recurring and escalating concern. UN mechanisms have documented the killing and injury of women and GSMs in retaliation for participating in protests and CDM (UNGA, 2021; 2022; HRC, 2021; 2022; 2024). They have also been indiscriminately targeted in broader military operations (UNGA, 2022; 2024). In detention, WGSMS individuals are regularly subjected to degrading treatment, torture and denial of healthcare (HRC, 2022).

Particular attention has been paid to the military's systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence. Documented violations include verbal abuse, forced nudity, sexual humiliation, threats of rape during interrogation, rape, gang rape and other forms of sexual assault, occurring both in custody and during raids (HRC, 2024; UNGA, 2024). Beyond direct violence, reports highlight worsening humanitarian conditions, particularly for displaced women, who face severely restricted access to food, healthcare and livelihoods (HRC, 2022). The collapse of public services and deepening economic instability have further limited women's access to employment and social protection, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas (HRC, 2022). These conditions have heightened the risk of trafficking and exploitation, with women and girls increasingly pushed into precarious cross-border migration and exploitative labour arrangements (HRC, 2022).

Violations of FoRB constitute another major concern in international reporting. Since the coup, these abuses have intensified, with credible evidence of the military destroying or occupying religious sites, sometimes repurposing them for military use (HRC, 2021; 2022; 2023; 2023; 2024; UNGA, 2024). Reports also document the arrest, enforced disappearance, torture and extrajudicial killing of religious leaders (HRC, 2022; 2022; 2024; UNGA, 2023). In addition, mechanisms describe the junta's role in actively fostering ethno-religious division through propaganda, hate speech and discriminatory legislation (HRC, 2025). Systemic discrimination against religious minorities is reported in areas including education, citizenship and access to public services (HRC, 2021; 2021; 2022; 2025; UNGA, 2024). Religious detainees are frequently denied the right to practice their faith while in custody (HRC, 2024).

Several reports also directly reference the regime's efforts to promote Burmanisation and Buddhisisation (HRC, 2022). They emphasise the military's role in advancing an ideology of ethnic Burman supremacy closely aligned with conservative Buddhist nationalism. This alignment has served to legitimise discrimination, exclusion and violence against non-Burman and non-Buddhist communities. The military's influence over legal and political institutions has enabled discriminatory practices to persist unchecked, further exacerbating sectarian tensions (HRC, 2023). While only a limited number of reports explicitly address the broader rise in religious fundamentalism, those that do argue that the convergence

of authoritarian rule and religious nationalism reinforces patriarchal hierarchies, marginalising not only religious minorities but also women and GSMs (UNGA, 2023; HRC, 2024).

During this period, the Special Rapporteur has drawn attention to the heightened risks faced by activists situated at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities, particularly GSM individuals who are also members of ethnic and religious minority communities. These activists experience compounded forms of repression and are frequently targeted for their human rights advocacy. Under the current regime, such tactics have become entrenched, contributing to a pervasive climate of fear that restricts individual freedoms and undermines broader efforts toward inclusion, justice and democratic reform (HRC, 2024). Although these violations are extensively documented, they are often analysed in isolation. Existing reporting rarely adopts an intersectional framework: religious fundamentalism, civic repression and gender-based violence are generally treated as parallel rather than interconnected systems of control.

To address this gap, Chapter 2 of this report provides an intersectional analysis of Myanmar's post-coup environment. This analysis lays the foundation for Chapter 3, which examines how WGSMS rights advocates are navigating these overlapping structures of repression and developing strategies to safeguard themselves and the communities they seek to protect. As will be explored in Chapters 2 and 3, in the post-coup environment, the alliance between state authorities and Buddhist fundamentalist actors has grown stronger, emboldening new and more severe forms of backlash that repress gender rights.

## 2. Forms of Fundamentalist Backlash

This chapter outlines the principal forms of backlash perpetrated by Buddhist fundamentalist groups against WGSM rights advocates in post-coup Myanmar. Three key forms are prevalent and are examined here: weaponisation of laws, physical violence and online harassment. Together, they demonstrate how post-coup developments have reinforced the Buddhist-Bamar social order, framing WGSM advocates as morally corrupt and national threats to delegitimise, disrupt and ultimately dismantle rights-based activism for WGSM concerns.

### 2.1. Weaponisation of Laws



In Myanmar, the legal system has become a central instrument in a fundamentalist-driven backlash against WGSM rights advocates. This section demonstrates how the law is used as a tool for political repression, but also how legal persecution serves as a coordinated suppression strategy. Both approaches are rooted in fundamentalist interpretations of Buddhism that frame gender and sexual diversity as threats to national and religious identity. This section examines the use of two new laws – Counter-Terrorism Law (2012, amended 2021 and 2024) and the Organisations Registration Law (2022) – and two existing ones – the Penal Code (1861) and the Ward and Village Tract Administration Law (2012, amended 2021).

First, the junta regime deliberately conflates the advocacy efforts of WGSM rights advocates with terrorism to justify extreme forms of repression. This is done via the Counter-Terrorism Law (2014, amended 2021 and 2024), which was ostensibly designed to address security threats but is increasingly being exploited to criminalise dissent that challenges the religious and political status quo (International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2023). The law, enacted in 2014, was amended in August 2021 and again in 2024 when the military junta was facing mounting armed resistance from EAO/EROs and PDF. The amendments allowed the regime to “legally” deploy broad counterterrorism measures under the guise of restoring stability and security. In June 2023, Justin Min Hein, President of the LGBTQI+ Union in Mandalay, was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment under this law. His conviction is widely believed to be retaliation for his efforts to end the mistreatment of LGBTQI+ detainees (RFA Burmese, 2023; Burma News International, 2023). Similarly, in December 2022, prominent GSM activist Sue Sha Shin Thant was sentenced by a junta-controlled court in Mandalay to 22 years in prison, based on her active opposition to the military regime. She was charged under the Counter-Terrorism Law (The Irrawaddy, 2022b). These cases reveal how gender rights advocacy is conflated with threats to public order and used to justify repression cloaked in legal legitimacy.

Second, the junta enacted the Organisations Registration Law (2022) to compel all CSOs to register and disclose sensitive information such as funding sources, operational areas and staff profiles. Non-compliance carries penalties of up to five years in prison. The law was introduced at a time when many

CSOs and grassroots organisations continued to receive external support, document abuses, provide humanitarian assistance, and maintain advocacy networks inside and outside the country despite the coup. In response, the junta moved to tighten control over civil society by restricting organisations' ability to operate independently and support communities affected by military repression. Observers have noted how the law is deployed as part of the junta's "four cuts" strategy<sup>11</sup> to restrict access to humanitarian aid, food, information and recruitment channels of citizens believed to support the anti-regime and pro-democracy movement by targeting CSOs that facilitate them (Root, 2023).

These developments have directly impacted women and GSM rights work. The Organisations Registration Law raises security and surveillance concerns, forcing WGSM advocates to opt out of formal registration. The consequence is the absence of legal recognition, protection, and access to funding. For funding in particular, donors often require registration for eligibility or require official audited documentation for CSOs to apply for grants (Kyaw, 2024). Therefore, many groups have ceased formal operations or work under ambiguous designations such as "social organisations" to avoid scrutiny. As one respondent (KII04) puts it:

*"So, what has become now is that [women and GSM rights CSOs in Myanmar] work under the guise of "social organisations" and "social workers". We don't have a lot of people inside the country who are still able to work, but we have some very, very brave people inside. ... [But] they cannot make [reference] to "LGBTQI+", "women's rights", "human rights", "politics" or "unions" (KII04).*

Third, several provisions in the Penal Code (1861), including those amended by the junta after the 2021 coup, are being used to criminalise WGSM rights advocates. Ostensibly designed to prevent religious violence, Sections 295 and 295A (blasphemy) are routinely invoked to suppress critiques of Buddhism and religious authority. Section 295 criminalises the destruction or defilement of places or objects of worship with the intent to insult religion, carrying penalties of up to two years in prison. Section 295A extends this criminalisation to speech or actions perceived as deliberately and maliciously insulting religious feelings. While broad in scope, these provisions have been increasingly weaponised to delegitimise advocacy efforts that promote WGSM rights, particularly when such efforts challenge fundamentalist interpretations of Buddhism. In 2023, the film *Don't Expect Anything*, which explored gender roles in Myanmar and questioned the treatment of women in Buddhist culture, triggered a wave of hate from Buddhist fundamentalists in Myanmar (The Irrawaddy, 2023a; 2023b). Subsequently, the junta announced legal action under Section 295 against individuals involved in the movie (the director and 12 cast members, including a child actor), claiming they had insulted the virtue of Buddhist monks by using offensive and disrespectful language (Euronews & AP, 2023).

Provisions in Section 505 (amended 2021) and Section 505A (amended 2021) relating to "public disorder" also provide legal justification for the criminalisation of WGSM advocates challenging Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar. These amended provisions increase the scope and authorities of the regime to criminalise speech deemed to incite public unrest or disaffection toward the military or state officials. Although they do not explicitly reference religion, their application cannot be understood in isolation from the ideological environment shaped by Buddhist nationalist narratives. In practice,

<sup>11</sup> The "four cuts" strategy is a long-standing doctrine of the Tatmadaw aimed at weakening the support, control, and operational capacity of perceived "insurgents." The strategy involves systematically cutting off access to food, humanitarian aid, information and recruitment networks for suspected insurgents and communities accused of supporting them.

Buddhist fundamentalist actors and aligned authorities interpret WGSM advocacy as socially destabilising, culturally corrosive and anti-Buddhist, thereby justifying its repression under public order provisions. In one instance in March 2024, Daw Nyo Aye, Chairwoman of the Rakhine Women's Network, was sentenced under Section 505 for participating in a commemoration event. While framed as incitement to criminal activity and defamation of the state, her activism centred on women's empowerment in Rakhine ([Development Media Group, 2023](#)). Within this context, advocacy for women's rights is not treated as neutral civic engagement but as a challenge to entrenched religious-nationalist authority structures. The prosecution, therefore, illustrates how public order laws function as indirect instruments for enforcing a moral order aligned with Buddhist fundamentalist interpretations.

Section 377 of the Penal Code, a colonial-era law that criminalises “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”, has also been repurposed to delegitimise, specifically, GSM rights advocates, and deter advocacy through fear. Originally rooted in British Christian morality, the law has since been reinterpreted and upheld through the lens of Buddhist moral conservatism, which has been used to cast non-heteronormativity as sinful and against nature ([Chua & Gilbert, 2015](#)). While the law is not always invoked in prosecutions, respondents noted that police frequently use the threat of Section 377 against LGBTQI+ activists during arrests, interrogations, surveillance and harassment ([Ebead & Hirakawa, 2022](#), KII01, KII04). The existence of the provision – carrying penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment or life imprisonment – therefore functions as a mechanism of intimidation that restricts activism and legitimises broader patterns of discrimination and abuse ([Free Expression Myanmar, 2018](#)).

Fourth, and in a similar manner to the use of Section 377 of the Penal Code, amendments to the Ward and Village Tract Administration Law (2012, amended 2021), have been used as mechanisms of surveillance and intimidation against WGSM rights advocates, especially those from the LGBTQI+ community. The 2021 amendments reinstated and expanded requirements for households to report overnight guests to local authorities, while simultaneously weakening safeguards against arbitrary detention and warrantless searches. Under the amendments, individuals face imprisonment of up to three months or fines for failing to register overnight guests with local authorities. These changes significantly increased the discretionary powers of local administrators and security forces, enabling closer monitoring of pro-democracy elements under the guise of maintaining security and public order.

In practice, this law has enabled routine nighttime inspections, home raids and intrusive monitoring by security forces. GSM individuals have been disproportionately targeted through these practices, reinforcing broader patterns of stigma and repression ([Human Dignity Trust, 2024](#)).

The use of these new and existing legal instruments demonstrates that Myanmar's post-coup environment is one where Buddhist fundamentalism has supported the weaponisation of laws to suppress and neutralise WGSM rights advocates. Examples of how the laws have been used point to a pattern where the junta regime systematically targets those challenging patriarchal, heteronormative and religiously fundamentalist norms. In doing so, the legal system grants formal legitimacy to ideologically driven repression and constitutes the first core pillar of the fundamentalism-driven backlash against WGSM communities.

## 2.2. Online Harassment



Since the 2021 military coup, backlash perpetrated online has become especially prevalent in targeting women and GSM rights actors. Three most prominent forms are discussed in this section: hate speech, incitement to violence, “doxing”<sup>12</sup> and mass Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance.

The emergence and impact of these forms of violence have to be contextualised with the country’s rapid digitalisation following its political and economic opening in the 2010s. Internet penetration rose from less than 1% in 2010 to 43% by 2020 (before the coup d’état in 2021) (*World Bank, 2025; Kemp, 2021*), while social media gradually grew to be a dominant tool of communication by the time the coup occurred (*ibid.*). This shift enabled new avenues for civic engagement. However, it also facilitated the unchecked spread of hate speech, disinformation and incitement to violence (*Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 2024*).

One of the biggest concerns was how social media and digitalisation platformed religious fundamentalists like those associated with Ma Ba Tha. As early as the 2010s, they weaponised digital platforms, particularly Facebook, to incite hatred (*Hogan & Safi, 2018*). Initially, their campaigns targeted hate towards Muslims and the Rohingya, portraying them as foreign and existential threats to Buddhism and national identity (*McPherson, 2017*). Over time, their rhetoric expanded to include WGSM rights advocates, labelling them as agents of moral decay and threats to tradition, in part because their activism has also sought to strengthen the protection of ethno-religious minority women while also seeking to prohibit the role of Buddhist fundamentalism in the country (*East Asia Forum, 2015*).

In the post-coup landscape, four major forms of online harassment can be observed. First, hate speech has escalated sharply. Across public and private channels on various social media and online messaging platforms, Buddhist fundamentalist rhetoric is circulated widely to frame these actors as moral threats (*Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023; Myo Win & Phyu Phyu Thi, 2025*). Such messaging draws directly from propaganda strategies employed by the 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha (*KII08, Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023*).

Several factors explain this continuity: Buddhist fundamentalist monks affiliated with these groups use digital channels to spread hate in the post-coup context (*The Irrawaddy, 2023b*); such narratives often originate in sermons and religious teachings that are later amplified in digital spaces (KII08) and therefore are framed by Buddhist fundamentalist groups; and, even in instances where there are no direct connections with Ma Ba Tha figures, its Buddhist fundamentalist ideological legacy continues to be used to justify the role of the junta in politics and therefore also to demonise the anti-junta forces (*Zaw, 2024*). Together, these trends reflect a convergence of pro-military digital influencers and religious fundamentalist actors who share a worldview that frames gender and sexual rights as existential

<sup>12</sup> The public disclosure of personal information such as names, addresses and social media profiles.

threats. As Myanmar Witness and Sisters2Sisters (2023) observe, this reflects the enduring amalgamation of nationalism and religion, rooted in Buddhisisation and Burmanisation policies and reinforced by the encroachment of Buddhist fundamentalism into secular politics.

Hate speech tactics include circulating doctored, sexually explicit images and deploying gendered slurs to shame and discredit advocates. Common narratives include accusing Bamar and/or Buddhist women of having sexual relationships with Muslim men or members of EROs to portray them as traitors to Buddhism and national identity (Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023; The Irrawaddy, 2023b). This is used to justify narratives that these WGSM rights advocates have been controlled or brainwashed by non-Bamar-Buddhists (OHCHR, 2023).

For instance, Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a prominent pro-democracy activist and leader of the Sisters2Sisters campaign, has been targeted by pro-junta channels, which have labelled her as a traitor and accused her of being manipulated by foreign elements, suggesting that her activism is a form of moral corruption and a threat to national identity (Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023). These narratives reinforce the framing of ethnic and religious minorities as corrupting forces and cast gender and sexual diversity as a threat to societal values.

Such hate speech functions as a broader mechanism of psychological and social control. By portraying WGSM rights advocates as immoral, deviant, or corrupted by foreign and non-Buddhist influences, these narratives seek to generate shame, fear, stress and social isolation, while pressuring individuals into self-censorship or withdrawal from activism. At the societal level, the repeated dehumanisation of women and GSM activists as threats to Buddhism, morality and national identity also helps normalise hostility against them, cultivating public perceptions that they are dangerous or illegitimate actors deserving exclusion, punishment or violence.

Second, together with hate speech, there are widespread online efforts to incite physical violence against WGSM rights advocates. As pro-junta channels and Buddhist fundamentalist networks frame WGSM activists as existential threats to Buddhism and the nation, direct violence against them is legitimised as a form of patriotic or religious defence.

One documented case concern Ei Thinzar Maung, Deputy Minister of Women, Youth and Children Affairs of NUG, who has been regularly accused of undermining Buddhism and corrupting Myanmar women. Posts and comment threads often escalated into explicit calls for her arrest, assault or execution (Aye, 2021). Another case involved Esther Ze Naw Bamvo, who, in addition to being under constant surveillance from the junta authorities, faced coordinated online incitement to violence from Buddhist fundamentalists and pro-junta accounts because of her women's rights advocacy and criticism of military violence. Social media users accused her of betraying Buddhism and Myanmar culture, while posts circulated claims that women activists like her, who are connected to ethnic minority and feminist movements, should be killed (Bemma, 2018; Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023).

The prevalence of online incitement to violence, slow and inconsistent content moderation, and automated systems that are easily circumvented has enabled coordinated harassment campaigns to persist, while human reviewers frequently lack the contextual understanding necessary to identify policy-violating content in Myanmar's socio-political environment.

In the post-coup context, Telegram has increasingly emerged as a central platform for the proliferation of such narratives (KII08; The Irrawaddy, 2023b). This shift followed Facebook's comparatively stronger — though still limited — efforts to moderate Burmese-language hate speech, prompting pro-military and fundamentalist actors to migrate towards less regulated platforms. Telegram's weak moderation

environment has subsequently facilitated the expansion of coordinated pro-junta networks, including channels linked to Buddhist fundamentalist movements (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2023), which systematically target WGSM rights advocates with relative impunity.

Third, doxxing. WGSM rights advocates are doxxed at significantly higher rates than male pro-democracy influential figures with similar political visibility. Further, the patterns of doxxing in the post-coup context show how WGSM rights advocates who criticise the junta and express support for NUG or PDF are the targets of doxxing. At least half of the abusive posts, tracked in a research project on online harassment, involved doxxing (Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023). In one example, multiple women Facebook users were doxxed for commenting on a July 2022 post by pro-democracy and women’s rights activist Pencilo (Ibid., 2023). In another example, a female pro-democracy activist and advocate for gender rights described how, after a post she made went viral, private details like her legal name, photo, phone number family’s home address were published on multiple pro-military Telegram channels that labelled her a “terrorist” supporter, called for her arrest and encouraged others to hand her over to the junta (Pallabi, 2023).

The consequences of doxxing are severe and far-reaching. In these cases, and more, personal details are weaponised alongside dehumanising language, moral condemnation and explicit incitements to violence – including threats of rape, assault and murder. Doxxing cases also often escalate beyond online abuse: in several documented cases, doxxers have passed identifying information directly to police or military units to enable arrests and retaliation. A high-profile case involved Zin Mar Aung, the NUG Foreign Minister, whose personal information was posted online alongside a bounty offer for anyone willing to enact revenge on her, her family or her supporters (Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023).

A range of individuals have emerged to adopt doxxing against WGSM rights advocates. One of the most prominent is Han Nyein Oo, the administrator of a widely followed Telegram channel. His platform regularly promotes misogynistic and Buddhist fundamentalist content, specifically targeting WGSM activists advocating for gender equality (Khwar, 2022; Myanmar Witness & Sisters2Sisters, 2023). Beyond spreading hate, he has also been implicated in undertaking doxxing of several individuals who are associated with women’s rights and gender rights activism – viewed as anti-junta and morally reprehensible – and passing along their personal details to the authorities, facilitating their arrest and persecution.

Even exiled activists in relatively safer countries such as Thailand are not immune. Many go to great lengths to avoid revealing any identifiable information online, fearing that being doxxed could endanger their families back in Myanmar or expose their physical location to junta sympathisers operating within Thailand’s borders, such as members of paramilitary groups (See Section 2.1). As one respondent (K113) explained:

*“We stay very conscious about our security, even being based in Thailand. We stay very conscious because, especially on social media ... it can be a problem for my family [back in Myanmar] ... if I post things very serious about politics, especially against the regime, if they can track our posts and our social media” (K113).*

Doxxing in this context is not only a political tool but also deeply intertwined with Buddhist fundamentalist narratives. Doxxing often targets those perceived to challenge traditional norms. These individuals are portrayed as morally deviant or corrupting national and religious values, making them legitimate targets in the eyes of fundamentalists. Doxxing, in this context, serves as a mechanism of public shaming and exposure, allowing fundamentalist and pro-junta networks to punish dissenters by revealing their identities and encouraging retribution. The moral framing behind these attacks reinforces a worldview in which “impurity” must be purged to protect Buddhism and the nation, legitimising both online and offline violence.

Fourth, post-coup Myanmar has also become increasingly institutionalised through the integration of AI-enabled surveillance architecture. The junta’s consolidation of power since the 2021 coup has included the systematic weaponisation of AI and digital technologies in what observers describe as a “digital coup”. One key part of this strategy is the rollout of “Safe City” surveillance systems, for example, in Naypyidaw and Mandalay, with expansion planned for Yangon. Cities are to be equipped with CCTV infrastructure supplied by foreign companies such as Huawei, Dahua and Hikvision and integrated with AI-powered facial and licence plate recognition technologies. These systems have created a pervasive surveillance architecture that removes anonymity in public spaces and enables authorities to track anti-coup activists and monitor dissent. Combined with the suspension of safeguards against arbitrary detention and warrantless monitoring, such systems have intensified risks to freedom of expression, association, and assembly ([Human Rights Myanmar, 2025](#)).

Further, at the operational level, AI systems such as the Person Scrutinization and Monitoring System are deployed to aggregate biometric data, travel history, hotel guest lists and digital footprints to algorithmically profile individuals perceived as threats ([Ibid.](#)). The system has reportedly been used to cross-check accommodation records, resulting in arrests of members of CDM. Beyond reactive identification, these systems enable predictive threat analysis by flagging individuals based on movements, associations or online activity. WGSM actors, particularly those from ethnic minority communities, face heightened risks because algorithmic systems trained on biased datasets may reproduce historical patterns of discrimination and misidentification ([Ibid.](#)).

These developments must be understood within the broader post-coup resurgence of Buddhist fundamentalist politics, where WGSM rights advocates are increasingly targeted. The expansion of AI-enabled surveillance infrastructure significantly heightens the vulnerability of WGSM actors by enabling authorities to identify and profile individuals deemed politically suspect. Combined with coordinated hate speech, online incitement, doxxing, and overall, the weak protections for privacy and free expression, these technologies contribute to an increasingly integrated ecosystem of repression to constrain WGSM activism and civic space in post-coup Myanmar. Moreover, these digital forms of repression do not remain confined to the online sphere, but increasingly facilitate offline intimidation, arrest and physical violence, as the following section demonstrates.

### 2.3. Physical Violence



Physical violence against WGSM rights advocates remains one of the most visible and immediate forms of backlash in post-coup Myanmar. Such violence is perpetrated by the following main groups: (1) military; (2) police forces; (3) prison guards; (4) militias; (5) and civilian mobs. Their violence is enabled, legitimised or encouraged by the influence of Buddhist fundamentalist groups and narratives. While these actors operate with varying degrees of coordination, their actions collectively reinforce and intensify broader patterns of repression.

The military is the first perpetrator of physical violence against WGSM rights advocates in post-coup Myanmar, exercising direct armed force against protesters, members of CDM, and individuals accused of supporting PDFs or broader resistance networks. Military operations have involved widespread patterns of intimidation, arbitrary violence and sexualised abuses. In one instance, a leader of the Dawei LGBT Community reported that their home was deliberately set on fire multiple times by the military as an act of intimidation for the Community's activity of opposing the military regime and – in particular- for their efforts to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights ([Mok, 2024](#)).

These acts must be understood within the broader context in which state security actors are trained and influenced by Buddhist fundamentalist and ethno-nationalist ideologies. Respondents noted that military perpetrators often perceive themselves not merely as enforcing state authority, but as defending Buddhism and protecting cultural purity (KII04, 08 & 10; [Outright International, 2024](#)). This ideological framing reinforces impunity and normalises violence against those viewed as transgressing prescribed gender, sexual or political norms.

Second, police forces play a central role in surveillance, arrests, interrogations and intimidation targeting WGSM rights advocates and other perceived opponents of the junta. Since the coup, police actors have expanded monitoring of activists, conducted raids, collaborated with military intelligence and issued threats against individuals involved in rights advocacy or anti-junta mobilisation. For example, Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing was a protester in Myanmar's anti-coup demonstrations who was targeted and shot by the police during a rally in Nay Pyi Taw. She later died from her injuries, becoming the first known fatality of the protest movement and a symbol of resistance against the military coup ([BBC News, 2021](#)).

The conduct of the police force is similarly shaped by Buddhist fundamentalist narratives that position dissenting bodies and identities as threats to national and religious order. In this context, policing extends beyond law enforcement into moral regulation, where WGSM individuals are treated as symbols of social disorder or foreign influence. Such narratives contribute to the justification of harassment, arbitrary detention and sexualised violence as necessary measures to preserve social and religious conformity.

Third, prison guards exercise custodial control over detained WGSM rights advocates, often within highly abusive detention environments characterised by degrading treatment, intimidation and violence. Following mass arrests after the coup, prisons became important sites of repression where prison authorities enforced discipline through both physical and psychological abuse. As of April 2026, the political fallout has resulted in over 30,000 political prisoners, including at least 6,400 women ([Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2026](#)).<sup>13</sup> Female detainees have reported being denied access to basic hygiene products, placed in gender-inappropriate detention facilities, and subjected to systematic sexual violence and torture. In detention, they not only face threats but also face acts of rape, forced nudity, physical abuse and torture ([Outright International, 2024](#)). One prominent case was that of Saw Han Nwe Oo, a transgender writer arrested in Mandalay in September 2021.<sup>14</sup> She reported being tortured in prison including beatings, burning with hot water and gender-based humiliation linked to her identity. She also stated that prison authorities forced her to wear male clothing and subjected her to degrading treatment because she was transgender. She suffered multiple health complications even after she was released in late 2021 and passed away in 2025 ([Amnesty International, 2022](#); [van Linde, 2025](#); [Democratic Voice of Burma, 2025](#)).

Violence in prison context is reinforced by broader authoritarian and Buddhist fundamentalist ideologies that dehumanise individuals perceived as politically deviant or morally transgressive. Within detention settings, WGSM prisoners may be subjected to intensified targeting because their identities are viewed as violating dominant religious and gender norms. Violence in prisons therefore functions not only to punish political dissent, but also to discipline and erase identities considered incompatible with the military-aligned vision of Buddhist-Bamar social order. These abuses remain underreported, as survivors fear retaliation, facilitated by the absence of any accountability mechanisms under the current regime ([VOA News, 2023](#)).

The fourth group of perpetrators comprises paramilitary militias that carry out targeted killings, intimidation and attacks within religiously infused ideological frameworks. These militias emerged in the political vacuum in post-coup Myanmar, where repression has been increasingly decentralised through grassroots and local-level militias such as Pyu Saw Htee and Thway Thauk Apwe. Respondents describe these groups as de facto armed extensions of Buddhist nationalist networks like Ma Ba Tha (KII05, 07, 08). These groups operate alongside the military and other security actors, reinforcing broader patterns of authoritarian violence while targeting communities and individuals framed as threats to the Buddhist–Bamar nation.

Influential Buddhist fundamentalist monks have played active roles in the formation, mobilisation, and ideological justification of these militias. In Sagaing Region, for example, the monk Warthawa commands a regional Pyu Saw Htee cell and channels junta resources to sustain its activities ([Thiha & Nilsen, 2023](#)). The involvement of monks confers moral legitimacy on militia violence, reframing coercion as a religious duty. As noted by respondents (KII07, 08), monks function as moral authorities who sanctify repression as a defence of Buddhism and the nation.

While militias have widely targeted ethnic and religious minority leaders, EROs and pro-democracy actors ([Progressive Voice, 2022](#); [Burma Human Rights Network, 2024](#)), respondents (KII06, 07) also identified growing patterns of intimidation and targeted attacks against individuals associated with feminist and LGBTQI+ advocacy. In some cases, women relatives of prominent CDM activists were deliberately killed as retaliatory punishment, reflecting a gendered logic of collective discipline rooted in patriarchal and fundamentalist control ([Ibid.](#)).

<sup>13</sup> There is no disaggregated information on the number of GSM political prisoners.

<sup>14</sup> The individual was arrested under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code.

Respondents also expressed concern that members of militia are embedded within activist networks, even in exiled communities such as those in Thailand, heightening a sense of surveillance and insecurity (KII05). In 2025, Pauk Ko Taw, a military-aligned monk associated with the Pyu Saw Htee militia, travelled to Bangkok and publicly met with a Thai nationalist activist who has a record of inciting hostility against migrant workers from Myanmar (Khit Thit, 2025). Discussions reportedly included the Ma Ba Tha and efforts to prevent deported Myanmar nationals from re-entering Thailand (*ibid.*). Observers believe the visit may have been intended to undermine Myanmar revolutionary support networks, including WGSM activists, operating in Thailand, particularly by fostering division among migrant communities (*ibid.*) As a result, the meeting raised concerns among Myanmar pro-democracy networks in Thailand (*ibid.*). Activists have warned that the monk's presence reflects a broader pattern of cross-border intimidation, in which pro-military actors collaborate with Buddhist fundamentalist groups to pressure, monitor or disrupt anti-junta and rights-based movements abroad (*ibid.*).

Regarding militias like Pyu Saw Htee, respondents more familiar with its tactics note the following:

*“[After the coup], more groups – militias – are forming. Do you know Pyu Saw Htee? They are using arms ... They are almost the same as Ma Ba Tha ... They also target different religions... and also the LGBT community” (KII07).*

*“They had [been] formed under ... nationalist Ma Ba Tha [structure], and they supported [the military]. After the coup, these religious nationalist groups became more powerful” (KII05).*

*“We [also] have the evidence in Mae Sot, Ma Ba Tha [and its] religious networks, including Pyu Saw Thee, are operating ... under the order of the [junta]. They bring SAC people and also spies [to Thailand]” (KII05).*

The fifth group of perpetrators are civilian mobs incited by fundamentalist monks. Unlike militias or formal armed groups, these mobs are not organised, structured or systematically funded; instead, they emerge in a largely spontaneous and reactive manner, mobilised through sermons and social media narratives that frame specific individuals or events as threats to Buddhism, morality or national identity. According to several respondents (KII01, 07), many participants in these acts act out of internalised ideological conviction rather than coercion, reflecting the diffusion of Buddhist fundamentalist narratives at the grassroots level.

These groups are predominantly composed of laypersons from majority-Buddhist communities who are drawn into episodic collective action in response to perceived transgressions. For instance, individuals documenting sexual violence against Rohingya women have faced intimidation and threats (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Crowds have also been mobilised to threaten women reporting sexual abuse involving Buddhist monks, framing such documentation as an attack on religious sanctity (KII02, KII04).

In another instance, pro-military groups armed with sticks, knives and slingshots attacked anti-coup demonstrators, including stabbing a protester ([RFA Burmese, 2021](#)).

Also important to note is that, over time, particularly in rural areas of central Myanmar, some of these loosely organised civilian mobs evolved into more structured pro-junta militia formations (like Pyu Saw Htee described above) after receiving material support, weapons or political backing. Though even where these groups did not formally become militias, they continued to play important supporting roles for junta-aligned actors by providing intelligence, identifying anti-junta individuals, instigating flash mobilisations and contributing to an atmosphere of intimidation against activists and local communities ([International Crisis Group, 2022](#); [Rejwan, 2025](#)).

Altogether, the patterns of physical violence against WGSM rights advocates in post-coup Myanmar demonstrate the involvement of five interconnected groups of perpetrators: the military, police forces, prison guards, paramilitary militias, and civilian mobs. While these actors operate through different methods and degrees of organisation, their actions collectively reinforce broader systems of repression directed at those perceived as challenging dominant religious, gendered and national norms.

Chapter 2 has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of Buddhist fundamentalist-motivated backlash against WGSM rights advocates framed as disrupting the moral fabric of the Buddhist nation. The weaponisation of law, online harassment and physical violence collectively functions to silence these actors through distinct patterns of gendered and sexualised repression. Building on these findings, Chapter 3 examines the current strategies and protective measures adopted by CSOs working on WGSM rights, highlighting both their strengths and their limitations in mitigating these threats within an increasingly repressive socio-political environment.

### 3. Current Defences and Their Limitations

In response to escalating backlash following the 2021 military coup, WGSN rights advocates in Myanmar have adopted a range of protective and adaptive strategies to sustain their work under increasingly hostile conditions. This chapter examines five broad areas of response: security measures, civil society support networks, international aid and support, engagement with NUG, and long-term advocacy efforts. Together, these measures reflect efforts by WGSN rights advocates to mitigate threats, maintain organisational continuity and build longer-term forms of resilience against Buddhist fundamentalist backlash as outlined in Chapter 2. At the same time, the chapter critically assesses the extent to which these responses remain constrained by fragmentation, limited resources, uneven access and the broader political environment.

#### 3.1. Security Measures



WGSN rights advocates in Myanmar have prioritised both physical and digital safety to sustain their activism. While these efforts have led to increased awareness and adoption of protective practices, they remain fragmented and insufficient relative to the scale and sophistication of the backlash they face. This section first traces efforts to shore up physical safety, then digital safety; then, it unpacks current limitations.

In response to escalating risks, activists on the ground, especially in conflict-ridden or junta-controlled areas,<sup>15</sup> have strengthened localised physical security measures (Mon, 2024). Towards that end, emergency preparedness and safety training have become crucial. For instance, organisations such as Generation Wave provide vital emergency support and capacity building to activists, often in partnership with trusted local actors (Insight Myanmar, 2023). This assistance also includes immediate cash for relocation and basic needs, funding for safe houses, coverage for medical emergencies and training in physical security, human rights and nonviolent action (civil resistance).

In addition, a unique feature of Myanmar's context is that EAO/EROs, PDF and other reliable community groups are also sought after by many advocates who want to be trained and equipped with fundamental survival skills. These skills encompass first aid, self-defence, emergency relocation, secure communication protocols, and, occasionally, weapons handling. Such training is complemented by efforts to establish secure working environments, which defenders consider essential for their survival and sustained activism (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, 2025).

Furthermore, community-based early warning systems have emerged in some areas, particularly along the Thai-Myanmar border, where grassroots monitoring and emergency response mechanisms seek to protect at-risk activists (KII05). These systems function as informal networks designed to pre-empt violence or surveillance, particularly in conflict-affected ethnic regions, while similar mechanisms also exist among exiled communities in Thailand, as one respondent notes:

<sup>15</sup> Those operating in regions where PDF or aligned EAO/ERO have taken control face less threats of physical violence.

*“We have our own way of keeping each other safe. We share the list of people we suspect are working with Pyu Saw Htee or Ma Ba Tha. If someone new comes to the area, we ask around. It’s not formal, but it helps us to know when to hide or move” (KII05).*

In parallel, defenders have significantly increased their focus on digital safety to hide identity in order to avoid online harassment, hacking and surveillance. Widely adopted practices include the use of secure messaging apps (e.g., Signal, Proton Mail), VPNs, multi-factor authentication, encrypted data storage and “data burn” strategies to reduce exposure during military raids (O’Connor, 2025). Moreover, a small but growing number of organisations have begun to institutionalise standard operating procedures for digital security (The Hope Organisation & Centre for Law and Democracy, 2023). These procedures tend to focus on immediate threats, such as remote wiping of devices in the event of arrest or surveillance, and are typically found among more established groups, especially those with prior experience of online harassment or connections to broader digital security networks (KII05). In such cases, training has led to a more proactive “digital hygiene” culture, with routine risk assessments and internal monitoring becoming part of operational norms (Asia Centre, 2024).

Despite the range of protective strategies adopted, significant gaps persist. The first gap revolves around geographic diversity and resulting operational constraints. In regions where junta presence and Buddhist fundamentalist militia activity are strong, WGSM rights advocates operate under acute strain. WGSM activists operating in rural regions under junta control also often lack consistent access to updated tools, secure infrastructure or repeat training, making them more vulnerable (KII02, 08). Similarly, the feasibility of security measures is far more limited in urban centres under tight junta physical and digital surveillance, with safety often dependent on informal networks and rapid response tactics that lack institutional backing – such as secure communication devices or safe spaces (Potkin, 2022).

Second, there are limitations in current training and protection mechanisms. For one, the urgency of post-coup activism has led to numerous disconnected and short-term training initiatives. While useful in mitigating immediate threats, these interventions remain largely ad hoc, vary significantly across parts of the country, and suffer from weak coordination and continuity (Statsvetenskapliga Institutionen, 2022). Most interventions also fail to provide sustained follow-up or institutionalise knowledge within organisations, limiting the development of collective and long-term protection strategies against systemic threats.

For another, existing protection approaches remain heavily reactive rather than proactive. Both local actors and international partners often prioritise emergency response and rapid capacity-building over structural investment in long-term organisational resilience. As a result, insufficient attention is given to embedding standard operating procedures, internal security protocols, regular risk assessments and institutional safeguarding mechanisms into organisational practice. Without these continuity measures, the same vulnerabilities frequently re-emerge each time groups are forced to relocate, suspend operations, or replace arrested staff. This keeps defenders in a continual state of crisis management rather than enabling sustainable resilience and preparedness.

Third, mainstream capacity-building efforts frequently overlook the specific needs of marginalised groups within the broader movement. GSM activists are often excluded from women’s rights training spaces, while ethnic minority-led organisations face persistent barriers related to language, geographic

isolation and political marginalisation (KII06, 09). Through an intersectional lens, KII01 notes the disparity between urban and rural communities:

*“In urban areas, there are progressive groups advocating for LGBTQI+ rights. In rural areas, the situation is much more difficult. Protection mechanisms are limited. There is no strong collective agency to protect LGBTQI+ organisations” (KII01).*

In sum, while the post-coup environment has led to increased uptake of both physical and digital safety practices among WGSN rights defenders, limitations persist due to geographic and operational constraints, short-term and poorly coordinated protection mechanisms, and the absence of sufficiently intersectional and inclusive systems. As a result, many WGSN rights advocates continue to remain highly vulnerable to backlash in post-coup Myanmar.

### 3.2. Civil Society Support Networks



Beyond direct security measures, civil society support networks have become a critical lifeline for WGSN rights defenders in Myanmar, enabling them to navigate escalating risks arising from Buddhist fundamentalist backlash. At the same time, however, the gender rights sector remains deeply fragmented due to limited broad-based solidarity, weak cross-sectoral coordination and uneven recognition across different communities and movements.

Wide-ranging forms of coalitions have emerged and/or consolidated in the years following the coup in 2021. Since the 2021 coup, several networks and platforms have either emerged or grown in prominence compared to the pre-coup context. Organisations such as the Women’s League of Burma, Progressive Voice Myanmar, Women’s Advocacy Coalition Myanmar and Sisters2Sisters, Myanmar Women for Media, along with many other networks, have become crucial hubs for consolidating fragmented advocacy, research and testimonies into unified, coordinated platforms (Ebead & Hirakawa, 2022). The Women’s League of Burma has functioned as an umbrella coalition linking exiled and underground women’s organisations, facilitating transnational coordination and collective advocacy on gender-based violence and political inclusion (International Civil Society Action Network, 2025). Sisters2Sisters documents sexual violence and coordinates online advocacy on gender rights and online harassment against WGSN rights advocates. The Global Emergency Network, in collaboration with local partners, implemented initiatives in Myanmar focused on preventing and responding to sexual- and gender-based violence (International Civil Society Action Network, 2025). Other CSOs, like the Mukwege Foundation, offer mental health and psychosocial support and safe environments, and focus on building the capacity of frontline responders and grassroots organisations (Mukwege Foundation, 2025).

There has also been a notable increase in human rights awareness training since the attempted coup, especially among youth, driven by a greater public desire for knowledge about politics, federalism and human rights (Burmese Women’s Union et al., 2025). This training goes beyond theory, with CSOs conducting community training in various regions, covering topics like human rights, health, documentation and federalism (Ibid.). Specific initiatives include a CSO in Shan State offering health

training for teenage girls and young women, which has positively impacted their mental health, autonomy, and body acceptance, and is viewed as foundational for women's future political participation (*Ibid.*). Anecdotally, human rights awareness training provided to armed groups has also led to a decrease in reported sexual harassment.

Despite these contributions, support networks remain weakened by significant structural and ideological fragmentation that undermines collective resistance. Firstly, many of the most established Bamar-Buddhist-majority women's organisations remain reluctant to engage with issues affecting ethnic and religious minorities, viewing them as too politically sensitive as a disturbance to the so-called "equilibrium". In a climate where Buddhist nationalist narratives continue to shape public discourse, this reluctance is reinforced by fear of reprisals from Buddhist fundamentalist networks (*Al Jazeera, 2022*).

At the same time, ethnic-aligned women's organisations, while often more responsive to their own communities' needs, may also focus narrowly on intra-ethnic concerns. In a context shaped by longstanding ethnic tensions and political polarisation, extending solidarity beyond one's own community is frequently viewed as politically risky or culturally contested. Consequently, even non-majority organisations may self-censor when gender rights intersect with religion or ethnicity, prioritising organisational survival over inclusive advocacy (KII01, KII02). This renders WGSN rights "the minority within minorities" (KII02), where defenders face compounded vulnerabilities and often lack validation and support from both majority communities and their own minority groups.

Secondly, and similarly, the support ecosystem is far less robust for GSM rights defenders. These groups face severe targeting, weaker public acceptance and therefore tighter operational constraints. Often limited and concentrated in urban centres, GSM organisations are frequently excluded from the broader women's rights coalitions and pro-democracy networks (KII01, KII04, KII05). In some cases, women's organisations have deliberately distanced themselves from GSM-related issues to avoid political exposure or public backlash, further isolating GSM activists within the broader rights landscape (KII01):

*"Being LGBTQ+ in Myanmar is a crime. There's no proper mechanism for protection ... there's no one to talk to if something happens. People are afraid to come out, and even women's organisations don't want to touch the issue because it's too risky" (KII01).*

A respondent further noted that some self-described women's rights actors actively reproduce exclusionary or Buddhist fundamentalist narratives that marginalise gender and sexual minorities, particularly those from ethnic or religious minority backgrounds. In certain cases, these actors have explicitly justified backlash against GSM communities on religious or cultural grounds (KII01).

Thirdly, the continued presence and influence of government-affiliated women's CSOs undermines the cohesion and trustworthiness of the broader gender rights sector. These organisations frequently amplify state narratives and discredit independent civil society actors, contributing to an atmosphere of suspicion and fragmentation within advocacy spaces. This reflects a longer continuity of authoritarian governance strategies in Myanmar, where state-linked organisations were cultivated to astroturf advocacy, infiltrate civil society spaces, shape international narratives and project the appearance of state-supported women's participation while constraining genuinely independent mobilisation. Under

both previous military governments and the post-coup SAC administration, such actors have functioned as intermediary mechanisms through which the state monitors activist networks, influences donor engagement and weakens oppositional solidarity from within. For instance, according to KII01, some women’s rights organisations and CSOs are led or heavily influenced by the wives of military generals and elite figures connected to the security establishment. While these actors often position themselves publicly as advocates for women’s empowerment, social welfare or minority rights, their close relationship with military elites blurs the boundary between independent activism and elite patronage.

Respondents noted that the presence of these organisations has generated significant distrust across the sector, leading many activists to engage only with a limited number of verified and trusted partners (KII01, KII04). This environment of uncertainty constrains information-sharing, coalition-building and coordinated protection efforts, particularly for WGSM activists already operating under heightened political and social vulnerability.

At the same time, many independent women’s organisations and networks have actively resisted these dynamics by rejecting participation in junta-controlled gender governance structures that would give undue prominence to such government-operated organisations. A key example is the refusal of several organisations to participate in the junta-controlled Myanmar National Committee on Women (Mra, 2021). This refusal carries particular significance because, prior to the coup, the NLD government had for the first time allowed independent organisations such as the Women’s Organisations Network and Gender Equality Network to participate in the Committee, opening limited but meaningful space for women’s voices in policymaking (Ibid.). However, both before the NLD government and since the coup, the Committee has been dominated by state-affiliated organisations closely tied to military elites and patriarchal power structures (Ibid.). Similarly, several women’s groups and networks have boycotted the Technical Working Groups responsible for implementing the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, publicly stating that they do not recognise the SAC as the legitimate governing authority and therefore cannot participate in its administrative processes (Ibid.). Through these collective refusals, women’s organisations are not only distancing themselves from state-controlled structures, but also directly contesting the junta’s attempts to legitimise its rule through managed forms of civil society participation.

In the absence of broad-based solidarity and support, mutual recognition and cross-cutting coordination, the gender rights sector remains fragmented. This undermines its collective capacity to resist rising ideological threats, particularly from Buddhist fundamentalist networks, and leaves its most marginalised members exposed.

### 3.3. International Aid and Support



Since the 2021 coup, international aid and support for Myanmar’s WGSM rights organisations have become increasingly constrained in a way that has reduced support given to WGSM rights organisations in protecting themselves against the mounting backlash. This section examines three interrelated developments shaping the current international support landscape: the restructuring of an overall decline in donor funding; persistent mismatches between donor frameworks and the lived realities of WGSM rights defenders; and the inadequate protection afforded to exiled activists and organisations.

Before exploring the post-coup situation, it is important first to understand the pre-coup context. Myanmar’s gender rights organisations operated within a civic space and benefited from international aid, with INGOs and foreign aid agencies providing cross-border

funding, acknowledgement of concerns, platforms for visibility and other forms of support that allowed these organisations to strengthen protective measures for their members and sustain advocacy for WGSM rights (Wells & Maung, 2024). They also benefitted from global solidarity networks, where INGOs recognised the structural vulnerabilities faced by WGSM rights defenders in authoritarian contexts (Wells & Maung, 2024).

However, the 2021 coup systemically closed civic space, criminalising advocacy and forcing activists to either go underground or flee abroad, while simultaneously undermining the protective infrastructure that once enabled these organisations to function with relative safety. As traced in Chapter 2, WGSM rights advocates in Myanmar found themselves in an increasingly hostile environment marked by heightened surveillance and escalating violence (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Within this context, three developments regarding international aid and support have made the situation worse for them.

First, shifting and declining funding. International funding has been and continues to be a critical lifeline for WGSM rights organisations in Myanmar. As KII04 suggests:

*“[For us], funding [from the international community] is the most important issue – both to continue operation, seek resources regarding protecting themselves [and] advocate on policy change” (KII04).*

However, as conflict and armed clashes intensified, donor priorities shifted toward immediate humanitarian relief and emergency response (Worley, 2024). This reorientation has diverted resources away from longer-term investments in democracy promotion, civil society strengthening, and human rights protection. For example, the Women’s League of Burma reported being forced to scale down its safe-house network for women fleeing domestic and political violence after its donor support was redirected toward food relief programmes (Women’s League of Burma, 2025). Though there was not an across-the-board reduction in gender rights programming altogether, the funding shifted away from longer-term structural reform, movement-building, and capacity-building initiatives.

Compounding these challenges is a broader decline in available funding. In particular, the funding freeze imposed by the United States in January 2025, including the subsequent dismantling of funding mechanisms such as the United States Agency for International Development, left many groups underfunded and ill-equipped to confront growing threats (Reuters, 2025). Across multiple rounds of consultations with WGSM rights organisations, respondents consistently identified this as one of the most critical concerns. Many organisations reported being forced to downsize staff, reduce programmes to bare-minimum operations, suspend outreach and protection activities or cease operations entirely due to the loss of sustained financial support. In a further setback for Myanmar civil society organisations, Sweden announced plans to phase out all development assistance to Myanmar by 2026, including support that had previously provided approximately USD 2.65 million annually to media and human rights groups (Human Rights Myanmar, 2025).

Within this context, international advocacy on Myanmar remains ongoing through UN mechanisms (Human Rights Council, 2025), INGOs, transnational activist networks and some governments, which continue to document abuses and maintain international attention on the crisis. However, these efforts are increasingly crowded out by competing global conflicts and shifting geopolitical priorities, resulting in declining visibility and reduced political urgency surrounding Myanmar. Consequently, while statements of solidarity and international condemnation continue, they are often not matched by the

sustained financial, technical and institutional support required to strengthen long-term resilience among WGSM rights organisations. Therefore, Myanmar’s civil society increasingly faces a “solidarity deficit”, where symbolic support is not accompanied by the material resources necessary for survival and sustained resistance ([Frontier Myanmar, 2021](#)).

Second, even in cases where funding continues, significant misalignments persist between donor priorities and the lived realities of WGSM rights defenders ([Wells & Maung, 2024](#)). For one, international donors frequently frame repression in Myanmar in broad human rights or humanitarian terms, without adequately accounting for the specific ideological and identity-based targeting faced by WGSM activists. In particular, violence and harassment driven by Buddhist fundamentalist movements such as Ma Ba Tha are often insufficiently recognised within donor programming and protection frameworks ([ibid.](#)).

This disconnect is reflected in programming that emphasises broad human rights principles without sufficiently investing in digital security, psychosocial support or resilience strategies tailored to ideologically motivated violence. For example, although substantial progress has been made in documenting and responding to gender-based violence during protests, in conflict zones, and in detention settings, these initiatives often fail to engage with the role of Buddhist fundamentalist narratives in perpetuating such violence ([Worley, 2024](#)). Consequently, critical intersections between ideology, gender, sexuality and violence remain underexplored. The absence of threat-informed monitoring and protection mechanisms, particularly regarding nationalist or religiously motivated violence, leaves WGSM organisations inadequately prepared to anticipate or mitigate targeted backlash ([Wells & Maung, 2024](#)).

Donor practices themselves may also reproduce inequalities within the broader civil society landscape. Funding and partnership opportunities are often concentrated among organisations with stronger administrative capacity, English-language proficiency, established documentation systems and operational bases in relatively safer areas ([Ebead & Hirakawa, 2022](#)). As a result, access to resources, training, visibility and international advocacy spaces becomes unevenly distributed. In some cases, advocacy hierarchies emerge in which a limited number of CSOs are repeatedly invited into international consultations and donor dialogues, while smaller grassroots organisations – including those operating in conflict zones or representing highly marginalised communities – remain largely invisible despite facing the highest levels of risk ([Parmer, 2018](#)). These inequalities are further reinforced by donor compliance requirements and funding structures. Grant mechanisms frequently require organisations to register with state authorities or maintain formal banking arrangements that are only accessible through legal registration. In contexts where registration is dangerous, politically compromising or impossible, many grassroots, clandestine and exile-based organisations are effectively excluded from accessing support ([International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2023](#)).

The weakening of protection frameworks has also intensified the mental health burden on activists ([Human Rights Watch, 2025](#)). Psychosocial support was previously a central component of international assistance to civil society organisations, but shifting donor priorities have increasingly deprioritised this dimension. Without sustainable funding streams, psychosocial support and long-term resilience-building programmes remain inadequate, leaving defenders vulnerable to enduring psychological harm ([Wells & Maung, 2024](#)).

Third, international protection and support for Myanmar activists in exile remain limited. With many WGSM rights advocates relocating to Thailand following the coup, concerns have intensified regarding both their safety and operational sustainability. Because Thailand has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, many Myanmar asylum seekers lack formal protection status in line with international standards. As a result, exiled activists often operate under precarious conditions marked by visa

insecurity, restricted mobility, risk of arrest (KII02, KII03). At the same time, declining international support has weakened access to psychosocial support, legal aid, and long-term protection mechanisms, despite growing levels of burnout, trauma, anxiety, and economic insecurity among exiled activists.

These legal constraints also create major operational barriers for exiled organisations. Many groups are unable to formally register, open bank accounts, or access conventional funding channels, forcing them to rely on informal and insecure support networks. For example, an exiled LGBTQI+ rights organisation based in Mae Sot reportedly operates without legal registration and depends on informal donations to sustain community outreach and HIV prevention activities ([Outright International, 2024](#)). Such conditions significantly undermine long-term organisational sustainability, institutional development and access to protection resources.

For WGSM rights defenders, these vulnerabilities are further compounded by the politically sensitive nature of their work, particularly where advocacy intersects with LGBTQI+ inclusion, reproductive rights, or criticism of Buddhist fundamentalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, exile does not insulate activists from repression, as Buddhist fundamentalist and nationalist networks maintain transnational linkages that facilitate continued surveillance, intimidation, and harassment across borders ([Fortify Rights, 2024](#)).

In conclusion, the post-coup landscape in Myanmar has exposed the fragility and unevenness of international aid and support frameworks for WGSM rights CSOs, significantly constraining the ability of frontline organisations to sustain rights-based work under increasingly hostile conditions.

### 3.4. Alignment with the National Unity Government



Since the 2021 coup, as a way to protect themselves, many WGSM rights organisations have aligned themselves with Myanmar's broader pro-democracy resistance movement, particularly NUG and other mechanisms aligned with it. This section examines two dimensions of the relationship between WGSM organisations and the NUG: first, the forms of symbolic and practical support and inclusion facilitated through this alignment; and second, the structural limitations that constrain the NUG's ability to provide meaningful protection and long-term institutional support to WGSM rights advocates.

The NUG has attempted to position itself as the legitimate government of Myanmar (in exile) and a more inclusive and rights-oriented alternative to the military regime. For WGSM rights advocates, alignment with NUG serves both symbolic and practical functions.

Symbolically, it situated WGSM rights within the broader democratic struggle. It has done so by incorporating gender equality and LGBTQI+ inclusion into its political discourse and emerging governance structures from the outset. For instance, through the Ministry of Women, Youths and Children Affairs, the NUG has articulated commitments to embedding gender equality within a future federal democratic framework. Similarly, the appointment of Aung Myo Min, an openly gay human rights defender, as Minister of Human Rights carried significant symbolic value, signalling an effort to frame WGSM rights as integral to democratic reconstruction rather than peripheral social concerns ([Kyaw, 2021](#)). This stands in sharp contrast to the junta's Buddhist fundamentalist framing that portrays WGSM rights advocacy as morally deviant or foreign-influenced.

The NUG has also sought to engage feminist and LGBTQI+ civil society actors in consultations on constitutional reform, transitional justice and accountability processes. Through documentation initiatives highlighting gender-based violence under military rule, the NUG has attempted to both expose systemic abuses and establish foundations for future accountability mechanisms (Mizzima, 2025). These consultative efforts represent an important ideological shift within Myanmar’s resistance movement (Myanmar Campaign Network, 2022).

Pragmatically, the NUG has provided limited but important forms of practical support to WGSM organisations and local CSOs. This includes sub-grants for programme implementation and emergency needs, alongside collaboration with INGOs and local actors on training related to digital security, physical protection, documentation and rights awareness (KII06). At the community level, NUG-linked initiatives have supported sessions on women’s and children’s rights, reporting mechanisms and basic protection procedures. For example, a training conducted in Yesagyo Township in Magway Region reached more than 200 participants and covered women’s rights (Radio NUG, 2025).

Alignment with the NUG, in this regard, not only provides WGSM groups with political legitimacy but also opens up opportunities for them to access solidarity networks and operational funding and support otherwise unavailable under military rule. However, the NUG’s ability and effort are still severely constrained. First, the NUG lacks territorial control, institutional authority, and coercive capacity. While it possesses legitimacy among many resistance actors – including many prominent internal actors such as countries and intergovernmental organisations – it lacks the administrative mechanisms necessary to enforce protections or respond effectively to threats on the ground.

Respondents noted that there are no credible systems through which the NUG can investigate attacks, issue protective measures, or intervene when activists are targeted (KII04, KII05). At the very least, none that is direct and accountable to the NUG as the government. This is because areas not under junta control (including under the control of EAOs aligned with the junta) are either (1) in conflict, where no actors could establish law and order (Wee, 2026) or (2) are in controlled by specific EAOs/EROs or PDFs which may or may not be accountable to the NUG. As one respondent observed:

*“The NUG can only issue statements; they can’t really protect anyone. When activists get arrested or threatened, there’s no system to help. We still rely on our networks, not on the NUG, because they don’t control the area and have no way to investigate or take action” (KII05).*

In practice, alignment with the NUG therefore often functions more as a source of symbolic legitimacy than as a reliable security guarantee. For WGSM rights defenders, whose work already intersects with politically and socially sensitive issues, these insecurities are compounded by continued exposure to surveillance, harassment, and precarious living conditions.

Second, and stemming from the lack of authoritative control, financial limitations significantly constrain the NUG’s support capacity. Reliant largely on diaspora remittances, crowdfunding campaigns, informal donations and alternative financial channels – in addition to the limited tax that it could levy – the NUG lacks the stable institutional funding available to recognised governments (Tuseng et al., 2024). The absence of formal banking access has also forced reliance on intermediaries and cryptocurrency-based transfers, increasing risks of delays and financial instability. Consequently, assistance remains

largely reactive and emergency-oriented rather than institutionalised or preventative. Funding unpredictability limits long-term planning, continuity of services and relocation support for at-risk activists ([Human Rights Watch, 2025](#)).

Third, these limitations are particularly acute for exiled organisations and activists operating in Thailand. Because the Thai government does not recognise the NUG as a legitimate governing authority, NUG-affiliated organisations cannot formally register, access legal protections or secure residency status. Many activists therefore operate through temporary visas, informal arrangements or undocumented pathways, leaving them vulnerable to arrest, detention, or deportation (KII04, KII05) (also see Section 3.3).

Fourth, the NUG’s longer-term political legitimacy may itself become increasingly contested. The junta’s efforts to “normalise” its rule via the 2025–26 general elections risk complicating this position internationally. In the coming future, some states and entities may gradually shift toward pragmatic engagement with the SAC-backed political order or treat post-election Myanmar as having returned to a degree of political “normalcy”, regardless of the elections’ credibility. Such developments could weaken international recognition and diplomatic space for the NUG, thereby further constraining its ability to mobilise resources, maintain external support networks and advocate effectively for at-risk WGSM organisations.

Overall, alignment with the NUG has provided WGSM organisations with important symbolic recognition and limited operational support. However, the absence of territorial control, institutional authority and sustainable funding significantly constrains the NUG’s ability to function as an effective long-term protection mechanism for WGSM rights defenders.

### 3.5. Long-term Advocacy



Long-term advocacy functions as another important, albeit constrained, protective strategy for WGSM rights defenders in post-coup Myanmar. Unlike immediate security responses focused on physical survival or emergency relocation, long-term advocacy seeks to address the structural conditions that enable backlash and repression in the first place. This section, first, outlines current trajectories of WGSM rights advocacy in the post-coup context; then, secondly, explores shortcomings.

On current trends, first, one important development has been the emergence of alternative governance structures in territories controlled or influenced by NUG (and aligned entities), as mentioned in the previous section. In some of these areas, resistance actors and local communities have experimented with decentralised forms of governance, including parallel justice systems, humanitarian administration and local political structures ([Haines, 2025](#)). For WGSM rights advocates, these evolving governance spaces create opportunities to push for the incorporation of gender equality, women’s participation and minority protections into emerging political frameworks before exclusionary norms become institutionalised in a future political framework – as was the pre-coup situation ([Ibid.](#)). Women have also assumed increasingly visible leadership roles within resistance movements, humanitarian operations and local organising structures, allowing advocates to frame women’s and WGSM rights as central components of a future federal democratic Myanmar rather than peripheral social concerns ([HRC, 2024](#)).

Second, advocacy efforts have further sought to normalise women’s leadership and challenge patriarchal and exclusionary social norms embedded within both state and resistance structures.

Compared to previous political transitions in Myanmar, resistance discourse following the 2021 coup has included more visible rhetoric surrounding gender equality and inclusion (HRC, 2024). WGSM advocates have attempted to leverage this moment to institutionalise more inclusive political norms within resistance governance, constitutional discussions, and community-level organising processes. These developments are significant because greater political visibility and institutional recognition can contribute to longer-term protection by legitimising WGSM actors within broader democratic movements and reducing their isolation.

Third, advocacy has also increasingly shifted into transnational and exile-based spaces. Following the coup, many WGSM activists fled Myanmar due to arrest warrants, targeted violence or credible threats to their lives (Akhtar-Khan et al., 2026). From exile, activists have continued documenting abuses, engaging international organisations and foreign governments, lobbying for sanctions and accountability measures and maintaining international attention on the gendered dimensions of repression in Myanmar. Diaspora advocacy networks have also played an important role in fundraising, coalition-building and ensuring that WGSM concerns remain visible within broader international human rights discussions (Ibid.). In this sense, exile-based advocacy functions not only as political mobilisation, but also as a protective mechanism that preserves organisational continuity, leadership capacity and international pressure against the junta and associated Buddhist fundamentalist actors.

Despite these developments, the protective capacity of long-term advocacy remains severely constrained. First, governance experiments across resistance-controlled territories remain highly uneven and decentralised. The absence of unified constitutional frameworks or formal coordination mechanisms means that protections for WGSMs vary considerably across regions, leaving many WGSM advocates dependent on local political dynamics and leadership attitudes (KII03; HRC, 2024). Without codified institutional guarantees, gender inclusion risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative. Respondent explains:

*“Every organisations – EAOs, NUG [and other] – is led by men. So, it is very difficult to get the point about women’s rights at the highest level and have them take action on this.*

*Issue of gender equality is a factor that the military is trying to use to divide different ethno-religious communities. This is partly because some groups are embracing [gender rights] more clearly [while others don’t]” (KII06).*

Secondly, prolonged conflict and repression have significantly weakened the organisational foundations necessary for sustained advocacy. Many experienced WGSM organisers have been imprisoned, displaced, killed or forced into exile, producing a major loss of institutional memory and disrupting intergenerational leadership development. At the same time, the collapse of education systems, widespread displacement, economic insecurity and shrinking civic space have undermined opportunities for long-term skills-building and political participation (Fishbein & Lusan, 2022; Roy et al., 2023). For women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities, this erosion of educational and economic opportunities further entrenches dependency, precarity and vulnerability to exploitation.

*“Before the 2021 coup, there was significant progress in framework development for women, youth, and LGBT communities, but the current need is for new, holistic mechanisms for protection and defence against the military. Long-term advocacy requires more alliance groups across diverse communities, but the process will be hard and take time. Due to the severe livelihood difficulties and focus on survival faced by people in Myanmar, there is a critical need for ... direction and collaboration among rights defenders” (KII09).*

Thirdly, increasing militarisation has narrowed the space for sustained civic organising. The introduction of mandatory conscription, alongside escalating armed conflict, has intensified pressures on young people across Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Fear of forced recruitment, arrest or surveillance restricts mobility and discourages participation in public activism, training or community organising. Vulnerable populations, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, displaced persons and economically marginalised communities, face heightened risks of abuse and exploitation under these conditions (Oo, 2025).

Overall, long-term advocacy remains an important protective strategy because it seeks to reshape the structural and political conditions that enable backlash against WGSM rights defenders. However, these efforts remain severely constrained. Consequently, long-term advocacy in post-coup Myanmar functions less as a stable pathway toward protection and more as an ongoing struggle to preserve the political and organisational foundations necessary for future rights-based reconstruction.

In conclusion, the chapter demonstrated that while WGSM rights defenders have developed important mechanisms of survival, protection and resistance, these responses remain largely reactive and structurally fragile. Significant gaps persist in areas such as coordination, sustainability, inclusivity and institutional support, with GSM activists and grassroots organisations often facing the greatest barriers to protection. The findings, therefore, highlight the broader structural vulnerabilities confronting Myanmar’s WGSM rights movement under post-coup conditions and provide the basis for Chapter 4, which outlines recommendations to strengthen protection, resilience, and long-term movement sustainability.

## 4. Recommendations



This section highlights that protecting WGSM defenders in Myanmar requires an intersectional and multi-level strategy that addresses the interconnected dynamics of military authoritarianism, Buddhist fundamentalism and shrinking gender rights civic space. Drawing from the gaps identified in Chapter 3, the recommendations below focus not only on immediate protection needs, but also on strengthening the long-term resilience, political inclusion and operational sustainability of WGSM organisations. In this way, advocates can directly challenge the structural logic that links religion, authoritarianism and WGSM oppression.

### United Nations' Human Rights Mechanisms should:

- Integrate analysis of Buddhist fundamentalism and its impacts on gender rights activism into UN monitoring, reporting and advocacy frameworks on Myanmar.
- Advocate and facilitate practical protection mechanisms for WGSM defenders, including confidential reporting channels, emergency relocation support, psychosocial assistance and digital security resources.
- Strengthen coordination between the Human Rights Council, treaty body committees, Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, and Special Rapporteurs to ensure sustained attention to the intersection of authoritarian violence, religious fundamentalism and shrinking civic space.
- Facilitate regular consultations between WGSM organisations, UN country teams, and relevant Special Procedures (both inside Myanmar and in Thailand, where exiles reside) to ensure that protection responses are informed by evolving local risks and realities.
- Encourage member states and donors to restore and sustain democracy, civic space and rights-based funding streams for Myanmar, with specific attention to grassroots and under-resourced WGSM organisations.

### The NUG should:

- Institutionalise protections for WGSM rights defenders within constitutional reform, transitional justice and future legal frameworks, including explicit recognition of protections based on gender identity, sexual orientation and religion.

- Ensure that WGSM organisations are substantively represented – rather than symbolically included – in justice, peacebuilding and governance consultations, particularly those addressing conflict-related sexual violence, social cohesion and constitutional reform.
- Establish a dedicated task force on religious fundamentalism and gender-based violence, working with INGOs and CSOs to monitor hate crimes to ensure accountability.
- Develop clearer operational protection mechanisms for at-risk activists, including referral pathways, emergency response coordination and partnerships with local protection actors.
- Improve transparency and accountability in funding distribution by developing rights-based and gender-responsive allocation mechanisms in consultation with civil society organisations.
- Promote public education and civic messaging that challenge Buddhist fundamentalist narratives.
- Engage aligned entities – CDM, PDFs, EAOs/EROs and the wider pro-democracy network – on gender-sensitive protection standards to reduce risks of discrimination, abuse or exclusion within pro-democracy structures themselves.

#### **International Aid Organisations should:**

- Rebalance aid portfolios to restore long-term investment in democracy promotion, institutional resilience, civic space and rights-based programming.
- Increase flexible and core funding for WGSM organisations, recognising that project-based and short-term grants are insufficient for organisations operating under protracted crisis conditions.
- Simplify funding and compliance mechanisms that disproportionately exclude grassroots, exile-based, ethnic minority and smaller WGSM organisations lacking formal registration or administrative capacity.
- Conduct transparent reporting on aid allocation patterns and localisation practices to reduce perceptions of unequal access and donor favouritism within the civil society landscape.
- Integrate WGSM protection standards into humanitarian and development programming, including safeguards against discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion.
- Assess how aid delivery mechanisms may inadvertently reinforce exclusionary power structures, particularly where junta-linked, nationalist or religiously conservative actors influence local access to resources.
- In the event of suspension or withdrawal of international aid, commission a rapid Human Rights and Conflict-sensitivity Impact Assessment of its withdrawal.

#### **INGOs should:**

- Provide legal and psychosocial assistance programmes for activists at risk, including safe-house coordination, emergency relocation, and rehabilitation support.

- Support CSOs to strengthen monitoring and documentation of religious fundamentalist backlash against WGSM groups.
- Facilitate knowledge-sharing platforms across the region to exchange lessons from other contexts confronting religious extremism and civic space repression.
- Ensure that all programming in Myanmar applies an intersectional gender-equality lens, recognising that religious fundamentalism disproportionately harms women, ethnic minorities and GSMs.
- Advocate internationally for recognition of religiously motivated gendered violence and digital repression against WGSM defenders as distinct forms of human rights abuse requiring targeted protection responses.

**WGSM rights advocates and organisations should:**

- Systematically document and preserve evidence of religiously motivated harassment, online abuse, gendered violence and human rights violations in ways that support future accountability and advocacy efforts.
- Engage progressive monks, religious scholars and community leaders to develop counter-narratives that challenge Buddhist fundamentalist interpretations and promote inclusive understandings of religion and coexistence.
- Strengthen confidential security systems, including secure communications, data protection practices, crisis protocols and community-based early warning mechanisms.
- Institutionalise organisational procedures, safeguarding mechanisms and internal accountability systems, to reduce dependence on informal and reactive protection arrangements.
- Build broader solidarity networks across women's rights, GSM rights, ethnic minority and pro-democracy movements to reduce fragmentation and strengthen collective responses to backlash.
- Invest in leadership development, mental health support, succession planning and trauma-informed organisational practices to reduce burnout and improve long-term sustainability.
- Expand collaboration with diaspora networks and independent media platforms to sustain international attention and counter disinformation targeting WGSM communities.

## 5. Conclusion

In February 2026, the junta-organised “sham” general election received public endorsement from fundamentalist monk Ashin Wirathu, founder of the 969 Movement. This endorsement reinforced the long-standing alliance between military authoritarianism and Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar.

This report has argued that WGSM rights advocates have become key targets within this political project. Since the 1960s, military regimes and Buddhist fundamentalist actors have mutually reinforced narratives portraying women’s rights, LGBTQI+ advocacy, religious pluralism and minority protections as threats to national culture, religion and stability.

The report then moved to show how this ideological environment translates into concrete forms of backlash. The weaponisation of laws, various forms of online harassment directed against WGSM rights advocates, as well as physical violence conducted against them, has created an increasingly integrated ecosystem, where the military and Buddhist fundamentalist groups and actors operate in overlapping and mutually reinforcing ways.

In response, WGSM rights advocates have adopted a range of survival and protection strategies, including security protocols, solidarity networks, international partnerships, engagement with the NUG and long-term advocacy initiatives. However, these measures remain fragmented, reactive and unevenly accessible, particularly for GSM activists, ethnic minorities and grassroots organisations operating in conflict-affected or exile contexts.

Looking ahead, the post-election environment points to continuing and possibly deepening these vulnerabilities. The SAC’s attempts to institutionalise itself through elections and narratives of “normalcy” may encourage some international actors to gradually re-engage with regime-linked structures or reduce pressure on the junta. At the same time, donor fatigue, geopolitical competition and shifting global crises risk further weakening support for WGSM rights organisations and broader pro-democracy networks. In this context, authoritarian consolidation may increasingly proceed through international normalisation rather than overt military domination alone.

However, in this transition to “normalcy”, the report finds little evidence that Buddhist fundamentalism will recede from Myanmar’s political landscape. On the contrary, the post-coup period demonstrates that Buddhist fundamentalist networks remain central to legitimising authoritarian governance and exclusionary frameworks. This means that WGSM rights defenders will likely remain among the most exposed groups in Myanmar’s civic space.

Ultimately, the future of democracy in Myanmar cannot be reduced solely to removing military rule. Previous democratic transitions failed to establish an inclusive political framework capable of addressing the intersection of ethnic, religious and gender inequalities, allowing exclusionary nationalism and militarised politics to persist beneath formal democratic institutions. The protection of WGSM rights defenders is therefore not peripheral, but a central test of whether Myanmar can move toward a genuinely pluralistic and rights-based political order.

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## Annexe I: List of Respondents

Interview Code	Respondent's Background	Date of Interview
KII01	Representative of a Myanmar CSO	9 June 2025
KII02	A Myanmar woman journalist	9 June 2025
KII03	A Myanmar woman journalist	12 June 2025
KII04	Representative of a Myanmar CSO	17 June 2025
KII05	Representative of a Myanmar political organisation	18 June 2025
KII06	Representative of a Myanmar political organisation	25 June 2025
KII07	A Myanmar woman journalist	30 June 2025
KII08	Representative of a Myanmar CSO	9 March 2026
KII09	Representative of a Myanmar CSO	9 March 2026
KII10	Representative of a Myanmar CSO	10 March 2026



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