

Psychological impact of repression in Myanmar

Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders – September 2026

Introduction

This submission to the UN Special Rapporteur's report on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of human rights defenders (HRDs) documents the experiences of HRDs in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup. HRDs, including journalists, women HRDs, community leaders, lawyers, and civil society actors, operate amidst armed conflict, military rule, mass surveillance, and widespread attacks on civic space. Their mental health and psychosocial well-being are shaped not only by direct threats, violence, and arbitrary detention, but also by the cumulative effects of displacement, digital repression, family separation, and continued exposure to human rights violations. Myanmar demonstrates how psychological harms such as fear, hypervigilance, burnout, and self-censorship can affect both individual HRDs and the wider human rights movement, weakening civic participation and collective action.

The mental health impact of defending human rights

Myanmar HRDs in the country and [abroad](#) face a unique combination of [pressures](#) arising from armed conflict, surveillance, criminalisation, displacement, and ongoing exposure to serious human rights violations. Many HRDs have [experienced](#) threats, arrest, forced relocation, loss of livelihood, or separation from family members while continuing to document abuses and advocate for accountability. The cumulative effect of these experiences generates significant psychosocial strain.

Unlike contexts where trauma is linked to a past event, many HRDs in Myanmar experience what may be understood as continuous traumatic stress. Human rights work is frequently conducted amidst ongoing insecurity, military operations, displacement, and threats of arrest, leaving few opportunities for recovery. HRDs often continue [working](#) under the same conditions that generate their stress and trauma.

Common psychosocial impacts

Anxiety and chronic fear are [widespread](#). Many HRDs alter their communications, travel plans, and public activities due to concerns about [surveillance](#), arrest, or retaliation. The constant need to assess personal security creates persistent psychological pressure.

Hypervigilance has become a normalised survival strategy. HRDs frequently assume their communications are monitored and remain alert to possible threats from security forces, informants, or digital surveillance systems. While these behaviours may reduce risk, they can also contribute to long-term stress and emotional exhaustion.

Burnout and emotional exhaustion are increasingly reported across civil society. Years of operating under emergency conditions, combined with limited resources and growing humanitarian needs, have placed substantial burdens on HRDs and organisations. Many continue supporting affected communities despite personal insecurity and fatigue.

Secondary trauma is particularly relevant for journalists, documenters, lawyers, and community workers. Many are repeatedly exposed to testimonies, images, and evidence of killings, torture, displacement, and other abuses. This exposure may affect mental health even when HRDs are not directly targeted.

Survivor guilt is frequently [reported](#) among exiled HRDs. [Many](#) continue advocacy work from exile while colleagues, friends, and family members remain imprisoned, displaced, or exposed to violence inside Myanmar. HRM has documented the [case](#) of one individual whose elderly parents were arrested after the military failed to locate him, effectively using family members as hostages to pressure him to stop working.

Groups with distinct psychosocial pressures

Journalists have been among the most heavily [targeted](#) groups since the coup. Many have experienced detention, threats, loss of livelihood, or forced exile while continuing to report on violence affecting their own communities.

Exiled HRDs often escape immediate physical risks but face new [challenges](#), including legal insecurity, economic hardship, separation from family members, and ongoing concern for communities inside Myanmar.

Women HRDs frequently face gender-specific harassment, attacks on reputation, online abuse, and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities alongside broader political repression. HRM has documented [coordinated](#) online [attacks](#) involving doxxing, sexualised disinformation, and the publication of personal information about women activists and journalists. These campaigns are designed not only to discredit women but also to create fear, emotional distress, and withdrawal from public participation.

HRDs in conflict-affected areas experience multiple overlapping threats arising from armed conflict, displacement, movement restrictions, surveillance, and fear of arrest. HRDs in states like Kachin and Northern Shan [have](#) severe stress, trauma, and burnout among local HRDs.

This suggests that mental health impacts are not isolated experiences affecting a small number of individuals. Rather, they have become a structural feature of the environment in which HRDs operate in Myanmar.

Contextual factors in mental health

The psychological challenges experienced by Myanmar HRDs cannot be separated from the wider environment of repression that has developed since the 2021 coup. Armed conflict, surveillance, criminalisation, displacement, and attacks on civic space create [conditions](#) in which psychological harm accumulates over time. These factors do not operate independently. Rather, they reinforce one another and contribute to a sustained environment of fear and insecurity.

Digital surveillance and psychological harm

Myanmar's military has developed an increasingly sophisticated surveillance infrastructure that includes communications interception, biometric systems, facial recognition technologies, internet restrictions, and monitoring of digital communications. Civil society organisations have [documented](#) how these systems are used against journalists, activists, and political opponents.

While surveillance is often discussed as a [privacy](#) or freedom of expression issue, its psychological effects are equally significant. HRM has [documented](#) the military's use of facial recognition systems, biometric databases, Deep Packet Inspection technologies, communications interception, and random phone checks. The practical consequence is that many HRDs [assume](#) they are continuously monitored and adjust their behaviour accordingly, including restricting communications, avoiding public activity, and limiting contact with sources and communities.

Surveillance also contributes to [self-censorship](#) and social isolation. HRDs may avoid discussing sensitive issues, restrict communication networks, or reduce public engagement. Over time, these measures can weaken trust within organisations and undermine collective action.

HRM has also [documented](#) a “dox-to-arrest” pipeline in which pro-military actors publish the personal information of journalists and HRDs online, after which security forces use that information to locate or target individuals. The resulting fear extends beyond those directly targeted, contributing to broader self-censorship and withdrawal from advocacy activities.

Criminalisation and arbitrary detention

The criminalisation of dissent remains a major source of psychosocial harm. Since the coup, journalists, activists, civil society leaders, and HRDs have faced arrest, prosecution, and threats under a broad range of [laws](#). The risk of detention extends beyond those directly targeted and influences decision-making throughout civil society.

HRDs must routinely assess whether ordinary activities, such as publishing reports, organising meetings, or interviewing witnesses, could result in arrest or retaliation. This uncertainty creates chronic stress and reinforces fear, particularly when family members may also be affected by State actions.

Conflict, displacement, and cumulative trauma

Myanmar's armed conflict adds a further layer of psychological pressure. Many HRDs operate in areas affected by airstrikes, displacement, humanitarian crisis, and ongoing military operations. In addition to documenting violations, HRDs often provide humanitarian support and community protection, increasing their exposure to trauma and stress.

HRDs in Kachin and Northern Shan States [face](#) severe psychological stress linked to surveillance, fear of arrest, movement restrictions, displacement, and the pressures of continuing documentation and humanitarian work amidst active conflict. These [documented](#) experiences illustrate how conflict and repression combine to create cumulative mental health burdens over time.

Psychological harm as a mechanism of shrinking civic space

The cumulative effect of surveillance, criminalisation, conflict, and displacement is a chilling effect on civic participation. Individual HRDs decide not to engage in advocacy due to fear and insecurity. Existing HRDs may withdraw from public life, reduce activities, or leave the sector altogether. Organisations may become less willing to undertake sensitive work.

For this reason, psychological harm in Myanmar should not be understood solely as a health issue. It is also a civic space issue. HRM has previously [argued](#) that surveillance in Myanmar is designed to atomise dissent by eroding trust, fragmenting civic networks, and discouraging collective action. Attacks on HRDs therefore affect more than individual well-being. They weaken organisations, reduce community participation, undermine relationships of trust, and diminish civil society's capacity to document violations and pursue accountability.

Attacks on HRDs therefore affect more than individual well-being. They weaken relationships of trust, reduce organisational capacity, discourage community participation, and undermine the collective ability of civil society to document violations and pursue accountability.

Access to support and care

Despite significant psychosocial needs, access to mental health support for Myanmar HRDs remains [limited](#). Specialised trauma-informed services are scarce both inside Myanmar and among exile communities. HRDs in conflict-affected areas face additional barriers arising from insecurity, displacement, and weak health infrastructure. Exiled HRDs often encounter severe financial constraints, uncertain legal status, language barriers, and limited access to public healthcare systems.

Stigma continues to discourage help-seeking among HRDs. In many organisations, a culture of sacrifice can pressure people to keep working despite exhaustion, trauma, or poor mental health. Many HRDs put victims' needs ahead of their own and see seeking support as weakness. As a result, burnout grows, and distress often stays hidden until it becomes severe.

Security concerns also discourage help-seeking. HRDs frequently operate in environments characterised by surveillance and low trust, creating fears regarding confidentiality and potential

exposure of sensitive information. As a result, many rely on informal support networks rather than professional services.

A broader protection gap exists because support programmes commonly prioritise physical security, relocation, and legal assistance while giving less attention to burnout, trauma, survivor guilt, and chronic stress. Myanmar demonstrates that mental health and psychosocial support should be recognised as core components of HRD protection rather than optional services. Research and protection efforts should also pay greater attention to the psychosocial [impacts](#) of digital surveillance, prolonged exile, family separation, and organisational burnout, all of which remain underexamined despite their significance in Myanmar.

Organisational and community responses

In the absence of State protection, HRDs have developed community-led responses to support well-being and resilience. Peer-support networks, informal solidarity structures, and collective care practices often serve as the primary sources of psychosocial support. These mechanisms are particularly important because HRDs frequently feel most comfortable discussing mental health challenges with trusted colleagues who understand the realities of repression, surveillance, and displacement.

[Initiatives](#) supporting Myanmar's exile communities have increasingly incorporated psychosocial support. Programmes have sought to strengthen access to trauma-informed and culturally appropriate care for HRDs living outside Myanmar.

Some organisations have begun incorporating well-being considerations into organisational policies and practices. These efforts remain uneven and are often constrained by limited resources.

However, these responses remain insufficient to meet demand. Most rely on limited funding and small numbers of trained providers, while many HRDs in rural, conflict-affected, and displacement settings remain underserved. The Myanmar experience demonstrates the value of collective care but also highlights the need for greater institutional support and long-term investment.

State responsibilities and protection frameworks

Under international human rights law, States have a responsibility to create an enabling environment in which HRDs can operate safely and freely. In Myanmar, however, State institutions are frequently perceived as the primary source of risk rather than protection. Since the coup, HRDs have been subjected to surveillance, criminalisation, arbitrary detention, censorship, and intimidation by military-controlled institutions.

Myanmar lacks effective protection mechanisms capable of addressing either physical or psychosocial risks faced by HRDs. Judicial institutions lack independence, legal frameworks are frequently used against civic actors, and no meaningful State-led programmes exist to address the mental health and psychosocial well-being of HRDs.

The situation in exile is similarly challenging, even if not as severe as inside Myanmar. In some host countries, HRDs are viewed with suspicion, while in others they are pressured to take up basic employment, limiting their ability to continue the human rights work for which they were given refuge.

The Myanmar context demonstrates that psychological harm is closely linked to State policies and practices. Surveillance, lawfare, restrictions on civic freedoms, and violence generate fear, insecurity, and self-censorship, contributing directly to the deterioration of civic space.

Conclusion

Myanmar demonstrates that repression extends beyond physical violence. Surveillance, criminalisation, conflict, and displacement do not merely produce psychological harm as a by-product of repression. They can create fear, hypervigilance, burnout, and self-censorship that weaken civic participation and the capacity of human rights movements to operate.

The Myanmar experience shows that mental health and psychosocial well-being are not peripheral concerns but essential components of human rights defender protection. Protecting civic space therefore requires not only safeguarding HRDs from physical harm but also addressing the psychological consequences of repression. Without such protection, the long-term sustainability of human rights movements and democratic participation is placed at risk.

Recommendations

- Recognise that, in contexts such as Myanmar, surveillance, criminalisation, arbitrary detention, conflict-related violence, and forced displacement may generate psychological harms that function not only as consequences of repression but also as mechanisms for restricting civic space, discouraging public participation, and weakening human rights movements.
- Protection programmes should recognise that relocation, digital security assistance, legal support, and emergency grants do not by themselves mitigate the psychosocial consequences of repression, and should therefore integrate long-term mental health and psychosocial support into all protection responses.
- Develop dedicated protection responses for HRDs exposed to digital repression, including monitoring and reporting on the psychosocial impacts of surveillance technologies, communications interception, biometric monitoring, and online harassment, which in Myanmar have contributed to fear, hypervigilance, self-censorship, and reduced civic participation.
- Call for long-term protection frameworks for exiled HRDs that address not only physical safety but also family separation, legal insecurity, social isolation, survivor guilt, and other psychosocial harms associated with prolonged displacement and continued engagement with crises in their countries of origin.

- Recognise organisational burnout, staff attrition, secondary trauma, and the erosion of civil society capacity as protection concerns in their own right, and encourage donors and protection actors to support collective-care, staff well-being, and organisational resilience measures as part of efforts to sustain human rights movements operating under prolonged repression.