

## The Mental Health of Journalists and Human Rights Workers in Myanmar – Concept Note

### 1. Background

Since the start of the coup on February 1, 2021, Myanmar has seen an alarming increase in repression of critical voices and dissent. The Tatmadaw has been gradually restricting freedom of expression, media, and communication by drastic means. Licenses of major independent media houses were revoked, media houses were raided and journalists, human rights defenders, and pro-democracy activists were arrested brutally in broad daylight.

Civil society members and critical voices across the country have been forced to give up their livelihoods, go into hiding, and many have had to leave Myanmar due to the threats of violence and arrest by the Tatmadaw. Attacks on the security of critical voices have occurred since February 1:

- Interventions to restrict freedom of communication;
- The passing of decision and laws restricting media freedom;
- Physical attacks and arbitrary arrest of critical voices, human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, members of civil society, and creatives.

The current development suggests that the military has taken a firmer grip on the media, labor unions, activists and dissidents of all forms. Free expression and uncensored media and critical voices are integral to the healthy functioning of any robust democracy. The current situation in Myanmar puts these values under threat.

This project ensures that Myanmar's media, human rights defenders, and critical voices are supported both locally and in exile to securely carry on their professions, strengthening the voices that make up Myanmar's critical discourse. Supporting critical voices and creating spaces for democratic deliberation, we can strengthen and defend the values of democracy and pluralism.

According to AAPP or Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners the junta's security forces have killed over 1100 civilians and arrested more than 8,000 people (over 7000 still detained). Most independent media houses in Myanmar have been forcibly closed, while their staff are being hunted by security forces across the country. This shows that spaces to voice out criticism or express opinions freely are shrinking and becoming more and more dangerous.

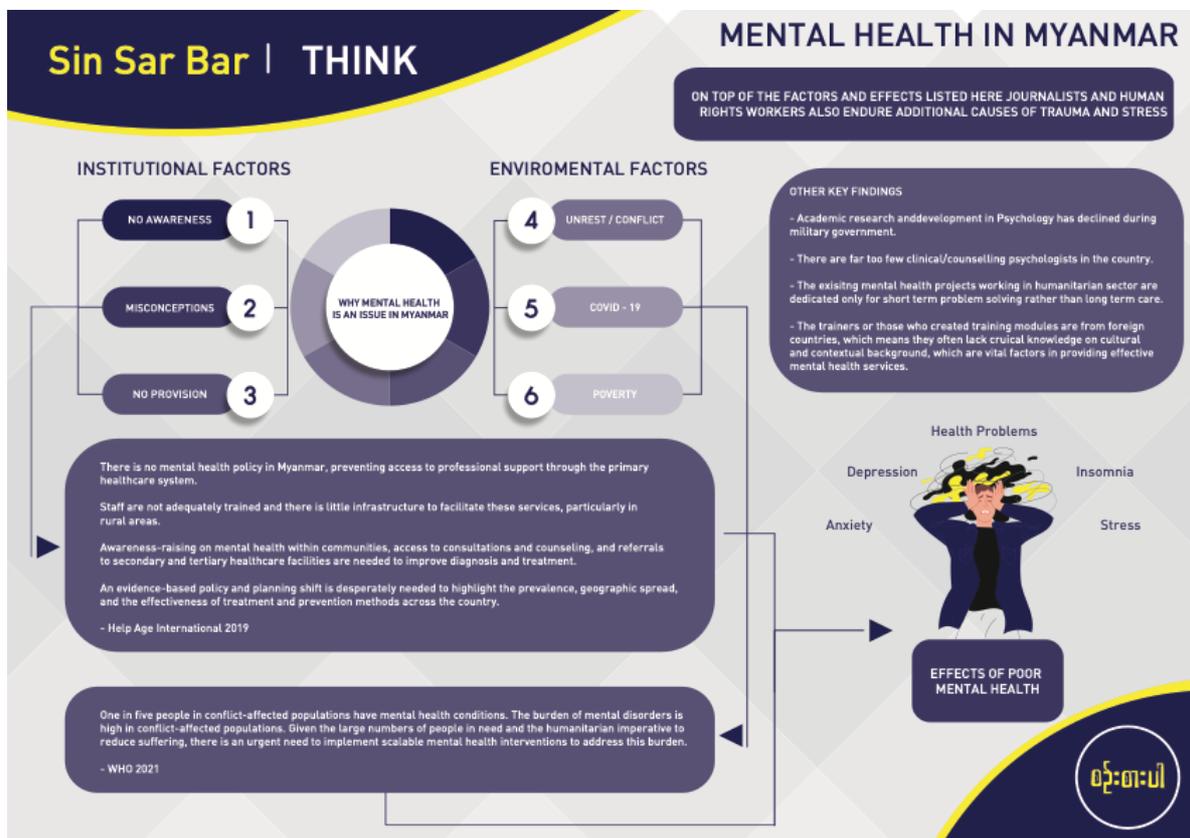
Our project aims to support the critical voices, human rights defenders, and pro-democracy activists both inside Myanmar and in exile by providing psychosocial support, data security training, legal and financial support, loaning equipment, and a community space for critical voices in exile.

### 2. Why Mental Health in Myanmar is a Priority

Mental health issues in Myanmar are an increasingly critical issue. Decades of protracted conflict, the recent military coup, and resulting violent crack downs have had a significant impact on citizens' mental well-being. According to a WHO synthesis of 129 studies, 'one in five people in conflict-affected populations have mental health conditions'. Conditions include: "depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia." The report concludes that, "The burden of mental disorders is high in conflict-affected populations. Given the large numbers of people in need and the humanitarian imperative to reduce suffering, there is an urgent need to implement scalable mental health interventions to address this burden."<sup>1</sup> A 2019 HelpAge International study further demonstrated the seriousness of expanding mental health issues in Myanmar with the following findings:<sup>2</sup>

- There is no mental health policy in Myanmar, preventing access to professional support through the primary healthcare system.
- Staff are not adequately trained and there is little infrastructure to facilitate these services, particularly in rural areas.
- Awareness-raising on mental health within communities, access to consultations and counselling, and referrals to secondary and tertiary healthcare facilities are needed to improve diagnosis and treatment.
- An evidence-based policy and planning shift is desperately needed to highlight the prevalence, geographic spread, and the effectiveness of treatment and prevention methods across the country.

Currently most of the services available for mental health are predominantly Yangon, or online focused, and also re-active as opposed to pro-active - that is to say they require people to actively seek help (which with mental health, people often don't for reasons like stigma or misinformation as we will describe below). More information on research on the topic can be found [here](#).



### 3. Mental Health For Journalists

Journalists and Human Rights Workers also endure additional mental health issues specific to their line of work. According to a 2019 paper<sup>1</sup>, 'Journalists are often first responders and eyewitnesses to violent news events. Trauma reporting can take its toll, resulting in mental health effects. Addressing the solution requires understanding the problem.' Concluding that 'as trauma coverage frequency and intensity increase, so does the severity of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.'

<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0739532919835612?journalCode=nrja&>

The additional stresses that journalists and human right workers deal with include:

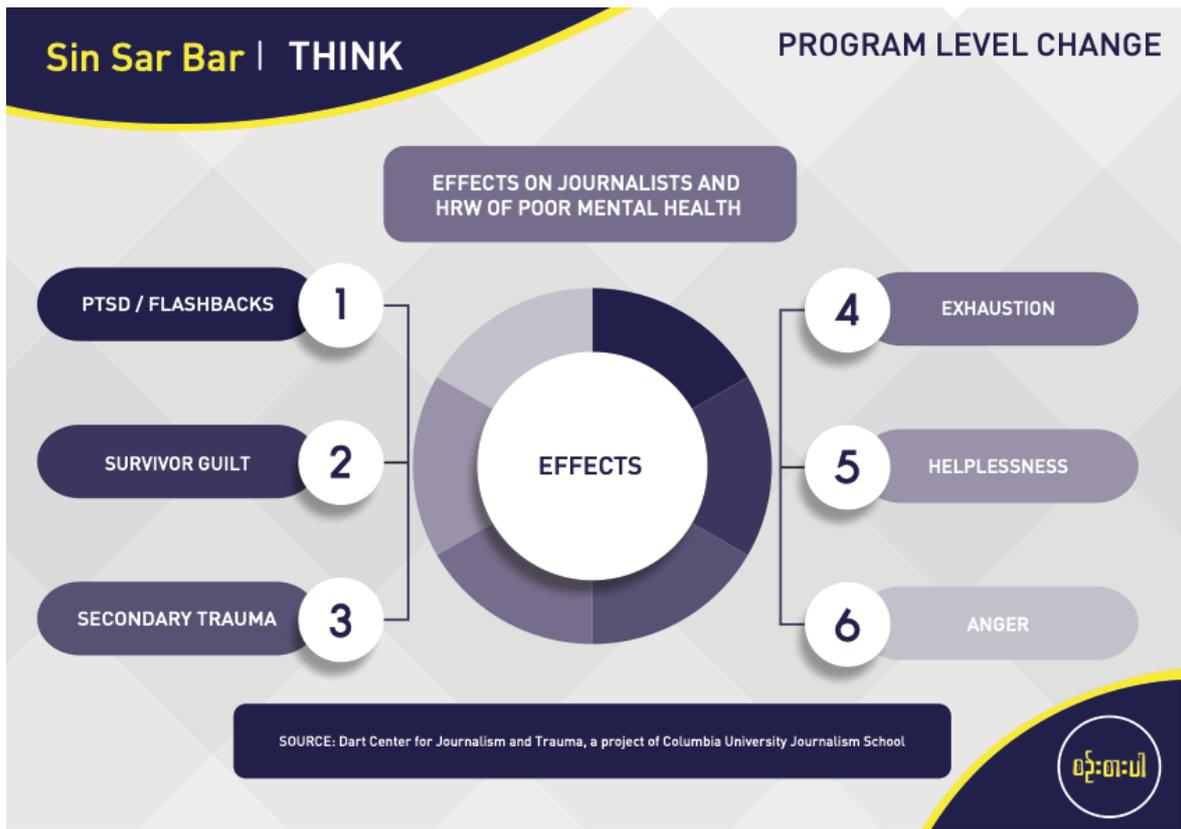
- **INCESSANT WORKLOAD** Due to the constantly evolving nature of news, journalists and HRW are often work many days on end without breaks. this is compounded by the fact that many workers are also freelance, meaning that they are not given regular rest or breaks.
- **SECONDARY / VICARIOUS TRAUMA<sup>2</sup>** Journalists and HRW often deal with content that is severely traumatic in nature, like serious human rights violations. This includes interviewing victims, and viewing photos or videos of disturbing events. This secondary trauma has serious negative effects on their mental health.
- **PERCEIVED RELIENCE** Due to the extreme work that Journalists and HRW often partake in, it is common for both groups to not want to seek help for mental health issues. The mentality is that the victims of these crimes need more help than me, so I don't want to make a fuss.
- **TARGETTED BY AUTHORITIES** As Journalists and HRW are often break stories of crimes perpetuated by authorities, they targeted by said authorities for arrest, violence or other punitive actions. This means that these groups often have to evade capture, which can be incredibly stressful.



This in turn can lead to the following effects: PTSD / Flashbacks, Survivor Guilt, Secondary Trauma<sup>3</sup>, Exhaustion, Feelings of Helplessness, and anger – all on top of the underlying mental health issues that the general population is going through.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/finally-recognizing-secondary-trauma-as-a-primary-issue.php>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/finally-recognizing-secondary-trauma-as-a-primary-issue.php>



A preliminary investigation into the current resources available suggests that there is a complete lack of free and easily accessible resources and counselling services specifically designed for Journalists and Human Rights Workers in either Burmese or other ethnic languages. In addition, the two counselling agencies that offer these specialised services could do with additional capacity training with specialists in the field.

Organisation	Description	Language	For Journalists	Current Status	Cost
Sin Sar Bar	Resources developed for journalists and human rights workers.	Ethnic Languages	Yes	Running	Free
Counselling Corner	A Myanmar-based mental health clinic which offers specialist services for journalists	Burmese	No	Running	Not Free
Aung Clinic	A Myanmar-based mental health clinic which offers specialist services for journalists	Burmese	No	Running	Not Free
Asia Foundation and	5 Module Training course on how to teach first responders to take care of yourselves and your beneficiaries. This course consists of five modules including 1) Your Wellbeing, 2) Supportive Communication in Everyday Interactions, 3) Offering Practical Support, 4) Supporting People who are Experiencing Stress and 5) Helping People in Specific Situations. Whilst this course is primarily designed to support COVID-19 responders, these skills can be applied by first responders to other crisis situations	Burmese	No	Running	Free
Sin Sar Bar	Translation of above resources into different ethnic languages	Ethnic Languages	No	Running	Free
Sin Sar Bar	Social media campaign, including graphics and animations with content designed to educate people about mental health in Myanmar, in 11 ethnic languages	Ethnic Languages	No	Running	Free
MHPSS (UNFPA)	A directory of links to Psycho-Social Support in Various different states in Myanmar	Ethnic Languages	No	Running	Free
MHPSS (UNFPA)	Basic video resources on mental health in different ethnic languages	Ethnic Languages	No	Running	Free
MHPSS (UNFPA)	Basic infographic resources on mental health in different ethnic languages, focused on the impact of COVID-19	Ethnic Languages	No	Running	Free
MHPSS (UNFPA)	A list of available counselling services in Myanmar	Burmese	No	Running	Free
Reuters	Website with extensive resources specifically designed to help journalist's mental health: Stress & Burnout, Trauma, Vicarious Trauma & PTSD, Covid-19, Digital Overload, Mental Illness, Sexual Harassment, Online Harassment, Staff & Manager Support & Guidance, The Peer Network, Employee Assistance Program and CiC Trauma Program, Taking Care of the Mental Health of your Staff, Covering Trauma: Tips For Managers & Editors, Interviewing Survivors & Witnesses, Moral Injury & Journalists, Managing Stress & Trauma On Investigative Projects, Building Resilience, Resilience, Mindarma, Mindfulness, Guided Mindfulness, Self Care	English	Yes	Running	Free

***Mental health support for journalists and human rights workers in Myanmar<sup>1</sup> is thus an incredibly pressing issue that needs to be addressed.***

#### 4. Proposed activities

The theory of change for this project can be summarised as such:

*The current limited provision of mental health services is negatively impacting the physical and psychological health<sup>ii</sup> of Journalists and Human Rights Workers. By providing counselling sessions and mental health-related materials for Journalists and Human Rights Workers, people in this industry will be more resilient to the negative effects the conflict and political crisis has on their mental well-being, and will be better able to do their jobs, which will help society as a whole through the services they provide.*

This project intends to address the problems raised in this concept note, and improve the mental well-being among Journalists and Human Rights workers through the following two objectives

- I. To improve access and availability to mental health services for Journalists and Human Rights Workers
- II. To increase industry awareness/ information about mental health



In order to achieve this, it intends to pursue two activity trees:

1. The provision of counselling services

- a. The first phase of this activity tree will include enlisting a specialist in the areas of mental health and journalism/mental health work, and have them give in-depth training to a small group of experienced counsellors so that this group of counsellors will then be able to address the specific mental health needs of journalists and human rights workers in the field, and furthermore, help develop resources.
  - b. The second phase will involve conducting counselling sessions, either online or in person, with journalists and human rights workers. This can be in the form of individual sessions, group sessions, or workshops.
2. The provision of relevant information and resources
    - a. The first phase of this activity tree will include an information campaign specifically focused on journalists and human rights workers to help combat the stigma and misinformation around issues of mental health. This will take the form of graphics, animations and videos.
    - b. The second phase will involve developing journalist/human right worker specific resources to help them start to address their own mental health issues. In terms of a blueprint, Reuters has an informative website that could be used as a guide<sup>4</sup>.

Once these activities are completed, we hope the following outcomes are achieved:

1. Increased awareness on mental health issues
2. Misconceptions and stigma of mental health issues addressed
3. Increased resilience towards mental health going forward
4. Immediate relief for mental health issue

***Due to the vital role that journalists and human rights workers play not only in documenting events but also providing support for those affected by such events, and raising awareness in the wider population, we feel that a project that focuses on addressing the mental health of these groups is both urgent and of utmost importance, not just to the group themselves but the wider Myanmar civil society as a whole.***

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#### <sup>i</sup> THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Given that a key aspect of mental health counselling is the expression of one's feelings, it is best provided in an individual's mother tongue. While Burmese is spoken widely across the country, for many it is a secondary language, and therefore, wherever possible we will try to communicate in the language that individuals feel most comfortable with. Sin Sar Bar has experience with working in different languages and dialects, and we have a wide network of local language networks who, where possible, can help identify community leaders who speak other ethnic languages and dialects, and also assist with the translation of creative resources

#### <sup>ii</sup> PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Psychiatry is more concerned with a diagnosis which they use to prescribe medicine to treat the illness, whereas psychology is less concerned with labels and instead uses an individual's history and symptoms to make a formulation of what is causing someone's distress, they then design a treatment plan using an evidence based psychological approach. A psychiatrist is classed as a medical doctor, they include a physical examination of symptoms in their assessment and are able to prescribe medicine: a psychologist cannot prescribe, they use communication instead. Our project is focused on

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthreuters.com/introduction>

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a psychological approach, though we have psychiatric contacts who we can recommend beneficiaries to where required.