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To cite this article: Patrick Meehan, Mandy Sadan, Sai Aung Hla, Sai Kham Phu & Nang Muai Oo (2022): Young people's everyday pathways into drug harms in Shan State, Myanmar, Third World Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2022.2090923](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2090923)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2090923>



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Published online: 01 Jul 2022.



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## Young people's everyday pathways into drug harms in Shan State, Myanmar

Patrick Meehan<sup>a</sup> , Mandy Sadan<sup>b</sup>, Sai Aung Hla<sup>c</sup>, Sai Kham Phu<sup>c</sup> and Nang Muai Oo<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Development Studies, SOAS University of London, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; <sup>c</sup>Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), Chiang Mai, Thailand

### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, youth drug use has become a cause of increasing concern across Asia and has inspired hardening drug control measures. However, consistently missing from drug narratives is a deeper engagement with young people themselves on why they use drugs and an understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural forces that shape their interactions with drugs. By engaging with the lived experiences of young people in the Myanmar city of Taunggyi, this paper offers new insights into the everyday pathways and practices through which systemic risk factors – poverty, large-scale local drug production and poor welfare provision – materialise into drug harms. This paper draws attention to three factors that shape these pathways: first, the role that drug-selling and drug consumption plays in the coping strategies that people deploy in an environment of economic hardship; second, the intersections between drug use and gendered conceptions of youth; and, third, the everyday institutional practices of local authorities. Exploring young people's testimonies offers a grounded perspective for considering what can be done to reduce drug harms in a context where the structural determinants of drug risks are deeply entrenched and, in the context of post-coup Myanmar, likely to worsen.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 April 2021  
Accepted 13 June 2022

### KEYWORDS

Drug use  
gender  
coping strategies  
youth  
everyday life  
risk environment

## Introduction

In recent decades, the impact of drug use has become a cause of increasing concern across Asia, and harsh drug control policies have become a populist issue in many Asian countries under the mantra of achieving 'drug-free societies' (Lasco 2020). The Wars on Drugs launched in Thailand under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003, and more recently in the Philippines by President Duterte, are the most notorious examples of this trend, although political leaders in Bangladesh, Indonesia, China and Sri Lanka have all adopted similar rhetoric over the past decade (IDPC 2019). In Myanmar – the focus of this paper – an estimated 50–70% of inmates are in prison on drug charges, and in recent years lawmakers have upheld the use of lengthy prison sentences even for minor drug offences (DPAG 2017; Su Myat and Ye 2019).

**CONTACT** Patrick Meehan  [pm42@soas.ac.uk](mailto:pm42@soas.ac.uk)

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Concerns over youth drug use have been at the forefront of hardening drug control measures across Asia. Although the vulnerability of young people has long been a common trope in the rhetoric of drug control (Kelly 2007; Withers and Batten 1995), this narrative has a particular resonance in Asia where many countries have youthful populations and concerns over rising drug use – especially synthetic drugs – reflect wider anxieties regarding the erosion of traditional values as a result of globalisation (Lasco 2020; Cohen 2014).

Drug policy narratives oscillate between the paternalistic responsibility to protect young people and criticism of their delinquent and deviant behaviour. However, consistently missing from these narratives is a deeper engagement with young people themselves on why they use drugs and an understanding of the wider social contexts that shape young people's lives and decision-making around drugs.

This blind spot has been replicated in much of the scholarship on youth drug issues in Asia. Epidemiological studies, while providing important insights into the incidence of drug-related activities, have rarely paid attention to the importance of social structures in shaping young people's pathways into drugs and their subsequent drug practices. This approach is indicative of how rational choice and individualist models of behaviour are increasingly used to model social life (Giddens 1991; Cramer 2002). People are viewed as 'self-governing agents', and 'those who fail to assess risk and who undertake risky behaviours are categorised as irresponsible' (Nasir and Rosenthal 2009, 242).

Through an analysis of youth drug use in Myanmar, this paper contributes to a small but growing literature that challenges individualised notions of risk and behaviour by focusing on the entanglements of social, political, economic and cultural forces that shape youth's lived experiences of drug use and drug harms in Asia (Cohen 2014; Hardon and Idrus 2014; Hardon and Hymans 2014; Lasco 2014; Liu 2011; Nasir and Rosenthal 2009; Zoccatelli 2014). In this paper, 'drug harms' refers not only to the adverse health and financial impacts that may arise from consuming drugs, but also the damaging effects of certain responses to drug use, such as stigmatisation and long prison sentences even for minor offences.

The paper explores how young people in the city of Taunggyi encounter illicit drugs in their daily lives and their experiences of drug harms. Taunggyi is the capital of Shan State, Myanmar's largest state and the epicentre of Southeast Asia's illicit opium and methamphetamine production. The paper draws upon insights from 40 extended interviews and life stories conducted in Taunggyi between 2018 and 2020 by a team of Shan-identifying researchers based at the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) as part of a broader research project exploring drug issues across Shan State and Kachin State.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted with Shan youth, family members of young people who use drugs, youth leaders, civil society organisations and local officials during two rounds of fieldwork in 2018 and 2019. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated and were analysed jointly by the paper's authors through a series of workshops conducted in Taunggyi, London and virtually. This dataset set was then supplemented with a set of life story interviews conducted by the SHAN team in 2020. Most interviews were conducted in Shan language with young people who identify as Shan, although interviews were also conducted in Burmese with Pa-O and Burmese-identifying populations.

Taunggyi is the focus of our analysis for three reasons. First, the city is an important centre for education and has a large youth population. Second, initial scoping studies conducted by the research team in 2018 revealed that families and communities in Taunggyi have been deeply affected by changing patterns of drug use, especially increasing levels of heroin

injecting and methamphetamine use. Third, the research team has longstanding networks within the city, especially with youth organisations. These networks provided a foundation of trust and rapport between the research team and the young people who agreed to be interviewed, which facilitated the sharing of personal life stories covering highly sensitive issues regarding drug use. Taunggyi thus offered an important and practicable site for the research team to conduct in-depth analysis of drug harms amongst young people and thereby to contribute to wider debates on this issue within Myanmar and across Asia more broadly.

Even though rising drug use in Myanmar – especially amongst young people – is perceived as representing an existential threat that has placed severe pressures on families and communities (Dan et al. 2021), very few studies have examined youth drug use in Myanmar, and none have done so through sustained engagement with young people who use drugs. To start to address this gap, this paper explores how young people in Taunggyi encounter illicit drugs in their daily lives as an entry point for exploring how structural and systemic risk factors – poverty, large-scale local drug production and poor welfare provision – materialise into drug harms. First, we draw attention to the coping strategies that people deploy in an environment of poverty, precarity and insecurity. We explore how these coping strategies increase young people's vulnerability to drugs by embedding drug use and drug-selling in everyday life, and in creating routines in which young people lack adequate care, support and attention. Second, we focus on youth culture and its gendered dimensions. We explore the following questions: What does it mean to be young? How do young people forge identities? And what practices lead drug use to become an increasingly normalised aspect of youth experience? Our findings contribute to existing work that has explored the linkages between notions of masculinity and drug use across Asia (Lasco 2014; Nasir and Rosenthal 2009). We extend this work further by also drawing attention to the experiences of drug use amongst young women – who remain a largely hidden population in most drug studies in Asia – to show how pathways into drug harms are distinctly gendered. Third, we analyse how everyday institutional practices of local authorities – especially the police – shape the ways in which young people encounter drugs and magnify their risk of harm. Whereas existing work has concentrated on the impact of police violence and punitive anti-drug policies in magnifying the risks that young drug users face, we draw attention to a more complex set of practices at work in Myanmar. We highlight the symbiotic relationships that have emerged between local authorities and the illegal drug trade whereby authorities simultaneously facilitate the spread of drugs while also then targeting small-scale drug users and sellers. Together, these three research strands provide a way to start to unravel the assemblage of structural forces and everyday practices that underpin worsening drug-related harms amongst young people in Shan State and, we hope, will inspire much-needed further research in this field.

### Exploring youth drug harms through the study of everyday life

Numerous studies have drawn attention to how social, political and economic forces influence drug use and the need to understand drug harms as 'the epiphenomenal expression of deeper structural dilemmas' (Bourgeois 1995, 319; see also Pilkington 2007; Rhodes 2009; Singer 2004). This literature highlights a vast array of structural factors that magnify the risks of people experiencing drug harms, ranging from proximity to drug production and

drug-trafficking routes to poverty, economic recession, systematic discrimination and marginalisation of certain social groups, and poor welfare provision. Young people are often viewed as particularly vulnerable to these risk factors as they transition away from parental oversight and attempt to forge their own identities and make their own way in the world (Pilkington 2007). Understanding drug harms as a product of the wider 'risk environment' (Rhodes 2009) in which individuals live their lives offers a particularly important entry point for challenging dominant drug narratives in Asia that blame rising drug use on deviant individual behaviours that need to be policed (Zoccatelli 2014).

However, privileging the role of structural forces in shaping patterns of drug use can lead to a struggle to identify the specific pathways and practices through which macro forces lead into drug use, and why drug harms have differential impacts on people within the same local contexts (Duff 2007; Katz 2002). Furthermore, by portraying people who develop harmful drug practices as 'passive victims' of systemic forces that dominate their lives, structuralist approaches overlook how people actively shape the environments in which they live (Cohen 2014; Duff 2007; Fitzgerald 2009; Lasco 2014). As Rhodes (2009, 198) observes, '[r]ather than delineating a composite of interacting macro forces acting upon individuals from outside, risk environments should be understood as emerging out of "an assemblage" of manifold interactions between individuals and environments'.

In this paper, we argue that the study of everyday life provides a way to move beyond these limitations. At its core, this research paradigm analyses people's lived experiences – especially how people 'find meaning, develop habits, and acquire a sense of themselves and their world – and explores how everyday practices relate to wider systems of power, violence and meaning' (Trentmann 2012, 1; see also Ghiabi, this volume; Lefebvre 1947, 1961, 1981; Ludtke 1995). This approach does not study everyday life *sui generis*, as a distinct or separate realm from structural forces. Rather, it offers a relational framework for theorising how systems of power and everyday practices are co-produced. This approach thus articulates a focus on the ways in which structural forces become constituted through quotidian practices, and how it is through these practices that political and economic forces come to order and structure people's daily lives and are thus made 'real'.

Allowing systemic and structural forces to become visible through young people's narrations of their daily lives offers important entry points for advancing research on youth drug issues. As Nasir and Rosenthal (2009) argue, although there has long been a strong association between socio-economic marginalisation and youth drug use, few studies have explored how specific social contexts shape pathways into harmful drug practices. Their study of injecting heroin use amongst young men in slum areas of Makassar, Indonesia, demonstrates how harmful drug practices became rooted in the intersection between deprivation and the pursuit of 'rewa', a local concept of masculinity rooted in notions of courage and toughness. 'Rewa' previously had positive associations with attaining knowledge, esteem and prosperity through study and employment. However, in a context of economic marginality young men have sought alternative pathways to express 'rewa' through more attainable but increasingly risky practices such as fighting, alcohol and drugs use. Lasco's (2014) study of methamphetamine use amongst underclass young men in the Philippines also demonstrates the importance of analysing drug use 'at the level of lived experience' to understand how wider risk environments – in this case economic hardship, insecure and poorly paid informal employment, and easy access to cheap drugs – translate into regular drug consumption. His study shows that while young people were aware of the legal, economic and

physiological risks of using methamphetamines, these risks were outweighed by the perceived benefits drug use provided. Methamphetamines acted as performance enhancers, boosting stamina for those working hard manual jobs and suppressing inhibitions around sensitive activities such as sex work and theft. Drugs also enabled young men to stay awake and suppress hunger in contexts where working hours were irregular, to manage their emotions in a context where life was hard but expectations of masculinity required young men to be confident and assertive, and to forge trust, loyalty and camaraderie.

These studies are also instructive in demonstrating the active role that people play in shaping the drug environments in which they live. Exploring why young people turn to drugs, the effects they are seeking, and the socio-cultural meanings they attach to drugs can provide important insights into how people engage with drugs as part of their efforts to shape their own social worlds, even if such agency becomes self-defeating in cases where drug use results in worsening health and/or financial hardship (see also Cohen 2014; Lin and Zhang 2014; Zoccatelli 2014). Understanding how people become 'active shapers' rather than just 'passive victims' of the drug worlds they frequent thus offers ways to better understand how risk environments are 'made' through everyday practices (Pilkington 2007).

Analysing the lived experiences of young people who use drugs offers a particularly important framework for advancing the field of drug studies in Myanmar and incorporating insights from Myanmar into wider debates around drug policy in Asia. In contrast to the rich body of scholarly work on the politics of drug production and trafficking in Myanmar (Lintner 1999; Htun 2018; Meehan 2021; SHAN 2006; Yawnghwe 1993), rising drug use has garnered little scholarly attention and has typically been characterised as the 'logical outgrowth' of large-scale local drug production (Lim and Kim 2021; ICG 2019). Missing from these 'supply-led narratives' is a more fine-grained analysis of young people's pathways into drug use, how drug harms occur and how they are avoided, and the risk and protective factors that shape why drug-related harms are experienced differentially amongst youth populations.

Addressing these issues can also contribute important insights to a growing body of literature on everyday life in Myanmar that explores the socio-economic challenges that shape people's daily lives and the strategies they deploy to navigate multiple and overlapping structural constraints (Hedström 2021; Kyed 2020; Thawngmung 2019). This literature draws attention to a wide array of systemic challenges that people face in Myanmar, including dysfunctional and under-funded health, education and justice systems; restrictive citizenship laws; limited and precarious employment opportunities; worsening inequality in an economy where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small military-crony elite; and systems of fragmented, authoritarian and militarised political authority. These vulnerabilities are particularly acute in conflict-affected, borderland regions of Myanmar like Shan State, where ethnic minority populations face systematic marginalisation at the hands of a racialised national ideology that has entrenched the dominance of the country's ethnic majority Bamar population (Hedström and Olivius 2020, 390–394; Sadan 2016). This literature has been important in drawing particular attention to how the everyday risk management and coping strategies that the poor deploy to try to secure their economic survival and manage uncertainty in the short-term often reinforce practices and environments that perpetuate poverty, insecurity and harms in the long term (Hedström 2021; Thawngmung 2019; see also Wood 2003).

However, despite the fact that drug use and drug harms have become an increasingly significant aspect of daily life in Myanmar, studies of everyday life have not engaged substantively with drug issues. In the material that follows, we therefore aim to show how an

everyday lens can offer new insights into youth drug issues in Myanmar, and, in turn, how a deeper understanding of drug use and drug practices reveals a different side to everyday life in Myanmar that has largely been overlooked.

## Everyday pathways into drug-related harms amongst Shan youth in Taunggyi

### *Youth in Taunggyi*

Taunggyi is a small city located in southern Shan State with a population of approximately 250,000 people. It acts as the state capital and is home to the Shan State parliament. Taunggyi's population is made up principally of Shan-, Pa-O- and Burmese-identifying populations, but it is ethnically diverse and such categorisations do not do justice to the intersectional identities that such diversity also creates. Taunggyi has been under central Myanmar government control for decades, but adjacent rural townships have experienced protracted armed conflict and remain contested regions.

Taunggyi is an important centre for education with many high schools and universities. The growing stability of rural areas around the city and improvements to rural roads have enabled more young people to come to Taunggyi to study. The city's youth population thus comprises those who grew up in Taunggyi and whose families live in the city, and those who have migrated – often on their own – from rural areas for study and/or work. Almost 40% of Taunggyi's population are aged between 15 and 35, an even younger demographic than the national average (Government of Myanmar 2017b). Almost 20% of the city's population have completed a university degree, diploma or postgraduate qualification, again far higher than the national average (Government of Myanmar 2017b, 17).

In contrast to Taunggyi's educational and administrative importance, the city's economy has struggled over the past two decades. The decline of the Mong Hsu ruby mines – for which Taunggyi had been an important stopping point and market – adversely impacted the city's economy in the 2000s, as has the fact that the town of Aungban has now surpassed Taunggyi as the main trading and distribution hub for agricultural products from southern Shan State. The economy is mainly driven by small retail traders and service providers and there are few opportunities for training and career enhancement. In this context, the relatively larger number of young people educated to a post-compulsory level are not rewarded with better jobs or higher incomes (Government of Myanmar 2017b, xix).

The rising level of drug use, especially amongst young people, is a primary concern in Taunggyi, as it is across much of Shan State. Although there is no publicly available data on the incidence of drug use or drug harms, our interviews show that a wide array of drugs are consumed in Taunggyi, including heroin, 'formula' (opium mixed with cough syrup), 'yaba' (methamphetamine pills) and 'ice' (crystal methamphetamine).

### *Coping strategies*

Most of Taunggyi's population face economic hardship, have limited social safety nets, and are governed by arbitrary and capricious authorities. In such contexts, people are constantly required to juggle multiple competing pressures and risks. They are confronted with the challenges of finding work, providing for their families, dealing with sudden emergencies,

coping with injustices, and trying to fulfil aspirations to improve their lives, while at the same time dealing with the exhaustion, drudgery, and physical and mental depletion that these challenges generate. In such contexts, the risks posed by drugs are but one of a complex set of vulnerabilities competing for 'risk management attention' (Rhodes 2009, 157). Exploring how people deal with the manifold challenges they face in their daily lives offers an important entry point for understanding how coping strategies create daily routines and practices that inadvertently increase young people's risk of drug harms. It also reveals how drug use and drug-selling have become part of the ways in which people try to cope and exert agency within a wider environment of poverty, insecurity and minimal welfare provision, even if these coping strategies often become self-defeating.

The coping strategies that poor families deploy to secure their livelihoods create patterns of living in which young people receive limited care, support and attention. Coping strategies often revolve around parents taking on multiple jobs, working long hours and/or migrating for work. This creates daily routines in which young people – especially boys – have little oversight and are left to entertain themselves, for example travelling to and from school on their own or with older students, being sent to live in school boarding houses, or having to find ways to fill their after-school time such as hanging out with friends or spending hours in gaming shops. As one young man reflected of his high school years, home became 'like a second place'. In more severe cases, parents take their children out of school, either because they can no longer afford school fees, books and uniforms, or because they require their children to work to supplement meagre household incomes. Although these are not new or unique phenomena, they generate particular risks in an environment where drugs are cheap and widely accessible and where guidance and oversight by parents and teachers can be important protective factors in limiting young people's exposure to drugs. It also creates contexts in which many young people rely on their peers for support and advice, including on drug issues. As one student reflected,

I have been living in a boarding house since I was a small kid as my parents are working in Thailand. I only visit my home village during holidays ... I started using formula when a friend said it is a cure for coughing. I felt sleepy after I had taken it. Later, I found out that when I didn't use it I had headaches and diarrhoea.

In a context where few families have access to any kind of welfare support, periods of ill-health, unemployment or imprisonment can result in prolonged hardship that further limits the scope for families to provide oversight or support to young people. This is captured in the following testimony of a young woman in Taunggyi:

We have five members in my family. I am the oldest sister and I have two younger brothers ... We went through a big hardship as our father got arrested and sent to prison. Everything was in chaos, since our father was the only one with income ... While me and my mother were busy and struggling to help with my dad's court case, we failed to watch over my youngest brother ... We noticed only when he became heavily addicted to drugs ... I had to work really hard, as I have to support my father in the prison by preparing his food and medicine ... My mother also needed regular medical consultation, while my younger brother also now needed support. There was also the cost of our living that I have to cover. Those were the darkest days of my life.

In response to these kinds of economic hardship, some resort to small-scale drug selling to try to generate small amounts of extra cash on the side, despite the risks involved. As one Taunggyi resident reflected,



One of my friends who is running a betel nut shop uses and sells drugs. Selling means he got a commission. But he is just a small-level dealer. It is so dangerous for them [small-level dealers], because when something happens, they are the ones in the front line to get arrested. Most of the arrests target the small-level dealers, not the big dealers and the producers.

In some cases, the decision to sell drugs is a calculated risk that people make to try to improve their situation. In other cases, it is an unwanted practice that has been forced upon people. This has been a particular aspect of the drug environment in certain areas around Taunggyi linked to the illicit opium economy, as one local government officer explained,

When it is poppy harvesting season, the opium traders come to the villages and buy the opium. Before, the payments for opium were made in cash ... But after 2015 the payment pattern changed. Opium traders pay the local farmers half in cash and half in WY [methamphetamine] tablets. This put the farmers in a trap as it turned them into small-time drug dealers. Some farmers would sell those meth tablets at a really cheap price. This way WY tablets have become widely available.

As another Taunggyi resident continued,

Some students from the village coming to study in Taunggyi bring a pack of meth, as his family has no money. His friends would buy those meth from him and sell them in a more profitable way to cover their own school fees and other expenses. This way the use of meth is widespread amongst students at schools. The youngest meth dealer that I met was only in Grade 9 [13–14 years old].

Small-scale sellers will often try to manage the risks they face from authorities by selling within their own social networks or to people – including youth – who are not seen as posing a risk of informing authorities. These kinds of coping strategies have brought drugs into a host of everyday settings throughout the city, including tea shops, gaming shops, schools and workplaces. In so doing, drugs are no longer viewed as exceptional, but have become embedded within everyday life through the small-scale activities of many different people who unintentionally or unwillingly become complicit in shaping an environment in which drugs are widespread and easy to access.

As has been documented in other contexts of socio-economic deprivation across Asia (Lasco 2014), drug use in Taunggyi has also become an important aspect of how people attempt to cope with the ‘violence of everyday life’ (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Habitual drug use, like alcohol, has for many become a form of self-medication to deal with tired bodies, stress and anguish. The drugs that are available in Taunggyi have different characteristics and are valued in different ways: methamphetamine as a ‘tonic’ to provide energy, alertness and confidence; opium and heroin as a way to relax and, in the words of one young user, to ‘go to heaven’ and ‘forget all troubles’. It is important to situate people’s therapeutic use of illicit drugs within a broader historical context of opium’s longstanding use in Shan society as a medication for various ailments including diarrhoea, angina, rheumatism, toothache, coughs and sore eyes, as well as a source of relaxation and pleasure. Self-medication using powerful drugs (ostensibly ‘prescription drugs’) that are available over the counter has also long been the norm in Myanmar considering the limited access to formal healthcare, as is the case in many countries (Cohen 2014; Hardon and Hymans 2014). This has reduced inhibitions to try other kinds of available drugs, especially methamphetamines which are synthetically produced and come in pill form.

These issues are not specific to youth but do offer insights into young people's pathways into drug harms. First, they reveal how habitual drug use is commonplace in many family settings. Indeed, many young people spoke of growing up in families where drug use (especially by fathers) was common and, where homes were small, took place in everyday living spaces frequented by children. Although in some cases young people narrated how negative experiences of parental drug and alcohol use strengthened their resolve to avoid these substances, in other cases it provided a frame of reference in which drug use was normalised. Like their parents' generation before them, many young people have turned to drugs when struggling with physical ailments or emotional pain, or to have more energy. The decision to start taking drugs was often motivated by a desire to feel more confident and relaxed when moving into new school, university or work environments. For others, regular drug use offered a way to be more productive and achieve more, as explained by one young man:

I used to work at a mobile phone company ... At that time, I mostly used yaba. Young people use meth, I think because they like it. They become much more productive, such as being able to concentrate better. Many of my colleagues also do drugs, including the women. There are drug users amongst employees in almost every company. Especially those who are responsible for marketing. The reason is they become more productive when they use drugs, as they have to engage with and talk to customers.

For many young people, using drugs has also become a way of dealing with the pressures they experience from the growing gap between their aspirations (inspired in part by growing exposure through the internet to better lives) and the opportunities actually available to them, as explained by a youth leader working in Taunggyi:

Most young people who graduated from university don't have any job opportunities. They just go back home. In my community, parents believe that if you graduated you have to work somewhere like government, a company, or an NGO [non-governmental organisation] ... But if you go back in the community and do nothing after you graduated, they will pressure you. They say you already graduated so why don't you do something? And parents pressure other students' parents. They say why did we educate our children if after they graduated they are just going to work like us? This is a lot of pressure for young people. So, some, they use drugs, some also alcohol.

The 2014 Myanmar census – the first to have taken place in the country since 1983 – provides data that illuminates the challenges facing young people. Despite the major flaws inherent in how the census was conducted, in the absence of other cross-sectoral, comparative, national data, the census gives some telling insights into young people's lives in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> The Census Thematic Report on Children and Youth finds that there is little job mobility for most people aged 15–24 and that the age for marriage increases as people move to urban areas, where they are less likely to be able to establish their own households (Government of Myanmar 2017a, xix). Most strikingly, the census reveals that youth unemployment increases with higher educational attainment (ibid). The study of everyday life translates these statistics through the stories of people's lived experiences and reveal how these experiences contribute to increasing youth drug use.

In some cases, young people have been able to manage regular drug use in a positive way, or at least without adverse effects. However, for many of those we interviewed, the initial benefits were gradually replaced by worsening health and financial burdens. This is reflected by the experiences of one Taunggyi student,

I started taking drugs with friends when I first moved to high school in Taunggyi. What I took was called 'Formula'. When I first started using it, it was so good ... I felt as if I had no hunger, desires and needs in my life. When doing drugs, everything was so peaceful around me, I enjoyed it a lot. But when I was not on drugs, I felt as if all the world's troubles were on me ... When I did not do drugs, my hands and legs felt such terrible pain that I was exhausted. Later some people recognised something different about me. Only then did I get frightened, realising that the drug had become essential for me and I had to use it every day. By then it cost me 10,000 kyats<sup>3</sup> a day.

Young people also recounted how their drug use morphed into small-scale drug-selling as a way to generate the income they needed to keep buying drugs, and often resulted in the spread of drug use amongst their friends and peers. These coping strategies have played an important role in perpetuating the kinds of risk environment in which they themselves have become victims.

### *Ways of being young: youth culture and its gendered dimensions*

Young people's pathways into drug-related harms in Taunggyi are also rooted in the ways in which drug use has become an increasingly normalised aspect of youth experience. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to understand how young people's experiences of drug harms are shaped by (1) meanings of youth; (2) the difficulties young people face in realising idealised notions of youth; and (3) how drug use and drug selling have become a way in which young people have sought to live up to these ideas in their daily lives.

The relationship between drugs and how meanings of youth are understood and 'performed' in everyday life is distinctly gendered. Notions of masculinity are particularly important in accounting for high levels of drug-related harms amongst young Shan men (as shown in other contexts across Asia: see Lasco 2014; Nasir and Rosenthal 2009), but have also created more tolerant societal attitudes towards male drug use. Conceptions of youth masculinity in Shan culture revolve around several core tenets. The first of these is that for men, youth is a period of freedom and limited responsibility. The Shan define the lifetime of a person through 'Sam Parn Jet Sean' or the three ages, a notion that is influenced by Buddhism. The first stage is childhood and youth, the second stage is the age of work, and the third stage is old age. In the first stage, including 'youth', men are supposed to learn and receive an education. It is considered an enjoyable time before opportunities become more limited through marriage, the pressures of being a breadwinner, and the need to secure the longer-term prosperity of the household. Youth is also seen as a time of experimentation when men should embrace new experiences. Young men are also expected to show self-assurance and courage. This notion has various meanings in everyday life, including the confidence to speak up to elders, to not feel fear in the face of local authorities, and for newly married men to be able to control their wives.

Young men in Taunggyi grow up in a context where the opportunities to fulfil idealised notions of freedom, exploration, experimentation and courage around their peers in their daily lives are limited. As one youth worker in Taunggyi reflected, 'other than drinking alcohol, playing videogames, or sitting around in the tea shop, there are no other activities or jobs for young people to do or engage in. Even at school there are no other extra-curricular activities'. In a context where drugs are cheap and accessible, taking drugs has become increasingly embedded in male youth culture because it is viewed as a practice that entails

risk, offers new experiences, requires a degree of courage, and can generate confidence and a sense of empowerment. The linkages between drug taking and performances of masculinity are captured in the following narrative of a young man in Taunggyi reflecting on his first experience with drugs:

When we were in 9<sup>th</sup> Standard, my friends drank alcohol and skipped classes ... I expected that we could go swimming and watch films. But it was not as I expected, we ended up at a small house at the corner. My friends used black opium, I thought that it was not right at the time but my friends asked me to use it. They said, would you like to try it? They would pay for it. They were my senior friends ... When they offered me drugs, I recall my aim, I would like to be a teacher, so I should have experiences. My friends went to buy drugs ... the elder people in the community did not prevent us at all even though we were younger than 18. They even gave a discount and suggested we use it at the corner. My friends also said, if you would like to try it, you can. We, as men, have to try everything.

These recollections offer some insights into how shared experiences of drug taking have become embedded in the ways in which young men seek to establish social bonds. Sharing drugs and providing them for free within the group is a way of establishing friendships and social networks. In environments where young ethnic minority men have long been treated with suspicion by state authorities, drugs can also be way of increasing confidence, especially when out at night. The extent to which exposure to drugs has become part of male youth culture is reflected by how young men perceive that the only way to avoid drugs is to change their everyday practices by breaking away from friendship networks and social bonds, as one university students explains of his own experiences:

Just like drinking alcohol, I would use drugs just to socialise and have fun when I met my friends ... But I was also worried and concerned that I would get addicted. I had to remind myself that I cannot use like my friends as I do not have money like them. At some point I noticed that I almost got addicted, so I stayed away from this environment. I put so much effort in staying away from friends who use drugs that when I see them, I would even run away from them. I have seen a lot of friends who were imprisoned because of drugs.

Selling drugs has also been tempting to some young men to try to break out of the confines of their existing lives. This is clearly reflected by one young man's recollections of the different life paths taken by him and his best friend:

My friend used to talk to me that he would take the short cut to get rich ... At the time, he said, friend can you think that we have no money, no land and no house. We have to stay living with our parents. I pity you, if you would like to get rich, you have to be brave. You have to be brave and do drug business. You would be a rich person within 3 years. So, I think that because he thought that way, he became a drug peddler ... Now, he has a two-storey house and many cars. He was able to get married when he was 19 years old.

Although youth drug use is particularly associated with men and notions of masculinity, drug use amongst young women is increasingly common. Accurate figures do not exist, but one local harm reduction organisation in Taunggyi estimated that 30% of those that registered with them between 2016 and 2018 were women. In adolescent years, the limited freedom afforded to girls, stronger parental oversight, and expectations that they stay within the domestic realm appear to reduce their exposure to the kinds of everyday interactions with drugs recounted by high-school age boys. Growing up in a cultural context where women who drink, smoke or take drugs are seen as 'bad' people also shapes early attitudes

towards drugs. However, as young women reach their late teens, access to drugs increases, especially in urban settings where women are increasingly able to continue into higher education and take on jobs outside of the household. In our interviews, young women reflected on how they took drugs to feel more confident in new social settings away from their families, to perform better (in their studies, at work or in karaoke), or to suppress hunger as part of aspirations to become thinner, often without a clear understanding of the effects of the drugs they were using.

Whereas pathways into drug harms amongst young men are linked to the role that drugs play in strengthening social bonds and demonstrating masculinity, for young women worsening harms were linked to experiences of marginalisation and everyday practices of self-isolation. Female drug use is highly stigmatised in Shan society – described as something ‘not even a husband could accept’. Many young women have become increasingly vulnerable to drug-related harms in a context where new freedoms and educational and job opportunities have increased access to and motivations for using drugs, but within an environment where long-held conceptions of femininity mean there is little acceptance or support for women who experience physical, emotional or financial difficulties because of drug use. The gendered meanings ascribed to drug use also shape pathways out of drugs in ways that create particular challenges for women. This is captured clearly in the response given by one drug treatment centre worker in response to our question regarding whether men and women have different experiences when trying to re-integrate into their community after treatment:

Yes, it is different. For the men, they even talk about what they had done. They see it as a lesson learnt. For women, they did not want to talk about their past. They felt ashamed ... So, many of them do not want to return home as their family members do not accept them ... Many of them choose to go away and work at other places where no one knows their past.

### ***Everyday institutional practices***

A third key element of everyday life that has shaped young people’s pathways into drug harms in Taunggyi is the activities of public authorities, especially the police, but also village and ward administrators, and government administrators. Public service salaries are low in Myanmar and many of those occupying positions of authority struggle to make ends meet and to provide for their families. The value of holding a position of authority is linked to how it can be leveraged to generate other forms of unofficial revenue through bribery and extortion, operating protection rackets, and becoming involved in illegal or black-market activities. Consequently, negotiating with authorities to get things done or to evade the law are commonplace activities. This includes paying bribes to escape larger fines or formal taxes and to avoid having charges formally processed. It also includes payments to expedite various applications and paperwork (for example for business licences or land registration), and to gain a favourable outcome in disputes or legal cases. In everyday life, the law is thus a site of negotiation, where the enforcement and evasion of rules and regulations are shaped by unofficial payments and the extent to which people can use their connections to claim protection or leverage preferential treatment.

These practices have coalesced particularly strongly around the drug economy. The combination of widespread drug use and the draconian prison sentences that are attached even to small-scale possession and selling creates scope for authorities to generate significant

revenue from the bribes that can be demanded from people to avoid formal charges, while sellers are willing to pay protection fees to offset these risks. These practices are captured in the reflections of one resident about the everyday experience of extortion in his home village on the outskirts of Taunggyi:

The local authorities are involved in drugs like this ... there is a drug dealer or distributor in the village. The local authority knows the drug dealer but would not take any action but instead taxes him. This means the drug dealer can carry out their business as they wish as long as they make a payment. But if the drug distributor fails to pay the local authority the required amount, they would transfer the dealer to the police. As long as payment is made, people are free to run any kind of business.

Protection rackets established between police and Myanmar Army authorities and large-scale drug distributors have also meant that when the police do launch periodic crackdowns on drugs in and around Taunggyi – whether to fulfil arrest quotas, to be seen to respond to societal concerns, or to generate private income at expensive times of the year (especially around the new year holidays in April and other festivals) – those targeted are almost always small-scale users or sellers who lack protection or the money to pay off authorities. Young people are particularly vulnerable, especially those who have moved to Taunggyi to study or work and who lack the knowledge of how local systems of authority work, the money to pay off authorities, or the support networks and local connections to leverage protection. In Taunggyi, as across much of Shan State, young people thus live in an environment that facilitates easy access to drugs but then exposes them to unpredictable and harsh punishments even for minor drug offences.

In cases where people are formally charged for drug offences, the legal system can become a terrifying, exhausting, unjust and financially ruinous experience, as recounted by one young woman in Taunggyi:

The day after our dad's arrest [for possessing drugs], one of the police officers asked for 500,000 kyat. He said he was the one who had to write up the case, so the outcome would be up to him. We gave him the money. But once we arrived at the court, my dad was still charged ... The urine test was also not reliable. They said that if you do not bribe the police then the result will automatically be positive. If you want the result to be negative, then you have to pay two million kyat. While our dad was on trial we also had to pay 80,000 kyat per month for his food. The trial took two years. When witnesses were asked to speak, the lawyer told us that we have to prepare 50,000 kyat to pay each witness. Those 'witnesses' are the police themselves ... We did not pay them as we had no money left. All the witnesses testified exactly the same information ... and so my father was charged ... He received a 15-year sentence. After that my mother got sick.

These testimonies demonstrate the symbiotic relationships that have emerged between the illegal drug economy and the authorities that are meant to be policing them. Local authorities have played a role in enabling the spread of drugs and have then drawn revenue from establishing protection rackets and systems of bribery around the drug trade.

These practices affect society as a whole but create particular risks for young people. They enable drug-selling networks to reach young people largely unchecked, including distribution of drugs in and around schools, universities and gaming shops. The links between drugs and local authorities have made it difficult to mobilise meaningful engagement on drug issues, either in schools and universities, amongst local communities, or in political forums. As one local civil society organisation reflected, 'it is difficult to talk directly about drug issues.

When we organise activities, people talk in small groups, but in a big group they did not speak up ... If we talk about drug issue, it links with power'.

The reluctance to engage with drug issues is particularly stark in the education system, and the fact that schools and universities have become associated with exposing young people to drugs, rather than providing nurturing and protective environments, is a major concern among local populations. Centralised governance structures and fears of arousing the ire of senior authorities by straying into contentious and politicised issues mean that schools and universities are reluctant to initiate responses to drug issues, whether in the form of incorporating drug awareness into the curriculum, tackling drug use in schools, or providing support for young people who get into difficulties with drugs. As one local government officer reflected,

The staff and teachers are aware of the drug issue; but they would just leave the situation as it is, so long as the students do not create any troubles and create riots, if to look at it from the perspective of politics. Teachers are well aware of the problems and situation ... [but] it is like students are permitted to use drugs as if it is legal.

This institutional inertia is indicative of a state education system in Myanmar which, as Hayden and Martin (2013, 52–53) argue, places 'more value on compliance with bureaucratic expectations than on the achievement of distinctive outcomes that meet the needs of local communities'. These insights reinforce the findings of other studies from across Asia that have shown how the lack of public discourse around drug issues has created a high degree of ignorance and naivete regarding drugs amongst young people and has magnified young people's risks of experiencing drug harms (Zoccatelli 2014).

## Conclusion

Through the study of everyday life in the Shan state capital of Taunggyi, this paper has explored why young people have become increasingly vulnerable to drug-related harms, and in so doing contributes four insights to the field of drug studies. First, it reveals the importance of studying everyday life as way to understand how systemic risk factors – in this case large-scale local drug production, economic hardship, inadequate welfare provision and authoritarian systems of rule – materialise into drug harms. The role that small-scale drug use and drug-selling plays in the coping strategies that people deploy to manage the economic and psychological challenges they face in their daily lives, coupled with the ways in which local authorities have sought to profit from rather than police drug-selling networks, has created an environment in which drugs are within easy reach across many of the spaces that young people frequent in their daily lives – homes, schools, universities, tea-shops, bars, nightclubs and gaming shops. In this environment, the risks facing young people – especially urban male youth – are exacerbated by routines that involve large amounts of unsupervised and unstructured time, and in which opportunities to realise idealised notions of youth – especially the kinds of permissive experimentation, courage and prowess associated with masculinity – are heavily circumscribed. These risks are further exacerbated by the practices of local authorities, who target drug users and small-scale sellers to extract bribes and to fulfil policing quotas but avoid going after better-protected drug sellers further up the chain. In Taunggyi, as across much of Shan State, these everyday practices coalesce to create an environment in which drugs have become an increasingly

normalised aspect of young people's everyday lives, but in which people – especially young, poor men – face harsh punishments if caught, and – especially in the case of women who use drugs – heavy social stigma.

Second, this paper shows how the study of everyday life offers insights into why pathways into drug harms are experienced differently across youth populations. The research presented in this paper draws particular attention to how experiences of drug harms are gendered and shows how efforts to respond to youth drug harms will need to be sensitive to how conceptions of masculinity and femininity affect pathways into drug harms and access to support. Our research also offers some insights into how pathways into drug harms may be shaped by other factors including young people's level of wealth and social networks. While better-off young people can more easily afford drugs and may find themselves facing demands for higher bribes if caught, they also have greater scope to negotiate their way out of serious punishment, especially those who are able to leverage personal or family connections (to government officials, army personnel or armed groups). In contrast, poorer young people and those without connections – such as those who have moved to Taunggyi alone for work or study – often find themselves taking on riskier practices such as drug-selling to afford drug habits and have little scope to negotiate with authorities to avoid prison if they are caught.

Third, this study contributes to a wider body of scholarship that explores how young people play a role in actively shaping the drug environments in which they live through the decisions they make around engaging with drugs to navigate the structural constraints they face (Lasco 2014; Pilkington 2007; Hardon and Hymans 2014). However, reinforcing recent scholarship on everyday life in Myanmar, our research also warns against romanticising the everyday as a site of empowerment and resistance (Thawngmung 2019; Hedström 2021). By becoming active participants in the drug economy – as a coping strategy, to perform better, for financial gain or to demonstrate masculinity – young people act in ways that often unwittingly reinforce the drug environments in which they live and that cause them and their peers harm. For many, these expressions of agency become self-defeating in the face of declining health, financial hardship and incarceration.

Finally, this study suggests possible entry points for considering how to mitigate worsening drug-related harms in contexts like Myanmar where overarching structural risk factors are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Exploring young people's testimonies and the knowledge they hold offers a grounded perspective for considering what can feasibly be done to support young people in such contexts, even if only in small ways. These include better education on drug issues, greater support for young people through extra-curricular activities, expanded funding for treatment services, and sustained engagement work with local communities to tackle some of the harmful practices that exacerbate drug harms, not least the stigmatisation of women who use drugs. The study of everyday life thus offers ways to consider how communities of care can be strengthened in contexts where structural determinants of drug risks are deeply entrenched and where existing drug control measures exacerbate the risks that young people face.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the people in Taunggyi who shared their insights and life stories with us. We also thank colleagues in the Drugs and (Dis)order research project, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), UKRI award number ES/P011543/1: Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war.

## Notes on contributors

**Patrick Meehan** is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Development Studies at SOAS University of London. He is also a co-investigator on a research project entitled 'Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war'. His research explores the political economy of violence, conflict and development, with a primary focus on the dynamics of statebuilding, peacebuilding and economic development in borderland regions of Southeast Asia.

**Mandy Sadan** is an Associate Professor in Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick. She has been researching and teaching in and about the borderlands of Myanmar for more than two decades. She has wide interdisciplinary interests with particular interests in life story research and oral history and the role of humanities education as a support for sustainable development. She is the author of *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (British Academy & Oxford University Press, 2013), which was awarded the inaugural EuroSEAS Nikkei Asian Review Prize for Best Book in the Humanities in 2015.

**Sai Aung Hla** is Executive Director of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN). He is also the project manager at SHAN for the research project led by SOAS University of London, entitled 'Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war'.

**Sai Kham Phu** is the research manager at Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) and conducts fieldwork for the research project led by SOAS University of London, entitled 'Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war'. His previous research explores Shan migrant entrepreneurship in suburban Chiang Mai, Thailand.

**Nang Muai Oo** is Data and Logistics Manager at Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) and conducts fieldwork for the research project led by SOAS University of London, entitled 'Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war'.

## Notes

1. The research for this paper was approved by the SOAS Research Ethics Panel. All research was conducted in line with the GCRF Drugs and (Dis)order project's 'Research Ethics Policy' and in accordance with ethics guidelines developed with Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN). SHAN has longstanding networks in Taunggyi, especially with youth groups and other civil society organisations, and these enabled the research team to reach out to youth in the city. The SHAN research team provided a clear explanation of the proposed research, including its aims and methodologies and how data would be stored and used. Personal details of those who subsequently agreed to be interviewed as part of the research were anonymised at the point of data collection and all interview files were stored securely on encrypted software. An important aspect of the research ethics that underpins this project is a commitment to sustained engagement with communities where we work. Although this has been made harder following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the research team continue to work closely with

youth organisations on drug issues. This has included sharing research findings and facilitating dialogue on drug issues amongst Shan communities in search of ways to support effective responses to drug harms. These engagement strategies have included the use of a comic (in Shan, Burmese and English, accessible on the project website: <https://drugs-and-disorder.org>) and a long-running SHAN radio series on youth drug issues). Interview and focus group data from the Drugs and (dis)order project, upon which this paper is based, will be made available by the Drugs and (dis)order project in 2022. The repository location and access conditions will be available via the project website (<https://drugs-and-disorder.org>).

2. Whole communities were denied the right to inclusion, most notably the Rohingya people where they professed an identity that was denied even to exist by the national government. In addition, many thousands of people living in areas where the government had limited control, such as in the northernmost Kachin State, were also beyond the enumerators' reach.
3. At the time of this interview, US\$1 was equivalent to approximately 1200 kyat, meaning that 10,000 kyat is equivalent to more than \$8. In a country where the average annual income is just \$1400 (or \$3.8/day) and one-third of the population exists below the poverty line, money spent on drugs can have a serious impact on individuals' and households' finances.

## ORCID

Patrick Meehan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4672-770X>

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