

Between Human Trafficking and Structural Violence: How do young people from Myanmar end up in the Scam industry?

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Abstract

This study explores how post-coup structural conditions in Myanmar shape youth pathways into illicit employment within scam compounds along the Myanmar-Thai borderlands, with a focus on the Myawaddy scam corridor in Karen State, but not limited to Shan State. Drawing on a three-tier theoretical framework integrating the political economy of conflict (Ballentine and Nitzschke, 2005), new wars and armed brokerage (Kaldor, 2012; Watanabe, 2025; Woods, 2017), and compound capitalism and platformised precarity (Franceschini, Li and Bo, 2025; Zan and Kyaw Min, 2025), the research conducts the qualitative 10 semi-structured interviews with Myanmar youth who have worked in scam compounds, and with extensive secondary source analysis. Data is analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis in MAXQDA, structured around a typology of economic opportunism, survival necessity, and coercion. The central analytical concept of structural exclusion mediates between macro-level conflict dynamics and micro-level individual experiences, tracing how the convergence of military coup, economic collapse, educational disruption, and armed-group territorial control closes off legitimate livelihood options and channels youth into exploitative digital labour. This study will contribute to emerging scholarship on conflict-driven illicit economies, forced labor in digital industries, and the agency and vulnerability of youth in fragile states. The research may also produce evidence relevant to human rights protection, anti-trafficking policy, and peacebuilding in ASEAN/Southeast Asia.