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Background brief

Diaspora peacebuilding capacity: Women in exile on the Thai/Burmese border

Dr. Anna Snyder

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a gendered analysis of peacebuilding capacity in the context of forced migration. Scholars have tended to focus primarily on potential threats from conflict-generated diasporas¹ rather than on how they contribute to peace processes in their homelands. Understanding how the millions of refugees affected by armed conflicts may, as non-state actors, help to facilitate peace making and peace building not only addresses some of the needs of refugees, but develops new policy and practices necessary to address contemporary ethno-political conflict. This study of women from Burma in exile reinforces the need to implement UNSCR 1325 in a way that strengthens the peace capacity of diaspora women's organizations in host countries as well as those at home.

Despite the portrayal of migrants as security risks for Western countries such as Canada and the attention given to minority militants from countries like Ireland, Iraq, and Sri Lanka, some research challenges views of migrants as warmongers. Smith and Stares (2007) claim diasporas can be both peace-makers and

¹ Conflict-generated diasporas are defined as diasporas that originate in conflict and emerge through forced migration.

peace-wreckers, sometimes even at “one and the same time.” It is important for policy makers to keep in mind that diaspora groups are diverse and “stratified by class, caste, education, occupation, religious affiliation, cultural interests, urban or rural background” (Werbner 1999, p. 24).

As such, members of diasporas engaging in extremist activities are often a minority; they are not representative. Further, diasporas may develop multiple identities in host countries, changing mono-dimensional identities that contribute to conflict (Cheran 2003). Diaspora responses are not static; as conflict changes, diaspora responses change. According to Pirkkalainen and Abdile (2009), studies show peace-wreckers are most likely to emerge in host countries when diasporas are isolated from the general population.

Diasporas can be partners in peacebuilding. Some of the specific ways that conflict-generated diasporas contribute to peace include: 1) civic-oriented activities such as community development activities and business investments; 2) direct political involvement in the country of origin; and 3) advocacy and lobbying activities (Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009). For example, members of the Irish diaspora convinced the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to adopt more peaceful measures, acting as mediators between the IRA and the Clinton administration in securing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Cochrane, Baser and Swain 2009).

Engagement of peace and security and development communities in what has been exclusively a humanitarian issue will increase the potential of refugee populations. The majority of refugees, approximately 70% or 7.7 million, are not in emergencies but are trapped in protracted refugee situations that are characterized by long periods, potentially decades, of exile. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is often left to cope with forgotten populations, ‘warehoused’ in camps where host countries, trying to contain militant ‘spoilers,’ prevent refugees from making positive contributions to regional development and peacebuilding. The presence of refugees in neighboring countries cannot be treated as an “isolated factor, addressed at the end of the peacebuilding process” (Loesher et al. 2007, p. 496). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2006) stated that “refugees return with schooling and new skills... Over and over, we see that their participation is necessary for the consolidation of both peace and post-conflict economic recovery.”



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Understanding the impact of diasporas on any given conflict situation, requires studying the capacities of the diaspora, as well as the broader political opportunity structures within the country of origin and the host country that might influence mobilization and engagement of diaspora groups (Pirkkalainen and Abdile 2009). However, very few such studies exist. This research is an attempt to fill that gap. My study examined capacity building efforts of indigenous women's refugee organizations on the Thai/Burmese border and the implications of their work for peacebuilding.

Lederach defines capacity building as “the process of reinforcing the inherent capabilities and understandings of people related to the challenge of conflict in their context and to a philosophy oriented towards the generation of new, proactive, empowered action for desired change in those settings” (1997, p. 109). He maintains that empowerment is at the heart of capacity building. A fundamental challenge of capacity building is changing the individuals' and the communities' belief that they are not capable into the belief that they do in fact have the power to effect change.

The focus of this study is women's empowerment in refugee and migrant worker camps. The empowerment is ambivalent (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001, p. 105). On the one hand, as forced migrants, strategic life choices clearly narrow rather than expand. There is little doubt that women often bear a double burden, taking on unaccustomed roles such as head of household and principal income generator, because they have lost male family members and experienced displacement arising from conflict. They experience gender-based violence, forced prostitution, trafficking, a lack of adequate health care, poor housing, and oppressive labor conditions as migrant workers. On the other hand, alternatives which may not have been available in the homeland arise in the new context. New spaces may open up for women's agency and leadership within changing family and community structures. Several examples exist of women's refugee organizations leading peacemaking and/or post-agreement peacebuilding due in part to their empowering experiences in refugee camps, e.g. in El Salvador and Cambodia (Fagen and Yudelman 2001; Kumar and Baldwin 2001).

This qualitative study of refugee women from Burma in camps on the Thai/Burmese border reinforces data on the enormous difficulties refugee women encounter, documented by researchers in forced migration studies and by international NGOs working in the border areas. However, the research challenges the infantilization of refugee women by revealing the transformative influence of a grassroots network of women's NGOs on the lives of the refugees. This study shows how the social resources – the healthcare, leadership skills, reconciliation, and gender training – made available by women's NGOs in Thailand helped to create discursive alternatives that, according to the interviewees, resulted in growing self-esteem and changes in how the sexual division of labor is conceptualized. The sense of empowerment some women discussed in the interviews may indicate an increased capacity for peacebuilding among some refugee communities on the Thai/Burmese border. The research reinforces the importance of

implementing policy and practice that supports refugee/diaspora women's self-organization. Promoting social emancipation, empowerment, political participation, and good governance helps to build civil society peace constituencies from the bottom up.

BACKGROUND ON BURMA

Civil War

Since its independence from Britain in 1947, Burma has experienced civil war. In the decade after independence, Burma's fledgling democratic government was challenged by armed communist and ethnic groups that maintained they were under-represented in the 1948 constitution. The autonomy promised to minority states was never granted. General Ne Win staged a coup against Prime Minister U Nu in 1960, solidifying his position as Burma's military leader by instituting authoritarian military rule and, in 1974, suspending the constitution. In 1988, Ne Win announced he would step down. Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in the hope of escaping military rule, economic decline and routine human rights abuses. On August 8, 1988, the troops began a four-day massacre killing at least 10,000 demonstrators across the country. Multi-party elections were held in 1990; however, when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party (NLD) won, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), Ne Win's successors, refused to acknowledge the election results and placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Although SLORC was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, government control remained with the military. Negotiations concerning a new constitution that began in the early 1990s culminated in a referendum held in the aftermath of the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Criticism of the consultation process was widespread, and the new constitution clearly reinforces military dominance.

Many Burmese refugees have fled the on-going civil conflict, which involves several ethnic minorities, political ideology, demands for participation, and access to resources such as oil, timber, and land. Some of the refugees fled to Thailand to live in camps on the Thai-Burmese border and have lived there for decades. Others are more recent refugees, fleeing the military campaigns and economic policies that make survival questionable in contemporary Burma. Thailand has not signed the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol, meaning the refugees are often dependent on maintaining the favor of local authorities and communities, as well as the Thai government, to ensure their stay. Although the military government, the SPDC, has negotiated settlements with several of the ethnic factions, it is still involved in armed struggle with seven ethnic groups, including the ethnic minorities highlighted in this study.

Women's NGOs on the Thai/Burmese Border

In the 1990s on the Thai/Burmese border, women from Burma developed a grassroots network of women's NGOs that grew out of their experiences of gendered conflict. This network of NGOs influenced the lives of most of the participants in our study. Mary

O’Kane (2006) has documented how women’s experiences as refugees, migrant workers, and student activists made them more aware of gender relations. In the refugee camps, women leaders noticed the male control of political and military decision-making and weaponry, women’s experience of rape and sex abuse, increased domestic violence, and growing maternal and infant mortality. Female activists who had helped to organize the 1988 uprising were told they could become medics or teachers. Migrant women were called to hospitals and police stations over and over again to assist women in sexually, physically, and psychologically abusive situations. Their heightened awareness led in turn to the formation of women’s associations that required conflict resolution and alliance building across ethnic boundaries as well as agreement on political processes.

Eventually, in 2000, the women’s activities led to the formation of the Women’s League of Burma, bridging differences among the twelve ethnic women’s organizations in order to create a strong voice for women’s rights. The women activists connected with global women’s movements, networking on issues like trafficking of women. Although the international connection meant renewed opposition from male political leaders, participating in global networks presented many opportunities, including the experience of attending UN international and regional conferences, increased funding, educational opportunities and new strategies from networking with women in other conflict areas. Currently, the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) offers training and services in refugee and migrant worker camps and conducts research on and documentation of key issues including maternal health, HIV/AIDS, and gendered violence, focusing primarily on rape by the Burmese military.

The aim and the objectives of the WLB are: 1) to work for women’s empowerment and advancement of the status of women; 2) to work for the increased participation of women in all spheres of society; and 3) to work for the increased participation of women in the democracy movement, and peace and national reconciliation processes. The peacebuilding capacity of the NGO has attracted international attention. In 2002, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Sweden, having observed that there were few if any women involved in the National Reconciliation Process, held two workshops with the leaders of WLB, several other women’s organizations, and invited senior male movement leaders, in order to strengthen the capacity of women to participate in and shape the reconciliation process.

Since the workshops, WLB has launched the Women as Peacebuilders Program, which aims to develop a culture of peace where women are free from all forms of violence. In 2006, prior to the constitutional convention of the Burmese government in exile, the WLB received training from the Global Justice Center on how to use international law to advocate for women’s political rights. In 2008, the WLB received an award from the US National Democratic Institute for their efforts to promote human rights and women’s participation in political movements.

METHODOLOGY

This research project explored whether women experience any of their new roles and circumstances in armed conflict as empowering and how their experiences impact their involvement in and/or perception of peacebuilding. My research assistant, Dr. Brian Rice, and I conducted 35 interviews with refugee women and several men, with the assistance of interpreters, in three refugee camps on the Thai/Burmese border near Chiang Mai, Thailand in March, April and May of 2007. The interview methodology of oral testimony (OT) is an appropriate research method for interviewing men and women in conflict, given the sensitive nature of their experiences and the possible consequences of disclosure. The refugee women are members of ethnic groups that have been forced from their lands by the civil wars in Burma. They were all connected in some way to the grassroots NGO Empowering Women of Burma, which arranged for our visits to the camps. Some of the interviews were carried out in the context of focus groups.

The 35 men and women interviewed left Burma for different reasons and were living in varied contexts, emphasizing the variation in the experience of refugees. All of the interviewees were members of ethnic minority groups involved in violent conflict with the Burmese military. Some had experienced direct violence from bombing, burned villages, landmines, torture and rape. Others were unable to survive at home when their villages were relocated to areas controlled by the Burmese military or because of the military's demand for taxes, rice, or farm animals. Several people left because of forced labor or fears of forced labor and rape. A few talked about dreams of a better life in Thailand in the refugee camps.

The interviews were conducted in five contexts: 1) a new small Shan migrant refuge on land donated by a Buddhist temple just outside a small village, Ban Luang; 2) a large, long-established Karen camp in an isolated, mountainous region in the vicinity of Mae Sariang; 3) Karenni NGOs outside of but closely connected to a series of Karenni camps near Mae Hong Son; 4) a Kayan village useful to the Thai tourist business in Mae Hong Son; and 5) a training centre for refugee camp nursery school teachers in Chiang Mai. Most of the women had lived in various camps for several years; a few had grown up in the camps, never having seen Burma. The majority of the women left subsistence farming in remote mountain villages to become refugees or migrant workers in Thailand.

DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender's (2002) study of women's empowerment as a variable in international development shows that although there are many different terms related to the concept of empowerment – such as gender equity and gender equality – there are common themes throughout the literature such as control, agency, and self-efficacy. Most definitions of empowerment focus on women's ability to make decisions and achieve outcomes that are important to themselves and their families. Gita Sen (1993) defines empowerment as “altering relations of power... which constrain women's options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being.”

Empowerment is thought to be a process that encompasses progression from one state (gender inequality) to another state (gender equality). This process, however, is a bottom-up rather than top-down progression; in other words, women must be significant actors in the process, not simply recipients of improved outcomes. Further, a fundamental shift in perceptions, that is, an “inner transformation” is considered essential to the formulation of choices and to the empowerment process (A. Sen 1999; G. Sen 1993, Kabeer 2001). In addition to inner transformation, feminist scholars point to the institutionalized aspects of gender inequality and call for the adoption of mechanisms and training to ensure “mainstreaming” of gender issues in order to transform structural inequity in society. As such, processes of empowerment require change at different levels: the level of the individual, the level of the family and household, and the structural level, that is, the level of the economy and state.

The existence of alternatives is crucial to women’s capacity for meaningful decision-making, as is access to resources – economic, social, and physical (Wieringa 2006). Wieringa maintains that if women become aware of their own oppression, without viable alternatives or choices available, they turn their anger inwards or develop an acceptance – perhaps religious acceptance – of suffering (2006). Resources that enhance the ability to make choices include material resources, e.g. economic and physical, as well as social resources such as healthcare, or various forms of training. However, Kabeer emphasizes that resources measure potential, not actualized, choice (1999).

Alternatives at the discursive level help people to at least imagine possibilities and are thus important for the development of a critical view of the social order that may potentially transform perspectives (Kabeer 1999). Choices, particularly those that appear to show compliance with norms and practices that deny women choice, e.g. son preference and/or daughter discrimination, acquiescence to domestic violence, childbirth despite maternal health problems, promotion of female circumcision, may be inscribed in taken-for-granted tradition and culture – what Bourdieu calls doxa. Doxa refers to those traditions and beliefs that are “undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny”; they are beyond discourse or documentation (Bourdieu 1977). The journey from doxa to discourse becomes possible when competing ways of being and doing emerge as material and cultural possibilities challenge the common sense propositions and naturalized character of culture. Significantly, some choices may result in improved functioning but do not challenge or destabilize social inequities.

Empowerment is often socially embedded; agency and choice may be inextricably linked to values which reflect the wider context. Women tend to make choices based on community values, because women tend to gain respect within their communities when they conform to community norms and to be penalized if they do not conform. Access to new resources may open up new possibilities for women, but how women view these opportunities will be shaped by the intersection of social relations and individual histories. As such, research on empowerment must be sensitive to the aspects of culture

that women value and seek to reproduce in processes of change and those they reject or seek to modify (Kabeer 1999).

This study shows the social resources – the healthcare, leadership skills, and gender training – made available by indigenous women’s NGOs in the camps helped to create discursive alternatives that, according to the interviewees, resulted in growing self-esteem and changes in their perceptions of gender relations and the sexual division of labor. Mainstreaming of individuals and the women’s NGOs in camp governance structures also contributed to a new discourse of equality. At the same time, some of the women indicated they were resisting the loss of valued traditional cultural practices that became increasingly important to them as exiles and that, in some cases, increased their value as women in the eyes of their own ethnic communities as well as their Thai hosts. The indigenous women’s NGOs supported this cultural resistance by offering training in traditional sewing, weaving and ceremonial practices.

AMBIVALENT EMPOWERMENT

Restrictions on Life Choices

The ambivalence of women’s empowerment during armed conflict was reinforced. Although many of the women experienced some new opportunities, they also described an overwhelming number of intersecting concerns and restrictions as well as exploitation and oppression. They chose not to mention the most well-documented difficulties: 1) lack of healthcare and family planning, resulting in high maternal morbidity from childbirth and attempted abortions; 2) rape from both the Burmese military – who use rape as a weapon – and Thai military, police, and employers – who commit rape with impunity; 3) the high volume of sex trafficking of girls and women; and 4) exploitative labor practices (Women’s League of Burma 2000; Kachin Women’s Association Thailand 2005; Burmese Women’s Union 2007). However, a few of the Karen women informed us that they had little recourse when Thai soldiers seduced their daughters and got them pregnant.

The Shan subsistence farmers, who had recently been forced to leave Burma, expressed deep frustration with their loss of land, which meant a loss of independence. They did not like being dependent on money and forced to work for someone else for very poor wages. Many of the women interviewed in all settings mentioned they had little freedom of movement, describing the camps as prisons or cages. When they did go out of the camps, they had to hide for fear of arrest or deportation. Lack of language facility was another major obstacle; several of the Shan women described themselves as “deaf and dumb” because they did not speak Thai or English. Income generation is a major problem, particularly for female headed households, as is loss of family and social networks. Some of the interviewees talked about being tired and overworked and struggling with new kinds of worries generated by raising children in a world based on a money economy, access to modern technology, and foreign lifestyles.

A few of the female leaders maintained that even though women had new opportunities for leadership, they did not receive respect from male leaders; in the Shan camp, the elected women leaders sat at the back of the room, just like they did in the Buddhist temples. The same women expressed frustration that women were thrust into leadership positions without training or support.

Change and Empowerment

In some of the refugee and migrant camps in Thailand, some women from Burma are experiencing limited positive transformation at the same time that they experience hardship. To some extent, the women found opportunity from changes in their way of life, from dislocation; life-threatening security issues were eliminated and in refugee camps, limited food and healthcare services were provided. However, the interviewees maintained their experiences of empowerment did not come automatically from dislocation. The strongest positive impact on the lives of interviewees came from the training and leadership opportunities created by the grassroots network of women's organizations described above. Further, the interaction of the Thai context, new community structures in the Thai refugee and migrant camps, and women's NGOs has resulted in a new approach to domestic violence. As forced relocation to Thailand has threatened their traditional life and identity, their role as cultural leaders and educators has increased their own sense of importance.

Informal Education and Training

In each camp that we visited on the Thai/Burmese border, the network of women's NGOs offers various types of training to women, men, and youth including human rights, women's rights, child development, healthcare, leadership, and conflict resolution. Almost all of the women interviewed thought that the training they had received from the grassroots women's NGOs provided them with new opportunities they did not receive in Burma.

The training increased their pride and self-confidence; they are "more brave" in the words of one interviewee (Interview, Ban Luang, 3/07). It gave them a sense of hope, a perception that life for them as women is improving. Because many of the women are illiterate or have little education, the training represents further education and an increase in experience to them. According to an interviewee, they are learning more than they would have had they stayed at home in Burma. With this greater experience and training, they received more respect from the wider community and as a result, a greater voice; that is, they expressed themselves more often and in public. (Not all of the women agreed that everything was improving for women; those who had the least contact with the NGOs were the least likely to talk about improvement.)

Many of the women thought that the training had changed female and male perceptions of gender roles. A number of the interviewees maintained that women were seen as weak before coming to the camps and receiving training. Now "women work as much as men." Women ran in the camp committee elections. They also received vocational training in

knitting, sewing, and haircutting so they could generate income. Moreover, some women (although not all) thought that men's perception of male roles had changed as well, so that now men were willing to cook, a role they would not have taken on without the influence of the camp training.

A Karenni nursery school administrator maintained,

In the past, women were looked down on because, except for the housework, men thought that woman couldn't do anything. Women were discriminated and more women were oppressed by men in the past. When women get more education, men have more sympathy with women. Women have more equality than in the past. When women looked after their children, men cook for their family. Before that I had to work very hard and my husband didn't help me with the housework. He didn't understand me. But now when I am washing, he cooks. Wherever I go, he allows me and he understands me now (Interview, Chiang Mai, 4/07).

She felt strongly that her training and experience gained in the camps influenced the respect she received from her family and from community members and as such she had much more confidence and was comfortable speaking. In addition, she noticed people listen to her more.

Moreover, the women's NGOs introduced a "new rule," a new way of thinking about gender relations. In the trainings, several women explained, men are taught women are equal (both men and women receive training in human rights and women's rights). As a result, they said, women can leave the home and stay out late to attend meetings or trainings. A member of the Karenni National Women's Organization said in an interview that, after they conducted a training on human rights and women's rights, women leaders came and talked to them, saying, "we did not know we had rights like this before, because in our traditional culture women had to stay at home" (Interview, Chiang Mai, 4/07). Before the new rule was introduced, she added, women were afraid of men if they did not fulfill their household duties. Generally, some of the women observed that the community as a whole gave more of a chance to women to take on new roles given the framework of equality.

This new rule of equality does result in conflict in families; however, a number of the interviewees described situations where the NGO staff had intervened, helping to explain the new rule to husbands who disagreed and to wives who did not understand and thus "misused" the rights-based discourse. Further, the women's NGOs offered conflict resolution training in addition to human rights training. Few interviewees touched on the effectiveness of the conflict resolution training.

Formal Education

Obtaining formal education in the camps represents an opportunity that many of the women and men did not have in Burma. Most of the women I interviewed reported that

their families were too poor to send them to school for very long. For most of the women, hope for the future was embodied in the educational opportunities for their children. Their own formal education did not appear to be a viable option; generally there were no adult education classes offered in the camps and a number of women mentioned they had too many worries and responsibilities to focus on learning. However, in the camps, education had become a priority of the community because training and education was seen as important for the next generation. Nevertheless, one interviewee noted that the community was becoming more open-minded in Thailand. She said “men say that now women have more rights to education and it is good for them” (Interview, Mae Hong Son, 4/07).

Some of the young women/girls who came to the camps and were able to finish high school in camp, talked about the camps as a place where they could dream about a future for themselves. I met a number of young adults who came to the camps specifically to study. A Mon nursery school teacher who had come to the camps as a young woman to study to be a teacher said,

I can study freely here and I can dream what I want to be. I can improve my skill and knowledge because I can go to school and attend the trainings. In Burma, there is nothing to do just eat and sleep. I couldn't go to school. My parents couldn't afford me to go to school. You cannot finish high school if you don't have money, even if you are very clever in school” (Interview, Chiang Mai, 4/07).

Through formal education, training from and work with women's NGOs, these women managed to develop careers unavailable to them in Burma.

New Community Structures

In Thailand, forced migration to refugee and migrant worker camps resulted in different community structures, which opened up new opportunities for women to participate in community life. Each ethnic group has established a refugee committee to provide relief assistance separate from the political parties that have little to do with the daily activities of the camp. Instead, the camps are led and organized through camp committees which included formal structures, sections, sub-committees, elected leaders, conflict resolution mechanisms, healthcare, schools, etc. The refugees experience a high level of autonomy running many components of the camp assistance and governance programs due in part to the willingness of the Royal Thai Government and NGOs to recognize the organizational capacity of the refugee groups (Bowles 1997).

Nevertheless, the value systems of the international NGOs running the camps² influence the structure of the camps; a number of the women interviewed mentioned that the NGOs

² The Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), an umbrella group which includes UNHCR, the Royal Thai Government and The Thai/Burmese Border Consortium (TBBC), ran the camps.

required a quota of women to be elected to the camp committee, providing a few women with leadership roles. A female Karen camp committee member maintained:

Men are cooperating with women and giving women a chance to work and advice on how to work. This means equality. The advantage of women's leadership is that women understand women more (Interview, Mae Sariang, 5/07).

In addition, the networks of women's NGOs played an active and important role in the camp structures, which in turn presented some opportunities for women in terms of employment, community participation, and training. Moreover, the camp structures include women's sections, validating the need for attention to gender-specific issues.

New Approach to Domestic Violence

Almost all of the women I interviewed identified domestic violence as the primary conflict they struggle with as women. At the same time, most interviewees pointed to ways that approaches to domestic violence had changed since migration to Thailand. A female elected leader of the Karen camp committee attributed the change in response to training on domestic violence and human rights. Many interviewees believed that the changes concerning domestic violence had resulted in a reduction in the incidence of domestic violence.³

The interviews revealed three ways that living in the camps and the migrant refuge had changed how communities and families responded to domestic violence. First, the conception of domestic violence transformed from a private family issue to a social problem (Fieldnotes, p. 18). Domestic violence is now seen as a threat to the community as a whole, because of the potential involvement of the Thai police/military (Interview, Ban Luang, 3/07). Second, the camps set up specific procedures and structures to respond to domestic violence, altering how domestic violence would typically be dealt with in their villages at home. The procedures differed somewhat depending on the camp but all of the systems involved women at the forefront. Third, women are now encouraged to speak up about violence in the home. The director of the Karenni National Women's Organization maintained, "Women suffer from domestic violence. Before that [in Burma], they didn't speak out because they were shy and afraid of their husbands, but now they share with their friends how they suffer" (Interview, Mae Hong Son, 4/07).

Gender and Culture: Making Choices

In many conflict situations when a group is under attack, the importance of social identity forms and transforms (Kriesberg 1982; Cook-Huffman 2000). Often it is the women who pass on cultural practices and maintain social identity. Many of the refugees I spoke to emphasized the importance of maintaining their culture and identity and expressed

³ We are unaware of camp-specific data that would confirm or refute their perceptions. However, the Karenni National Women's Organization estimated that 60 per cent of Karenni women in the Mae Hon Son were exposed to gender based violence with domestic violence the most common form of violence (Reproductive Health For Refugees Consortium 2002).

concern that it was changing in Thailand. Many thought teaching children about their ethnic culture in the school curriculum was important, as was training in weaving, music, and sewing. Moreover, they felt their leadership in traditional ceremonies and cultural practices was key.

A Kayan woman, in the context of a focus group, stated,

Yeah – we live in Thailand but we still use our tradition; we keep our tradition, like the long-neck. My mother wore rings around her neck, my sisters wear rings and my daughters also wear the rings to keep the culture. My mother said ‘you have to ask your daughter to wear the rings, if not then our culture will be lost’ (Mae Hong Son, 4/07).

She felt strongly that as a Kayan woman, her choices would impact the survival of the community’s identity and culture.

Most of the women felt that changes to women’s traditional behavior were negative. They mentioned clothing – some women no longer wore the traditional woven longyi or skirt, choosing instead “immodest” Thai clothing – and changes in traditional marriage practices. Most thought girls in Burma respected their parents and traditions more than the girls in the camps.

Sentiments expressed about changes in culture resulting from their life as refugees in Thailand were mixed and complex. Some connected their new equality with changes in traditional culture, but most did not. As a young Kayan man stated in a focus group,

Women are changing. In Burma, women respect their parents and neighbors, they maintain their culture. Here women think about education. They are more confident; they see each other more often and want to talk. Foreigners talk about education and human rights. They have opportunities. There is a difference between women with confidence and experience and those without. They improve their lives. So [But] the women who are afraid and scared are respectful. In one way it is good but one way it is bad for them. (laughing) I don’t know what to say (Focus Group, Mae Hong Son, 4/07).

The young man observed changes but noted his own preference for women who are “respectful” to men. The same Kayan woman who talked about the importance of maintaining culture responded to him, “I am happy men and women are now equal.”

ANALYSIS: DISCURSIVE ALTERNATIVES

The women in my study indicated their perceptions of themselves, gender relations, and gender roles had changed since coming to Burma as a result of the services (social resources) provided by the indigenous women’s organizations. They were introduced to new ideas and opportunities that changed their perceptions of what was possible and brought about new confidence. Some of the alternatives visible to the women challenged traditional norms and values.

At the individual level, many of the women talked about an increase in confidence. Fundamental changes in perception are indicators of an inner transformation (A. Sen 1999; G. Sen 1993, Kabeer 2001). According to Amartya Sen, women's own perception of their value is as critical to increased empowerment as is their value as perceived by others (Sen 1993).

At the family or household level, informal educational opportunities appeared to increase status and provide new discursive alternatives. The women maintained that the new social resources had an impact similar to that of formal education; that is, the training increased their status in the eyes of their husbands. Several of the women indicated that increases in educational levels were key to perceptions of equality in marriage. Their increased status, their increased informal power assisted them in their negotiations with their husbands when it came to further attendance at trainings and camp meetings.

Furthermore, the trainings initiated the use of human rights/women's rights discourse (the "new rule" of equality), altering perceptions of gender relations and gender roles. The existence of gender equity is disputed in the Burmese context. Both Kiang (1984) and Spiro (1993) use early colonial texts to reinforce their conclusions that Burmese women experience relative equality with men. The military government also claims that women in Burma are equal to men, in contrast to contemporary analysis that indicates the authoritarian, conservative, military regime undermines women's status and independence (Mills 2002). However, Belak (2002), author of the most recent comprehensive study of women originally from Burma, argues that most of the claims of gender equality are made by women with elite social status and maintains that, if there were advantages that Burmese women experienced in the Victorian era, they no longer existed inside contemporary Burma or for women in exile (p.8).

Nevertheless, the interviewees maintained that the new discourse changed their expectations of what was possible and/or desirable; now it was within the realm of possibility that their husbands take over typical female household chores and support their increased mobility in order to attend informal educational events available to them in the camps. The roles of women as wives and mothers across different ethnic cultures is clearly defined in Burma: women are expected to be responsible for child-rearing and most of the household work, regardless of whether or not they are the primary or sole breadwinner (Belak 2002, p.44). Nevertheless, the connection between leadership and mobility is critical in Burma. Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is said to have herself questioned the feasibility of women's leadership in the NLD, given the impact of mobility on the reputation of young women (Belak 2002).

Many of the women discussed their dreams of formal education for their children. Almost all of the women indicated that their families had been too poor to send them to school for long. Surveys of refugee camps indicate that less than 50% of Mon women between the ages of 20 and 30 were literate and that 50 to 60% of Karenni women of all ages were

literate. Further, the survey showed rates of literacy generally decreased with age, indicating that more young women had gained access to education (Burmese Border Consortium 1995, p. 13). In Burma, teaching ethnic languages is discouraged and learning to read and write Burmese means studying a second or third language. Moreover, women's literacy in their mother tongue has not been considered important in farming communities and culturally, women are seen to belong in the home, meaning a girl's education is seen as a waste of resources (Belak 2002).

In contrast, in the Thai refugee camps, the interviewees stated that education for their daughters is a viable alternative. Kishor (2000) maintains that, when women can dream of an education for their children – when it becomes a viable alternative, it is a direct indicator of empowerment. The women believed that their communities now validated the importance of education for both boys and girls indicating, in their minds, a shift in value preferences.

The efforts of international NGOs to mainstream women into governance structures at the community or camp level were perceived to be ineffective. Our informants did not believe the quota of women leaders required by outside NGOs had a concrete impact on their lives. But at the same time, they did not question that women could or should take on leadership roles in the governance structure. Whether or not visible female community leaders created a discursive alternative is debatable; did the quota transform perceptions or was that perception already an integral part of their cultural values and practices?

Some studies of women from Burma indicate that women did have political power in pre-colonial Burma, although it often took an indirect form as influence on their husbands (Khiang 1984, Spiro 1993). More contemporary data indicates that women from Burma experience discrimination in all aspects of political life (Belak 2002). Nevertheless, the women observed female leadership in the camp governance structure and although they questioned their viability, they did not question that women belonged in key governance roles. Overall, they were very pleased with the additional opportunities to meet with and provide support to other women; such opportunities were facilitated by the new community structures.

Informants did feel newly empowered by the change in community level procedures that put the women's NGOs at the forefront of family conflict resolution and by new attitudes towards domestic violence. The women attributed the new attitudes and procedures in part to their ambiguous political status in Thailand, but also to the human rights and conflict resolution training for men and women offered by the women's NGOs. During armed conflict, domestic violence tends to rise (Turpin 1998). Furthermore, England and Farkas' study (1986) indicates that women's empowerment may increase the level of family conflict. Yet, some of the women in our study indicated they have new "normative" alternatives when domestic violence occurs in their communities.

The increased importance of certain gendered cultural practices illustrates women's complex choices as they pick and chose which cultural values to modify and which to retain. In the context where ethnic values and practices were endangered by forced migration resulting from armed conflict, some of the women noted that their status increased if they were able to practice and teach some visible and economically advantageous gendered cultural customs such as weaving, sewing, music, ceremonial practices and, for the Kayan, wearing neck rings. The women in our study did generally not condone changing cultural practices that pertained to marriage and dress. The attitudes of the women may indicate compliance with traditional gendered roles. Nationalist images of home and household play out in the gendered construction of refugee camps (Giles 2004). However, their perceptions may also be seen as a form of resistance, a type of agency; are they resisting the loss of culture?

CONCLUSION

This study shows that on the Thai/Burmese border, networks of women's NGOs are offering training that is giving some women a new language, a new way of thinking about themselves that is empowering to them. The women's groups provide additional social resources through training that increases the informal power of some women in the camps and creates discursive alternatives for many. As a result, some of the women have noticed changes in gendered practices, including male and female perceptions of housework and female mobility. As such, the work of the women's NGOs can be considered grassroots capacity building. They have begun to change, at an individual and at a community level, the sense that women are not capable to the sense that they do have the power to effect change.

Over the decades, the women in the camps have increased their political influence and agency by forming collective gender-based organizations and by joining together across ethnicity to consolidate their power. They have sought international support and attention, gaining leadership experience and knowledge and alliances with funders increasing their resources. They have documented their grievances, strengthening their position. As this study shows, they continue to expand their gender-based grassroots constituency and to equip their constituency with human rights, women's rights, leadership, and conflict resolution training that has enhanced their status in the community. Moreover, the WLB has learned to use global mandates such as UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW as leverage with their male counterparts in the governments in exile and in their communities as they pursue a gender equality agenda.

Further research is needed to determine how and if their influence has translated into change in formal and informal governance structures. At the national level, WLB received an invitation for two women to participate in the national constitution drafting committee of the coalition government in exile. They successfully advocated for the inclusion of a 30% quota for women in the Draft Constitution for a Democratic Burma and recognition of Burma's obligations under CEDAW. According to Yee Htun, the constitutional training they received meant they were well prepared and defended their

positions despite discrimination; she said “[n]o other organization was as prepared as we were, and we blew them away and this time many men couldn't just dismiss us” (Global Justice Center 2006). WLB was also included in the development of the Proposal for National Reconciliation, along with six other major political and civil society alliances. The 2009 Proposal calls for “programs to promote the role of women in nation building and peacebuilding processes.”

However, current research shows that in the few instances where women have been included at the negotiating table, changes at the top/institutional level, although encouraging, are not enough to dramatically alter gender equity at the grassroots level. Sustainable peacebuilding requires linking bottom up and top down approaches. Further research is needed on how grassroots efforts might be linked to political participation at the top level. None of the local NGO leaders who we interviewed were informed about or involved in the WLB’s engagement in government negotiations; in fact, they were unaware that any such negotiations were taking place. However, my sense is that empowerment and capacity building at the grassroots level has been instrumental in the Women’s League of Burma’s belief that they are capable of being involved in the top level negotiations.

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