

**The Power To 'Shake The Ground':
Examining the Empowerment of Woman Activists in the Women's
Movement at the Burma-Thailand Border**

by

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ABSTRACT

THE POWER TO 'SHAKE THE GROUND': Examining the Empowerment of Woman Activists in the Women's Movement at the Burma-Thailand Border

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This thesis explores the capacity of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border to influence the sources of their gendered marginalization. These woman activists are part of an expanding women's movement comprised of political exiles, documented refugees, undocumented refugees and migrant workers from Burma, living in exile communities along the Burma-Thailand border. Feminist researchers have pointed to the gendered marginalization women experience in regions of conflict and displacement, arguing that conflict affects women differently than men. Further, researchers in peace-building and refugee studies have highlighted the important role exile communities play in addressing the roots of their displacement, fostering stability in their communities, and promoting positive social change in their exile communities and country of origin. I conducted individual interviews, focus groups, and participation observation with woman activists working for women's organizations in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand, to explore the constraints and opportunities for activism that they experience in their daily lives. My research indicates that the experience of 'social flux' that characterizes exile communities facilitates expanded opportunities for women to be involved in activism. These opportunities have facilitated the women's movement's use of a grassroots capacity building strategy that has led to the expansion of their informal power in their exile communities, and in turn, the expansion of their opportunities to influence the sources of their marginalization.

This thesis is dedicated to the women at Mon Women's Organization in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand who welcomed me into their lives and shared with me their strength of spirit and love of their ethnic homelands in Burma. Witnessing their courage and the courage of all the women that participated in this project has been transformative.

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ACRONYMS

BSPP	Burma Socialist Program Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Committee
NLD	National League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WLB	Women's League of Burma
BWU	Burmese Women's Union
KWAT	Kachin Women's Association-Thailand
KWO	Karen Women's Organization
KNOW	Karenni National Women's Organization
KYWO	Kayan Women's Organization
KWHRO	Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization
LWO	Lahu Women's Organization
PWO	Palaung Women's Organization
PWU	Pa-O Women's Union
RWU	Rakhaing Women's Union
SWAN	Shan Women's Action Network
TWU	Tavoy Women's Union
WRWAB	Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
GAD	Gender and Development
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
GDI	Gender Development Index
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
POS	Political Opportunity Structure

GBV	Gender-Based Violence
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
TANs	Transnational Activist Networks
TBBC	Thai-Burma Border Consortium
SYCB	Student Youth Council of Burma
KNU	Karen National Union
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
YNS	Youth for New Society
SAW	Social Action for Women
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
DPNS	Democratic Party for New Society
LLC	Labour Law Clinic
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nearly 1,200,000 people from Burma remain stateless as internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Burma, and as documented refugees or undocumented political exiles in neighbouring countries like Thailand, India, China, and Bangladesh (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2012). This is due to ongoing ethnic conflict and oppression at the hands of a series of dictatorships since General U Ne Win seized power of Burma in 1962 (Beatty 2010). After fleeing to refugee camps and exile communities in border cities in Thailand, and recognizing the protracted nature of their statelessness and the ongoing conflict and political repression at the hands of the government of Burma, a multi-ethnic pro-democracy movement has engaged in an ongoing struggle for genuine democratic reform inside Burma from outside its borders.

Concurrently, recognizing the gendered vulnerabilities that stateless women encounter in exile, a dynamic women's movement mobilizing within Burmese exile communities in Thailand has continued to expand its scope. For the past fifteen years, the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border has worked to build the capacity of woman refugee and migrant workers from Burma as a primary means of improving the well-being of women and increasing their status in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. Hundreds of grassroots Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) established by woman refugees and political exiles from Burma work with women living in exile communities to provide social and health services, education, and to advocate for social justice. The tactics of the women's movement have had an empowering effect on the woman activists involved, building their human and social capital as well as their confidence and self-worth (Belak 2002; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011b).

In this thesis I will explore the lived experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border to highlight the constraints and opportunities they face to address the sources of their marginalization, as both women and members of the exile community, in order to look to the future of the women's movement and of post-dictatorship reconstruction and democratization.

¹ The authoritarian government of Burma has remained isolated from international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF for the majority of its rule. This is a result of both the unwillingness of these institutions to engage with the authoritarian regime, and the isolationist economic policies of the military government.

To accomplish this I ask the following research questions: In what way can woman activists' geographic location (distance from the marginalization they have fled) and membership in exile communities provide opportunities to exert agency? Conversely, in what ways can exile communities be seen as constraining agency? To what extent has the range (length of time working in women's organizations, depth of experience with activism) of woman activists' experiences with capacity building programs run by organizations at the Burma-Thailand border facilitated a sense of individual empowerment? And, What is the capacity of woman activists to influence the sources of their marginalization in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border and inside Burma during the current political transition and ongoing peace process inside Burma?

Based on the lived experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, I argue that woman activists have strengthened their informal power in their exile communities by utilizing a movement strategy of 'grassroots community empowerment' within the experience of 'social flux' that characterizes the social and political environment of exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. The experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border demonstrate the dynamic and iterative relationship between movement actors and their social and political environment. Further, woman activists' movement strategy of 'grassroots community empowerment' has expanded existing opportunities and facilitated new opportunities for woman activists to mobilize, as they strengthen their informal power by building their capacity.

The development discourse has primarily utilized state-centric approaches to global politics and international relations; these characterize displaced groups as passive victims, and deny them agency and a political voice (O'Kane 2005). Moreover, the social movement discourse has increasingly highlighted the role of individual agency to understand movement emergence and maintenance, and researchers have called for greater empirical research examining agency and activism among stateless groups. Thus, I draw on a growing body of research examining the opportunity for positive social transformation that displacement and exile may provide, including contesting women's marginalised status (Snyder 2011a). Moreover, by participating in activism stateless groups are able to build their capabilities, establish informal activist networks, and foster a sense of empowerment in their daily lives (Cockburn 1998; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011a). While several researchers have noted the empowering effect of the activities of the women's activist network at the Burma-Thailand border, barriers to woman

activists' political participation through formal channels persist (Belak 2002; Snyder 2011b).

Since 2010, the government of Burma has engaged in a series of high-profile reforms, including the release of political prisoners and the re-establishment of official peace process negotiations between the Burmese government and ethnic opposition forces. At this stage in Burma's transition from authoritarian rule towards a genuine democracy, and the building of peace between ethnic groups with long-standing conflict, it is important to highlight the experiences of women with conflict, displacement, and life in exile. Importantly, woman activists working in women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border are making ongoing contributions to the well-being and stability of their exile communities through their movement activities.

In order to answer my research questions and make my argument, I have organized my thesis in the following way. In Chapter 2, I will provide a brief background of conflict inside Burma and displacement into Thailand, and the development of a pro-democracy movement and women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border. In Chapter 3, I will provide an overview of literature from feminist social movement, peace-building and refugee studies to demonstrate how women's activism in regions of conflict and displacement has been theorized and empirically demonstrated. In Chapter 4, I will outline the conceptual frameworks I used to explore the capacity of women activists at the Burma-Thailand border to engage in activism, including theoretical approaches to the gendered marginalization of women in exile communities, and concepts of opportunities for mobilization. In Chapter 5, I will outline the methodological approach I used in the design of this thesis, and the methods used during field research and analysis. Finally, In Chapter 6, I will outline my findings, first discussing the opportunities for activism facilitated by exile communities, and then woman activists' use of a grassroots capacity building strategy to further their movement goals.

Chapter 2: Background of Statelessness in Burma

In the following section I will provide a brief overview of the history of Burma, and the ongoing process of the displacement of women and their communities into exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. The porous 2,400-kilometre border between Burma and Thailand, and the protracted nature of statelessness from Burma has created a context in which the conventional categories of refugee, exile, and migrant have blurred. The women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border is comprised of 'stateless' people living in Thailand who differ in the causes of their statelessness, and the nature of their life in exile. In this thesis, I examine the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border with this broad understanding of statelessness from Burma; the diaspora population is comprised of people who have fled conflict between the government and ethnic opposition forces and are now documented refugees living in camps or undocumented refugees who have slipped through the camp system and reside in border cities and villages. The women's movement is also comprised of undocumented political exiles who have gone to Thailand to continue their political activity, and economic migrants who have fled poverty to gain employment in industry and agriculture in Thailand.

In Thailand, there are 140,000 registered refugees living in 10 refugee camps along the border, and hundreds of thousands more unregistered refugees living in cities along Thailand's border with Burma; another 350,000 people remain displaced internally in Burma (UNHCR 2012). In reality, these figures largely understate the scope of displacement from Burma, and the number of those displaced inside Burma and in Thailand is projected to be much higher (Lang 2002). Most of the refugees living in Thailand are from ethnic minorities inside Burma and come from rural regions that have experienced deepening poverty and neglect, as well as targeted violence from the government. Burma is home to over 135 different ethnic groups, possessing unique languages and histories; for a complete list of these ethnic groups and their corresponding regional demographics, please see Appendix I. Thailand has received steadily increasing flows of stateless people from Burma's ethnic minority regions since stateless members of the Karen ethnic minority established the first semi-permanent camp in 1984 (Lang 2002). In border cities in Thailand and in Bangkok, there are tens of thousands of stateless student activists and political exiles who fled Burma's capital, Rangoon, to escape government repression of the pro-

democracy movement. This group of stateless people is largely ethnically Burman, Burma's ethnic majority. Slightly more than half of those displaced into Thailand as well as those displaced internally in Burma are women (UNHCR 2012).

Conflict in Burma

While there are numerous overlapping factors that have contributed to the flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Thailand from Burma, their statelessness is ultimately rooted in the patterns and consequences of war and conflict in Burma. Since independence from Britain in 1947, Burma has experienced internal conflict between the central government in Rangoon and numerous ethnic minority opposition forces who have fought to win autonomy and recognition (Lang 2002). The country has been ruled by a series of military dictatorships since a military coup led by General Ne Win overthrew the democratic government in 1962. The Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was formed in July 1962, and all other political parties were banned (Schock 1999). By 1974, at which time a new constitution established the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', nearly all of the ethnic minority groups of the country had formed armed resistance fronts (Hyndman 2002). Under successive regimes, the *tatmadaw* (Burmese armed forces) fought back against its opposition with an increasingly aggressive counter-insurgency strategy that was sustained despite attempts to reach cease-fire agreements between the government and ethnic opposition forces throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Hyndman 2002).

The militarization of ethnic opposition forces and the government has created a climate of insurgency and counter-insurgency that has undermined the stability of Burma. As part of their counter-insurgency strategy, the military regime targeted ethnic minority communities that were perceived to form the support base for ethnic opposition forces, carrying out military attacks on civilians and undermining crucial infrastructure in these regions. For a map outlining Burma's ethnic minority regions, please see Appendix II. Further, the military regime has pursued policies that have forcibly relocated ethnic minority communities to government controlled border regions. Since 1992, tens of thousands of people living in ethnic minority communities along the border with Thailand were forced to relocate to army-controlled towns, as they ceded control of

territory, trade routes, and natural resources to the military government (Lang 2002). The government has also forced more than one million people, most of whom belong to ethnic minorities, into labour for portering, construction, servicing and maintenance of infrastructure projects without compensation (Hyndman 2002). In addition, ethnic minority women have been forced into sexual servitude by government military forces, and have experienced gender-based violence perpetrated by government armed forces, ethnic opposition forces, and men in their communities inside Burma (Hyndman 2002). Many women have also been forced into the sex trade in Thailand (Hyndman 2002). Thus, women's grievances inside Burma and at the Burma-Thailand border are directed at a broad range of perpetrators of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and gendered discrimination. Within Burma, many people have resisted the government's efforts to force their relocation and labour, and have fled conflict affected regions where GBV is amplified by moving to border areas where ethnic minority opposition forces have retained control, or have crossed the border into Thailand as documented refugees or as undocumented exiles and migrants.

Further, the military regime pursued economic policies that concentrated economic control in the hands of the state and attempted to disengage from involvement in the global economic system (Schock 1999). As a result of the regime's economic mismanagement, Burma has experienced decades of gross inefficiency, rampant corruption, and economic decline, leading to widespread poverty and to increasing economic migration to Thailand (Schock 1999).

Political Repression of the Pro-Democracy Movement

In reaction to political repression, poverty, and ethnic-based violence and discrimination, a pro-democracy movement developed inside Burma in the 1980's. In March 1988, students at the Rangoon Institute of Technology protested against the killing of university students by riot police, and were soon joined by students from Rangoon University in daily demonstrations, who argued an explicitly pro-democracy message. The pro-democracy movement launched a national general strike on August 8th (8-8-88), and peaceful demonstrations erupted in cities and towns throughout the country. The military reacted with extreme violence; in Rangoon it is estimated that three thousand demonstrators were killed by machine gun fire on the first night of the

general strike (Schock 1999). The movement turned to Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's hero of independence, to be the leading voice and political head of the pro-democracy opposition (Schock 1999). At its height, the movement drew one million people to participate in protest demonstrations in Rangoon alone. Despite violent repression from the riot police the students laid the foundation for a mass-movement that involved Buddhist monks, factory labourers, and impoverished urban residents (Schock 1999).

The following month a group of generals led by Ne Win staged a coup that retained the same personnel and structure, established the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) who reimposed martial law and brought the army back to cities where it brutally repressed all opposition (Schock 1999). SLORC ordered an end to the general strike, the workers returned to work out of a need for food and money, and the eight-week long general strike collapsed. The regime also placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest in 1989 and refused to recognize the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the 1990 general elections. SLORC was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, which extended military control of the country.

While the largest anti-regime demonstrations occurred in 1988, demonstrations also occurred in 1962, 1974, and 1996; each protest ended in a violent reassertion of control by the military government (Beatty 2010). In 2007, a resurgence of political demonstrations, referred to as the Saffron Revolution, highlighted the potential for a revolutionary political transition in Burma. Once again the regime violently repressed the Saffron protests; shockingly, many monks who participated in the demonstrations were beaten or killed by government forces (Beatty 2010). Despite the repression, the demonstrations helped to fuel greater international support for the pro-democracy movement and its activists by attracting global attention to the people of Burma's disapproval of the regime (Beatty 2010).

The Pro-Democracy Movement at the Burma-Thailand border

Over time the pro-democracy movement has established its roots in the exile communities along the Burma-Thailand border. After 1988, approximately 10,000 students, many of whom belong to Burma's ethnic majority, fled to the borders of Burma to escape

imprisonment and to further their pro-democracy aspirations through underground channels (Beatty 2010). The movement at the border has expanded to include the grievances of stateless ethnic minority groups, effectively becoming a multi-ethnic movement to achieve democracy in Burma. The exile community has become increasingly important to the pro-democracy movement, providing crucial resources and support from outside Burma's borders. Moreover, ethnic homelands are all located close to Burma's borders and activists slip in and out of Burma, retaining strong networks between activists inside Burma and those in Thailand (Beatty 2010). Activists in Thailand provide crucial support to their colleagues inside Burma using their relative freedom to access information, and to organize trainings and workshops. Due to security concerns and infrastructure limitations inside Burma, border activists are often the communication hubs for organizations, facilitating the growth of their colleague organizations inside Burma (Beatty 2010). International support has allowed the movement to expand, and many Burmese ex-pat communities in Asia, Europe, the US, and Australia and New Zealand support the work of movement activists inside Burma and along its borders. While the pro-democracy movement has been formalized with the work of Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party, the movement is largely maintained through underground channels.

The Women's Movement at the Burma-Thailand Border

Throughout the 1990s, stateless women living along the border in Thailand established a grassroots network of women's NGOs that developed through their experiences of violence and abuse by armed forces inside Burma (Snyder 2011). While observing stateless women's circumstances in the refugee camps and exile communities in Thailand, woman leaders noticed the marginalization of women in their communities. This marginalization included the male control of political and military decision-making and weaponry, women's experience of rape and sexual abuse by armed forces inside Burma and in exile communities in Thailand, increased reported cases of domestic violence, and growing maternal and infant mortality in exile communities in Thailand (Snyder 2011). Woman activists who had gotten involved in the pro-democracy movement in 1988 experienced a 'heightened awareness' of gender discrimination in their communities, and through this awareness formed grassroots women's associations that

required conflict resolution and alliance building across ethnic boundaries as well as agreement on political process (Snyder 2011). The network became formalized with the establishment of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) in 1999, and the activists subsequently became connected with global networks of women's movements and international bodies like the United Nations. The WLB is comprised of 13 women's NGOs, many of which represent ethnic minorities inside Burma: The Burmese Women's Union (BWU), Kachin Women's Association- Thailand (KWAT), Karen Women's Organization (KWO), Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO), Kayan Women's Organization (KYWO), Kuki Women's Human Rights Organization (KWHRO), Lahu Women's Organization (LWO), Palaung Women's Organization (PWO), Pa-O Women's Union (PWU), Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU), Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), Tavoy Women's Union (TWU), Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB). The aim of the WLB is to increase the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights, promote women's participation in the national peace and reconciliation process, and enhance the role of the women of Burma at the national and international level (Snyder 2011; WLB 2014). For the past fifteen years, the WLB has worked to build the capabilities of woman refugee and migrant workers in border communities as a primary means of improving women's opportunities for social, political, and economic empowerment. This is done through community programs such as micro-credit loans, language training, and skills training and development workshops.

Thailand has not signed on to the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees or the 1967 protocol, meaning that refugees are termed 'undocumented migrants', and are often dependent on maintaining the favour of local authorities to ensure their stay (Beatty 2010). Due to their undocumented status, the woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border must carry out their daily activities discretely to avoid attention from the Thai authorities. For those involved in the pro-democracy movement and the women's movement, many activists maintain anonymity in publications and correspondence. There is a substantial population of refugees, migrant workers and political exiles from Burma living in Mae Sot, Tak Province; a town located along Thailand's western border with Burma, approximately 500km from Bangkok, Thailand. Mae Sot is the major land gateway between Burma and Thailand and a large trade hub between the two countries, and as such, experiences massive flows of migrant workers from Burma. The town itself is a few kilometers from the border crossing, and is also in close

proximity to three refugee camps along the border. The exile community in Mae Sot, Thailand, has established an informal agreement with the local government and Thai authorities that allows Burmese refugees and migrant workers relative security in a small neighbourhood in the centre of the city. Information regarding changing border politics, conflict between the government and ethnic opposition forces, and the activities of local Thai authorities gets passed through the network of NGOs in Mae Sot. Thus, while the Burmese exile community may have been 'ghettoized' in Mae Sot, this has provided relative security to activists in the pro-democracy movement and the women's movement.

The Ongoing Political Transition and Peace Process

In November 2010, Thein Sein became Burma's first civilian president through an election that was condemned by civil society at the Burma-Thailand border and inside Burma for lacking transparency, and the use of coercion and intimidation by the government. The current 'civilian government' retains much of the personnel and structure of the military regime; in fact, Thein Sein is a former general. Since 2010, the government of Burma has enacted several high profile reforms, including the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, who now holds a seat in the national parliament, and the release of several hundred political prisoners. The government of Burma has engaged diplomatically with the governments of the US and European Union nations, and has begun to work with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)¹. It is important to note that there are many more political prisoners who remain detained as a result of their opposition to the government of Burma, and activists continue to be questioned and detained despite the lifting of a ban on public protests inside Burma. Moreover, the Burmese army continues to clash with ethnic opposition forces in violent conflict. For example, ongoing conflict in Kachin state has displaced 100,000 people in Kachin and neighbouring Shan state since June 2011, when the Burmese army offensive against the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) broke a 17-year cease-fire between the two groups (WLB 2014).

In conjunction with these reforms, the government of Burma enacted the most recent official peace process between the government and ethnic armed opposition groups after its 2010 election. Through this peace process, the government of Burma is involved in continued

negotiations of cease-fires with ethnic opposition groups. However, these talks have been delayed due to ongoing military clashes between these groups. Although women's organizations have been an important advocate for women throughout the peace process by raising awareness of the issues affecting women in exile communities and inside Burma, such as the intensification of GBV during the conflict, they have yet to be formally included as participants in the official peace process.

While there has been ongoing discussion of the potential return of refugees into Burma, the exile community has been largely left out of any formal discussion, and there is little information available to the exile population regarding the return of refugees into Burma. Many of the women who participated in my research expressed the pressure they are beginning to feel to return to Burma, particularly by donors who are beginning to direct their funding to projects inside the country. At this point in Burma's transition, women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border remain wary of the sustainability of the government's reforms and the tentative peace that has been built between the government and opposition groups. While the future of the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border remains uncertain, women's organizations remain committed to their struggle for women's rights and citizenship rights within their exile communities, and have begun to strategize how they can move forward if they determine that Burma has reformed enough to allow their critical voice to be heard inside the country.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In the following chapter I will provide an overview of academic literature that discusses the activism of women in regions of conflict and displacement. In this thesis, I explore the experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border to highlight their capacity to influence the sources of their marginalization in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border and inside Burma. While there has been increasing attention paid to the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of women in exile communities, there remains a limited amount of academic research focusing on the agency of women who mobilize in these contexts (O’Kane 2005; Snyder 2011a).

Traditionally, academic discourses in development studies, peace and conflict studies, and refugee and diaspora studies have reinforced state-centric ideas of global politics by utilizing categories of 'citizen', 'refugee', and 'stateless person'; these categories exclude groups living in exile from formal spheres of political activity, ignoring their individual agency and denying them a meaningful voice in the discourse (O’Kane 2005; Soguk 1999). Increasingly, researchers have called for a more nuanced understanding of the social and political landscape of exile communities that addresses the complex and ambiguous nature of politics for groups living in exile. Moreover, feminist researchers have continued to call for increased attention to the fundamental and multifaceted role gender plays in shaping the daily lives of women in regions of poverty, conflict, and instability.

As such, this thesis draws on academic discourses in development studies, peace and conflict studies, and refugee and diaspora studies to highlight debates surrounding the nature of politics for women in exile communities, and the role gender plays in shaping opportunities and constraints for women in exile to mobilize. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of individual agency for understanding the mobilization of women in exile, and advances the argument that women living in exile at the Burma-Thailand border are facilitating positive social change in their exile communities, and they are contributing positively to stability and peace in their exile communities and inside Burma.

Empirical Research on Women's Activism: The Mobilization of Women in Unstable Communities

There is a growing body of literature that explores the nature of activism for women in the developing world; this includes contexts where women are living in protracted exile, and more broadly, in regions of conflict, instability, and poverty. To begin, several researchers have carried out empirical research on the activism of women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border (Belak 2002; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011b). These researchers have examined how the women's movement has managed to build the capabilities of stateless women along the Burma-Thailand border, and the empowering effect these activities have had for the women involved (Snyder 2011b; O'Kane 2005). In general, these studies have revealed that women's organizations along the Burma-Thailand border have provided training and resources that have led to a greater engagement of women within activist organizations, and have created a new self-perception that is empowering for the women involved in activism (O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011b). While these studies provide valuable information regarding the empowerment efforts of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border thus far, the social and political environment is constantly evolving, and this has been accelerated by political reforms inside Burma and ongoing peace processes between the government of Burma, armed groups, and civil society inside the country. Moreover, the government of Burma and the government of Thailand have been engaging in negotiations over the return of the exile population living in Thailand, and this process is being overseen by the UNHCR. Thus, this thesis deepens the findings of O'Kane (2005) and Snyder's (2011a) research of the empowerment of women living at the Burma-Thailand border by highlighting how woman activists are able to utilize their increased capital and sense of individual empowerment to advocate for the well-being of women within the current political transition and peace process. Further, this thesis deepens O'Kane (2005) and Snyder's (2011a) research on women's empowerment by highlighting the challenges and opportunities woman activists have faced in spite of and because of their newly acquired capital and sense of individual empowerment.

Further, researchers have explored other contexts in which women living in protracted exile were mobilized by a women's movement with the aim to promote gender equity in their

exile communities, including Iraq (Al-Ali 2007), Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cockburn 1998), and Guatemala (Crosby 1999; Torres 1999). For example, Cockburn's extensive work with women in post-conflict societies has revealed the efforts of women to promote multi-ethnic approaches to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel, and Bosnia and Herzegovina leading to the development of a women's knowledge sharing forum, bringing together women from these disparate regions to share their experiences (Cockburn 1998). These studies have noted the inability of woman activists to utilize the knowledge and skills they gained through their activism to exert political influence at the local level in exile communities, as well as in their country of origin once they returned. For example, indigenous women from Guatemala living in refugee camps in Mexico were unable to have a fundamental role in the political negotiation of the return of refugees to communities in Guatemala, despite enormous gains made to their own sense of empowerment and self-worth while in exile (Baines 2000; Crosby 1999; Torres 1999). While these researchers have made strides in illuminating the experiences of women living in exile, there remains limited research on the relationship between the social and political environment of exile communities and the nature of mobilization for women living in exile. Specifically, empirical research is required to highlight how opportunities for mobilization can be expanded and new opportunities can be created as a result of the iterative relationship between movement activists and their social environment (Ray and Korteweg 1999; Wood 2003).

Expanding this discussion to include research that explores women's activism in the context of conflict, instability, and poverty, feminist researchers from across the social sciences have sought to illuminate the diversity of experiences of woman activists in these contexts (Mohanty 1991; Noonan 1995; Pessar 2001; Ray and Korteweg 1999; Wood 2003). In a widely cited article, Mohanty argues that, in contrast to women's movements in developed states, women in the 'third world' have been considered victims, rather than agents of their own destiny (Mohanty 1991; Ray and Korteweg 1999). This argument reflects the broader assumption that women in contexts of conflict, instability, and poverty "lead an essentially truncated life based on their feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and their being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized, etc.)" (Mohanty 1991: 56; Ray and Korteweg 1999). To combat this assumption in their overview of research on women's movements in the 'third world', Ray and Korteweg (1999) call for greater

attention to the locally specific contexts of women in the developing world, where larger political, cultural, and economic processes are played out, avoiding universalistic approaches that assume the homogeneity of women in the developing world (Ray and Korteweg 1999). Researchers who have sought to illuminate how the targets of development and empowerment efforts understand what empowerment means have advanced this argument. For example, Klenk (2004) argues that women who are the beneficiaries of development assert contesting subjectivities that disrupt undifferentiated concepts of ‘women’, ‘development’ and ‘empowerment’. Thus, rather than simply enhancing material circumstances, the process of development is a point of departure for the formation of new subjectivities (Klenk 2004). Rather than a static end point, Klenk (2004) argues that development is a contested process that is rendered meaningful through women’s own situated constraints, experiences, and hopes.

While empirical research has demonstrated the wide diversity of woman activists’ grievances, objectives, and experiences with activism, feminist researchers have developed several key criteria for defining ‘women’s movements’. Women’s movements are movements where “women are the major actors and leaders” (Beckwith 2013: 3; Tripp et. Al. 2009). The common thread among women’s movements is the politicization of their lived experience as women, and women’s gendered identity claims serve as the basis for activism and mobilization (Alvarez 1999; Beckwith 2013; Ferree and Mueller 2007). Importantly, women’s identity and the interests that derive from that politicized identity are specific to individual movements, necessitating empirical investigation of the specific political and social context within which women mobilize (Beckwith 2013).

The Mobilization of Exile Communities and the Development of ‘Peace building Capacity’

Within International Relations (IR) discourses researchers have largely focused on the potential security threats associated with stateless groups and exile communities, such as insurgent activity and arms and drug trafficking, rather than the positive contributions that can be made by these groups to peace-building and post-conflict resolution (Al-Ali 2007; Lederach 1997; Smith and Stares 2007; Snyder 2011). However, exile communities are diverse, “stratified

by class, caste, education, occupation, religious affiliation, cultural interests, and urban and rural background” (Snyder 2011b: 177). Within exile communities, an individual's status as either refugee, political exile, or undocumented migrant is determined by both the cause of their flight across the border (civil war, political repression, environmental disaster, poverty), as well as their conditions and registered status while living in exile (registered as a refugee in camps by UNHCR, migrant workers in factories in border cities etc.). Thus, the reactions of exile communities to conflict, and their effort towards post-conflict community building are not static; as conflict changes, diaspora responses change (Snyder 2011b).

Some research has challenged this traditional view of exile communities as threats to the peace-building process by arguing that groups living in exile can be both peace-makers and peace-wreckers, sometimes even at “one and the same time” (Smith and Stares 2007; Snyder 2011b: 177). Lederach defines peace-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” (Lederach 1997; Snyder 2011b: 177). Groups living in prolonged exile can acquire particular skills while living in exile communities, through a wide range of training and education opportunities such as language training, vocational training, professional development, and peace education (Milner 2011). The knowledge and skills that these groups acquire while living in exile communities may allow them to contribute to peace-building efforts through: a) post conflict reconstruction and community development activities; b) direct political involvement in the country of origin and in the negotiation of peace agreements; and c) advocacy and lobbying activities related to peace education while living in exile (Snyder 2011). By engaging in peace-building efforts, exile communities are able to actively pursue sustainable peace and development initiatives that directly address their fundamental grievances and the causes of their displacement (Milner 2011; Smith and Stares 2007).

Conversely, exile communities can threaten both their host states and their countries of origin through their activities, such as engaging in armed conflict or the trafficking of drugs or weapons (Loescher, Milner and Troeller 2007; Snyder 2011). The link between forced migration and regional security has been a focus of both academic discussions in international relations, and among humanitarian organizations working with refugee communities and the governments of states in which protracted refugee situations are found. For example, throughout the 1990s UN

resolutions on Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and Rwanda reflected the argument that failing to address forced migration can lead to threats to regional and international peace and security (Loescher, Milner and Troeller 2007).

Women's Role in Peace-Building

Research from diaspora studies and peace and conflict studies has examined the gendered impact of conflict and displacement, revealing that women experience armed conflict differently from men, and that the vulnerabilities of refugee women differ greatly from that of men while living in exile (Al-Ali 2007; Hyndman 2011; Snyder 2011). Thus, integrating discussions of the gendered nature of armed conflict, life in exile, and post-conflict reconstruction into the literature on the peace-building potential of exile communities is crucial to understanding the role women in exile communities can play, and the capacity they must build in order to do so (Snyder 2011).

Global policy has formalized this assertion; UN Resolution 1325 passed in October 2000 states the importance of mainstreaming gender in all aspects of post-conflict resolution and peace operations (Al-Ali 2007). However, there continues to be a disconnect between feminist research that demonstrates the relevance of gendered analyses of conflict and peace-building and the actions of stakeholders involved in peace-building operations on the ground, such as state governments and humanitarian organizations (Moran 2010).

Among feminist researchers, the social disruption caused by conflict, displacement, and exile has been theorized as an opportunity for the transformation of unequal social dynamics related to ethnicity, social class, and gender (Bleiker 2000; Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Enloe 2002; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011). Empirical evidence suggests that conflict can trigger unexpectedly positive civic behaviours from groups who are largely excluded from participating in civic and political life during peacetime, such as women (Buvinic et.al. 2012). For example, in her gendered analysis of transnational bridge-building capacity, Snyder (2011a) discusses the impact that promoting women's empowerment can have on creating a 'civil society peace constituency'. Her work outlines the efforts of refugee women in several different global contexts to advocate for their own immediate needs in exile, as well as for the transformation toward a more gender equitable society inside their country of origin (Snyder 2011a). Some researchers

have focused on the psychological and emotional elements of women's activism in regions of conflict and displacement; in her examination of women in conflict in El Salvador, Wood (2003) argued that experiencing state violence prompted women to support and join opposition forces out of moral outrage.

Moreover, states may be most amenable to women's movements when they are moving toward democracy. In her comparative study of women's movements, Beckwith (2013) outlines that "when women's movements inhabit civil society, succeed in organizing in advance of democratic transition, and construct alliances with other democratic actors, those movements are well positioned to gender new institutions favourably" (Beckwith 2013: 8). When women's movements affect democratic transitions, they construct conditions that have "enhanced women's citizenship in terms of women's access not only to civil and political rights, but also to various social and economic ones as well" (Beckwith 2013: 8; Waylen 2007). Thus, while democratic transitions do not uniformly produce women-friendly outcomes, research on women's movements during democratic transitions suggests that political opportunities are greatest for women's movements under these conditions (Beckwith 2013). In fact, feminist researchers have asserted that peace-building processes and the democratic transition of states may be jeopardized by overlooking the needs of women; Enloe states, "If a form of masculinity which has as its complement a passive, demure, domesticated model of femininity gains credibility, then genuine democratization is almost certain to be derailed" (Enloe 2004: 218).

Therefore, women living in exile have been theorized as important actors in the peace-building process, and a source of stability for their communities. Empirical research of women's activism in unstable states has demonstrated the ability of women to capitalize on the changes to their communities to advocate for gender equality (Mohanty 1991; Noonan 1995; Pessar 2001; Ray and Korteweg 1999; Wood 2003). The next chapter will build on this evidence to develop the conceptual framework for this thesis project, establishing a gendered understanding of the experience of life in exile, and the constraints and opportunities for women's activism that stem from their exile experience.

Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework

Gender and Life in Exile

In this thesis I place gender at the centre of my exploration of the capacity of woman activists to influence positive social change in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border and more broadly inside Burma. As such, it is crucial to conceptualize gender and its role in shaping the marginalization of women in exile communities, and in turn, their capacity to mobilize to contest this marginalization. The following section will discuss how researchers have theorized the relevance of gender to the daily realities of life in exile communities.

‘Power as Domination’ and Breaking Down the Formal and Informal Dichotomy

Feminist researchers seeking to conceptualize the marginalization of women have focused on power, and the interrelationship between power and gender. First, these researchers have articulated a conception of ‘power as domination’ to explain how social, political, and economic systems enforce the marginalization of women. The ‘power as domination’ concept is rooted in a notion of power as a negative force, involving the domination of men over women through an overarching system labeled as ‘patriarchy’ (Lloyd 2013). The ‘power as domination’ concept has been given increasing weight in the fields of development and humanitarian assistance, with researchers and practitioners focusing on ‘the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations to women and men that establish men’s domination over women (Hyndman 2011).

The ‘power as domination’ approach to gender conceptualizes male domination over women as a result of a system of social, economic, political and ideological factors. Thus, exploring how women experience this marginalization necessitates extending the conventional boundaries of power and resistance beyond formal state structures, such as political parties and interest groups, to include “political, social and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender” (Beckwith 2013: 3; Ferree and Mueller 2007). In addition to their marginalization from formal state structures, the marginalization of women in exile

communities also stems from 'informal institutions' that lie outside the formal system, and that determine women's access to 'capital' while living in exile communities (Knowles et.al 1999; Horn 2010). Informal structures are rooted in social context and exert their influence on women in exile communities directly and indirectly through traditions, customs, and social norms that constrain their access to physical, financial, and natural capital (Bebbington 1999; Jutting et.al. 2009; Kabeer 2003). Moreover, women in exile communities lack access to primary and secondary education, health care, and skills training, resulting in diminished human and social capital (Kabeer 2003; Jutting et.al. 2009). For women in exile communities, traditional cultural expectations of how to perform their gender may become more rigid, as exile communities seek to retain their ethnic identity (Nolin-Hanlon 1999; O'Kane 2005; Torres 1999). The prolonged existence of rigid gender roles that limit women's role in the public sphere may lead to the internalization of women's social status as persons of lesser value (Enloe 2002; Kabeer 2001). As a result, the marginalization of women becomes socially accepted as immutable, and can also lead women to reinforce their own marginalization and to discriminate against woman activists in their communities who may seek gender equality (Kabeer 2001).

In regions of conflict and poverty, men typically dominate formal structures, with women largely marginalised from mainstream economic, social, and political spheres (Kabeer 2001). Thus, the process of displacement and life in exile communities can create dual systems of oppression in which women encounter oppression as a result of both their gender, as well as their status as stateless. Moreover, women living in exile are faced with the emotional trauma of violence and forced displacement, and must cope with the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and possessions, and the loss of their social capital, including support networks of their family and friends. The emotional trauma and loss caused by forced displacement limits the ability of women living in exile to perform their care-giving and nurturance activities and erodes their primary social role to maintain household well-being (Blacklock 1999; Pessar 2001).

In spite of this dual marginalization, empirical case studies of women in exile communities have demonstrated their ability to advocate for their immediate needs, and call for broader social change regarding women's rights and women's role in society in their country of origin (Al-Ali 2007; Cockburn 1998; Snyder 2011). Thus, while the social and political environment of exile communities is crucial to understanding how patriarchy leads to the marginalization of women living in exile and the sources of their grievances, it is necessary to

account for situations in which women living in exile do collectively mobilize. Thus, in order to account for the agency of woman activists, and their ability to mobilize to contest their marginalization, it is crucial to highlight theories of power that conceptualize women's potential and their 'capacity' to contest their marginalization alongside discussions of patriarchy and 'power as domination'.

Power as Capacity: Capabilities and Empowerment

In order to highlight the agency of women within theoretical discussions of power and gender, a number of feminists developed an understanding of 'woman power', based on the assumption that women have distinctive life experiences compared to men, and that they understand power differently (Lloyd 2013). This theoretical approach conceived of power as the power to act, or 'power as capacity' (Arendt 1958; Hartsock 1985; Lloyd 2013). Supporting this school of thought, Arendt redefines power away from a conflict-based model of power and its association with domination and violence toward a community-based model of empowerment that emphasizes capacity and potential (Arendt 1958; Hartsock 1985; Lloyd 2013). Miller suggests that 'power as capacity' involves the ability to make a change in any situation, large or small, i.e. the ability to move anything from point A to point B, without the connotation of restricting or forcing anyone else (Lloyd 2013). Power as capacity has an epistemological dimension; it becomes possible when women have undergone a process of consciousness raising that enables them to see beneath the surface operations of patriarchy to its inner workings (Hartsock 1985). Moreover, researchers supporting the 'power as capacity' approach argue that this mode of power entails mutual empowerment whereby people other than oneself are simultaneously empowered by a particular course of action (Hartsock 1985).

The concept of 'power as capacity' has been utilized within development discourses to conceptualize the factors that can bring individuals out of poverty (Bebbington 1999; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Researchers applying the 'power as capacity' concept to their efforts to support marginalised communities living in poverty have equated poverty with a lack of access; when they have greater access to the resources and opportunities needed to build natural, physical, financial, human, and social capital individuals will develop the means to improve their

well-being (Bebbington 1999; Sen 1999). Thus, capacity, or capabilities, can be a vehicle for instrumental action (making a living), hermeneutic action (making living meaningful), and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living) (Bebbington 1999). Importantly, 'capacity' is rooted in individual agency, incorporating individual needs and abilities, as well as more complex social constraints (Kabeer 2003). Capacity can be measured in gender-disaggregated ways because capacity is defined in relation to the individual, as seen in the establishment of the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (Kabeer 2003; Okali 2011).

Central to the 'power as capacity' model is the process of 'empowerment' or consciousness-raising required to build an individual's capacity, and thereby, develop the power to act. Empowerment entails the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life, i.e. the power to enhance the possibilities of self-development (Kabeer 2001; Lloyd 2013). Moreover, empowerment entails individuals engaging with others, who are similarly situated, to identify both why they are oppressed and what they need to do to act collectively to change matters. The empowerment process involves dialogue with others, setting up or joining organizations to bring about social change, and group solidarity that results from working collectively. Thus, 'power as capacity' and its corresponding empowerment process, describes both an individual transformation that will be expanded on subsequently, and a more political and democratic process that has wider community implications, in which women are represented as "active participants in their social world" (Lloyd 2013: 6; Radke and Stam 1994). Given the relevance of the empowerment process to building the power to act, it is important to ask what conditions or events can trigger this empowerment process, permitting women to overcome the constraints to activism they experience as stateless women. The following section will discuss the social and political environment of exile communities, and the nature of opportunities for mobilization that exist in this context.

Opportunities for Mobilization

In this thesis, I explore the capacity of woman activists in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to influence the sources of their marginalization through activism in their exile communities and more broadly inside Burma. Engaging in the questions of how and why

activists mobilize necessitates a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the social and political environment in which women in exile may mobilize. However, literature examining women in the developing world, and more specifically how gender is experienced in regions of conflict and displacement has demonstrated that women are marginalized by multi-faceted sources of power that are both formal (e.g. state of origin, host state) and informal (e.g. social expectations prescribed by traditional culture, division of household roles). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘power as capacity’ highlights the potential for woman activists to create new opportunities for mobilization that lie outside of traditional opportunity structures, by interacting with their social and political environment. Thus, concepts of how the social and political environment shapes the nature of woman activists’ mobilization that rely on opposition to the state, specifically ‘political opportunity structures,’ account for only part of the puzzle of how women in exile communities can influence the sources of their marginalization (Banki 2013; Noonan 1995; Tarrow 2011).

By conceptualizing the nature of opportunities to mobilize that are tied to the social and political landscape of exile communities, this section emphasizes opportunities that lie outside of traditional political opportunity structures, including cultural opportunities. Importantly, the social and political environment in which activists mobilize has an enormous impact on the nature of their activism, and the strategies they choose to utilize. Further, this section emphasizes the iterative relationship between social movement actors and their social environment to argue that opportunities to mobilize are dynamic, and can be created or expanded by the actions of movement activists.

Political Opportunity Structure in Regions of Protracted Displacement

Political Opportunity Structure (POS) has been widely used by social movement scholars to examine how movements are able to mobilize given the political environment in which they are located. The concept of political opportunity refers to features of the political environment that influence movement emergence and success; however, specific definitions of ‘opportunities’ have differed widely (Staggenborg, 2012). Tarrow (1988) has presented the most commonly cited theory of political opportunity, which emphasizes the role of the state, and how changes in the nature of the state can create opportunities for movements to mobilize as well as maintain

their movement activities. Tarrow (1988) addresses the context in which states become vulnerable to the mobilization of social movements by outlining various dimensions of political opportunity: a) the degree of openness of the polity to its citizen base, b) stability or instability of political alignments, c) presence or absence of allies for mobilizing groups, d) divisions within the elite and e) the policymaking capacity of the government (Tarrow 2011). In addition to influencing the emergence of social movements, political opportunities may also impact the strategies and outcomes of mobilization. Further, threats or repression from the state have been conceived as opportunities for activists to mobilize, by creating the conditions that activists feel they have to work against (Staggenborg 2012).

Political opportunity structure has been criticized for being too rigidly defined, and for its inability to explain how subjective elements of movement emergence and maintenance, such as variations in culture and emotional commitment, can produce different mobilization outcomes (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Banki 2013). Moreover, researchers exploring mobilization and activism within unstable states, in regions of conflict, and where women are the main constituency of mobilization, have stressed the need to expand POS theories to account for the power dynamics that exist in these types of social environments (Banki 2013; Noonan 1995).

Woman activists living in exile communities experience power dynamics related to their gender, their experiences with displacement from their country of origin and their identity as exiles in their host country. The roots of displacement for individuals living in exile (conflict, poverty, discrimination etc.) and their experiences of this displacement are fundamental to understanding their motivation for their activism (Ray and Korteweg 1999). While much of the social movement literature is informed by the image of a stable state, exile communities in protracted situations are located in the most volatile regions in the world (Milner 2011). Those living in exile communities find themselves in 'a long lasting and intractable state of limbo in which their basic rights and essential economic, social, and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile' (Milner 2011: 267). Moreover, the restrictions imposed on exile communities limit their mobility and their ability to find employment, leading to poverty, frustration, and dependence on humanitarian assistance from NGOs (Hyndman 2011; Milner 2011). Researchers have highlighted how situations of precarity and extreme marginalization by the state can provide the motivations for collective action against that marginalization (Banki

2013; Tilly 1978, Burgerman 2001, Tarrow 2011). In order to apply POS theory to explain the opportunities for mobilization available to movement activists living in exile communities it is necessary to acknowledge the lack of a stable state in these contexts, and the impact this has on the nature of activists in exile communities' grievances, strategies and outcomes.

As previously discussed, women in exile communities are also marginalised as a result of their gender, enforced by 'informal' social structures at the household and community level. Moreover, the extent of women in exile communities' marginalization limits their ability to access opportunities for mobilization. Thus, while examining the social and political environment of exile communities reveals the nature of women's grievances in these contexts, the question remains: How were women from Burma living in exile communities in Thailand able to expand the women's movement despite having less political space to advocate for women's rights? The following section will examine gendered discussions within refugee studies and international relations that reveal the dynamic realities of the social and political environment of exile communities in protracted situations.

Constraints and Opportunities for Activism in Exile Communities

Throughout the literature on conflict, displacement, and life in exile communities, researchers have emphasized the dynamic nature of social and political processes in these contexts (Hyndman 2011; Milner 2011; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011). This section will discuss some of the salient features within this dynamic social environment characterized by the 'social flux' produced when displacement disrupts the social fabric of daily life for exile communities. In order to understand the significance of this 'social flux' concept to opportunities for activists living in exile communities to mobilize, it should be considered based on how it is experienced by individual activists. Thus, the following section provides a brief discussion of 'social flux' as it appears in the literature discussing exile communities, including the social disruption of established household and community dynamics, the emergence of new stakeholders, and the establishment of transnational networks, in order to provide the basis for a later analysis of how this 'social flux' has been experienced by woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border.

Disruption of 'Normal' Life: Breakdown of Household and Community Dynamics

First, for groups living in exile, violent conflict disrupts normal life to the extent that they are forced to move outside of their country of origin to attempt to re-establish the safety and stability of their families. By the end of 2009, it was estimated that 42 million people worldwide had been forced to leave or flee their homes due to violence, with women and children comprising 80 percent of all refugees and internally displaced people (Harild and Christensen 2010). By cutting off large numbers of people from economic opportunities, internal conflict can lead to a vicious cycle of displacement and household poverty; this situation is made worse by the destruction of social networks and the consequent depletion of social, economic and political capital (Buvinic et.al. 2012).

Researchers exploring the impact of violence, conflict, and displacement have highlighted how these events lead to the dramatic disruption of established household and community dynamics. Exile communities' experiences with violent conflict can lead to near total physical and psychological devastation, and as researchers studying societies experiencing conflict have noted, the experiences of death, severe injury, rape, abuse, poverty, loss of home, job, and country, are accompanied by dramatically shifting identities as exile communities attempt to cope (Cockburn 1998; Enloe 2002; Handrahan 2004). Thus, as the power struggles of violent conflict play out, old norms and definitions cease to apply (Handrahan 2004).

The experiences of conflict and displacement have important bearings on women's relationships with men in their communities. Given that men make up the majority of armed forces involved in conflict, young adult men typically suffer the highest mortality in conflict; the World Bank estimates that men constitute 90 percent of the missing in areas of conflict (Harild and Christensen 2010). This results in a higher proportion of women in post-conflict societies; the World Bank estimates that women and children make up 80 percent of refugees and those internally displaced by violence (Harild and Christensen 2010). As a result of the excess mortality rates of men during conflict, widowed women are left alone to attempt to rebuild their lives after the trauma of conflict. This represents a fundamental shift in traditional gender roles within the home, as women take over pivotal economic roles in their communities and assume responsibility for assuring the survival of their families (Buvinic et.al. 2012). The experience of

conflict facilitates the opening of space in which women can cultivate more equitable gender roles by filling the void left by the absence of men in communities affected by conflict. This results in shifting gender norms within the household and at the community level.

Further, feminist researchers have drawn attention to the gendered nature of conflict and post-conflict situations, documenting the horrendous impact of systematic violence against women as ‘non-combatants’ perpetrated by men during conflict (Handrahan 2004; Moser and Clark 2001; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002). Sexual violence (rape and sexual abuse) and other forms of GBV (domestic abuse) become amplified in societies experiencing violent conflict. Researchers exploring GBV have widely reported its use as a weapon of war (Buvinic et.al. 2012; Enloe 2002; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002). For example, in Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s, it is estimated that 20,000 women suffered rape, and in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, approximately 300,000 to 400,000 women suffered rape (Buvinic et.al. 2012). However, it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable data on the incidence of GBV given the psychological stigma associated with these experiences. Moreover, the post-conflict period may pose more of a threat to women than ‘formal’ conflict; after a conflict it is more likely for women to be trafficked, for domestic violence to increase, and for incidents of rape to increase (Handrahan 2004). Thus, conflict and displacement have an enormous impact on women’s relationships to men in their communities, either through the retrenchment of rigid gender roles, the escalation of violence against women at the hands of men, or the absence of men in the community due to their commitment to armed conflict. The retrenchment of rigid gender roles and the intensification of gender-based violence against women at the hands of men in armed forces and men in their communities constrain women’s opportunities for individual empowerment. However, conflict and displacement also leads to the reorganization of community dynamics due to the absence of men, and facilitates space in which women can become involved in community affairs, creating an environment that is conducive to women’s participation in the empowerment process.

New Stakeholders and the Development of Transnational Activist Networks (TANs)

In regions affected by conflict and displacement, local and international NGOs become significant actors, providing humanitarian assistance to exile communities who are marginalized

from the formal structures of their country of origin. Exile communities are characterized by the increased presence and necessity of local organizations and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) to maintain stability and basic well-being for groups living in exile. There is a growing literature examining the activism of stateless populations and the opportunities for activism that life in exile communities can present (Torres 1999; Nolin-Hanlon 1999). While living in exile, stateless groups have access to knowledge and resources through local-level interactions with community organizers and NGO workers, as well as at the global level, through online social networking with other activist and advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1999; O'Kane 2005). This can provide greater opportunities for stateless groups and their movement organizations to pursue their activism; these opportunities are directly related to their location in exile communities, and can provide more effective channels for social change than those available in their country of origin (Keck and Sikkink 1999). For example, O'Kane (2005) asserts that although women involved in activism at the Burma-Thailand border are stateless, their geographic location accords them greater opportunities for collective action than inside Burma; in pursuing their activism they reclaim the right to define their own identities and act politically.

Women in exile communities can capitalize on these opportunities to develop women's organizations whose mandate is to provide basic services and support to women in exile communities, and can connect these organizations through the establishment of a civil society network. Activist networks are characterized by their ability to allow stateless and other marginalised groups to mobilize information strategically to persuade, pressurize, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments (Ferree and Tripp 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1999). In their work on TANs, Keck and Sikkink developed the concept of the 'boomerang effect' to conceptualize how TANs may add momentum to social movements (Keck and Sikkink 1999). When links between state and domestic actors are severed, as is the case for stateless communities, domestic NGOs may directly seek international allies to pressure their states from the outside by 'amplifying' the demands of domestic groups, prying open space for new issues, and serving as mediators between the state and the domestic actors (Keck and Sikkink 1999).

In the context of Burma, TANs made up of international and domestic NGOs and aid workers, including UNHCR, and the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), have been active

in providing humanitarian aid and emergency relief to refugee communities along Thailand's borders with Burma since the early 1990s. Social movements in exile communities can utilize the resources and knowledge brought to the border by TANs to expand and strengthen their movements, and to recruit displaced groups in geographically distant or marginalized areas along the border and inside Burma despite socially fragmented constituencies (O'Kane 2005). Moreover, activist networks provide the means for the social movements to generate information quickly and accurately, and deploy it effectively. Movement activists can use this flow of information to reveal past or ongoing injustices or abuses by the authoritarian state that may have been kept hidden by mainstream media (Ferree and Tripp 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1999).

Creating Movement Opportunities through Empowerment

In his discussion of political opportunity structures, Tarrow (1996) notes that social movements can create opportunities through their own actions, changing the political opportunity structure in which they mobilize. Movements can create opportunities because their actions demonstrate the possibilities of mobilization to others and facilitate opportunities for resource poor groups that are not predictable from their structural position (Tarrow 1996). The actions of social movements also expose opponents' vulnerabilities, and reveal unsuspected or formerly passive allies who share the social movement's grievances. Finally, the actions of social movements can also pry open institutional barriers through which new demands can pour, allowing social movements to expand the scope of their grievances, strategies, and actions (Tarrow 1996). For example, social movements can create opportunities for their mobilization by expanding their repertoire of collective action into new forms. These new forms of collective action find opponents unprepared, and while they are preparing a response, the mobilizing group can escalate their forms of collective action, creating new opportunities (Tarrow 1996).

The women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border has utilized a strategy of grassroots capacity building through the proliferation of a civil society network within exile communities. Researchers have demonstrated that building the capacity of women to care for and provide stability to their exile communities has had an empowering impact on the woman activists involved (O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011). Thus, understanding how 'empowerment' is

conceived is crucial to understanding how woman activists were able to create greater opportunities for their activism through this capacity-building process.

Given that gender has been given increasing weight within development discourses, researchers have sought to develop a more comprehensive framework for evaluating gender dynamics and the tangible effects of empowerment for women in the developing world (Sen 1999, Sen 1993, Kabeer 2001). Kabeer defines empowerment as, “the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was denied previously.” (Kabeer 2001: 19; Nussbaum 2011). Kabeer (2001) theorizes that choice is made up of three elements: resources, agency, and achievements (the outcome of choice). Resources and agency form essential components of an individual's capabilities to make strategic life choices, and reflecting on the outcome of an individual's choice (achievements) is crucial to the empowerment process as a whole. Further, a fundamental “inner-transformation” is considered essential to the formulation of choices and to the empowerment process (Snyder 2011). This inner transformation involves the development of critical thought with which to perceive the sources of oppression, and to perceive the opportunity to contest gender inequality. Thus, Kabeer's (2001) theory of empowerment accounts for objective elements that have a measurable role in the empowerment process (financial resources, strategic allies), as well as subjective elements of agency that relate to critical understanding and intellectual cognition (Kabeer 2001).

The concept of agency has typically been synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain control in their own lives (Ortner 2001). Individuals who are marginalised may lack access to these forms of power. However, Ortner (2001) contends that despite their lack of access to forms of power in their daily lives, marginalised groups can exert agency through ‘the agency of intentions’. This form of agency involves a variety of culturally constituted desires, purposes and projects that emerge from and reproduce different socially constituted positions and subjectivities (Ortner 2001). Ordinary life is organized in terms of these culturally constituted projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose. In other words, people seek to accomplish things within a framework of their own terms, and their own categories of value (Ortner 2001). Ortner (2001) offers an example of the agency of intentions by discussing the resistance of Tswana women to the efforts of missionaries who actively sought to make agriculture men's, rather than women's work (2001). She argues that Tswana women invested a lot of pride and

planning into their agricultural activities, and when missionaries interfered with this project of empowerment and identity, Tswana women's resistance reflected an important arena of their intentionality. Thus, agency of intentions can be conceived as people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including their own structures of inequality (Ortner 2001).

Feminist researchers have argued that empowerment occurs within the subjective social positions of those who are participating in the empowerment process. Thus, rather than being a static position at the end of a process of development, empowerment should be conceived as a contested process that becomes meaningful through individual women's constraints, experiences, and hopes (Klenk 2004). In her article 'Who is the Developed Woman?: Women as a Category of Development Discourse', Klenk (2004) offers a discussion of the ways that women who are the beneficiaries of development efforts in India conceive of what it means to be empowered. Rather than a point of closure in which 'the developed woman' is clearly defined and attained, Klenk highlights how the women involved in development projects describe empowerment as a point of departure for the formation of new subjectivities, which simultaneously seem to open some possibilities and complicate others (Klenk 2004). Further, Klenk (2004) highlights how through the course of a workshop conducted with women involved with the Lakshmi Ashram, coordinators of the workshop sought to define 'the developed woman'. Importantly, differences in women's definition of what it means to be empowered emerged, reflecting the subjective experiences and priorities of the women involved. For example, graduates of the ashram school emphasized self-confidence, self-reliance, the prudent use of time, and the ability to speak out against social injustice and work for the improvement of others (Klenk 2004). In contrast, while women who had been recruited by other grassroots organizations largely agreed, they also emphasized the ability to knit, embroider, and sew as signs of becoming a developed woman. Importantly, these women's conceptions of what empowerment means reflect how they prioritize the burdens they experience in their daily lives, for example rural women's prioritization of being financially independent through the production of handicrafts (Klenk 2004).

As such, the empowerment process must be defined by the subjective realities of the individuals who are participating in it, rather than as an objective and attainable point at the end of the process. To conceptualize the impact of the empowerment process for women activists at the Burma-Thailand border, I will apply this subjective understanding of empowerment to the empirical analysis of interviews and focus groups with woman activists by highlighting how they

reflect on their lives inside Burma, and the changes they perceive in themselves and their relationships with men in their community after their engagement in capacity building programs in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. Moreover, I will account for the length of time spent living in exile communities and working with women's organizations, highlighting the diversity of experiences with the individual process of empowerment for the woman activists involved in this project.

The empowerment process has important implications for the ability of woman activists to access opportunities for mobilization. Researchers have demonstrated the impact that 'consciousness raising' has had on creating the conditions necessary for mobilization; for example, in Latin America, Christian base churches had an enormous role in mobilizing campesinos through the teaching of liberation theology leading to an increased awareness of the injustice of their suffering (Brockett 2005; Wood 2003). For stateless woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, the capacity building process of the women's movement may create greater opportunities for activism by building the individual confidence of activists, as well as contesting traditional gender roles within exile communities. This assertion has been reflected in several empirical studies that have observed the empowering effect that community organizing and activism have had on refugee women living along the Burma-Thailand border (Belak 2002; O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011). This process of creating a 'critical consciousness' for refugee women and their social environment is reflected in Bourdieu's theory of 'doxa'. Bourdieu states, "The passage from doxa to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when competing ways of being and doing become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that 'common sense' propositions of culture begin to lose their naturalized character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order" (as cited in Kabeer 2001: 25). A similar capacity building process can be seen in the organizing of indigenous women from Guatemala in exile communities in Mexico (Baines 2000; Blacklock 1999; Garcia 1995; Torres 1999). One woman refugee activist reflected on her experience within the activist network at the border stating, "We are not the same...We do not want to go back to Guatemala just to keep pigs in our backyard, living as we always did. We women have participated in the planning of our future cooperative. I never imagined we could do that" (Garcia 1995). Thus, researchers have demonstrated that the capacity building process can provide both an empowering 'consciousness raising' effect for individual activists, and can provide tangible opportunities for the expansion of

women's movements towards broader goals of positive social and political transformation for women in exile communities.

Based on this review of the literature, I have developed several propositions about the constraints that women face while living in exile, and the impact this has on their involvement in activism. We can expect the experience of 'social flux' that characterizes life in exile to present new constraints to the activism of women living in exile communities at the Burma Thailand border by virtue of: a) the retrenchment of gender roles among ethnic minority communities that make up the exile population, b) the experiences of poverty in exile communities and their dependence on humanitarian assistance, c) women's experiences of conflict and GBV, and the trauma felt by individuals who have experienced conflict and displacement, and d) exile communities' status as stateless, and the lack of a government to which to direct their grievances. Each of these new constraints poses barriers to women in exile communities' access to opportunities to build their human, social, and physical capital, limiting their ability to be involved in activism.

In conjunction with these constraints, the experience of 'social flux' also creates opportunities for women to be involved in activism that were not available prior to their lives in exile communities. We can expect the experience of 'social flux' characteristic of exile communities to facilitate opportunities for women's activism by virtue of a) the transformation of gender roles due to changes to community demographics and the increased presence of women in community affairs due to the absence of men because of conflict, b) the presence of new actors such as humanitarian organizations, foreign NGO workers, and the increased resources for activism that this can facilitate, c) the emergence of TANs through which women can gain support for their activism, pressure their country of origin or their host country via international actors, and access resources to maintain or expand their movement, and d) an individual empowerment process made possible by increased resources available to women in exile communities and the establishment of civil society networks in exile.

Woman activists' negotiation of the constraints and opportunities presented by life in exile is central to the question of how woman activists were able to mobilize to contest gender inequality in their exile communities in spite of the absence of formal political opportunities available to them. This thesis project will utilize empirical findings from field research with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border to explore which of these propositions is

demonstrated by their experiences: the proposition that exile communities present new constraints to women's ability to build their capacity to be involved in activism and the proposition that exile communities present new opportunities to build their capacity to be involved in activism. Further, I will explore whether woman activists' involvement in the capacity building process facilitated the expansion of existing opportunities and the creation of new opportunities for their activism, in spite of the constraints presented by the exile experience.

Chapter 5: Methodology

This thesis is based on nearly three months of field research carried out between January 2013, to March 2013 in Mae Sot, Thailand, and Chiang Mai, Thailand. Mae Sot is a hub of political activity for undocumented groups from Burma living in Thailand, and houses over two million migrant workers, and a large concentration of domestic and international NGOs that operate along the border. Mae Sot experiences massive flows of migrant workers in and out of the city, and activists who live in Mae Sot travel in and out of Burma to carry out their activism. The exile community in Mae Sot is made up of refugees, migrant workers, and political exiles from all nine of the ethnic nationalities in Burma: Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Pa-O, Palaung, Burman, Kachin, and Tavoy. Those who are stateless in Mae Sot have experienced varying degrees of conflict and political repression inside Burma, and come from varying socio-economic backgrounds. There is also a significant exile population in Chiang Mai, Thailand, with many activist organizations based in this urban centre.

In this thesis, I highlight the experiences of woman activists in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to reveal how they have been able to expand their movement activities in spite of the limited formal political opportunities for mobilization available in their exile communities. In doing so, I utilized feminist standpoint methodologies to reveal the gendered structures that shape the experiences of individual woman activists, as a result of their status as women and their status as undocumented.

Since the 1970s, feminist researchers have argued that traditional methodologies and epistemologies of the social sciences enable the patriarchic practices of legal, economic, educational, and political institutions (Harding 2004; Smith 1990; Wolf 1996). Social research applies categories to daily life that reflect the prevailing political arrangements in society. These categories enable institutions to govern our everyday lives in ways that fulfill the interests and desires of these institutions and the social groups that design and manage them, but not the interests of society's most economically, socially and politically vulnerable groups (Harding & Norberg 2005). As Smith (1990) argues, the social sciences construct the 'conceptual practices of power' and are complicit in the exercise of power, including the power to control relations between men and women.

According to feminist standpoint scholars, the methods, concepts, and theoretical frameworks of sociology (the fundamental social and political structures through which society is ordered) have been created by and based on the male universe (Harding 2004; Smith 1990). These practices of thinking convert what people experience directly in their everyday world into forms of knowledge in which people as subjects disappear and in which their perspectives on their own experience are transposed and subdued by the traditions of objectivity (Smith 1990). Thus, there is discord between how women experience the world, and the theoretical frameworks and methods in the social sciences that are used to describe the world (Smith 1990). Commenting on this discord, Smith (1990) argues that when doing social research “we may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits with ours” (Smith 1990: 25).

Feminist standpoint methodologies have been perceived as one way that social research can turn disadvantaged social positions into intellectual and political resources (Harding & Norberg 2005). Feminist standpoint methodology developed as an approach to see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and to apply the knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change (Brooks 2006). Feminist standpoint scholars emphasize the need to build knowledge starting with women’s concrete life experiences (Brooks 2006). Doing so highlights the lives and experiences of oppressed women, and uncovers women’s knowledge or skills that are hidden or undervalued (Brooks, 2006). For example, feminist scholars have continued to highlight the understudied nurturing activities that women perform on a daily basis, such as cooking, child care, and caring for others in their community (Brooks 2006; Collins 1990; Harding & Norberg 2005).

Furthermore, feminist standpoint approaches also call for the critical examination of society through women’s eyes, to reveal how society functions as a whole. Harding (2004) argues that illuminating the daily experiences of marginalized groups can provide insight into society and the hierarchical structures that reinforce marginalization and oppression. As Smith (1990: 23) states, “by taking up a standpoint in our original and immediate knowledge of the world, sociologists can make their discipline’s socially organized properties first observable and then problematic”. In making the everyday world problematic we also problematize the everyday localized practices of patriarchy that organize the everyday world (Smith 1990).

This thesis utilizes feminist standpoint methodologies to problematize the gendered

structures of power that shape the experiences of women in exile communities by illuminating the daily realities of the woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border who participated in this project. In doing so, this thesis does not strive to build a comprehensive and homogenous understanding of gender, statelessness, and women's empowerment. Rather, it seeks to provide an accurate snapshot of the constraints and opportunities the women who participated in this project experience in their daily lives, and how they go about negotiating these in order to further their activism. To accomplish this I employed an inductive approach to data collection, developing a set of preliminary research questions based on secondary literature, and revising these questions throughout the data collection process based on the priorities of the woman activists who participated.

Feminist standpoint methodologies have been important for shaping the ethical approach to the design of this project, and data collection in the field. Feminist standpoint scholars reject the sociological traditions of objectivity and distance in favour of an approach that embraces the subjectivity of sociological research by acknowledging the impact that the social positioning of the researcher and the researched has on the knowledge produced through the practice of research (Smith 1990; Tracy 2010; Wolf 1996). In *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*, Smith (1990: 25) describes the importance of social positioning for shaping the production of knowledge stating, "If we begin from the world as we actually experience it, it is at least possible to see that we are indeed located and that what we know of the other is conditional upon that location".

According to Wolf (1996), power differences between the researcher and the researched arise as a result of the kinds of social power embodied by the researcher and the researched and the power retained by the researcher through out the research design, data collection, and writing process. These power differences should be acknowledged and minimized through self-reflexivity by the researcher throughout the research process (Wolf 1996).

In the summer of 2010 I volunteered with a community-based women's empowerment organization in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand whose mandate was to provide assistance to refugee and migrant women and to build their capacity to participate in civil society in their exile communities and inside Burma. While living and working with the staff of this women's organization, I was continuously inspired by the strength and determination of the woman activists who work in women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border, and gained an

appreciation for the important role women can play in building community resiliency and promoting positive social change in exile communities. This volunteer experience has important bearings on my role in producing this research project.

First, my fondness for the women I met while volunteering was a motivating factor in returning to Thailand for my Master's Thesis research, and this positive outlook and desire to see them succeed in their work has shaped all aspects of this project from research design, data collection, and data analysis and dissemination. While I have sought to provide an accurate snapshot of the daily realities of woman activists based on their own experiences, I acknowledge that my positive and ongoing relationships with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border have played a role in the relationships I built during my field research, given that the participants of this project were aware of my previous support for the work of women's organizations at the border. Given my outward support for the work of the women's movement organizations, participants may have felt they needed to overemphasize the positive aspects of their daily lives in the interviews and focus groups conducted. When analyzing and presenting the data collected, my positive relationships with women at the Burma-Thailand border may have also led me to unknowingly overemphasize the positive aspects of the women's movement. To minimize this, I was careful to inquire about negative aspects of working in women's organizations during interviews and focus groups, and to include these negative experiences in my data analysis in order to provide a balanced snapshot of the daily lives of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border.

However, my experience as a volunteer with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border was also a crucial factor in the successful building of rapport, trust, and honesty between the women participating in this project and myself. Thus, my outward support for the work of woman activists and my positive relationships with women at the border contributed to the enhanced validity of the data collected and the findings presented in this thesis.

Woman activists living at the Burma-Thailand border's status as *undocumented* and the Mae Sot exile community's reliance on the favour of local authorities, necessitated that I established trust with participants and conducted all recruitment and data collection discretely. I did not discuss my research openly with strangers, and made sure to never reveal locations of organization offices through my correspondence with woman activists. Moreover, given their undocumented status, woman activists are wary of unknown names and faces, and avoid

discussing the political nature of their work with strangers. Thus, to ensure the successful recruitment of participants and to maintain positive relationships with participating organizations, I utilized my relationships with several key community contacts to connect with the broader network of women's organizations in the Mae Sot and Chiang Mai exile community. These individuals were able to vouch for my identity and intentions in researching woman activists, and connect me to woman activists in the exile community in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai by providing telephone numbers and email addresses for the women they thought may be interested in sharing their experiences. Moreover, these individuals were crucial in securing effective translators who were familiar with academic research and the issues discussed in the individual interviews and focus groups.

Given that I am a white, middle-class researcher from a Western academic institution, I was also conscious of the ethical implications of my role as a researcher working with women who are undocumented, come from economically deprived regions in Burma, and lack access to secondary education. Although this power imbalance is ever-present throughout the research design, data collection, and dissemination process of this thesis, I relied heavily on my previous volunteer experience with exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to demonstrate my allied support for the activist work of the woman activists involved in this project. I was also transparent in terms of my intentions and the rationale behind the research project, and allowed for input from the woman activists involved regarding the research questions, project title, and interview and focus group questions.

Feminist standpoint researchers assert that establishing both an emotional connection with, and deep commitment to, the research participants will yield in-depth data and is less exploitative of research participants than research that aims for objectivity and emotional distance from research participants (Irwin 2006). I had intended to contribute to the work of participating women's organizations by volunteering with in-office activities for the duration of the field research process. However, given the large and complex workload of women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border, and the short window of my field research, volunteering with participating organizations was not feasible. Instead, I ensured that each participant was aware of my previous volunteer experience at the Burma-Thailand border, and spent time when first meeting participants to get to know them and to provide some information to them about me and my intentions in conducting this research project. In a couple of instances,

I was able to continue to maintain my relationships with research participants by engaging with them socially after our interview or focus group concluded. Forging relationships in the field raises unique ethical dilemmas for the researcher in which the existing power dynamics between researcher and researched are complicated by feelings of friendship and loyalty. For example, in developing an emotional connection to the participants of this project, these participants may have felt obliged to provide data that is altered or embellished, providing data that they thought I would want, rather than data that is accurate. To minimize this, I kept detailed field notes that described reflections of my experiences as the researcher, social positioning within the community under investigation, and participants' feedback on the research process in order to be reflexive about how my relationships with participants may have shaped the research (Tracy 2010). Further, rather than relying on specific anecdotal evidence from individual participants to support the conclusions made in this thesis, such as specific events or dates, I ensured external validity by looking at the data more broadly to determine common trends among multiple participants, to avoid the inclusion of data that had been embellished.

Data Collection

Prior to entering the field I contacted the Women's League of Burma (WLB) to discuss my intent to carry out research with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, and invite the organization to participate or to provide guidance on issues they felt required investigation. The WLB generously provided me with a list of names of woman activists and phone numbers and email addresses with which to reach them. Two weeks before leaving for Thailand I contacted each of the woman activists to describe my project in more detail and to invite them to participate in either an interview or focus group. Many women responded positively, and I was able to set up tentative dates for individual interviews. However, given the unpredictability of working in community organizations at the Burma-Thailand border, many women were unable to participate due to travelling for work during my field research period, or their busy schedule.

As previously mentioned, I relied on key community contacts to connect with women and organizations I had not previously had contact with and to vouch for my intentions in researching with them. One key community contact generously brought me to several community

organizations in Mae Sot to introduce me to their staff, and provided guidance on which organizations and activists within those organizations may be interested in participating. Once I had exhausted the list of participants provided to me by the WLB and my key community contacts, I employed snowball sampling to connect with other woman activists. Each participant I researched with was able to provide me with the contact information of at least one of her friends or colleagues involved in activism at the Burma-Thailand border. This method of snowball sampling proved immensely effective given that woman activists must feel they can trust a researcher they are discussing political issues with, and having someone in their network vouch for me was able to facilitate that relationship of trust. The key criteria for the recruitment of participants for this research project was that they were women who were involved in activist work with community based organizations in their exile communities. All the participants of this project have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and ensure their safety when discussing politically sensitive topics.

Individual Interviews

I conducted thirteen semi-structured individual interviews with women working in women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border. Four of these women filled leadership roles in their organizations, and the remainder of the women interviewed worked as staff at various levels of leadership in five different community-based organizations located in Mae Sot and two community-based organizations located in Chiang Mai. They range in age from 18 to approximately 50 years old, and represent different experiences of life in exile, with several women having lived at the border for over 20 years, one participant who was raised in a refugee camp, and one woman who had only been living at the border for six months. Two of the women interviewed were involved in the 8-8-88 student movement inside Burma and fled to the jungle, joining armed groups and fighting in an armed struggle before arriving in exile communities and founding organizations to assist women living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. The women I interviewed for this project come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, and Mon.

Due to the sensitivity of conducting interviews with participants because of their

undocumented status in Mae Sot, I obtained informed and voluntary verbal consent rather than written consent, with the help of a translator in interviews where participants requested a translator. I also obtained oral permission to audio-record focus groups and individual interviews. In one situation, a participant did not wish to be audio-recorded. Instead I relied on hand-written notes of this interview.

Many women who were working as staff of women's organizations preferred to participate through individual interviews, given that their busy schedule made it difficult to schedule focus groups that suited multiple activists' availability. Conducting interviews with individual participants provided an opportunity to address sensitive political and social topics in a confidential setting, as well as an opportunity to gather responses with the level of depth required to produce 'valid interpretations of participants' life-worlds' (Roulston 2010). Moreover, the concept of 'anaday', which means to cause another person to feel ashamed, leads many people from Burma to refrain from voicing criticisms or negative interpretations of those around them. Thus, individual interviews were crucial to provide a confidential platform through which participants could voice possibly negative experiences, without worrying about causing their colleagues in movement organizations to experience 'anaday'.

The individual interviews were largely conducted at the organization offices where participants worked to avoid the attention of Thai authorities and ensure the safety of participants. In several instances, participants selected an alternate location, such as a local coffee shop or a hotel resort, given that organization offices are small and bustling with activity. The individual interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 150 minutes. To conduct the individual interviews I utilized an interview guide with questions formulated during the design of the research project; to view the individual interview guide used during field research, please see Appendix III. During the interviews, participants often diverted from this interview guide, highlighting issues in their daily lives that I had not anticipated. Thus, the interview guide was used to help focus the interview, but in some instances significant departures from the interview guide were necessary to capture the realities of woman activists' daily lives and their priorities. Moreover, as my time in the field progressed, I was able to refine the interview guide based on participants' responses to be more reflective of the realities of their daily lives.

Focus Groups

In addition to individual interviews, I also conducted five focus groups with student interns working with two different Community Based Organizations (CBOs). The first three focus groups were conducted with students in the Emerging Leadership Program (ELP) facilitated by the Women's League of Burma in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Each focus group involved 4 or 5 students, and was conducted at the students' school, located on the outskirts of Chiang Mai, Thailand. Each focus group lasted approximately 2 hours, and utilized a translator who was a former colleague of my key community contact in Mae Sot, Thailand. The final two focus groups were conducted with students at the Leadership Management Program (LMP) with the Student Youth Council of Burma (SYCB), located in Mae Sot, Thailand. Each of these focus groups lasted approximately two hours. To conduct the focus groups I utilized a focus group moderator guide with questions formulated during the design of the project; to view the moderator guide used, please see Appendix IV.

The participants in the focus groups ranged in age from 18 years old to 26 years old. Their level of experience with community activism varied. Some women came from families with connections to civil society in Burma or at the Burma-Thailand border, or connections to ethnic minority political opposition parties. Others had never been involved in political work prior to their work with women's organizations. Roughly half of the women who participated in the focus groups had never been in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. All of the participants involved in the focus groups had prior experience with organizations, either through membership in organizations, participation in short-term workshops, or as staff of organizations in their home communities.

The decision to conduct focus groups with such a young sector of the exile population was partly logistical; as previously mentioned, the women I interviewed played leadership roles in their organizations, either as General Secretaries or as staff. This limited their flexibility, making it difficult to coordinate focus groups involving women who had years of experience with the women's movement. In contrast, the women who participated in focus groups were all studying and living in the same location, and were accustomed to group discussion and sharing their experiences with each other. Further, conducting focus groups with a young sector of the

exile population was important in order to generate ideas about women's empowerment with women whose knowledge has largely come from capacity building internships facilitated by women's movement organizations. This allowed me to gain insight into the women's movement's strategy of grassroots empowerment from women whose conception of gender and the way it shapes their daily lives has been directly informed by their experiences with the women's movement. Moreover, the focus groups facilitated the development of conceptions of women's empowerment generated by group discussion, providing a snapshot of what empowerment means for young woman activists in the broader women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border. The ideas generated by the group dynamic of the focus groups complemented the ideas presented by the more experienced activists who participated in the individual interviews. Finally, in her study of women's empowerment in Burma, Belak noted that in some situations, women were more willing and comfortable voicing opinions and concerns when they were part of a group, rather than the sole focus of attention, and that sharing ideas with peers seemed to be a more rewarding experience for the participants (Belak 2002). For these young women, being able to discuss their experiences with empowerment programs among their peers seemed to make them more comfortable, largely due to the fact that these women had developed close relationships with their fellow students over the course of their six-month internship.

Participant Observation

While in the field, I engaged in roughly twenty hours of participant observation of organization offices, and meetings and events facilitated by women's organizations. While I had originally planned to volunteer in organization offices, my short time frame in the field limited by ability to make a valuable contribution to women's organizations' activities. As a result, my opportunities for participant observation were limited to visits to organization offices before and after conducting interviews and focus groups. I was also able to attend a public event for International Women's Day, several community network meetings, and observe the provision of health care and social services to the exile population at the Mae Tao Clinic in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Observing woman activists was useful to expand my knowledge of the civil society landscape of the Burma-Thailand border, and develop a better conception of the links between

woman activists and actors in the exile community, such as the pro-democracy movement. Further, being able to witness events in the daily lives of woman activists was useful in illustrating first-hand some of the themes that emerged in interviews and focus groups I conducted.

Language Limitations and Translation

While many of the participants were able to speak English, their proficiency and confidence with the language varied. To address this, I hired three different woman translators living in the exile community in Mae Sot, to assist with conducting the interviews and focus groups. I was able to locate and connect with translators through my key community contact in Mae Sot and women who had participated in the project, who provided me with the contact information for women who were involved in activism and familiar with academic research. Over the course of the field research process, these three translators assisted with translating two individual interviews and all five of the focus groups I conducted. The use of translation was necessary for this project for several reasons. First, utilizing a translator was crucial in order to capture a wide range of women's experiences that I would not be able to capture if only those fluent in English were to participate. The women with less fluency in English were often those who had spent less time in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border and less time working in women's organizations. It was important to include these experiences in order to establish the scope of women living in exile communities' experiences with activism and to be representative of the diverse experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border.

In order to produce the most effective interview or focus group possible while using translation, I made sure to inform the translators of the research questions and the rationale of the project prior to engaging with the participants. This was particularly useful in situations where the women participating in the project did not understand my questions; the translator was able to reword the question to be more appropriate to women in exile communities, while retaining the same meaning implied by my original question.

While using translation was a crucial factor in gathering data that was inclusive of the experiences of women in exile communities at the Burma Thailand border, there are some

limitations associated with its use in this thesis. First, while I made every attempt to ensure that the women I hired to translate were aware of the research questions, and were familiar with the interview guide, I cannot be certain of the accuracy with which they were translating my questions, and the participants' responses. To address this, when analyzing interviews or focus groups that had been conducted using translation, I focussed on the overall narrative rather than on individual words used. Second, building rapport with the women participating in this project was made more complicated with the presence of a translator. Having to address the women participating through a translator created a level of distance between the participants and myself that I did not experience during the interviews where translation was not required. This was particularly evident in the five focus groups I conducted, in which having to pause for translation hindered the overall discussion. To address this, during the two interviews and five focus groups in which I utilized a translator, I spent longer establishing rapport through the beginning of the interview, and tried to connect with the participants throughout the interviews and focus groups to build a comfortable rapport with them in spite of the language gap that existed between us. In some instances, the translators were familiar with the woman activists who participated, which helped to facilitate this relaxed and comfortable dynamic.

Furthermore, these limitations of translation are partly mitigated since the use of both individual interviews and focus groups in this thesis project is complementary. The focus groups allowed the woman activists who participated to develop ideas about broad ideas such as empowerment as a group, through discussion and the sharing of similar experiences. Through this process of sharing experiences, the woman activists who participated in the focus groups developed an accurate account of the daily realities as activists in exile communities through verification by the group. Moreover, from an observational standpoint, the focus groups provided an opportunity to view the real-world dynamics between women who are new to activism, come from diverse backgrounds, and who are studying and working together in an exile community at the Burma-Thailand border. In contrast, the individual interviews facilitated more in-depth and detailed discussions about these experiences, providing validity to the ideas developed during the focus groups. As such, each method addresses the limitations of the other, to ensure validity in the data collected.

Transcription and Coding

When I returned from the field I transcribed all the audio-recordings of the interviews and focus groups using a program called ‘Audacity’, to slow the tempo of the recordings. I also transcribed any hand-written notes taken during the interviews, focus groups, and during participant observation of women’s organizations’ offices. For interviews conducted in English I chose to preserve the broken English used by the participants to retain as much of the original meaning expressed by participants as possible. In some instances I was required to change the wording to account for participant’s misuse of English words in order to retain the meaning of their statements. Through this process, I relied heavily on my field notes to contextualize the audio-recordings and to clarify any words or statements that might have been misused by the participant during the interview. For the two interviews and five focus groups in which I utilized a translator, I made efforts to clean up the transcriptions and correct any grammatical errors made by the translator. Once all of the interviews, focus groups, and participant observation notes were transcribed, I engaged in a thematic analysis of the transcriptions, coding them by hand using a thematic framework developed throughout the field research process to address the question of how the social environment of exile communities shaped the movement activities of woman activists, and their individual experiences engaging in these activities.

To establish a sense of time within discussions of the empowerment process, I coded the data based on a chronological narrative to identify the factors that influenced the constraints and opportunities experienced by woman activists prior to their experience working in women’s organizations. For many women, their interviews and focus groups revealed significant information regarding the constraints and opportunities they faced in their home communities inside Burma prior to their displacement to the Burma-Thailand border. For some women who were born in exile communities or refugee camps at the Burma-Thailand border, I coded their transcripts to highlight the constraints and opportunities they faced in their exile communities prior to working in women’s organizations. When coding participants’ responses that described their life prior to their involvement in activism in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, many sub-themes emerged including: women’s traditional status in the household and the community, experiences with conflict, barriers to capacity building (education, economic

deprivation), political repression and the fear of politics.

Utilizing this data, I was able to form a snapshot of life for women inside Burma against which to highlight the constraints and opportunities presented by life in exile communities while working with community organizations. Many sub-themes emerged through this coding process related to the constraints and opportunities faced by women living in exile communities including: the normalization of women's status outside the household, humanitarian assistance and access to physical security (food, shelter, health-care), access to CBO facilitated education, and the role of informal networks between community stakeholders and with international allies.

After coding the data to highlight the social environment in which woman activists live and work, and the constraints and opportunities for mobilization that this environment facilitates, I coded participants' responses to highlight their individual experiences with activism within this environment, and how their experiences with activism may have changed the way they perceived their status as women within their communities. In doing so, I hoped to highlight the process of empowerment for individual woman activists, based on their own reflections of the 'changes' they perceived in themselves and their relationships with men in their communities. It was important that I utilized a conception of 'empowerment' that was informed by the academic literature on gender in unstable communities while using the realities of daily life for women in Burma and at the Burma-Thailand border as the starting point. As previously discussed, Kabeer's definition of empowerment focuses on the ability of women to make strategic life choices (Kabeer 2001). Resources and agency form essential components of an individual's development of critical thought with which to perceive the sources of oppression, and to perceive the opportunity to contest gender inequality (Kabeer 2011). Moreover, reflecting on the outcome of an individual's choice (achievements) is crucial to the empowerment process as a whole (Kabeer 2001). Thus, in order to explore the empowerment process for woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border I identified achievements that participants noted, such as the development of a quota system, the renegotiation of household and community roles between men and women, and the proliferation of advocacy materials and publications that called attention to GBV and the impact of conflict on women to an international audience. I also noted changes that woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border perceived in themselves and the ways they interacted with their communities, such as greater confidence, the development of the capacity for critical thinking, English language ability, the broadening of their world view (interaction with foreign

NGO workers, knowledge global struggles for women's rights), and their relationships with men in the community. One unexpected theme that emerged when the participants reflected on their experiences was the building of relationships between women from ethnic minorities inside Burma different from their own. Thus, I was able to highlight how woman activists themselves perceive their own empowerment, allowing for a diversity of experiences with empowerment through activism presented by the woman activists involved in this project.

The following chapter will present my findings to explore the capacity of woman activists to influence the sources of their marginalization and expand their women's movement.

Chapter 6: Opportunities for Activism at the Burma-Thailand Border: Expanding Women's Opportunities Through Grassroots Capacity-Building

In this chapter I will explore the lived experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border gathered through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. As such, it is useful to be reminded of the context in which woman activists cross into Thailand, and the nature of their citizenship status once in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. The following accounts describe the diverse experiences of three different woman activists in their home communities inside Burma, the circumstances surrounding their crossing of the border into Thailand, and the nature of their daily life in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. I have created these narratives by pulling together data from interviews and focus groups of individual women who participated in this project. Woman activists in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border embody a diverse range of backgrounds inside Burma, and varied citizenship statuses in their exile communities. As such, the following accounts are not meant to homogenize the experiences of women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. Rather, they are meant to illustrate some examples of the daily realities of the woman activists who participated in this project, and the circumstances surrounding their involvement in activism.

a) Chit grew up in a small village in an ethnic minority region in the South Eastern part of Burma. When she was young girl, her mother left Burma to work in garment factories in Bangkok. Her mother has been working in Bangkok since, and sends remittances home to her family inside Burma. Her grandmother and aunts, who were members of a women's empowerment organization, helped raise her, and introduced her to women's rights, democracy, and community activism. Chit's woman relatives also alerted her to the opportunity to leave Burma to attend an internship with the women's organization they were members of. Chit's unpaid internship was designed to provide some basic education on women's rights and community organizing, and to provide her with the skills to become involved in civil society, including English language training, report writing, and outreach in the community.

Chit had never been outside Burma before deciding to travel to Thailand to attend her internship at the Burma-Thailand border. To cross the border into Thailand, Chit and five other women of similar ages who wanted to learn about social issues, politics, and working for civil society met in Burma before crossing. These five women then spent four days trekking through the jungle, first by foot, then by boat down a river, and were met at the Thailand border by women working with the organization. Because Chit crossed the border illegally, she does not have any identification documents in Thailand.

The organization Chit is interning with is located in a small house, in which eight women share large rooms upstairs for sleeping. The main floor contains a small office with one computer, equipped with the Internet, for the organization's work, a kitchen, and a meeting area/classroom/television room. She and the other interns she crossed the border with do not have any documentation, so they spend most of their time at the organization office. She worries about getting stopped by the Thai authorities, and feels uncomfortable living in Thailand because of her lack of mobility. She was detained by Thai police once, and was forced to pay 2500 baht to the police for her release and to spend one night in jail. She misses her home in Burma, her friends, and her family. However, she has made new friends in Thailand- her classmates and other young women who are studying with organizations affiliated with hers. After her internship is over, she will go back to her community inside Burma and work with her organization for one year, providing workshops for her community on the topics she has learned about.

b) Kyaw grew up in a small village in an ethnic minority region inside Burma. For her entire life there was armed conflict between ethnic opposition forces and the government of Burma in her area. In her village inside Burma there is little infrastructure, and opportunities for work are few and far between. One of the only potentially profitable activities is opium production; many households grow small crops of opium and pay a tax to the local government for its sale. In her village, the use of heroin is common among the men and women who are growing opium. Faced with a lack of prospects in her village, Kyaw and her sisters decided to go to Thailand to seek migrant work in factories along the Burma-Thailand border. Their uncle was living in a refugee camp along the Burma-Thailand border, and he helped them to cross the border and enter the refugee camp. Kyaw and her sisters met with a friend of their uncles at night, and he drove them across the border in a truck. Once in Thailand, Kyaw purchased identification documents from a

Thai employer giving her permission to work as a migrant worker in Mae Sot, but not permitting her to leave the area. Kyaw worked as a migrant worker for 5 years, from the time she was 15 years old until she was 20 years old. She worked 7 days a week, at least 12 hours a day, and had one day off a month. She was paid 100 baht/day, or \$3.40 Canadian dollars.

One day while working at the factory, staff from the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) visited with the woman employees to distribute books and to tell them about a drop-in centre run by the BWU for woman migrant workers. Kyaw decided to visit the drop-in centre, where she was able to do her laundry, network with other women in her community, and access books about human rights and English language training materials. She was then able to participate in an internship with the BWU, and subsequently became a staff member of the organization. She currently lives in a house with several other women from the BWU. Despite her possession of documentation as a migrant worker, she must keep a low profile to avoid revealing the details of her work, and to protect the migrant women who access the organization's programs from discrimination at work and interference by Thai authorities.

c) Nu was born and raised in Yangon, and her father and uncle were politicians in the NLD, a national level opposition party, throughout her life. She attended University in Yangon to study economics, and through her studies she met other students who were interested in politics and were forming student unions. She and her colleagues became heavily involved student activism, and formed student groups that called for democratic reform in Burma. After the violent suppression of peaceful protests by these student groups in 1988, Nu joined an armed opposition group that sought to dismantle the authoritarian regime through armed conflict. She lived in the jungle with this armed group for six years, frequently moving through the border regions of Burma and Thailand during their clashes with government forces. She was one of five women among roughly seventy men, and while she felt respected by her male counterparts, the women in the group were limited to roles such as cooking. Further, she was witness to the impact of armed conflict on women in the areas that this armed group was active in. She then went into exile in Thailand, where she and her husband, an exiled opposition politician, settled. In partnership with other women in the exile community, she helped to form a community organization dedicated to promote the security and well-being of women in the exile community in Thailand, and to promote the human rights of women at the border and inside Burma. At this

time the lives of undocumented Burmese residents in cities along Thailand's border with Burma were characterized by frequent interferences by Thai authorities. By engaging in community activism, Nu and her colleagues constantly risked imprisonment by the Burmese government. As a result, many adopted pseudonyms at the border, and carried out, and continue to carry out their work underground. She has been working with her organization since its establishment to promote the capacity of women in the exile community, and strengthen and expand grassroots networks of women in the exile community and inside Burma. She is very well respected in her exile community, and frequently collaborates with other organizations in the community.

In this chapter I ask, 'What is the capacity of woman activists to influence the sources of their marginalization in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, and more broadly inside Burma during the current political transition and ongoing peace process inside Burma?' To address this question I will explore whether life in exile presents expanded constraints for the activism of women, or whether life in exile presents expanded opportunities for the activism of women at the Burma-Thailand border. Using data from interviews and focus groups with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, I will provide a comparison between the social and political environment of communities inside Burma and exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, to highlight how life in these exile communities presents different constraints and opportunities for women's activism. I will discuss the diverse backgrounds inside Burma, experiences of displacement into Thailand, and experiences in exile communities among the woman activists who participated in this project. These experiences include those of veteran political exiles who have helped to build communities in exile, young interns who have never been outside Burma before, woman migrant workers, and woman activists who were born and raised in refugee camps at the Burma-Thailand border. Further, I will discuss how woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border are utilizing these different opportunities to positively influence peace and stability in their communities.

Comparing the Social and Political Environment of Communities Inside Burma and Exile Communities at the Burma-Thailand Border

In the following section I will highlight salient features of the social and political environment inside Burma and in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to develop an understanding of how living in these exile communities can present expanded opportunities for women to participate in activism. Previously, this thesis highlighted theories in development and gender theory that describe the complex marginalization of women in exile communities as a result of gendered structures, both formal and informal (Beckwith 2013; Ferree and Mueller 2007). Moreover, social movement scholars emphasize the fundamental role played by the social and political environment in shaping the nature of woman activists' movement objectives and activities (Noonan 1995; Benford and Snow 2000). Thus, to answer this question, this section will first highlight the lived experiences of woman activists inside Burma prior to their displacement to establish what factors may limit women's capacity in their home communities inside Burma. This is followed by a discussion of woman activists' perceptions of the constraints and opportunities to build their human, social and physical capacity in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. The experiences of woman activists in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border demonstrate that, while exile communities present unique challenges to the activism of women, they also present new opportunities for women to build their capacity, thereby increasing their opportunities for activism.

The Lived Experiences of Women Inside Burma

To explore how woman activists' social and political environment in exile communities may provide an opportunity to do things differently, it is necessary to discuss woman activists' lived experiences in their home communities inside Burma prior to their displacement into Thailand. As discussed in Chapter 2, Burma has experienced ongoing conflict and political repression at the hands of a long-standing authoritarian regime, and economic deprivation resulting from an isolationist economic policy. The following section will discuss the gendered marginalization of woman activists within this turbulent social and political environment. This discussion is based on the lived experiences of woman activists living at the Burma-Thailand

border prior to their displacement into Thailand, gathered through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation at the Burma-Thailand border. Importantly, these women's experiences of marginalization inside Burma are unique, and therefore should not be generalized to the entire population of women inside the country. Nor does this section offer a comprehensive overview of the daily realities of women's lives inside Burma. Rather, it will highlight issues that the woman activists who participated in this project perceive to be at the heart of their lack of 'capital' while living in their home communities inside Burma. First this section will discuss woman activists' perceptions of their traditional 'feminine' role as caretakers of the household, which limits women's freedom, mobility, and access to information outside of the household domain. Next, this section will discuss the gendered access to the Burmese education system, and the poor quality of that education system, leading to the diminished human capital of women living inside Burma. Finally, this section will discuss how experiences of conflict, violence, and political repression throughout Burma have led to a culture of fear surrounding political activity inside the country. This section will argue that the gendered marginalization of women living in communities inside Burma severely limits their capacity to engage in activism. Further, as the lived experiences of the woman activists will demonstrate, this marginalization is intensified for women living in remote ethnic minority regions inside Burma, from where a significant majority of the exile population living in Thailand has migrated.

Traditional Role of Women

Throughout the interviews and focus groups I conducted with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, women reflected on how their daily lives inside Burma were fundamentally shaped by the traditional social roles they were expected to fulfill as women. Many women spoke of their overwhelming responsibility to be nurturers to their families and caretakers of their households. They are expected to be modest and demure, and their daily activities are confined to maintaining the wellbeing of their households. In an interview with a General Secretary of the BWU, she outlined her responsibility to her household as a young woman stating, "As a woman we don't, I don't really have a general knowledge, because in our community we have tradition of like women, we cannot go out at nighttime, and we cannot visit

one place to another often. We have to stay at our house. If we have free time, then we have to do something in house affairs.” (Myint Myint, BWU, February 19, 2013).

For women inside Burma, their domestic responsibilities fundamentally shape their daily lives and limit their ability to participate in any community activities outside of their household. In an interview with a staff member of the WLB, she outlined a typical day for a woman living in a rural village inside Burma:

“A farmer couple in a village, and women and men get up the same time, or sometimes women get up earlier because of she needs to prepare the breakfast for her husband and kids. So she gets up early and then she did prepare the breakfast, then wake her husband, and he had breakfast and he prepare to go farming. And kids have breakfast, and she continues to serve them, and then she cooks for the lunch, and her kids go school...and she keeps cooking. Then around ten o'clock every thing is finished then she packs the food. Then she follows her husband to the farming place, she works with her husband...and when they get back husband got relax, and wife stay cooking, and serving family for the dinner, and she's the last person to go to the bed.” (*Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013*).

Women inside Burma, and particularly in rural areas, must balance an enormous domestic workload, while also assisting their husbands in generating income for their households. Thus, even if they were permitted to participate in community affairs, they would have no availability to do so given their daily responsibilities to their families. Similar constraints in neighbouring countries, such as India, Nepal and Bangladesh have been shown to reduce women's participation in activism, and in social life in general. For example, when exploring the mobilization of rural women in India, Kishwar (1988) highlights how women are so heavily overworked that they have no time to participate in building a movement, except when men in their communities help to relieve women of these responsibilities. Thus, as Kishwar (1988) observes, rural women in India have often become mobilized within male-led movements that do not necessarily address their gendered grievances.

For the woman activists I interviewed, this social role shaped all aspects of their daily lives, and was strictly enforced by the social expectations of their communities inside Burma. Social interaction outside the household was severely limited, and community members frowned upon any interaction with men. During our interviews and focus groups, several women discussed their experiences of discrimination by their communities inside Burma in reaction to their social activities with men outside of their homes. During one focus group, an intern with the

WLB stated, “The surrounding people...in the neighbourhood, they might say something bad about me if I go late. They will say ‘oh this girl must be hanging around with her boyfriend’, something like that. Bad words, to undermine you, to undermine the girls.” (Focus Group 2, ELP, February 13, 2013). This woman expressed a common understanding among women inside Burma; that their reputation and the reputation of their family was dependent on upholding their traditional role as women, and avoiding activities outside the house as much as possible. During another interview, a staff member of SYCB explained how women’s fear of stigma from their community leads them to self-regulate their behavior and limit their own opportunities for engaging in community activities: “When the women are leaving work together with men, or have friendships with a man, they think the woman is not really grateful. So most of the women...especially in the village in the rural areas, don’t have any chance to participate in everything.” (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013). Thus, the woman activists I interviewed had to adhere to the expectations of their communities inside Burma to be nurturers of families and caretakers of households, severely limiting their social capital, freedom of mobility in their communities inside Burma, and as will be discussed next, their access to opportunities to build human capital, such as education.

Diminished Human Capital: Lack of Access to Education

Many participants spoke of their limited access to education as a result of their gender, leading to a lack of knowledge and skills necessary to participate productively in the public sphere in their communities inside Burma. During one focus group, an intern with the WLB stated, “In my community, it’s like, most of the women are not very educated, because we have no high school, just middle school, and also it’s like traditional beliefs, women should stay at home, but women must do...housework, so, they said women should not be educated a lot because the men will support for you” (Focus Group 1, ELP, February 17, 2013). This intern describes a common assumption within Burma that women do not need to go to school, given that their daily lives will revolve around their domestic responsibilities. Parents will opt to keep their daughters out of school so that they can assist with the maintenance of the household and learn domestic skills they will need later in life to care for their husbands and families. Moreover, some of the woman activists I interviewed who were able to access education faced

barriers to their success as a result of the economic status of their households. For example, one woman had to drop out of a university degree in economics due her family's financial difficulties, and the need for her to work in order to help support the household (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013).

For women inside Burma who are able to access basic education, gendered institutional barriers exist within the education system inside Burma; several women I interviewed described how women inside Burma must achieve higher grades than men to achieve the same standard of success. Describing the discriminatory policies for acceptance into medical school, one intern with the WLB stated, "In the education system in Burma the girls have higher marks to enter to the medical school. Then the girls, even if same marks with the boy student, she cannot enter to the medical school because she must have higher grades, higher marks than the boy." (Focus Group 1, ELP, February 17, 2013).

Further, the Burmese education system relies on rote learning and students lack opportunities to build critical thinking skills. Describing her experience in the Burmese education system, an intern with the SYCB stated, "If we study in Burma, the student has no chance to share their opinions. If the teacher says that it's right they have to just follow that. If it's wrong then they cannot share their opinions that's right or wrong." (Focus Group 4, LMP, March 1, 2013). Several women I interviewed described how the education policies of Burma purposefully sought to limit the capacity for critical thought among the population, to ensure the maintenance of the authoritarian regime. A founding member of the BWU voiced her frustration with the military leaders of Burma and education policies that reflect a deliberate effort to stunt the minds of the population of Burma:

"The military groups who have power, their generation is spending life in other countries. Even education, they send to Singapore, Malaysia, even in Europe. See how poor are our country, it's the poorest country, but still they can send to Europe to study their children. But they didn't set up the education system institutionalized in Burma, to have all get the education, because they don't want the new generation to come up against them. So that's why everything...they break the system. Because of everyone who have the, no experience and... later they never against to the military." (Kyaw Zin, BWU, February 12, 2013).

Thus, woman activists reflected on the institutional failures of the Burmese education system to highlight how the curriculum utilized by this system, as well as a lack of education resources in ethnic minority regions, have led to a widespread lack of critical thinking among the

population of Burma. Moreover, these activists outlined how their experiences of discrimination as a result of their gender limited their ability to access this flawed system. The next section will discuss how the limited social and human capital of women inside Burma is exacerbated by ongoing conflict and instability throughout Burma, particularly in ethnic minority regions from which a majority of the exile population living in Thailand have migrated.

Conflict, Instability, and Fear in Ethnic Minority Regions

Throughout interviews and focus groups with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border, these women discussed their experiences with conflict in their home communities inside Burma, and the impact that experiencing conflict had on their individual capacity. Most of the woman activists who participated in this project were from communities located in ethnic minority regions inside Burma. As discussed in Chapter 2, these regions have been hit hard by ongoing conflict involving the Burmese military and armed ethnic groups. When discussing their experiences with conflict in their home communities, woman activists described the threat this posed for their physical and human security. During an interview with a staff member of BWU, she described her experiences with conflict in her home community, located in a region controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic armed group that has been engaged in ongoing conflict with the Burmese military:

“I grew up in KNU area, which a lot of fighting is going on in that time. And I was really young as well in the village...me, my family, and also my community faced with the SPDC troops abusing us. When they came, they beat us up, and they did a lot of things. And also, a lot of fighting going on. The villagers have to go away, for example, every single man had to go away because they’re worried that the SPDC, the government troops are going to take them as a porter. So I grew up in that community with fear.” (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013).

Another woman, an intern with the WLB, described her own experiences with conflict:

“In my community there is a lot of military around our community, so we have to always forced labour, and...if we can’t go we have to pay money to local authorities. In my community, more men don’t have economic to make money so they go outside like Malaysia...In my community most of the women has stayed in the village so when military call to do, so most of the women have to go.” (Focus Group 1, ELP, February 17, 2013).

This woman described how the absence of men in her community, who have left Burma to engage in migrant labour in neighbouring countries, led to women in her community being forced into labour, such as portering, for the armed forces operating in her area.

Another aspect of the daily realities of woman activists' experiences with conflict is their experiences with sexual violence at the hands of state military forces and armed ethnic groups in their home communities inside Burma. In an interview with a staff member at WeWomen, she outlined the gendered nature of sexual violence and its roots in gender inequalities inside the country:

“Women and children are the most affected whenever conflict happen... part of what is bad is one government group invade the area, the ethnic area...but another bad is between men and women, the gender issue. Even maybe you are from the government soldier, and you rape the women in ethnic areas...It cannot say that from Kachin...soldier from Kachin opposition army rape the ethnic group. You cannot say absolutely whether it is from government or whether it is from Kachin. It is between men and women.” (Moe Hay Ko, WeWomen, March 9, 2013).

In other words, women living in conflict-affected regions of Burma experience GBV at the hands of government forces, ethnic-minority armed groups, and men in their communities. Thus, woman activists' grievances are directed at a broad range of perpetrators of GBV that go beyond just the state military.

In our interviews and focus groups several women outlined the enormous impact that conflict and instability has had on an entire generation of young people living in Burma's ethnic minority regions. The General Secretary of the WLB outlined the imperative for the government of Burma to address this generational impact:

“Those are continue to suffer, in the areas, and continue to stay as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) life, staying as refugee in like Rakhine state. There is no human security in their lives. So for the children, no good education, and then because all those fears that they have, it is so hard for them to actually concentrate on their education. That meant that Burma is losing its future leaders in the country too, I think that's why the country leaders, those that are taking the positions right now really have to be wise, to think about the future generations, not to harm their cycle, their way of thinking.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

These experiences of conflict coupled with the widespread repression of political organizing and the imprisonment of political activists inside Burma as discussed in Chapter 2, have resulted in a culture of fear inside the country. Many women reflected on their fear of

politics and community organizing while living in their home communities inside Burma. During one focus group, an intern with the WLB outlined her fear of discussing political issues while living in her community inside Burma: “I’m afraid the Burmese soldiers, because if I am saying some word like politics, maybe they come for me, so they arrest me, so I am really afraid, I don’t want to make anything in Burmese, especially about the political.” (Focus Group 5, LMP, March 1, 2013). In our interview, a leader of Youth for New Society (YNS) described how this culture of fear has led to a lack of support for women’s involvement in politics: “Young women who participated in the politics, they have been killed, or they have been put in jail, that kind of risk, also they have been threatened so it’s quite, it seems weak, and the culture of our Burma is not one of support the women, to involve in the politics” (Thet Mon Myint, YNS, February 7, 2013). This culture of fear limits the ability of women inside Burma to access information about politics in the country, and about activists and organizations working on political issues. Moreover, it leads to a widespread disapproval from their community regarding work that is politically related.

Thus, the experiences of woman activists inside Burma prior to their displacement into Thailand demonstrate that women living inside Burma face significant constraints to building their capacity and engaging in activism. In their daily lives, women must uphold their traditional feminine role as caretakers of their households, they encounter significant constraints to accessing education, and they experience the trauma of violence and political repression. The following section will discuss the constraints and opportunities woman activists experience while living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to develop a conception of how the experience of ‘social flux’ that characterizes exile communities shapes the daily lives of women and presents different opportunities to build their capacity.

The Lived Experiences of Women in Exile Communities

As previously discussed, woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border expressed an overarching perception that the marginalization they experienced while living inside Burma limited their ability to build human, physical and social capital, and thus, their ability to act in opposition to this marginalization. The following section discusses how woman activists reflect

on the constraints and opportunities they face in their daily lives in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, and the ways that living in exile communities presents different constraints and opportunities to build human, social, and physical capacity.

Central to this investigation of how life in exile presented more opportunities for activism to woman activists than inside Burma is the question of how the exile experience impacted women's relationship to men. Based on my participant observations of woman activists as well as individual interviews and focus groups, I was able to explore how women's connection to men was impacted by their displacement into Thailand. Given the protracted duration of exile from Burma, the numbers of men and women in exile communities are fairly representative of community demographics inside Burma, although accurate data regarding the demographics of exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border is difficult to attain due to the undocumented status of the majority of the exile population. In many ways, women's relationship to men seemed to be unchanged by the exile experience, with men retaining their prominent status in community affairs, and women retaining their responsibility for the household. Further, men who had been actively involved in political organizing prior to their displacement continued this work in their exile communities, taking up leadership positions in community-based organizations and opposition political parties located in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. Men continued to occupy positions as the head of their households, as the husbands or fathers of woman activists, and were commonly women's primary connection to community activism. Thus, the exile experience resulted in the continuation of the dynamics between men and women that had existed in their home communities inside Burma. However, within the exile experience women encountered more opportunities to be involved in activism, and their involvement in activism has led to changes in women's role in their exile communities, and consequently, how they relate to men in their communities.

The following section will highlight several salient features of life in exile communities that woman activists discussed in interviews and focus groups. First, many woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border are 'undocumented' while living in Thailand, and all face harassment by Thai authorities because of their Burmese identity. This has led to the development of strategies and mechanisms for woman activists and women's organizations to maintain an underground existence, avoiding the attention of Thai authorities, but limiting their freedom and mobility while living in exile communities. Second, woman activists spoke about how changes

to community demographics as a result of displacement into Thailand, and women's increased prevalence in the informal workforce in Thailand has led to a normalization of women's activities outside of the household. Finally, this section will discuss how the presence of new actors in the form of humanitarian organizations has led to the development of community-driven humanitarian intervention, as well as services targeting the basic resource and security needs of women living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border.

By highlighting woman activists' experiences while living in exile, this section argues that the social and political environment of exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border can be characterized by the experience of 'social flux'; fundamental changes to formal and informal social and political structures, and the constraints and opportunities that these structures facilitate. While living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border presents constraints for woman activists, the experience of 'social flux' has opened up space for women living in exile to build the capacity necessary to engage in activism.

Building an Underground Movement: Blessing and a Curse

During interviews and focus groups, the woman activists who participated consistently described how their undocumented status fundamentally shaped their daily lives and had significant implications for their security in their exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. For many women, their undocumented status was a source of frustration and fear, and limited their ability to move freely within their exile communities. In exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, Thai authorities strictly regulate the movement and activities of these exiled individuals, often detaining or deporting individuals from Burma who do not have any documentation. In our interviews and focus groups many women discussed their frustrations with their undocumented status, and the negative emotional impact that their precarious security situation had on them. In one focus group, an intern with the WLB explained how she internalizes her undocumented status stating, "I don't want to hear the word illegal. Because we have been hearing the word, and whatever we want to do, it's illegal, it's illegal. So that's a repeated word and you don't want to hear it. And because in Mae Sot...if you don't have a document you are illegal, and everything you do you have to be very careful of doing that. So sometimes I want to go back to Burma and work inside the country, but because of some reasons

still have to be in Thailand and border area.” (Focus Group 3, ELP, February 17, 2013). This woman outlines the difficult security situation that woman activists’ at the Burma-Thailand border face and the damage it can cause to their emotional well-being. This woman went on to describe the internal conflict she feels when thinking about going back inside Burma. While she felt frustrated by her daily life as an undocumented migrant in Thailand and wanted to return to her home inside Burma, she knows that Burma is unsafe for her, and that her work requires her to stay in Thailand, where her daily life is also dangerous. This woman struggles to find stability in her daily life, and a sense of belonging in her community, whether in her home community inside Burma or her exile community in Thailand.

In an interview, the General Secretary of the WLB outlined her perception of Thailand’s strict immigration policies stemming from the political dynamics between Burma and Thailand, and how she and her colleagues must adapt to the elevated security risk these policies result in:

“Most of us who are working in the organizations do not have any documents. Until I think 2010, until lately. So we have to make, have to make ourselves low profile. Where we hear about security restrictions, or any order coming from the security force of Thailand, then we have to run away. When we were in Mae Hong Son, we always run to the camps, when we heard that there will be a police raid to the different offices. Because Thailand clearly declared that they would not tolerate any kind of political activities by Burmese people in their land, because they always want to build a good relationship with the Burmese regime, and they would like to make economic profit out of that, although they might not like the political system of Burma. And, that’s why, when they can do it, they give pressure to the opposition groups, including the women’s organizations.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

This woman spoke of how woman activists’ working with women’s organizations must make themselves ‘low-profile’, developing strategies for how they can avoid the attention of Thai authorities, and relying on information and support from their exile community networks in instances where Thai authorities seek their offices out. In our interviews and focus groups, many women spoke to me about some of these strategies, and their efficacy, for woman activists to avoid interference by Thai authorities. For example, some women spoke of alternative methods for securing citizenship documents, such as ‘renting’ employers. Many undocumented individuals from Burma living in Thailand will purchase documentation from a Thai employer who verifies their status to live and work in Thailand. For example, one woman activist informed me that she purchased her identification, which indicated she was employed in construction in

Thailand. This ‘rented’ documentation affords woman activists a greater amount of security and freedom of mobility while living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border (Myint Myint, BWU, February 19, 2013).

In addition, woman activists described making efforts to change their appearance to blend in with Thai citizens. In an interview, a staff member of SYCB outlined how avoiding wearing her longyi (a sarong with significance rooted in their ethnic heritage) and tanaka (a chalky paste applied in intricate designs on women and children’s faces) allowed her and her colleagues to avoid attention from Thai authorities: “I really would like to wear longyi. But when I go outside, you shouldn’t wear longyi, because longyi is...no Thai women wear longyi. Only Burmese women wear longyi. So the police will know they are Burmese...Most of the people...when they go outside I always say no longyi and no tanaka, because tanaka and longyi is the symbol of the Burmese woman.” (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013). However, while changing their appearance can allow woman activists to go about their daily activities without interference from Thai authorities, many women in both interviews and focus groups spoke of their discontent with having to hide their ethnic identity (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013; Focus Group 1, 2, and 3, ELP, February 17, 2013; Focus Group 4 and 5, LMP, March 1, 2013).

In spite of the difficulties that woman activists’ undocumented status poses for their safety and security while in living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, many women outlined how keeping a low profile and operating through underground networks at the border can paradoxically provide more freedom to woman activists than inside Burma. In an interview with a staff member of the BWU, she described how living in exile communities, and outside the reach of the repressive actions of the Burmese regime’s forces, makes it easier for women to mobilize than inside Burma:

“Even though here it is not secure enough but it is so much better than being in Burma. Inside, if I do this kind of thing inside Burma I would get arrested very easily. But for here, we can organize the events, we can do the community organizing, and we can do the education to the migrant people...So we have more chance to do here than doing in Burma...I don’t think we can do this kind of things inside Burma. And also it might not be easy for us...what we educate and what we do...awareness raising on women’s rights, and women’s rights is also human rights as well, so that kind of thing is very sensitive inside. We cannot share our knowledge within the community easily, because it is sensitive.” (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013).

For this woman, the ability to discuss ‘sensitive’ topics, such as human rights and political rights, that inside Burma could result in the imprisonment of the individuals involved, facilitated a greater level of freedom for herself and her women’s organization. Another woman echoed a similar sentiment in a focus group with interns at the WLB, reflecting on how her daily life in her exile community at the border differs from that inside Burma stating, “Inside the [refugee] camps, it has more freedom to talk than inside Burma. And here you’ve got more than that. We can talk, we can express our opinions, and here in Chiang Mai we can use the Internet and we can study the topics that interest us...” (Focus Group 3, ELP, February 17, 2013). Thus, the freedom of information and freedom of expression afforded by leaving Burma to live as undocumented in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, albeit through underground channels, provided the women I spoke to with new opportunities to access information and build their capacity to engage in activism. However, these new opportunities were accompanied by significant constraints related to women’s freedom of mobility and their ability to display symbols of their ethnicity in their new communities.

The Normalizing of Women’s Rights

Another salient theme that emerged when discussing how woman activists reflect on their daily lives in exile communities was the normalizing of women’s assumption of roles outside of the household. As previously outlined, the activities of women living inside Burma are fundamentally shaped by community expectations for women to fill a traditional role as nurturers of their households. This limits women’s ability to engage in public affairs, and leads them to confine most of their activities to inside their homes.

In contrast, many women spoke about the increased presence of women in the public affairs of their exile communities, and the normalizing of women’s activities outside the household in the long term, leading to increased community support for women’s efforts to build their human and social capital. One BWU staff member felt that at the grassroots level, men in her exile community have a greater understanding of the potential women possess, stating, “For my own opinion, I’m not talking about the very top level of women, I’m talking about the women on the ground. So, we just have more opportunity than inside...because like here man has more understanding of woman, about getting involved in this kind of thing, and for helping

the community. So they understand that women are important to get involved in this kind of movement as well to make changes. So, for me my personal opinion is just because of that. Men have more understanding of women.” (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013). This woman described how men in her exile communities demonstrated a greater understanding of the potential contribution women can make to the affairs of the community, and the positive attitude many men in her exile community have towards women’s involvement in civil society. While the woman activists involved in this project discussed some negative reactions from men towards women’s increased involvement in community affairs, many women noted positive changes in their relationships to men, particularly among the younger generation of men in the exile community.

In trying to conceptualize where this greater understanding stems from, several women identified the increased presence of women in the informal labour force at the Burma-Thailand border as an important shift in traditional social roles. In an interview with a leader in YNS, she discussed this shift in women’s role in the labour force stating, “...Women are also not only working inside the house, they also have to leave outside and work outside, so women are more becoming more...Yeah I think before, like very restricted because of the culture as well, women have to stay at home, but nowadays women are more free, and going out and doing some business outside.” (Thet Mon Myint, YNS, February 7, 2013). This woman went on to describe why more women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border are leaving the household to seek work: “Because in Burma I think the income, it only comes from the father or the husband, the head of the house. But nowadays it’s not enough, to cover the whole family expense. So everybody have to go out and work outside. That’s also I think one of the reasons.” (Thet Mon Myint, YNS, February 7, 2013). Thus, while living in exile more women must leave the household to seek employment as undocumented labourers, their ongoing and increased presence in public community spaces has normalized the concept of women being involved in public life.

Interestingly, while women’s increased involvement in migrant labour has led to the normalization of women’s role outside the household, it has also limited women’s ability to access new opportunities to be involved in activism in their exile communities. While observing the work of the BWU, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit their migrant worker drop-in centre. The coordinator of the drop-in centre explained that in many cases, migrant women’s

long work days in farms or factories, coupled with their household obligations, limited their ability to access the opportunities to build human, social and physical capital facilitated by organizations like the BWU. To address this, the drop-in centre provides space for women working as migrant workers to finish their household chores, such as the laundry, while facilitating knowledge sharing among migrant women and providing access to books and movies that inform them about human rights and gender. The drop-in centre also coordinated a mobile library that visits women at their homes or places of employment, facilitating the engagement of women who may be hesitant to visit the drop-in centre or are unable to given their intensive work schedules and household obligations.

Moreover, many women discussed how being able to access global information networks afforded by exile communities has developed a greater understanding among the exile community, particularly men, about women's rights. TAN theory highlights how transnational networks can facilitate cultural exchange between activists and the transnational networks they become connected to (Keck and Sikkink 1999). In an interview with a staff member of the WLB, she described the generational shift she has witnessed while living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border and the resultant attitude of men from her generation towards women's presence in public affairs:

“Maybe my generation is seen more about women are working with the men, educating women, the same dignity that they receive. Even though, they're stay in the subordinate role, but they see the potential of the women...also I think the shifting of the international feminist movement as well, because now you see the Facebook and internet and twitter and everything like that, so they've got more information that women prime ministers and presidents, and also women, the international women are trying to gain the higher position, so its quite, its become very normal to us, my generation.” (Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013).²

Access to information is a key factor in conceptualizing the different opportunities life in exile communities represents for women at the Burma-Thailand border. Greater access to

² Interestingly, the lead opposition figure in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi, is the most famous and revered woman in Burma. I would argue that for members of the older generation in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi embodies the symbol of her father, General Aung San, considered to be the father of modern-day Burma and a martyr in Burma's struggle for independence. Thus, her prominence reflects this familial legacy. In contrast, Burma's younger generation has grown up with Aung San Suu Kyi as a symbol of the struggle for democracy in Burma, partly contributing to the cultural shift that this participant outlines.

information has led to the development of a greater understanding of women's rights and has provided global examples of women's capacity to be community leaders. Additionally, the presence of foreign NGO workers, and international humanitarian organizations at the Burma-Thailand border has contributed to the long-term development of a culture at the border that is receptive to the empowerment of women. In addition to the development of a progressive culture in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, TANs have played a crucial role in the activities of woman activists at the border, as will be discussed in a later section.

Community Driven Humanitarian Assistance: Addressing Women in Exile Communities' Immediate Needs

Another important difference between life inside Burma and life in exile communities at the Burma Thailand border is the increased presence of humanitarian organizations whose mandate is to provide basic support to exile populations. This humanitarian culture led to the development of organizations focused on health, such as the Mae Tao clinic, established by Dr. Cynthia Maung; an ever-expanding health clinic providing free health care and support services to undocumented groups living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. In fact, the Mae Tao clinic is so widely regarded for providing accessible quality health care, that it is common practice for individuals living in insecure regions inside Burma to migrate across the border for the sole purpose of receiving health care that they would otherwise be unable to receive inside Burma, in spite of the dangers their border crossing entails. The increased presence of international humanitarian organizations focused on exile communities' basic well-being has developed a culture of humanitarianism, increasing the basic well-being of exile communities by providing access to food, housing, and security.

Moreover, the humanitarian culture of exile communities allowed for the development of community-driven humanitarian organizations focused on women in exile communities, and addressing the specific needs that women in these communities have as a result of their gender. Perhaps the most prolific organization of this kind, Social Action for Women (SAW) was founded by a member of the BWU to address the gaps in humanitarian assistance in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, and the unique needs women have in this context. In

an interview with the founder of SAW, she described the rationale behind the inception and formation of the organization:

“Main reason why SAW is being here is there are a lot of women and children who suffer from different types of trouble, so why we are here is to support them, and to protect them and to help them as best as we can. For children as well we protect them and we support them, and women the same, but we are not focusing on, we can't say that we are mainly focusing on women's rights but we base on the social activities, protecting and helping for the women who has been abused, and women has been broken, their rights, so we protect them and we try to help them to get their rights as best as we can.” (Chit Chit Zaw, SAW, March 6, 2013).

While SAW is not explicitly focused on women's empowerment at the border, the founding member of the organization expresses a concern for promoting women's rights by being attentive to women's needs, and providing the support necessary for women to build capital and maintain stability in their lives in their exile communities. SAW has grown from humble beginnings, running one safe house for women in need of shelter and safety, for example survivors of domestic abuse, and independently raising funding through the sale of local food to the community. Its current operations include five safe houses and 18 different programs that run in the exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border.

In an interview with a staff member of the BWU, she outlined women's organizations' efforts to provide for the basic needs of women, and the long-term effect this can have on engaging women in issues of women's rights and community activism. Describing the establishment of a drop-in centre for women living in exile communities, she stated:

“...When we talk about knowledge, or to read a book, and what they reply is 'oh, no we don't have the time, and we have to look after the children, we have to wash the clothes, and also we have to iron, and there is no time to, we have to cook'. So then what we do is we set up the drop-in centre, and there, women can wash their clothes with the machine, and also the television, and also the ironing place. Then the ironing place is in front of the television so that they can watch the movie, or the...some documentary while ironing, so that's what we do. And then later we don't go to their place and ask them to visit to our place. They are willing to come to our place and also use our service, and join our activities by themselves. So that's one of the improvements.” (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013).

Thus, by establishing a drop-in centre where women living in exile communities can get support to maintain their household's well-being, the BWU is making progress in engaging

women in activities outside the household, strengthening women's social capital by developing relationships at the drop-in centre, and increasing women's access to knowledge.

Thus, woman activists' perceptions of the constraints and opportunities they encounter in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border reveal that women in exile communities are largely cut off from any formal political structures, due to their undocumented status while living in exile communities and their need to maintain their underground identity to avoid the attention of Thai authorities. They lack access to citizenship rights, information about political negotiations and reforms, and access to stakeholders in political activities, such as the governments of Burma and Thailand and international bodies such as the UNHCR. Moreover, their marginalization from formal political structures is exacerbated by their lack of opportunities to build capacity inside Burma prior to their displacement. Notwithstanding these constraints, woman activists' experiences in exile communities reveal that the 'social flux' that characterizes exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border has facilitated new opportunities that lie outside of formal political structures, to build their capacity. While living in exile communities presents its own security challenges, woman activists are able to speak more freely about political topics within their community networks without fear of direct political repression, such as imprisonment, by the Burmese government. Moreover, women in exile communities are increasingly engaging in activities outside the household, such as migrant labour; this has led to the normalizing of women's presence in the public life of exile communities. Finally, new stakeholders such as humanitarian organizations and foreign NGO workers have allowed for the development of a humanitarian network in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to meet the basic needs of women living in exile. The process of targeting the basic needs of women through community driven humanitarian assistance has led to an increased standard of living for households and the proliferation of social support networks within exile communities, laying the foundations for woman activists to mobilize to contest the sources of their gendered marginalization.

Scholars discussing the experiences of displaced groups often focus on top-down understandings of citizenship and political engagement that emphasize displaced groups' marginalization from formal state structures and rights to citizenship (Hyndman 2011; Milner 2011). However, there is an expanding literature examining groups who have been denied formal citizenship and access to formal political institutions, who are increasingly contesting the sources

of their marginalization through informal channels (Kibreab 2012; Mehta & Napier-Moore 2010; Sassen 2004). For example, in their analysis of new definitions of citizenship, Mehta and Napier-Moore (2010) describe the engagement of displaced groups in informal political activities as “creating lived multiple and multi-layered (i.e. beyond or beneath the state) citizenship experiences”. The women involved in this study are very similar to other case studies of women who have been denied formal citizenship, and have demonstrated agency through informal activities and towards informal targets. The next section will discuss how woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border have utilized a movement strategy of ‘grassroots community empowerment’ within the environment of ‘social flux’ to capitalize on the constraints and opportunities that exile communities facilitate, and to build new opportunities out of old constraints.

Utilizing a Movement Specific Strategy of ‘Grassroots Community Empowerment’: Creating New Opportunities Out of Old Constraints

In the previous section I compared woman activists’ experiences inside Burma and those in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to develop a conception of the social and political environment of exile communities, that I have characterized as the experience of ‘social flux’. In doing so, I highlighted how the experience of ‘social flux’ that characterizes exile communities can facilitate new opportunities and constraints for women to build their capacity to engage in activism that lie outside of formal political structures. As previously discussed, social movements can expand current opportunities and create new opportunities through their activities (Tarrow 1996). In this section I will discuss how woman activists have mobilized within the experience of ‘social flux’, and asks the following research question: ‘How do woman activists utilize the types of opportunities facilitated by the experience of ‘social flux’ in exile communities to expand their movement activities and expand the women’s movement and its increasing influence in exile communities? This section will explore woman activists’ use of a movement strategy of ‘grassroots community empowerment’ within the experience of ‘social flux’ that characterizes exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. In doing so, it reveals how woman activists in the women’s movement have encountered new opportunities to build

their capacity to accumulate informal power in their exile communities, and are utilizing this informal power to contest gender inequality along the border and more broadly inside Burma. Further, these grassroots community-building activities have led to the expansion and creation of informal opportunities to contest their marginalization and influence the development of sustainable peace inside Burma.

First, the objectives and strategies of woman activists in the women's movement are based on grassroots definitions of politics that emphasize the contribution of every individual towards positive change both in exile communities and inside Burma. Second, woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border have applied this grassroots approach to politics to develop a strategy of grassroots capacity building for woman activists involved in the movement and women in the broader exile population. The capacity-building activities facilitated by women's organizations in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border have had an empowering effect on the individuals involved, and have provided greater opportunities for education and experience than those available inside Burma. Third, the women's movement has also sought to influence discourse at the national level inside Burma and internationally, through advocacy and outreach programs that rely on informal networks in exile communities, and cooperation with international allies. Finally, the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border has engaged in a process of bridge building, fostering mutual understanding and respect between women who are living in exile communities and are from ethnic groups that are traditionally divided inside Burma. The women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border has also developed cooperation between women's organizations at the border and those inside Burma through informal activities such as forums and project partnerships.

In the process of performing these grassroots capacity-building activities, woman activists have encountered significant constraints and have been met with disappointment. However, the experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border highlight the tangible positive improvements that woman activists have made to the lives of women living in exile communities, and demonstrate the agency of these activists. Further, as woman activists build their capacity through their strategy of grassroots community empowerment, their opportunities for activism in their exile communities expand and their informal power in their exile communities increases.

“Everything is Politics”: The Ideology and Objectives of Woman Activists in the Women’s Movement

The women’s movement at the Burma-Thailand border has developed in response to the constantly changing constraints and opportunities that surround their daily lives in exile communities. Woman activists have developed a grassroots approach to their work that addresses their marginalization from formal political structures, such as their lack of citizenship, by emphasizing the need to engage every individual to promote gender equality and to increase the status and influence of women at the Burma-Thailand border. In doing so, woman activists have developed a movement strategy that emphasizes the individual agency of women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, and that can operate independently from formal political structures.

For many woman activists I spoke with their first experience with ‘politics’ occurred when they had arrived at the border and began to be involved with women’s organizations. In these contexts, woman activists have developed a definition of politics that expands what is considered political to include the actions and choices of all people inside Burma and in exile communities, purposefully including groups who have been marginalized from formal political activities. Describing her conception of what is political, an intern from the ELP stated, “every word, the words, their everyday work is the political activities” (Focus Group 2, ELP, February 17, 2013). Another intern with the WLB spoke of her definition of politics stating, “If you say I’m not related to politics, you are wrong, because even if you eat a meal you are doing political activities because if you are healthy you can support people in the country, right?” (Focus Group 3, ELP, February 17, 2013).

The women I spoke to often discussed their desire to educate men and women in their exile communities and in their home communities inside Burma about this grassroots definition of politics, with the goal of developing a greater level of engagement in issues of human rights, democratic political reform, and rights for women. Reflecting on her opinion of the impact of this strategy of grassroots education, an intern with the WLB stated,

“...If we think of very small steps that we can think, it is like their everyday activities could be political activities, but they may not be familiar with the political words, the meaning of the politics. Then we have to make them understand that this is what they do in their everyday work. So if the people could have changed within

their families, within their communities, we can build more to the state level, so we can build understanding of the words and the meaning in step by step.” (Focus Group 2, ELP, February 17, 2013).

The development of this grassroots approach reflects the marginalization of women from formal political activities resulting from their location in exile communities and their gendered identity. By developing an approach that contests this marginalization and seeks to develop an inclusive conception of political activities that can include the everyday activities of exile groups who have been marginalised, woman activists are exerting their agency to take control of their marginalization. By adopting this approach, woman activists are able to focus their activism around the agency of individual women living in exile communities while utilizing a conception of agency that incorporates the daily realities of women in exile communities. In doing so, woman activists are able to acknowledge the constraints posed by the marginalization of women living in exile, while capitalizing on expanded opportunities for activism that are informal in nature, and are facilitated by the environment of exile communities.

Gender and the Political Landscape of Exile Communities at the Burma-Thailand Border

The women’s movement at the Burma-Thailand border is working to increase the status of women and achieve gender equality at the household and community level, and to increase the visibility and influence of women in formal local and state-level institutions in the long term (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013). Speaking about her own personal goals for her activism, and how these fit into the objectives of the women’s movement, the General Secretary of the WLB stated, “I have been working toward a genuine democratic country of Burma. And also I would like to see a sustainable peace process that brings to a developed society where there should be full participation of women in every level of position, and the reform process, including this peace process.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013). This woman described how she is working to achieve gender equality in all levels of leadership inside Burma, as well as equal involvement of women in the ongoing peace process; achievements that she views as crucial to achieving genuine democratic reform. Woman activists in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border are engaging in their movement activities within a complex political

environment that involves many multifaceted and overlapping grievances among the exile population. In addition to the pro-democracy movement at the Burma-Thailand border, migrant workers from Burma are seeking labour rights from their employers in Thailand, groups from ethnic minority regions inside Burma are seeking the right to self-determination and a recognition of their autonomous political leadership, and environmental activists are contesting the increasing prevalence of land grabs and development induced displacement resulting from resource extraction and infrastructure projects inside Burma. While each of these groups feels a sense of urgency and importance about contesting their grievances, woman activists believe that establishing women's rights and increasing the influence of women in exile communities is crucial to achieving each of these distinct movement goals. For the activists I interviewed, there was no separation of gender and politics; significant democratic political reform and the establishment of sustainable peace inside Burma require the equal involvement of women. However, woman activists often spoke of the subjugation of their movement goals by members of their exile communities, who prioritized other grievances ahead of the marginalization of women. The women I interviewed felt that both men and woman members of their exile communities believed it is more important to achieve democratic political reform inside Burma than to establish women's rights; put simply, improving women's status is not a priority. Reflecting on the struggle to make women's rights a priority alongside the struggle for significant democratic political reform inside Burma, a staff member of SYCB stated,

“...We still haven't reached the real democracy that we want. Most of the people, they think that asking for the women's rights, it is not time, not enough time to ask that because we still need to work for the democracy. Then after that we talk about women's rights. But of course also the women, including me, talking that democracy important, but also women's rights is important. We should have both at the same time. So most of the women are working for that.” (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013).

Woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border see the achievement of political reform inside Burma and the development of women in exile communities' capacity as inexorably linked; achieving political reform would require acknowledging the experiences of women in exile communities, and building their capacity to be part of an engaged population that holds the nation state accountable. Speaking about the connection between women's rights and politics, one activist stated,

“I don’t think there is a separation, because we have to work for women’s rights. Because these women have been put in the lower condition, status, or in the subordinate role. They have not been given the chances and the opportunities, and because of the very loose law and also systems, and women are not being protected...And also women have been living under the patriarchal system and they are not trained with confidence or self-esteem, that’s why we have to train them to become like that, right. Because of the needs, we have to work for these rights. But when we are working for these changes that means that this is also politics. Because in this process if there is discrimination and violence in this country how can the country be stable, and if there is fighting, violations, discrimination, how can this woman stand to work for the country’s development or the country’s political stability? (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

By developing an approach to their movement that emphasizes the individual agency of women living in exile communities, the women’s movement at the Burma-Thailand border has sought to engage individuals who have been marginalized from formal political activities in the process of developing significant democratic reform and accountability from the government of Burma. Moreover, woman activists have situated the imperative to address gender inequality and the marginalization of women as central to addressing other overlapping grievances held by exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. In doing so, woman activists have focussed their activism on the grassroots empowerment of women living in exile communities to highlight the contribution women living in exile make to improving the well-being of their exile communities, and to broader struggles for political reform and stability inside Burma. As demonstrated, situating their activism for women’s rights at the centre of broader struggles for political reform in exile communities has been met with opposition from male and woman pro-democracy activists working for political reform. In spite of this opposition, woman activists continue to call for attention to the gendered marginalization of women living in exile, and the contributions women are making to achieve genuine political reform inside Burma. In framing their movement in this way, woman activists have established the conceptual foundations on which to build new and greater opportunities for women in exile communities to engage in social and political change through informal channels, and have highlighted the imperative and urgency to address the marginalization of women.

Access to Education and Knowledge: Grassroots Capacity Building in Exile Communities

Woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border use a grassroots approach to ‘politics’ that emphasizes the individual agency of each person inside Burma and in exile communities. As such, the women’s movement at the Burma-Thailand border has put this approach into practice utilizing grassroots capacity building activities focusing on education and training for women living in exile communities. As previously discussed, a lack of access to quality education, and a widespread fear of politics among exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border has led to a lack of human capital among women in exile communities. The women’s movement’s strategy of capacity-building and empowerment programs has managed to provide education programs to women in exile communities that emphasize critical thinking and engagement with politics. In doing so, these education programs are providing many women with opportunities that they have been unable to access due to gender discrimination, poor infrastructure, and instability inside Burma. At the same time, these capacity building activities have led to a re-negotiation of women’s role in their households and in their exile communities; many women are experiencing growing support for their activism from their male partners and from men and women in the broader exile community.

Individual Empowerment Through Grassroots Capacity Building

In exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border women’s organizations provide specialized training programs and internships for women already involved in women’s organizations to improve their ability to manage projects and take on leadership roles in those women’s organizations and other CBOs in exile communities. They also provide more general capacity building workshops and short-term training programs that are designed to provide women in the exile community at the Burma-Thailand border with basic knowledge of human rights, politics and democracy, and health and nutrition.

This thesis project includes three focus groups conducted with student interns participating in the Emerging Leadership Program (ELP) facilitated by the WLB in Chiang Mai Thailand. The ELP is a six-month internship in which woman students are recruited from one of

the WLB's 13 member organizations. During the ELP program students are taught about Burmese history, human rights, politics, conflict resolution, and other skills necessary for working in a civil society organization, from a feminist perspective (Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013). The WLB requires that once students complete the ELP internship, they return to work for their member organization for two years in order to improve the capacity and retention of members in the WLB's member organizations. In an interview I conducted with the coordinator of the ELP, she discussed the creation of two different curriculum levels within the program, to provide more focussed language and skills training that more effectively meet the needs of the interns. She estimated that facilitating two school terms a year for a beginner level and an advanced level would result in roughly 60 woman interns receiving this intensive capacity building training each year (Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013).

Many of the activists I interviewed had participated in capacity building internships facilitated by organizations at the border, and reflected on their personal experiences gaining knowledge of rights, critical thinking skills, greater freedom and mobility afforded by living in exile communities, and significant increases in self-confidence. Describing her experiences with capacity-building programs one participant stated,

“The feeling, I really gained confidence, like sometimes, as I explained to you before, before I was very shy even to speak out my name...So the confidence is really, I mean, gaining the confidence is really useful for me, so that I can always express my opinions and my ideas, if I don't agree then I can express my decision. So yeah. Emotionally, I feel that I'm getting very strong, and also working with the other people then I feel that I gained patience (laughs)”. (Myint Myint, BWU, February 19, 2013).

Through the development of grassroots capacity building programs in women's organizations located at the Burma-Thailand border, many women are able to access greater opportunities for education and knowledge sharing at the border compared to their home communities inside Burma. One participant described these opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills:

“In my area there is, I never heard about rights, civil rights or human rights. Although I thought of politics is very scared thing to do, I never heard about it, and what kind if political system the government is using to govern the countries... I helped in my home and go to school and come back at home, that is my life in the past...I never dreamed of coming to Thailand before, but when I communicated with women's organization in my community, and then I got to know about democracy, human rights, and women's rights, so I was so surprised, amazed to learn all about

this. So since that time, I became aware that politics is really important for everyone..." (Focus Group 1, ELP, February 17, 2013).

Another woman spoke to me about experiencing this difference in opportunities:

"We are human, so we have to know like free, so in the country, what happened in the country, and I would like to know. So I feel when I attended I am really happy to know about the political. I am woman, I have to know about the woman. So I am really happy. In Burma I am feeling like close my mouth so don't have to say anything, I feel very hot in my heart (laughs). I have to control everything to say, yes." (Focus Group 5, LMP, March 1, 2013).

For this woman, the opportunity to learn about women's rights and to openly share her opinions with her colleagues at the organization at the Burma-Thailand border gave her a sense of personal satisfaction that she was unable to experience prior to studying at the border. Moreover, this woman voiced feelings of anger and frustration when reflecting on her lack of knowledge, and her inability to speak critically about the political system and women's status while inside Burma.

My visit with the students in the ELP occurred the day after their graduation from their six-month internship. The atmosphere at the school was bittersweet; for many of these students, their internship was a life-changing experience, providing their first opportunity to leave Burma, to study human rights, and to build relationships with women belonging to other ethnicities. The impact of this capacity-building internship for these women is immeasurable. During my visit to the ELP the day after their graduation, there was a strong sense of accomplishment among these women, as well as a palpable excitement over their ability to utilize this knowledge when working for community organizations in the future. However, faced with having to say goodbye to the friends they had made while living and studying together at the school left the students feeling quite sad. During their graduation, their teachers and mentors gave them words of praise and encouragement, and the students celebrated their accomplishments late into the night. Having the opportunity to meet with these women during such an important moment in their lives was an amazing experience, and drove home the profound and immeasurable impact that the capacity-building and empowerment programs facilitated by women's organizations are having for women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border.

Renegotiating Social Roles

For many women I spoke with, their involvement in capacity building programs has required them to dually re-negotiate their relationships with men and their roles in their communities. This process has been difficult for some women who have faced negative attitudes from members of their exile communities due to their increased activity outside of their homes, as well as negative assumptions about their time in exile communities in Thailand from members of their home communities inside Burma. For example, several student interns in the ELP run by the WLB indicated that members of their home community inside Burma assumed they had engaged in sex work while in Thailand, and that they had faced stigma from their home community inside Burma as a result. The women I interviewed outlined how the increased involvement of women in civil society in exile communities has led some community members to respond with opposition in a variety of forms. One participant described the attitude of men in response to woman activists' work for women's rights:

“It is very difficult to change the mindset of the man. And also when we talk about the women's rights, then people always, how do you call that, tease. What kind of women's rights, do you mean that while men are peeing beside the road and you are also going to pee. Like something like that. And you are talking about the women's rights, that means you want to drink alcohol like a man!? Or something like that. Those kind of I mean, teasing, or unrespected words coming through to the women's movement” (Myint Myint, BWU, February 19, 2013).

Some women described mounting tension in their households, when their commitment to their activism led them to spend more time out of the house, and away from their traditional role as caretaker of the family and the household. One staff member at the WLB described the negative impact her organization's capacity building activities at the Burma-Thailand border had on some of the women involved: “We really need to be careful sometimes, it's kind of like starting the conflict between the family. They start challenging their husbands (laughs), and more conflict after that. So we don't really want that situation, but at least they need to see themselves” (Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013).

Despite these tensions, many women spoke of a gradual process of conflict resolution between themselves and their husbands; their husbands slowly began to take care of the children, help with cooking and cleaning, and voice support for their work with women's organizations the border. When speaking with the founding member of a woman's organization, she spoke of

her own household dynamics, and the process of developing new roles in the household and sharing responsibility: “Now is very good that he is cooking evenings and I am cleaning up, and my daughter is now, our daughter is 16 now, so she can also get involved in our house. We work together. The youngest one playing herself, keep things and take responsibility to help us. So it’s quite useful in the family. So you can have a happy life. We fight before, everyday.” (Kyaw Zin, BWU, February 12, 2013). This woman described to me how her husband has gradually taken on more responsibilities within the household, and with the help of her daughters, the entire family contributes to the domestic responsibilities that are typically reserved for the women of the household. Further, this woman’s husband has faced ridicule from his male friends for engaging in domestic responsibilities, such as shopping at the market and cooking meals for his family. While the process of renegotiating these household roles has been slow and caused tension within their household, this woman felt an enormous sense of personal satisfaction with her current household dynamics, and it has given her more freedom to pursue her activism outside the household.

While woman activists have experienced stigma from community members opposed to their increased presence, some of the community has responded with support, and their increased presence in community affairs is slowly normalizing women’s involvement and leadership in community organizations. The women I spoke with considered this support to be a positive step towards their goals of equality and political reform, and internalized this support: “Their encouragement and their support, ‘you are great’, ‘your work is great’, and ‘there are people who are giving their life to such activists and you are one of them’. So when I heard someone supporting me, it really make me encouraged, and I decided that I will work. I will just leave the people who say bad about me, and just ignore their bad words, and just take the people who support me.” (Focus Group 1, ELP, February 17, 2013).

Thus, the women’s movement has addressed the marginalization of women in exile communities and their resulting lack of human capital by facilitating their own grassroots education programs that seek to build the capacity of women in exile communities to be actively involved in their community. This grassroots capacity-building approach is providing women with the knowledge, skills and experience to effectively pursue their movement goals of increasing the influence of women in exile communities, and has resulted in an increased sense of confidence and self-worth in exile communities. The next section will discuss woman

activists' use of informal networks with other CBOs and INGOs at the Burma-Thailand border to advocate for gender equality and pressure formal political structures from the outside and through informal channels.

Utilizing Informal Networks to Increase the Scope and Impact of the Women's Movement

Parallel with the women's movement's capacity building activities, woman activists have been utilizing informal networks to expand the scope and impact of their activities. Informal networks in exile communities have been crucial to recruit new women into the women's movement's activities. Further, women's organizations are able to utilize their informal community networks and informal connections with International legal support networks to connect women in exile communities with mechanisms for justice. Finally, the women's movement has utilized its transnational networks with international allies to pressure organizations and institutions dominated by men to support the development of a quota system to encourage women in exile communities' involvement in civil society activities at the community level.

The Women's Movement's Informal Networks in Exile Communities

The women's movement has developed an extensive informal network, comprised of friends, family, and members of the exile community who have been directly or indirectly involved in the capacity-building workshops and awareness activities put on by women's organizations. This has proven to be an important recruitment mechanism for the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border, given that woman activists must carry out their movement organizing underground to avoid notice from Thai and Burmese police and government authorities. Many of the women I interviewed got involved with activism and the work of women's organizations through their husbands, fathers or teachers; many are '88 generation' activists, a group of student activists who were central to the widespread popular protests that occurred in Rangoon in 1988. Others became involved after attending workshops,

advertised as computer skills or language training, facilitated by women's organizations from the Burma-Thailand border in communities inside Burma. One staff member of SYCB described how women are recruited into the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border through their social networks, stating that most women are recruited into capacity building activities "through family, through friends, and through the network too" (Khin Yupa, SYCB, February 9, 2013). This woman indicated that the informal network of civil society organizations at the Burma-Thailand border has promoted awareness of the presence and activities of women's organizations. Another woman described how the civil society network facilitated the recruitment of women living in exile communities into capacity building programs: "I think it is more common for women on the border to get involved in these kinds of movements and organizations because there are a lot of organizations and they do their work here and they are close with the community too". (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013). The members of organizations at the Burma-Thailand border are connected as family, friends, and neighbours, and information regarding the capacity building activities of women's organizations is readily available and shared through these relationships.

Further, women's organizations have been able to access judicial structures in Thailand, by networking with other CBOs and INGOs in the exile community in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence. Speaking about how her organization assists women to access the formal legal structures they are marginalized from while in exile, a staff member at BWU said, "So for the normal case like women domestic violence case, we contact to any other CBOs within the movement...then we work together and those cases were ok, but for the important case like rape case, women being raped, so we contact to the Thai police, we contact to also another LLC, Labour Law Clinic." (Thin Kyi, BWU, March 4, 2013). This woman describes how BWU will utilize its informal connections to other CBOs in the exile community to connect women who have experienced sexual or domestic violence to mechanisms for justice that they are otherwise excluded from due to their lack of social capital, and their fear of Thai authorities given their undocumented status. While the BWU does not have formal partnerships with CBOs specializing in legal support for the exile community, the woman activists working with the BWU have developed informal relationships with the staff of these organizations, and can capitalize on these relationships to more effectively assist the women who the BWU works with.

Women's organizations also utilize their relationships with members of the community in refugee camps to advocate for women's rights within traditional camp systems. Describing women's organizations' engagement with traditional systems of justice in the camps, one participant stated,

“BWU has been a very strong advocate and also pressure group for these kinds of issues, because BWU is also very active in the gender advocacy. So not only to the, not only giving education and awareness to the women that are victims, but we also target it to the judicial levels to understand, and we have we tried to make some changes in the judiciary system in the camps...Some of the cases, if the women are raped or tortured by the husband or whatever, there are different ways of handling. But the rape is sometimes, the elder, they force these two to marry, and sometimes, if the girl does not accept it, then the elder asks the perpetrator to give a chicken and two bottles of alcohol and that's finished. So this is the kind of traditional ways of handling the cases... And also for the family matters, no matter what ethnicity they represent, they all see this problem as a family matter. No one should interfere. So that's why BWU tried to break this silence (laughs), and we have started working, we have started to lay down the program on the...we call it public awareness campaign on domestic violence and sexual harassment.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

Utilizing the informal networks between women's organizations and members of the community in the refugee camps, woman activists have carried out an awareness campaign that calls into question traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and justice in the camps, and highlights the imperative to adhere to international norms for gender justice.

Transnational Advocacy Networks: Connecting Woman Activists to Formal Political Processes

Traditionally, women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border have been underrepresented within community-based organizations, for example pro-democracy organizations advocating for political reform inside Burma or labour rights organizations. Many of these community-based organizations were established by men in exile communities after they participated in the 8-8-88 uprising inside Burma and fled repression by the government. Women's underrepresentation in civil society and within opposition political parties established in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border is in part due to women's diminished human

and social capital, as well as the reluctance of men in these organizations to allow for the equal contribution of women in the public affairs of their exile communities. Woman activists have managed to utilize their connections to international donor organizations that they have worked with in the past and their shared concern for gender equity to pressure community-based organizations in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to promote greater involvement and decision-making of women through a quota system. One woman who has been involved in the efforts to enact a quota system for membership in local and national government inside Burma, and in civil society along the border, described the scope of this effort across all levels of government and civil society: “How can you get the women decision. Everybody is elected. That’s why we said the quota. Not just only one quota. Instead it is a three-step quota. One is the party quota. The second is electoral system quota, the electoral law if you don’t put it how can we do. And the bigger one is the constitution first. So those kinds of three levels...” (Kyaw Zin, BWU, February 12, 2013). This woman described how, in order to create space for women to fill elected government positions inside Burma, a quota system is required to be formalized within political parties, within the electoral system, and within the broader constitution. This quota system involves reserving 30-40% of all leadership positions in the local and national government inside Burma, and woman activists have advocated for its implementation among community-based organizations and political opposition parties in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. One woman activist indicated that the political organization at the Burma-Thailand border that she works with has become more receptive to women since the addition of a quota system over the past ten years or so: “Even this organization, we didn’t have any women leaders in the leading positions, all are men, and we didn’t have any policy that there must be at least 30 percent of women’s participation in decision making level, we didn’t have it before, but we have it now.” (Thet Mon Myint, YNS, February 7, 2013).

Woman activists’ efforts to enact a quota system have been met with opposition from male-run organizations. In order to promote the quota system, woman activists have relied on their relationships with international humanitarian and development organizations that they have worked with in the past, and their shared concern for gender equity in order to put pressure on organizations that have resisted reserving positions for women. Speaking of how woman activists have worked with international allies, a founding member of the BWU stated,

“The problem is donors are also asking the gender, because we also talk to the donors about the gender, how many women are getting, just giving the, please ask the question to the organization you are giving the money, how many women are getting involved, in decision making power... Sometimes they [male-run organizations] accuse us. Sometimes they said that ‘Why you are interfering in the donor!’ We are not interfering the donor, what we want is the donor working for us.” (Kyaw Zin, BWU, February 12, 2013).

This woman describes how some international donors that are concerned about gender equality share women’s organizations aspirations for a greater representation of women in civil society and government. Because of their common interest in gender equality and improving the status of women, woman activists have requested that international donor organizations put increased pressure on community-based organizations that are dominated by men. These international humanitarian and development organizations can make their financial support for community-based organizations contingent upon the inclusion of women as members, and the promotion of women’s leadership. While these male-run organizations are sometimes frustrated by women’s organizations pressuring them through a third party, the participants of this project highlighted several different community-based organizations that have implemented a quota for 30-40% of staff positions to be filled by women as a result of this strategy.

Further, through their transnational networks with ethnic minority communities in conflict-affected regions inside Burma, woman activists have demonstrated to international actors, such as the UN and foreign governments, their capacity to play an important role in formal political processes, such as the ongoing peace process inside Burma. Interviews and focus groups revealed that woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border have gathered some of the only demographic data currently available about violence against women in ethnic minority communities inside Burma by government forces and armed rebel groups; these abuses continue to be under-reported or denied by the Burmese government. The woman activists I interviewed expressed their belief in the important role they have to play in ongoing discussions about building peace between ethnic armed forces and the government of Burma, given their unique ability to utilize their informal networks to access disparate regions inside Burma that have been hit hard by conflict. International allies in advocacy organizations and media outlets have used this data widely, to highlight the realities of conflict in Burma, and draw attention to human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burmese government.

The woman activists I interviewed believed that their ability to gather and circulate this data and shed light on the understated human rights abuses of the Burmese government armed forces and ethnic opposition armed forces has led to a greater recognition of women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border by international actors, such as the UN and foreign governments. Representatives from women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border have attended various international forums and events, sharing their experiences with a broader audience and demonstrating their fundamental role in the civil society landscape of the Burma-Thailand border and Burma itself. For example, the General Secretary of the BWU was recognized by the Global Fund for Women at an event in San Francisco, US, for her and the WLB's efforts to advocate for the rights of women and sustainable peace in exile communities and inside Burma (WLB 2014). In turn, the publication of this data has highlighted the experiences of women with conflict inside Burma to an international audience. It has also provided concrete evidence of pervasive GBV throughout Burma, and the imperative to address the needs of women to the actors involved in the official peace process, including the government of Burma, foreign governments, and UN organizations.

CBOs have an important role to play in the peace process, communicating the needs of the civilian population and their experiences to the Burmese government, Thai government, and armed opposition groups involved in the peace process (Myanmar Peace Monitor 2014). Communicating the experiences and needs of women in the exile population at the Burma-Thailand border is a crucial step in establishing a process of reconciliation for the exile community at the Burma-Thailand border. Many of the woman activists I interviewed viewed their location in exile as a strategic advantage within the current political transition and peace process. Women's organizations have largely been left out of official peace negotiations, as well as the discussion of the return of exile communities into Burma. However, woman activists believe that by utilizing their transnational advocacy networks established in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, and cooperating with allies inside Burma, women's organizations in exile will play a crucial role in Burma's transition, by advocating for women and pressuring political leaders inside the country to address gender inequality. These women expressed that their location in exile is a strategic advantage with which to achieve their movement goals of gender equality and political reform. While operating from exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, woman activists can avoid the ongoing pressure and coercion from the

government of Burma to continue to draw attention to under-reported human rights abuses at the hands of the government (Myanmar Peace Monitor 2014). The transition process inside Burma is in its nascent stages, beginning to impact the daily lives and nature of woman activists' work. As such, I was unable to witness many concrete ways in which woman activists' opportunities for activism have been shaped by the transition beyond their strategic role in transnational advocacy. Future research to explore how this transition process is continuing to shape the constraints and opportunities for woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border would reveal greater insight into how the women's movement is adapting to the opportunities presented by this constantly evolving political environment.

Thus, through the use of informal networks within exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, between women's organizations at the border, and their international allies, these organizations have managed to connect women in exile communities with legal structures from which they have been marginalized. These networks have also provided woman activists with opportunities to put pressure on community organizations to include women via international humanitarian and development organizations that provide funding to civil society at the Burma-Thailand border. By utilizing these informal networks, woman activists have experienced increasing recognition for their advocacy work from the international NGO community and an increased ability to advocate for women in their community and reveal the overlooked experiences of women to actors involved in the formal peace process and political transition.

Building Bridges: Reconciling Long-Standing Social Divisions within Diverse Exile Communities

The women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border has developed inclusivity in its movement activities by developing cooperation between woman activists from different ethnicities inside Burma with long-standing tensions and conflict. Further, women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border have engaged in cooperative initiatives with woman activists inside Burma to develop mutual understanding and strengthen the women's movement's organizational network. In the process, woman activists have gained understanding and respect

for other women outside of their ethnic community, and have helped to mend tensions between the woman activists working in exile communities and women inside Burma.

Ethnic Divisions: Building Understanding and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms Within Women's Organizations

The women's movement has engaged in a purposeful process of bridge building between the many ethnic groups that make up Burma. To accomplish this, many women's organizations have sought to be multi-ethnic and inclusive organizations that provide equal opportunity to all ethnic groups. The Women's League of Burma serves an important function within the exile community; the WLB is made up of 13 different women's organizations representing different ethnicities from Burma through a complex organizational structure that strives for inclusivity. Forming the WLB solidified the women's movement into a structured body that allows for a plurality of opinions among members while providing the opportunity for women's organizations to form a unified front to influence issues related to women's status and well-being. Speaking to this strength, one staff member of the BWU stated, "When we speak one organization, and another organization, then we didn't get much attention. So then we formed the Women's League of Burma, and we, also the women's organizations, both ethnic based organizations and rights based organizations, we came together. And also, then we said one voice, one words. Then we believe that it is louder than telling only one organization, because WLB there is thirteen women's organization no? So, WLB's role is really big." (Myint Myint, BWU, February 19, 2013). Further, the ability to connect with women's groups who operate in hard to reach ethnic regions inside the country has led to increased access to information on the ground and a greater ability to gather knowledge of the realities of life in Burma and at the border. For example, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) has collected some of the only information on sexual violence in regions of ongoing conflict inside Burma (KWAT 2013). This data has been used by international media outlets, and has drawn significant international attention to women's status in Burma.

With that said, the complex structure of the WLB has resulted in the slower implementation of WLB's activities and a loss in efficiency, given the democratic decision

making process the WLB has established. A staff member of the WLB outlined her opinion that this was a necessary side effect of building an organization based on inclusivity:

“It’s quite a bit tricky situation, because for example, we have a Kachin, Karen, Shan, and other, so sometimes they feel that their own ethnic women’s issues are the most important, the most problematic in the situation...The rest of the organization, they don’t really feel the same with that. They feel that actually it is quite totally wrong that, its all women that are suffering, why not thinking that different way. Of course that, but no one is the most important. Everything is the most important, you know...We need a lot of adjustments, because that needed to be discussed on the tables, all the time, that we are doing now, more talk, and more negotiation, and more direct way, rather than just leave it, leave the problem. It is quite tricky.” (Nwe Nwe Mu, WLB, March 8, 2013).

Further, the imperative to engage in multi-ethnic organizing is more pronounced in exile communities at the border; for many women I spoke with, their first experiences meeting individuals from an ethnic group other than their own occurred when they arrived at the border. In interviews and focus groups woman activists discussed some of the tensions present during these first encounters resulting from a lack of mutual understanding, as well as incorrect knowledge of the sources of injustice in their lives. For example, some women indicated that ethnic minorities generally distrust Burman people, the ethnic majority in Burma, because they associate the actions of the military government and army (largely Burman in ethnicity) with Burman people as a whole.

“We have a military regime and the soldiers. They have fighting in their ethnic areas, and some of the people, mostly the Karen people, their houses burned down, their children, or their women is raped, or some shoot. So they have been witness of that...so they have a very deep misunderstanding on the Burman people, because the soldiers they are speaking the Burmese language, and it can be ethnic and other soldiers, but they speak Burmese so they are Burman. So they really hate Burman, so between Burman and Karen it’s also have some misunderstanding. Actually, they hate their government, but they don’t know it’s the government or not, they just know they’re Burman. So they mix up everything. They say Burman is bad guy....So that kind of mindset is staying in their minds, still now today” (Thet Mon Myint, YNS, February 7, 2013).

One woman from an ethnic minority community inside Burma described when she initially arrived at the border, and the feeling of animosity and mistrust from colleagues in their organizations who belong to ethnic minorities towards women from the Burman majority:

“I was worried there would be a Burman girl, I would come join in the workshop, because we didn’t know each other...Then I thought, why the Burman need to attend that kind of workshop we are going to attend? Because Burman already have opportunities to many good things, they can use computers, they speak English, they have many good things in life. Why should Burman include in the training!?...So when I arrive here the other ethnic including, they sneak me in the room and say ‘There is a Burman in the next room, we cannot talk about bad things about generals and Burman problems because she is Burman’. People think because we did not know each other.” (Focus Group 2, ELP, February 17, 2013).

This participant went on to discuss the process of developing a common understanding based on the shared experiences of social injustice, and conflict:

“So the time comes when interns start talking about how bad the authorities are and how they suffer, not getting literacy, how bad is transportation and big costs, every difficulties in Rangoon, Rangoon people face. So the people in border areas and the people in Rangoon, the problems are the same. And that’s why learning about each other’s experience we know that we are not the only ones suffering that abuse. There are other people. Many Burman in Rangoon and other areas are also suffering the same. So but here it’s good that we have learned different cultures, including Burman.” (Focus Group 2, ELP, February 17, 2013).

This process was important for the women I spoke to because it led to a greater sense of understanding between woman activists from disparate regions inside Burma, as well as cooperation between different organizations representing ethnic minorities living at the Burma-Thailand border through joint-projects. In their organizations woman activists conduct workshops designed to allow members to share their experiences with each other to build understanding of the complex circumstances surrounding each individual. By developing mutual understanding and concrete cooperation with each other through the women’s movement’s activities at the Burma-Thailand border, woman activists from different ethnicities are bridging ethnic divides in Burmese society. In doing so, the women’s movement at the Burma-Thailand border has been strengthened because it is able to bridge the divisions that constrain positive cooperation in Burmese society, giving it a wider reach, louder voice, and greater moral authority because of its inclusivity.

While visiting the WLB’s office, I was fortunate to be invited to join the staff and volunteers of the WLB at the public gathering for International Women’s Day, held in the centre of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The celebrations included a march through the streets of Chiang Mai followed by presentations of music and dancing by ethnic minority women, and speeches from

woman community leaders. Many women's organizations were in attendance, and women from all ethnic backgrounds inside Burma, as well as trans women, sex workers, and migrant workers from Burma and Thailand gathered together to celebrate their lives as women. The evening ended with the entire gathering joining hands, and singing together. This joyous event was an amazing glimpse into the achievements that woman activists have made towards mending tensions that have divided their communities, and the strength that the network of women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border has developed because of its inclusivity.

Building Cooperation Between Women's Organizations at the Burma-Thailand border and Women's Organizations Inside Burma

Woman activists working in women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border have sought to connect with woman activists working inside Burma, to develop a common understanding of their experiences with activism thus far, and with the goal of developing a cooperative relationship with each other. Describing the imperative to develop relationships with woman activists inside Burma, the General Secretary of the WLB stated,

“I think, these kinds of struggles or difficulties, we need to understand each other. This is not the time that we can actually talk about who suffered most. Because, also, this is not the time that the people in the borders and the people inside Burma to say that who have sacrificed the most, and who have benefitted the most. We shouldn't compete with each other. That's why for BWU and member organizations and WLB, we feel like it is so important that we build bridge, a bridge, between inside and those that are living outside, in order to build those trusts and understandings. From that, we can work together, and then to help to develop our country to make some changes in our country.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

To accomplish this, several organizations run programs that connect woman activists in communities inside Burma with those working in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border for educational workshops and knowledge sharing forums. These forums often ended with participants returning to their home communities to provide workshops on the material covered while at the border, and also led to the development of joint projects and reports. Speaking to the accomplishments of this bridge-building process between woman activists in exile and those inside Burma thus far, one woman stated:

“Although our point of views might still be different, but we could come out with some common understanding...So that after the third meeting we can come with some kind of a coordinated effort, agreement. So one issue is to work on the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and another issue is to work on this peace process, and the third is for the women’s participation. So these are the three main places that we have committed to work together. So that was very, very, very good.” (Phway Phway, WLB, March 9, 2013).

The woman activists I spoke with felt that this engagement of women’s groups inside Burma has led to the strengthening of their network, and has highlighted the strategic importance of movement activists working in exile communities because of their ability to use the opportunities afforded by living in exile to be a more outspoken critic of the government from the relative safety of their exile communities.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Overall, the interviews, focus groups, and participant observations conducted with woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border demonstrated that their activities are having a very tangible positive impact on women in exile communities, and women inside Burma. The following section will revisit the central research questions of this thesis to make concluding remarks summarizing the findings presented in Chapter 6.

First, it will address the impact that the social and political environment of exile communities has on woman activists' opportunities for activism. Second, it will discuss the impact that the women's movement's strategy of grassroots community empowerment has had on woman activists' sense of individual empowerment. Third, it will discuss the capacity of woman activists to influence the sources of their marginalization, as a result of their gender and their undocumented status, in the context of the ongoing political transition and peace process.

First, the social and political environment of exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border can be characterized by the experience of 'social flux'; exile communities are characterized by fundamental changes to formal and informal social and political structures, and the constraints and opportunities that these structures facilitate. In Chapter 2, I outlined several propositions based on a review of the literature, for the constraints and opportunities we could expect women in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border to encounter. The evidence I have provided indicates that while living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border presents constraints for woman activists, the experience of 'social flux' can open up space in which women living in exile can build the capacity necessary to engage in activism. Woman activists have utilized these new opportunities to facilitate the expansion of their women's movement.

Woman activists' undocumented status while living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border has led to the development of strategies and mechanisms for woman activists and women's organizations to maintain an underground existence, avoiding the attention of Thai authorities. Further, due to changes in community demographics as a result of displacement into Thailand, and women's increased presence in the informal workforce in Thailand, women's participation in activities outside the household has become normalized. In addition, the presence

of humanitarian organizations has facilitated support for the basic resource and security needs of women living in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border.

Second, the grassroots capacity-building strategies of the women's movement emphasize the agency of women living in exile; this comes in direct contrast to the marginalization of women in exile communities from formal structures of power. The women's movement's strategy of capacity building and empowerment programs are providing many women with opportunities that they have been unable to access due to gender discrimination, poor infrastructure, and instability inside Burma. Many woman activists involved in this project voiced changes they perceived in themselves, such as greater knowledge of political issues, increased self-confidence, increased English language skills, and the broadening of their world-view as a result of the culture of gender awareness promoted in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. At the same time, these capacity building activities have led to a renegotiation of women's role in their households and in their exile communities; many women are experiencing growing support for their activism from their male partners and from men and women in the broader exile community.

Finally, I have discussed the impact that the grassroots empowerment activities of the women's movement have had on women's capacity for activism by highlighting the ways that woman activists are utilizing their informal and transnational networks to advocate for women's rights and influence the ongoing transition and peace process. Based on the experiences of woman activists at the Burma Thailand border, I conclude that woman activists' involvement in the capacity building process facilitated the expansion of existing opportunities and the creation of new opportunities for their activism, in spite of the constraints presented by the exile experience. As a result of the experience of 'social flux' and woman activists' newly acquired human and social capital, woman activists possess a great deal of informal power to influence the sources of their marginalization as undocumented, and as women. Woman activists have been able to utilize informal and transnational networks to connect women in exile communities with legal structures for justice for their experiences with domestic and gender-based violence. Moreover, woman activists have utilized their transnational networks to pressure civil society at the Burma-Thailand border and inside Burma, and local and national government inside Burma to enact a quota system requiring the membership of women. Woman activists have also used these transnational networks to advocate for justice for gender-based violence perpetrated by

armed forces inside Burma, and to communicate the needs of women to actors in the official peace process and political transition, such as the governments of Burma and Thailand, the US government, and the UN. Woman activists have also engaged in a process of bridge building between groups who have traditionally been divided in Burmese society; an accomplishment that has had a positive impact on the woman activists involved, and has important bearings on effectiveness of the peace process and the sustainability and security of Burma in the future.

Thus, by building the capacity of women in exile communities, woman activists and their women's movement are able to capitalize on opportunities for mobilization that are facilitated by the exile experience. While they continue to manage the constraints to their activism that the experience of 'social flux' presents, the capacity-building activities of woman activists create new opportunities for activism, facilitating the expansion of the women's movement.

Limitations

There are several limitations to my research. First, the woman activists who participated in this project have devoted themselves to their activist cause, living lives that have been complicated by their involvement in politics, and facing repercussions from their exile communities and their communities inside Burma. As such, they have an enormous stake in the success of their work, and the positive portrayal of women's organizations. This may have limited the amount of negative criticism they voiced to me, or led to an overstatement of their achievements through their activist work. That being said, many participants did voice negative criticisms of their own organizations and of the exile community. Further, my findings echoed those of other researchers who discuss the positive experiences of exiled women with community organizations and activism (O'Kane 2005; Snyder 2011). I made to sure to let participants know my own positive impressions of woman activists and women's organizations, so that they would trust my intentions in researching their movement. I was also careful to use questions that focussed on any negative experiences they may have had, in order to draw these criticisms out during the interviews and focus groups.

Second, I did not conduct any interviews or focus groups with women who were not involved in activism in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border. As such, I was unable

to gather data with which to contrast the experiences of the woman activists involved in this project. Engaging with women who had not been involved in activism with women's organizations at the Burma-Thailand border would have provided a control group to further demonstrate the changes that participating in activism has had on the women involved in this project. Further, this may have added insights into what factors make it more or less likely that an individual woman will get involved in activism.

Third, I did not conduct any interviews or focus groups with men. Researchers and practitioners of international development have emphasized the need to bring men into the debate on gender to produce more sustainable and transformative change in gender relations (Okali 2011; Rathgeber 1995). While I was able to informally discuss woman activists' activities and gender roles with several men who were working in community organizations with some of the woman activists involved in this project, I did not formally involve men in any interviews or focus groups. I chose to exclude men from formal interviews or focus groups because of the need to limit the scope of this thesis and my short length of time in the field. Discussing the topic of gender with men would further inform the question of how women's involvement in activism is impacting gender in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border, highlighting the changes that men have experienced as a result of the activities of woman activists.

Implications

This thesis can be used by the women's organizations that participated in this project to highlight the impact that their capacity-building activities are having on women living in exile communities, and the capacity that woman activists working in women's organizations have to affect positive change in their communities. These women's organizations have yet to be involved in formal peace process negotiations inside Burma and negotiations over the return of refugees from Thailand. This thesis provides support to their claims for recognition from male-centered organizations, the government of Thailand and Burma, and international stakeholders involved in the negotiations, such as UNHCR.

More broadly, this thesis situates itself within discourses of international relations and development studies that discuss exile communities in situations of ongoing peace and

reconciliation processes. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, by engaging in peace-building efforts, exile communities are able to actively pursue sustainable peace and development initiatives that directly address their fundamental grievances and the causes of their displacement (Milner 2011; Smith and Stares 2007). Research from diaspora studies and peace and conflict studies has examined the gendered impact of conflict and displacement, revealing that women experience armed conflict differently from men, and that the vulnerabilities of refugee women differ greatly from that of men while living in exile (Al-Ali 2007; Hyndman 2011; Snyder 2011). Thus, integrating discussions of the gendered nature of armed conflict, life in exile, and post-conflict reconstruction into the literature on the peace-building potential of exile communities is crucial to understanding the role women in exile communities can play, and the capacity they must build in order to do so (Snyder 2011). In this thesis I advance the argument that moments of political transition, democratization, and peace building provide important opportunities for women to contest the gendered structures that marginalize them.

Moreover, highlighting the positive impact that woman activists in exile communities are making to the specific context of Burma provides a useful case-study for broader discussions of the role women living in exile could and should play in moments of transition, given their gendered experiences with conflict and displacement, and their motivation to address unequal gendered structures while renegotiating power dynamics in their country of origin. Establishing a genuine democracy would require the involvement of women in exile, helping to address the sources of their statelessness as well as the sources of their gendered marginalization, in order to build inclusive and sustainable solutions for communities living in protracted exile. This case study of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border provides useful information for other women's organizations and woman activists working to advance the needs of women living in exile in other contexts. As has been demonstrated, the opportunity to network with international allies has proven invaluable to the woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border. The experiences of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border could help to inform parallel organizations advancing the needs of women in other global contexts of protracted conflict and displacement.

Further, stakeholders involved in peace-building and reconciliation efforts, including international organizations such as the UNHCR, have called for the involvement of women in all operations related to peace building. UN Resolution 1325 passed in October 2000 states the

importance of mainstreaming gender in all aspects of post-conflict resolution and peace operations (Al-Ali 2007). However, there continues to be a disconnect between feminist research that demonstrates the relevance of gendered analyses of conflict and peace-building and the actions of stakeholders involved in peace-building operations on the ground, such as state governments and humanitarian organizations (Moran 2010). This case study provides further empirical evidence of the contribution women can make to these official processes, including building women's capacity, advocating for gender rights and pressuring the government of Burma to address GBV within the official peace process, and building bridges with traditionally disparate groups inside Burma. Furthermore, this case study calls attention to the ongoing need to integrate academic discussions of the gendered experiences of displacement into peace-building operations on the ground.

Future Research

The ongoing peace process inside Burma and the potential return of refugees from Thailand into Burma present an important opportunity for continued research into the capacity of woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border. As the social and political landscape inside Burma and in exile communities at the Burma-Thailand border continues to change, further research on the ability of woman activists to be involved in peace-process negotiations, political parties, and negotiations over the return of refugees throughout this transition would yield important insights into their ability to utilize the capacity they gained while in exile to influence formal decision-making mechanisms inside Burma. In addition, further research with men at the Burma-Thailand border would yield insight into the wider impact that woman activists at the Burma-Thailand border are making to their exile communities, and the community's perception of women's capacity for activism and community leadership.

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Appendix I: List of Ethnic Groups from Burma

The following is a list of ethnic groups recognized by the government of Burma, and retrieved from the Website for the Embassy of Myanmar. This list has stirred up controversy among ethnic minorities in the country who assert that these groupings do not accurately reflect the ethnic divisions within the country. Given the ongoing conflict among various ethnic groups, a comprehensive and conclusive list of ethnic groups in Burma is difficult to retrieve. (Embassy of Myanmar 2014)

Composition of Ethnic Groups under the 8 Major National Ethnic Races in Burma

<p>Kachin</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kachin • Trone • Dalaung • Jinghpaw • Guari • Hkahku • Duleng • Maru (Lawgore) • Rawang • Lashi (La Chit) • Atsi • Lisu 	<p>Kayah</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kayah • Zayein • Ka-Yun (Padaung) • Gheko • Kebar • Bre (Ka-Yaw) • Manu Manaw • Yin Talai • Yin Baw
<p>Kayin:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kayin • Kayinpyu • Pa-Le-Chi • Mon Kayin (Sarpyu) • Sgaw • Ta-Lay-Pwa • Paku • Bwe • Monnepwa • Monpwa • Shu (Pwo) 	<p>Rakhine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rakhine • Kamein • Kwe Myi • Daingnet • Maramagyi • Mro • Thet
<p>Bamar:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bamar • Dawei • Beik • Yaw • Yabein • Kadu • Ganan 	<p>Mon:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mon

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salon • Hpon 	
<p>Shan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shan • Yun (Lao) • Kwi • Pyin • Yao • Danaw • Pale • En • Son • Khamu • Kaw (Akha-E-Kaw) • Kokang • Khamti Shan • Hkun • Taungyo • Danu • Palaung • Man Zi • Yin Kya • Yin Net • Shan Gale • Shan Gyi • Lahu • Intha • Eik-swair • Pa-O • Tai-Loi • Tai-Lem • Tai-Lon • Tai-Lay • Maingtha • Maw Shan • Wa 	<p>Chin:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chin • Meithei (Kathe) • Saline • Ka-Lin-Kaw (Lushay) • Khami • Awa Khami • Khawno • Kaungso • Kaung Saing Chin • Kwelshin • Kwangli (Sim) • Gunte (Lyente) • Gwete • Ngorn • Zizan • Sentang • Saing Zan • Za-How • Zotung • Z0-Pe • Zo • Zahnyet (Zanniet) • Tapong • Tiddim (Hai-Dim) • Tay-Zan • Taishon • Thado • Torr • Dim • Dai (Yindu) • Naga • Tanghkul • Malin • Panun • Magun • Matu • Miram (Mara) • Mi-er • Mgan • Lushei (Lushay)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Laymyo• Lyente• Lawhtu• Lai• Laizao• Wakim (Mro)• Haulngo• Anu• Anun• Oo-Pu• Lhinbu• Asho (Plain)• Rongtu
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Appendix II: Map of Burma Outlining Ethnic Minority Regions



(Belak 2002)

Appendix III: Individual Interview Guide

Opening Lines (after verbal informed and voluntary consent has been reviewed with the participant)

In this interview I would like to have a conversation with you about your life of activism at the Burma-Thailand border. I am going to ask you some questions to keep the conversation going. Feel free to talk as long and in as much detail as you want to.

I am interested in both the challenges and opportunities you have experienced while being involved in activism at (organization name, SAW or WLB). I am interested in your individual experiences of participating in activism and community decision making while being part of the women's movement at the border. I want to hear about the challenges and opportunities you face in your daily lives, and how you have interacted with these challenges and opportunities.

As I said, I would like to hear both your positive and negative experiences being a woman activist in your community, so please feel comfortable and free to talk about anything you think is important to include.

Warm-up Questions:

So let's begin [begin audio recording]. "It's [date] and I am sitting in [place] with [participant's coded name]. We are going to have a conversation about her experiences of activism at the border as part of the women's movement."

Opening Questions

Displacement

Ok, now I would like to discuss how you got involved with the women's movement, and your experience of moving to the border. Maybe we could start by talking about why you left Burma?

[Probe] Were you alone when you left Burma?

[Probe] Can you describe to me where and how you crossed the border into Thailand?

Could you tell me about what your life was like as a woman in your home community inside Burma?

[Probe] Do women have many opportunities to be involved in activism?

Has your daily life changed by moving to the border?

[Probe] Are there differences between your life inside Burma and your life at the border?

[Probe] Do you think that the way people see you has changed by moving to the border?

The Women's Movement and Empowerment

When and how did you first get involved in activism?

Could you talk to me about the women's movement along the Burma-Thailand border?

[Probe] Who is the women's movement for?

[Probe] What activities does the women's movement participate in?
[Probe] What are the goals or objectives of the women's movement?

Do you think the women's movement is improving the lives of women in Burma and at the Burma-Thailand border?

Now I'd like to hear more about your individual experiences with activism. What are your personal goals for your activism?

[Probe] How important is it to you to be an activist?

[Probe] Why do you do activist work?

[Probe] What do you think you can accomplish as an individual by working with (Organization name)?

[Probe] Is it important to you that others view you as an activist?

How do people in your community in Mae Sot react to your work with the women's movement?

[Probe] Do you think you are viewed positively by your community?

Do you see any changes in yourself as an activist at the border, compared to how you saw yourself when you were still inside Burma?

[Probe] Has being at the border changed your self-image? If yes, how? If no, Explain.

How long do you see yourself living at the border? Do you think you will ever stop being an activist?

[Probe] Do you think you will ever go back inside Burma, and stop working with activist organizations?

Politics

What do you think of when you hear the word *politics*?

Are you involved in politics? Do you think your work with the women's movement is political?

[Probe] Do you see yourself as part of the pro-democracy movement?

What role should women have in politics in Burma?

[Probe] Do you think that women should be involved in politics, and if so, in what capacity?

In what ways can women at the border become involved in politics (local/community, or national)?

[Probe] Are there opportunities for women to be involved in politics?

Are there constraints to women's participation in politics?

[Probe] What stops women from being able to be involved in politics?

What needs to be done to help women from Burma become more involved in politics?

[Probe] What should the government do?

[Probe] What should organizations do to promote women's involvement in politics?

[Probe] What should the international community do to help women from Burma become involved in politics?

Closing Questions

What role should women have in the democratic transition in Burma?

Do you think that as women, you will be able to influence policy so that your needs and interests are promoted?

Could you tell me about your long term goals, for your work as an activist and for your life at the border?

[Probe] Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

Do you have anything else you would like to add about your experiences with activism, living at the border, or being part of the rights-based women's movement that we haven't covered yet?

Do you have any questions for me?

Conclusion of Interview

Thank you so much [Participant's Coded Name] for taking the time to speak with me today. I've learned a lot from this conversation, and am really grateful for your ability and willingness to share your unique story with me. Your experiences will provide interesting and useful data which will be analyzed and incorporated into this project on women's activism.

[Participant may comment if she wishes]

Please contact me if you have any questions about the content or analysis of our interview, or if you would like to discuss the consent form again. Once again, thank you so much for your time.

Additional prompts

Earlier you mentioned [x]. Can we go back to that?

Can you tell me more about that?

I'm not sure what you mean when you say [x]. Can you describe that for me in more detail?

Can you give me an example of what you mean when you say [x]?

Appendix IV: Focus Group Moderator Guide

Introduction

I would like to welcome everyone to this group discussion on what it is like to be a woman activist at the Burma-Thailand border. My name is Meaghan Anderson, and I am a researcher from the University of Guelph in Canada.

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this group discussion on your individual activism, and the women's movement and pro-democracy movement here in Mae Sot.

You have been chosen to participate in this discussion group because of your work with women's activist organizations, and your location here in Mae Sot. In this discussion I am trying to gather stories of your lived experiences with activism for women's rights, and your connection to or involvement with politics in Mae Sot. There are no right or wrong answers in this discussion. I want everyone to feel comfortable discussing their experiences honestly without any judgement from myself or the other participants. Everyone in this room is different, so please feel free to share your point of view with the group even if it is different from what others have said. I am looking for both positive and negative experiences so feel free to include both in your responses.

You have all given verbal consent to participate in this discussion, and have been given written descriptions of the project and your role as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the discussion at any point. As the consent summary outlines, I will be audio-recording this discussion to fully capture what is said during the discussion. The audio recording will not be heard by anyone outside of this research group, and will be used for data collection only. The audio file of this discussion will be destroyed when it is no longer needed for this project.

Please speak as clear and loud as possible so that you will be heard on the recording. If only one person could speak at once, that will help make the conversation audible.

I would like everyone to feel comfortable in this discussion so we will be on a first name basis. When I transcribe the audio recording of this focus group discussion I will use pseudonyms for each of you, so that your real names will not be visible on any documentation. Your involvement in this project will be known to myself, two hired assistants who will assist in translating the discussion and taking notes, and the organization directors of SAW and the WLB. We are conducting the focus group in a location that will help secure the privacy of our discussion, and myself, the assistants, and the other participants in the focus group will know the content of what you have said. That being said, I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of this focus group discussion. It is imperative that you keep the content of the discussion confidential, and do not reveal any information about what was said by you or other participants in the discussion to organization leaders, your colleagues, and any other outsiders. I will do by best to remove all direct identifiers that could link your identity to your statements. While I will take every precaution to avoid linking your statements in your interview to your identity, given that this is a group discussion, and not an individual interview, I cannot guarantee that you will not be identified by organization directors or other members of your community. If you have comments you would like to make but would feel more comfortable saying it privately, please arrange to

Speak with me at a later date. I will audio-record the focus group to ensure the accuracy of what you have said in the discussion, and I will store these audio files on an encrypted computer.

Does anyone have any questions about the project in general, issues of confidentiality and your consent, or your rights as a research participant?

Our discussion will last 1 to 2 hours. Feel free to help yourself to some snacks that have been provided for our discussion here. If you need to leave the room to get a drink, snack, or use the bathroom, feel free to do so, but please do it quietly so that it doesn't disrupt the discussion.

Ok, let's begin. Everyone has a name-tag, and many may know each other already, but I would like to get us started by going around the room and getting each woman to tell the group her name, where in Burma she is from originally, which organization she is from, and how long she has been at the border.

Thank you.

Question Guide

Our discussion today is about participation in community decision-making and efforts to promote the well-being of women from Burma living along the border in Thailand.

I would like to start by discussing how your lives may have changed by moving to the border. You've all come from different communities inside Burma. Could you tell me about what your life was like in your home communities inside Burma?

[Probe] What is life like for women inside Burma? Do women have many opportunities to be involved in activism?

Has your daily life changed by moving to the border?

[Probe] Are there differences between your life inside Burma and your life at the border?

[Probe] Do you think that the way people see you has changed by moving to the border?

The Women's Movement and Empowerment

Could you describe what the women's movement is and the women's movement at the Burma-Thailand border?

[Probe] Who is the women's movement for?

[Probe] What activities does the women's movement participate in?

[Probe] What are the goals or objectives of the women's movement?

Do you think the women's movement is improving the lives of women in Burma and at the Burma-Thailand border?

How do people in your community in Mae Sot react to your work with the women's movement?

[Probe] Do you think you are viewed positively by your community?

Do you see any changes in yourself as an activist at the border, compared to how you saw yourself when you were still inside Burma?

[Probe] Has being at the border changed your self-image? If yes, how? If no, Explain.

Politics

What do you think of when you hear the word *politics*?

Are you involved in politics? Do you think your work with the women's movement is political?

[Probe] Do you see yourselves as part of the pro-democracy movement?

What role should women have in politics in Burma?

[Probe] Do you think that women should be involved in politics, and if so, in what capacity?

Are there opportunities for women to be involved in politics?

Are there constraints to women's participation in politics?

[Probe] What stops women from being able to be involved in politics?

What needs to be done to help women from Burma become more involved in politics?

[Probe] What should the government do?

[Probe] What should organizations do to promote women's involvement in politics?

[Probe] What should the international community do to help women from Burma become involved in politics?

Closing Questions

What role should women have in the democratic transition in Burma?

Do you think that as women, you will be able to influence policy so that your needs and interests are promoted?

Could you tell me about your long-term goals, for your work as an activist and for your life at the border?

[Probe] Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

Do you have anything else you would like to add about your experiences with activism, living at the border, or being part of the rights-based women's movement that we haven't covered yet?

Do you have any questions for me?