Claiming rights in exile: women’s insurgent citizenship practices in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines insurgent citizenship practices employed by activists in the exiled Burmese women’s movement from the 1990s and onwards. Consisting of political exiles, refugees and ethnic insurgents, this movement has successfully used the transnational, transitory space of the borderlands to constitute its participants as political subjects with legitimate claims to rights, citizenship and leadership. Drawing on interviews, this analysis interrogates women’s activism through the lens of insurgent citizenship practices. Thus, how have Burmese women’s activists claimed rights and lived citizenship in exile? Three main strategies are examined: firstly, women activists have positioned themselves as political actors and authorities through involvement in governance and humanitarian aid delivery in refugee camps. Secondly, they have claimed rights and political subjectivity through engagement with international norms, networks and arenas. Thirdly, they have claimed citizenship and political influence in oppositional nation-making projects through engaging with and negotiating ethno-nationalist armed struggles. The analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of women’s insurgent citizenship practices, showing how they navigate multiple marginalized subject positions, direct their rights claims towards multiple governing authorities, and enact multiple political communities.

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Introduction
Most of independent Myanmar’s history has been marked by military dictatorship, civil war and ethnic conflict (Callahan 2003; South 2008). Since 2011, significant steps towards democratization has been taken, and a renewed peace process has brought the government and eight Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) together as signatories of a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (Thawnghmung 2017). While these are promising developments, ethnic discrimination and armed violence has not ceased; indeed, conflict in Northern Myanmar has intensified in recent years and persecution of ethnic Rohingyas in Western Myanmar has escalated to the point of alleged ethnic cleansing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017; Kachin Women’s Association Thailand 2016; Sadan 2016).1

Notably, Myanmar’s long war has resulted in long-term, large-scale forced displacement. Pervasive human rights abuses committed as part of the government’s counterinsurgency strategies have forced people in conflict areas to live in constant fear, displacing many
people several times during more than 60 years of war (South 2008). By the end of 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that almost 850,000 people were internally displaced or stateless within Myanmar; 932,000 Rohingya had fled Myanmar for Bangladesh; and 593,000 people from Myanmar were refugees or stateless persons in Thailand (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2018). While currently overshadowed by the Rohingya emergency in terms of media and donor attention, the refugee situation in Thailand is one of the most protracted in the world. Throughout Burma’s civil war, Thailand has been a main destination for political exiles, refugees from Burmese ethnic minorities, as well as ethnic insurgent armed groups. The first refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese border were established in 1984, and, in addition to those recognized as refugees or stateless persons, another two million Burmese migrants are estimated to be illegally in Thailand (South and Jolliffe 2015; Lang 2002).

Thus, displacement from Myanmar has generated long-term humanitarian crises and immense human suffering. However, the borderlands of Myanmar’s neighboring countries have also provided political space for the mobilization of diverse forms of oppositional politics, ranging from armed resistance to human rights documentation, alternative news reporting on the situation in Myanmar, and international networking and lobbying. These movements constitute examples of the ways in which refugees and diasporic communities engage with and affect conflict and peace processes in the home countries they have fled (Koinova 2018; Smith and Stares 2007). Further, refugee activism along the Thai-Myanmar border has also demonstrated how refugee camps can become sites for political mobilization and empowerment (Olivius 2017).

In particular, the Thai-Myanmar borderlands have, since the 1990s, seen the emergence of a vibrant, multi-ethnic women’s movement. In Myanmar, governed by a military regime until 2011, oppositional political activity was a life-threatening endeavor, and space for civil society organizations was severely restricted. In contrast, the borderlands, especially along the Thai-Myanmar border, provided more fruitful spaces for political organization and mobilization, as well as communication with the international community. Despite its geographical and political marginalization, the border has constituted a transnational, diasporic space that has enabled Burmese women activists to mobilize international support and throw the weight of international norms and policies behind their struggles. As a result, the movement has been able to challenge male dominance, gain acceptance for women’s leadership and participation, and advance women’s equality to a degree previously unimagined (Hedström 2016; Ferguson 2013; O’Kane 2007). After 2012, a more open political environment has seen a significant expansion of women’s activism inside Myanmar, and some organizations founded in exile have relocated their work into Myanmar (Olivius 2019). Yet, the Thai-Myanmar borderlands remains a key site for Burmese women’s activism.

This paper aims to provide a novel perspective on refugee activism and diaspora politics by interrogating Burmese women’s activism in exile through the lens of insurgent citizenship practices. Performed by people marginalized by dominant orders of power, insurgent citizenship practices signifies ‘an insurgence that begins with the struggle for the right to have a daily life … worthy of a citizen’s dignity’ (Holston 2009, 246). Refugees, stateless people and irregular migrants are, at least de facto if not de jure, excluded from national citizenship and belonging, and thereby from enjoyment of
rights associated with it. Nonetheless, as the Burmese women’s movement in Thailand exemplifies, they struggle to claim a ‘right to have rights’ (Arent [1951] 2004), constitute themselves as political subjects, and carve out space to live with dignity and shape the conditions of their lives. This analysis examines how Burmese women activists in Thailand perform insurgent citizenship practices; if and how these practices generate transformative change; and how they are constrained, enabled and shaped by activists’ location in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands.

The analysis of the Burmese women’s movement in exile contributes to the literature on ‘acts of citizenship’ in contexts of forced migration (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016; Müller 2016; Lewicki 2017) through highlighting the complexity of such practices and rights claims. Firstly, the analysis shows that Burmese women in Thailand embody and navigate between multiple marginalized subject positions, claiming rights as refugees; as ethnic minorities; and as women. Secondly, their claims to rights, influence and belonging are directed towards multiple governing authorities and construct multiple, if overlapping, political communities. In refugee camps, women activists defy humanitarian authorities as they claim rights to ownership and self-determination on behalf of the refugee community; through engagement with international norms and arenas, they constitute themselves as political representatives of ethnic minorities in relation to the Myanmar government; and in relation to ethno-nationalist nation-making projects, they claim a right to participation and leadership as women. Thus, while the nation state and the exclusions it creates is one key referent for insurgent citizenship practices, this analysis demonstrates that it is not the only form of political order and community in relation to which marginalized people seek to claim belonging and rights.

Further, in the literature on transnational migration, migrant activism and citizenship, as well as in literature on diasporas, peace and conflict, there is a lack of research that approach activism as gendered, or explore women’s activist practices (Kron 2016; Al-Ali 2007). This paper thus contributes to addressing this gap, rectifying a longstanding bias where political agency and activism in marginalized spaces and communities is implicitly constructed as male.

The paper is structured as follows. Next, the analytical framework is outlined, conceptualizing refugee and migrant activism as insurgent citizenship practices. The materials and methods forming the basis for the analysis are then described. This is followed by the analysis, exploring how Burmese women activists located in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands act to claim rights and practice citizenship in the context of refugee camps; in relation to the political situation in Myanmar; and in relation to ethno-nationalist nation-making projects. In conclusion, the wider significance and implications of the findings are considered.

**Refugee activism as insurgent citizenship practices**

The concept of insurgent citizenship was originally used to describe marginalized people’s efforts to claim rights and space to live dignified lives in urban peripheries, in the context of unequal urbanization (Holston 2008, 2009). However, the concept can fruitfully be employed as analytical lens to interrogate refugee activism and diaspora politics. Like the urban poor, refugees and exiles are excluded from the dominant
orders of power and governance that supposedly provide access to citizenship rights. Indeed, the possibility of being a refugee is inevitably bound up with a world order of territorial nation states, where spatializing and nationalizing political rights, belonging and community constitutes the twin strategy upon which modern political rule depends (Lui 2004; Hindess 2000). Malkki (1992) compellingly describes how this ‘national order of things’ is made to appear natural and necessary through metaphors linking land, nation, culture and identity. On the margins of this order, refugees are anomalies that simultaneously threaten the order of nation states and, by being its constitutive other, reaffirms the normality of territorial citizenship (Lui 2004; Soguk 1999).

In the face of such marginalization, Holston argues, insurgent citizenship practices do not only protest and resist dominant orders and the forms of marginalization they produce; they also enact and bring into being new forms of citizenship. This understanding of citizenship as a dynamic process of subject formation, underpinned by concrete acts through which people ‘constitute themselves as citizens’, is also reflected in Isin and Nielsen’s conceptualization of ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2), and in a growing literature which examines acts of citizenship by those who formally lack it, like refugees and irregular migrants. In this literature, citizenship is approached as ‘a complex phenomenon that stretches beyond legal definitions into the domains of those who are formally citizens but do not practice their citizenship, and those who enact their right to have rights even though not officially entitled to do so’ (Maestri and Hughes 2017, 629). Case studies drawing on this conception of citizenship have demonstrated how refugees and asylum seekers in various contexts act to claim their right to have rights, and to live with security and dignity through art performances and other public, symbolic acts; establishment of structures for political representation; and through creation of mechanisms for provision of social services (Lewicki 2017; Müller 2016; Rygiel 2012).

Acts of citizenship ‘exercises a right that does not exist or a right that exists but which is enacted by a political subject that does not exist in the eyes of the law’ (Isin 2012, 13). This formulation is especially pertinent in an analysis of the activism of refugees, stateless people or irregular migrants. People categorized as such are simultaneously often denied the rights linked to national citizenship, and denied status as political subjects; instead constructed as bare lives to be saved or threats to be controlled (Hyndman and Giles 2011, Edkins 2000). In this context, acts of citizenship are subversive and insurgentist as they challenge and reshape established boundaries and conceptions of citizenship. However, it is essential not to romanticise this radical potential. In an analysis of acts of citizenship by asylum seekers in Israel, Tanja Müller argues that while engaging in acts of citizenship had transformative, empowering effects on individuals, their potential as a politics of resistance is limited by the power of the nation state to ultimately determine actual access to and realization of rights (Müller 2016). Clearly, a vital research task is to explore if and in what ways acts of citizenship actually generate results that affects the lives of marginalized individuals and groups.

As exemplified by Müller’s study (Müller 2016), the nation state and national citizenship is often the explicit or implicit reference in analyses of acts of citizenship. Indeed, as discussed above, the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1992) constitutes a central, dominant form of power and political order that generates exclusions, as well
as resistant practices from non-citizens. However, nation states are not the only forms of governing powers or political communities that marginalized people relate to in their claims to rights and belonging. This is clear in Holston’s conceptualization of insurgent citizenship, where he speaks of multiple citi- zenships in relation to the city as a political community. Insurgent citizenship practices are insurgent towards the dominant forms of power that create exclusions in the context of urban inequality, and are not necessarily directed towards formal state authorities. Broadening the potential referent of citizenship in this way allows for an analysis that empirically explores how resistance and rights claims are directed towards multiple governing authorities and exclusionary orders in a particular context, rather than assuming the nation state to universally be the most influential referent. The Thai-Myanmar borderlands are characterized by political and legal pluralism, where overlapping forms of power and authority shape the lives of refugees (McConnachie 2013). In this context, it is important to trace how insurgent citizenship practices challenge the exclusions of not only nation states, but of alternative political authorities such as humanitarian agencies and ethno-nationalist nation-making projects.

Further, in the context of borderlands, it is important to be attentive to how geographically and politically marginalized sites can open up space for resistance and for creative forms of transformative politics. As Holston observes in relation to urban peripheries, or ‘slums’, ‘the very conditions of remoteness in the peripheries enabled an off-work and out-of-sight freedom to invent new modes of association’ (Holston 2009, 257). Similar results have emerged from studies of refugee camps as political spaces. Refugee camps and border areas in the Global South are certainly located in what Duffield terms ‘the global borderlands’: economically and politically marginalized regions seen as potential sources of underdevelopment and insecurity (Duffield 2001). However, despite the repressive nature of refugee camps as technologies of governing, relying on confinement and denial of rights, they can nonetheless enable new forms of political mobilization and claims-making (Olivius 2017). This paper provides new insights into the role of borderlands and marginal spaces through exploring how Burmese women’s citizenship practices are constrained, enabled and shaped by their location in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands.

Material and methods

The analysis presented here is based on two sets of interview data. The first consists of 33 interviews with humanitarian workers employed by UN agencies and NGOs, and refugee activists representing the refugee governance structures and other CBOs in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. These interviews were conducted by the author in 2010 and 2011. Most interviews were conducted in the area around the Thai border town of Mae Sot, a major hub for humanitarian aid to the refugee camps along the border, and some were conducted in Bangkok, Thailand. Fieldwork at this time primarily focused on the three camps closest to Mae Sot: Mae La, Umpiem Mai, and Nu Po. Striving for broad coverage of relevant camp actors, representatives from the majority of humanitarian agencies were included, as well as refugee representatives from the camp governance structures and from women’s organizations. Humanitarian staff consisted of international as well as local employees, at different levels within
organizational hierarchies. Refugee representatives held leadership positions in their organizations. Respondents were accessed through organizational contact channels as well as through snowball sampling. The interviews focused on how the promotion of gender equality was organized in the refugee camps, the relationships between various actors engaging in gender equality work, and on the meanings interviewees ascribed to gender equality as a policy goal in the context of humanitarian aid in refugee camps. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. In this article, this set of interviews is used to analyze refugee women’s activism in the camps, exploring how they seek to claim rights and engage in acts of citizenship in relation to the humanitarian aid organizations that govern their everyday lives.

The second set of interviews consist of 21 interviews with activists from Burmese women’s organizations based in Northern Thailand, conducted by the author in 2016 and 2017. The offices and leaders of these women’s organizations were, at the time of the interviews, based in Thai cities and towns in proximity to the Burmese border, such as Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. Their members are found in refugee camps as well as in cities and towns in Thailand, but many of their members are also located in ethnic minority areas of Myanmar. The Thailand-based activists interviewed for this study generally held leadership positions within their organizations. Some of these women have themselves fled from Myanmar as a result of being involved in armed resistance or political oppositional activities. Many of the younger activists have either left Myanmar as young children or been born in exile, and have grown up in refugee camps or border towns. Again, snowball sampling was used to access respondents, while striving for inclusion of activists from as many organizations present in Thailand as possible. The interviews focused on the role and strategies of women’s organizations in pursuing peace and political change in Myanmar, the political goals of the organizations, their relationships to other actors, and the interviewees’ views on the current peace process and their visions for their homeland. Further, at this time an additional five interviews were also conducted with other organizations close to the women’s organizations, discussing their perspectives on the role and potential of diasporic women’s organizations as peacebuilding actors. These organizations included ethnic human rights organizations; Burmese exile media; donors; and women’s organizations based in Yangon, Myanmar. The length of interviews ranged between 20 minutes and 2 hours, with most lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. In this article, these interviews are used to explore how Burmese women’s activist engage in practices where they claim rights and political subjectivity in relation to the government in Myanmar, from which they have fled; and in relation to the alternative nation-making projects articulated and pursued by ethno-nationalist armed movements fighting the Burmese government.

Before all interviews in both sets of data, respondents were informed of the focus and aims of the research; the voluntary basis of their participation; their right to withdraw at any time; and their opportunity to access the results of the research if they would like to. Interviews were conducted in English. While the interviews on which this analysis is based were conducted for the purposes of two different research projects – the first focusing on the politics of gender equality in refugee camps and the second on women’s diasporic activism in relation to conflict and peacebuilding – both sets of interviews share a central focus on Burmese refugee and migrant women’s activism, and how it is challenged by, and challenges, dominant power relations and forms of governance. For
the purposes of this article, both sets of interview data were re-analyzed using the analytical framework outlined above, focusing on tracing insurgent citizenship practices; their impact; and the way they are shaped by being conducted in the context of the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. Together, these two sets of interviews provide insights into a broad range of strategies and practices employed by Burmese women activists in different settings in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. These are explored next.

Women’s insurgent citizenship practices in Myanmar’s borderlands

Below, the three sub-sections of the analysis in turn explore how Burmese women activists located in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands act to claim rights and practice citizenship in the context of refugee camps; in relation to the political situation in Myanmar; and in relation to ethno-nationalist nation-making projects.

Shaping governance and humanitarian aid delivery in refugee camps

One location where Burmese women’s activists in Thailand live and practice their activism is in refugee camps along Thailand’s Western border with Myanmar. In these camps, women activists struggle to shape how they are governed and claim rights, influence and space to live with dignity despite their marginalization as refugees.

The context of the refugee camp shapes women’s activism and insurgent citizenship practices in particular ways. As Hyndman and Giles observe, ‘[w]hile refugees are nominally covered by human rights covenants and refugee law, “temporary” camps have become extra-legal spaces of liminality where rights are optional’ (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 367). As implied here, in the contemporary world the refugee camp is not only a temporary arrangement for the management of emergencies. In many situations of protracted displacement, for example along the Thai-Myanmar border, refugee camps are also spaces where people’s everyday lives are lived, sometimes for decades; where people seek to make ends meet and build a life for themselves to the best of their ability. As such, refugee camps are political spaces where struggles over the right to influence life in the camps and shape how they are governed are continuously ongoing (Olivius 2017; Sigona 2015; Rygiel 2012; Agier 2011). Despite the liminality and limits of camp life, refugees exercise agency through the construction of self-governing structures, organize to improve camp life, and continue to involve themselves in the politics of their homelands (Turner 2016a; Holzer 2015; McConnachie 2013).

The first refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Myanmar border were established in 1984 when Karen refugees fled across the border following advances in the counterinsurgency campaign of the Burmese military against the Karen National Union (KNU) (Lang 2002). Currently, there are about 92,000 refugees in nine camps along the border. The majority of the refugees identify as Karen, but there are also refugees from minority groups such as Karenni and Mon, as well as some Burman refugees (The Border Consortium 2018). Humanitarian aid and services are mainly provided by a network of national and international NGOs. The Thai State holds formal jurisdiction over the camps and is present through military police, surveilling movement in and out of the camps. However, in everyday life in the camps, the Thai State is less involved and less visible in comparison to the humanitarian aid apparatus of NGOs and UN agencies.
Thus, humanitarian aid agencies are experienced as the main governing authorities shaping the lives of refugees, and are therefore the main targets of refugee resistance and claims to self-determination and rights.

While humanitarian aid agencies do control significant aspects of camp governance, aid and services in the camps are coordinated and partly implemented by the refugees themselves through a system for community-based camp management. An elected camp committee is responsible for the day to day running of each camp and coordinates services such as education, health, and justice. In addition to the refugee camp committees and its subcommittees, there are also a number of other community-based organizations (CBOs), for example women’s organizations, youth organizations, and student organizations. Many of these CBOs are included in the governance structures, but are also involved in political activism relating to the situation in the camps and in Karen State in Myanmar (Olivius 2017). The most prominent of these is the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO), an organization founded in Burma in 1949 with a membership exceeding 60,000 women in Myanmar and in the Thai border camps (Karen Women Organization 2018).

The KWO runs an extensive number of programmes in the seven Karen-dominated refugee camps, ranging from nursery school programs and social welfare interventions for elderly refugees to prevention of and response to violence against women and leadership training for young women. As such, the organization has established itself as a key actor in camp governance and provision of social services (Olivius 2011, 2014). These activities contribute to secure social rights for the camp population through the creation of refugee-led organizations and structures and, as argued by Müller (2016), constitute specific ways of performing citizenship. Through these practices, women activists lay claim to not only social and political rights, participation and belonging, but also leadership and governance in their communities. Notably however, highly gendered notions of community and responsibility shape these acts of citizenship. As explained by an activist,

We are responsible for our community, for the Karen people. If there is a problem, we have to be there. We are responsible for the social welfare of our people. Wherever there are women and children, KWO is there.4

Here, this activist represents the Karen refugee community as a people with a right to self-determination – ‘our community’. Moreover, Karen women are framed as uniquely responsible for the welfare of the Karen people. While gendered expectations positioning women as responsible for reproductive work in the family as well as the community entail significant constraints, they are also actively utilized by women activists to claim ownership and influence on matters of camp life. In particular, by embracing female responsibility for social welfare in the camps, KWO challenges the right of humanitarian organizations to define needs and decide on how the camps are to be governed. The activist cited above is deeply critical of the failure of international humanitarian organizations to collaborate with and build on the work of refugee-led organizations such as the KWO. In her view, their tendency to bypass, neglect and duplicate refugee-led structures and initiatives reflects a lack of trust in refugee organizations and an intention to exclude refugees from decision-making:
They [international humanitarian workers] are speaking like they are the highest, like they
know everything about gender equality, but by the way they speak I’m not sure they
understand at all! [...] they think they have all the ideas and principles about gender
equality but how can you disregard to learn from what is already there? [...] NGOs who
work in the camps, we don’t want them to come and duplicate or overlap our work. They
come with a bag of money and we have to work with very scarce resources. Instead of
duplicating they should support what’s already there, but it’s not like that … we want
NGOs to work on women’s issues, gender equality, GBV [gender based violence], but they
should consult with us and avoid duplication.5

However, claims to a right to govern themselves and shape the conditions of refugees’
lives in the camps have not always been welcomed by humanitarian aid organizations.
For example, one representative of an international organization defends duplication of
programs run by refugees because in his view, it is not possible to trust that these will
live up to ‘international standards’.6 This attitude is rooted in prevalent perceptions of
refugee culture as ‘traditional’ and thereby oppressive of women by default. These
perceptions have caused humanitarian workers to question the legitimacy and capacity
of refugee women’s organizations as agents of change toward gender equality. As
exemplified by the quotation below, refugee activists and organizations are seen as
part of the culture that humanitarian actors perceive as the root of the problem:

Some of the women working in these organizations have the same perceptions … so for
someone who is working to promote what we call international standards and guiding
principles, from my point of view I see that as problematic. You know, some of them are
part of this culture which is accepting of some forms of SGBV [sexual and gender based
violence] against women.7

Here, a notion of ‘international standards’, contrasted with a construction of refugee culture
as ‘traditional’, is used to de-legitimize refugee women’s claim to ownership, leadership and
decision-making in their communities. Notably, in making claims and challenging huma-
nitarian governance, international norms and policies are also appropriated by refugee
women and turned back against international humanitarian rule. For example, when
criticizing an international humanitarian organization for trying to monopolize the posi-
tion of gender equality experts, a refugee activist employed Security Council Resolution
1325 as a tool to challenge its legitimacy and competence in this role: ‘Sometimes [their]
staff does not know about international norms like SC 1325. I guess they think that refugees
know nothing!’8 These discursive practices, where refugee women actively appropriate and
use ideas about gender equality and human rights transmitted by humanitarian organiza-
tions, are examples of how governing tools can be modified and reclaimed as tools of
resistance in the hands of marginalized subjects.

Thus, women’s performance of social welfare tasks in the community is a way of
extending social rights and services to refugees. Through these practices, refugee women
claim political subjectivity and rights as members of a political community, rather than
positioning themselves as passive beneficiaries of aid. Such acts of citizenship fundamen-
tally challenge the logic of humanitarianism, which is premised on saving ‘bare lives’ rather
than providing space for political dissent (Edkins 2000; Holzer 2015). This exemplifies how
‘non-citizen migrant groups are involved in practices and ways of engaging in citizenship
even when lacking formal status’ (Nyers and Rygiel 2012, 2). In their performance of
citizenship, refugee women activists have strategically drawn on conventional notions of
gendered reproductive duties to legitimate their centrality in community welfare work in relation to humanitarian organizations, and appropriated international norms and policies to challenge the ownership and expertise of humanitarian actors on their own terms.

**Engaging with international norms, networks and arenas**

While KWO is one of the oldest organizations of Burmese women active in the Thai borderlands, it is only one member of a diverse network of women’s organizations, which emerged in exile in the 1990s. The context from which this movement emerged was a broader exile-based opposition movement composed of ethnic minority armed insurgency groups, student activists and political exiles who had been forced out of Myanmar by armed conflict and political repression, in particular in the wake of the pro-democracy uprising in 1988 (Olivius and Hedström 2019). Eventually, women started to question male dominance within the broader opposition movement in exile, where women were relegated to secondary roles focusing on support and caregiving while leadership was in the hands of men. As an increasing number of women grew impatient with this gendered division of labour, a cross-ethnic, collective identity as women could be mobilized as a new basis for political action (Hedström 2016). Consequently, several new women’s organizations were founded, and some older women’s organizations like the KWO, originally established as ‘women’s wings’ of armed movements, were reinvigorated and developed a more independent political role. The majority of these organizations’ membership were based on ethnic identification, and the organizations were closely embedded in the ethno-nationalist politics of ethnic armed insurgencies (Women’s League of Burma 2011). In 1999, twelve Burmese women’s organizations based in exile – most of them in Thailand – united to form a multi-ethnic umbrella organization, Women’s League of Burma (WLB). Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, WLB sought to constitute a stronger voice for the advancement of Burmese women and to be better able to demand influence in the exiled oppositions as well as raise international awareness of the plight of women in Myanmar’s conflict areas (Women’s League of Burma 2011, Hedström 2016).

From the outset, international advocacy and engagement with international norms and laws, as well as arenas within the UN system, has been a key aspect of the work of the WLB. Highly connected to transnational feminist movements and advocacy networks, the WLB and its member organizations are consciously using the language and tools of international policies and norms, such as Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325, to draw attention to conflict-related violence against women and exclusion of women from negotiation and decision-making forums. Thus, drawing on the authority of international norms, they construct new narratives about Myanmar that challenge the status quo, placing women’s experiences of conflict and agency for change at the center. As noted by scholars on feminist transnationalism (Zwingel 2012; Reilly 2007), women’s organizations make use of transnational spaces, relations and norms, reconstructing, negotiating and localizing transnational feminist ideas and goals to make them useful in their own struggle for change.

Moreover, developing strategies and skills to be present at UN forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Human Rights Council, and the Commission on the Elimination on all Forms of Discrimination against Women
(CEDAW) has been a key mobilizing structure and a way for the Burmese women’s movement to draw attention to the situation in Myanmar generally and the situation of Burmese women specifically. As one activist relates, an advocacy trip to the CSW as a WLB representative was a formative experience: it exposed her to new ideas and strategies, and enabled her to relate the situation of women in Myanmar to the situation in other conflict areas as well as to international law and human rights frameworks:

During that trip I learned a lot of things about advocacy and human rights, what can we do and what is the strategy and idea and everything. And then I heard about the situation in other countries, and we shared about the women’s suffering from conflict and abuse by the authorities. So it made me more and more committed to work for my people.\(^9\)

Thus, practices of training women for international advocacy and engaging with UN agencies and arenas gave women activists critical political skills that further equipped them to claim rights and take up leadership on behalf of ethnic minority women and their communities. Making use of international norms and arenas, women activists have sought to exert pressure on the Burmese military regime through the mobilization of international support for their cause. International lobbying and advocacy has helped the women’s movement in exile generate funding and establish important support networks. Importantly, as noted by Mary O’Kane (2007), being present in UN forums also enabled women activists to reconstruct themselves as legitimate political subjects in relation to their government: here, they could openly debate with and challenge the representatives of the military regime, something that was not possible in Myanmar before 2012. For example, by writing CEDAW shadow reports and presenting them to the committee, the WLB has been able to challenge the regime’s representation of the situation of Burmese women, bring the suffering of minority women to international attention, and demand that the regime fulfil their international legal commitments.\(^10\)

In particular, refugee women’s organizations have been especially successful in documenting and drawing attention to the Burmese military’s widespread sexual violence against ethnic minority women. The first report on this theme that really caught the attention of international audiences was Licence to Rape, released by WLB member Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN) in collaboration with Shan Human Rights Foundation in 2002. The report presented evidence of 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by Burmese army troops against Shan women and girls between 1996 and 2001. Further, the report contended that sexual violence was systematically used as a weapon of war and ethnic persecution (Shan Women’s Action Network 2002a, 1). Thus, the report skillfully drew on international human rights discourses to frame local abuses as instances of a wider, international phenomenon, and use international law as leverage to condemn the Burmese regime. The report generated extensive international attention from foreign governments, UN bodies and human rights groups, and eventually some academic attention (Won 2016; Ferguson 2013; Harriden 2012; Laungramsri 2006). For the first time, the military government was also forced to confront the issue of sexual violence. It vehemently denied the accusations put forward in the report, writing the evidence off as plain lies, and devoted substantial efforts to discredit its authors (Shan Women’s Action Network 2002b). Further, to strongly and publicly criticize the military as human rights abusers was a dangerous enterprise: SWAN was forced to close its office in Chiang Mai and go
underground in order to ensure the security of its staff (Won 2016). However, the impact of Licence to Rape also helped make sexual violence a pivotal issue in international campaigns related to the conflict in Myanmar, raised the international profile of the conflict, and earned women’s organizations significant recognition and respect from ethnic minority leaders. As one activist recalls, this was crucial in gaining acceptance for women’s participation and leadership in oppositional politics:

Yeah, all the leaders, we get attention from them and they say ‘oh we are fighting for over 50-60 years with our guns, but the Burma army or the government they didn’t change, but the women’s power with the pen is like, they have really got the attention from the global or the international [community]’. So, later, they came to accept women’s participation.\(^{11}\)

Contributing to establishing women’s activists as legitimate political subject in relation to ethnic minority leaders as well as the Myanmar State, the Burmese women’s movement’s international advocacy work demonstrates the potential of international norms and arenas as tools for creating ‘the insurrectionist moment that a right claim generates when articulated by marginalized subjects’ (Turner 2016b, 145). Making use of these tools, women activists have been able to reclaim a position as active citizens and political adversaries of the Burmese government, rather than silenced, excluded and unrecognized non-citizens in marginalized border peripheries.

**Negotiating ethno-nationalist armed struggles**

Successful international advocacy allowed women activists to access support networks and resources, and claim a position as political subjects and citizens of Myanmar. Moreover, as noted above, these practices has also gained women respect within ethno-nationalist armed struggles, and increased the salience and visibility of women’s experiences. In relation to ethnic minority armed groups fighting the Burmese government, women have not only been loyal allies, but they have also been able to leverage their position as ‘critical insiders’ of militarized nationalist projects to change them from within, gradually reshaping dominant notions of gender, national belonging and nation-making (Olivius and Hedström 2019). These acts of citizenship directed towards alternative nation-making projects of ethnic minority armed groups and elites are crucial, as ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have acted as de facto states in many conflict-affected areas of Myanmar for decades, and enjoy far more legitimacy among minority populations than the central State. For many refugees and migrants in Thailand, these alternative nations are therefore the most relevant referents in terms of political order, community and belonging. Therefore, they have constituted key targets of women’s claims to more inclusive and gender equal citizenship and leadership. In their specific practices of challenging male dominance in ethno-nationalist movements, women activist have often utilized different forms of a strategic essentialism (Spivak 1996 [1985]) to facilitate women’s inclusion. This suggests that traditional gender roles have provided arenas for leadership in ways that are potentially transformative, even as they reinforce dichotomous gendered roles (see also Olivius and Hedström forthcoming). For example, this quote illustrates how women active in an ethnic minority women’s group have utilized gendered expectations in order to carve out a space for participation in peace negotiations and political dialogue:
[The ethnic armed groups] cannot do their work without the support [from us] so they cannot go at it alone. Like, if they are going to organise anything or they are going to do anything, you know, they need the support, for example with cooking, or logistics or decorations. Without the support from [us] they can’t do that. In the end, they can’t do anything, they have to listen to us, because we have a policy like, if we have to be part of the logistics and cooking, then they have to include at least two [women] at the table. No pain no gain, naw (laughter).  

Through this strategy, this women’s organization manages to use their adherence to traditional gendered norms to open up space where the constraints of gendered expectations and power relations can also be challenged and modified (Olivius and Hedström forthcoming). This is how women activists tread the fine line between adherence to cultural practices and traditions of minority communities that are central to their ethnno-nationalist identity, and their aspirations to increased equality and empowerment for women (Harriden 2012, 287).

Another example of how women’s activism has been able to change ethnno-nationalist nation-making struggles from within are their success in gaining mainstream acceptance for a quota stipulating that women should make up at least 30 per cent of representatives in decision-making fora. Thus, besides strategic deployment of traditional femininity, this constitutes another example where international norms and institutions are made useful for women’s insurgent citizenship practices. The idea of a quota was first used in the negotiations around an alternative constitution for a federal Myanmar that was adopted by exile-based opposition and armed groups in 2008 (Olivius and Hedström 2019). The quota proposal was only partially integrated in the text of the exile constitution, but this nevertheless eventually led the political dialogue framework informing the current peace process to adopt the language of gender quotas. Importantly, even though the quota has not yet been realized in practice, women leaders are drawing on the adoption of quotas to legitimize and demand their participation in decision-making:

The EAOs, [ethnic] armed organizations, they have a policy, they accept at least 30 percent women participation in peace process, they agree on that. This, we have been pushing a lot. We can say this is one of our achievements because we can organize and we can advocate and lobby to ethnic leaders rather than the government.  

Thus, the idea of a quota for women’s participation has come to inform EAO strategies in relation to peace negotiations with the government, and provide women activists with strategic leverage in lobbying for women’s inclusion in decision-making and leadership within ethnno-nationalist struggles. Notably, the notion of a 30 per cent quota has made its way into the ongoing national peace process in Myanmar, and is now promoted by a wide range of actors such as donors, NGOs and women’s networks. This became clear to an exile-based activist after travelling to a meeting in Yangon in 2016. At the meeting, she was surprised to hear ‘everyone’ talk about women’s participation in the peace process and argue for the quota:

We can say that at the meeting people were aware. A lot of people were aware of women’s participation, women’s rights and especially women peace and security issues, that WLB has been pushing for a long time. Now it is not only the WLB […] everyone is talking about women, peace and security, 30%.
Thus, while the outcome of the ongoing peace process and political transition is still uncertain, it is clear that women’s persistent efforts to gradually challenge alternative nationalist projects from within and claim space for women as citizens, decision-makers and leaders has generated ripple effects across time and space. Women’s acts of citizenship has, with time, changed the terms of the conversation within ethnic armed groups, as well as oppositional politics more broadly. Women activists have thereby enacted new forms of citizenship within these alternative imaginaries of nation and belonging, where women’s experiences of conflict cannot be ignored, and women’s political agency and leadership is recognized.

Conclusions

The analysis in this paper aimed to analyse Burmese women’s activism through the lens of insurgent citizenship practices, exploring how Burmese women activists in Thailand perform acts of citizenship; if and how these acts generate transformative change; and how they are constrained, enabled and shaped by activists’ location in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands.

Firstly, the analysis has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of how acts of citizenship are performed. Women activists are embodying and navigating between several marginalized subject positions, claiming rights as refugees, ethnic minorities, and women. Rights claims are also directed towards multiple governing authorities, including humanitarian aid organizations working in camps to the Myanmar government and ethno-nationalist alternative nation-making projects. Further, articulating their claims to rights, participation, and leadership, women draw on several types of discursive resources. A leading role in service provision in refugee camps is often legitimated through notions of traditional femininity and caring responsibilities, while international norms and laws on women’s rights are used as tools for women from persecuted ethnic minorities to constitute themselves as legitimate political subjects and make claims to belonging in relation to the Myanmar state. In relation to ethno-nationalist nation-making projects, arguments based on women’s specificity and usefulness and on women’s rights to equal participation are combined. Exploring these themes further could advance the analysis of the complex process of subject formation involved in acts of citizenship, and of the political and discursive strategies employed in claiming rights.

Secondly, Burmese women’s acts of citizenship have arguably had a transformative impact reaching beyond individual political empowerment. To be sure, mobilizing and empowering individual women to conceive of themselves as bearers of rights and act to claim those rights is a key effect, and this is important in itself. But this has in turn contributed to change the lives of Burmese women refugees and exiles for the better. For example, McConnachie (2012) has argued that refugees in the Thai border camps have had access to better services because of strong refugee involvement in camp governance. Moreover, women’s international advocacy work generated financial and moral support that has been key to implementing women’s leadership programmes as well as providing education and other basic services in the border areas. It also raised the international profile of the conflict in Myanmar, and contributed to sanctions against the regime. Further, skilful use of international norms and arenas by women in exile set an example that is now being followed by the emerging women’s movement
inside Myanmar. Moreover, ethno-nationalist, militarized nation-making projects has been reshaped to include women’s rights and women’s participation as integral to the struggle for federal democracy and ethnic self-determination. This has opened up for women’s participation and leadership in ethnic armed organizations and peace negotiations. In the event that a degree of ethnic autonomy is realized in a future, peaceful Myanmar, women in exile have ensured that the vision for these political orders is more inclusive of women’s experiences and agency.

Thirdly, the findings of this analysis affirm Holston’s assertion that marginalized spaces can provide a degree of freedom to invent new political practices. The Thai-Myanmar borderlands are at the same time geographically and politically peripheral, and highly cosmopolitan and transnational. The relative freedom of the border areas has enabled international communication and networking, and the presence of international aid organizations brings exposure to international norms and policies, and offers opportunities for new links and partnerships. As noted elsewhere, even refugee camps do, despite their repressive features, offer specific opportunities for mobilization and resistance (Olivius 2017). These opportunities has been effectively exploited by the Burmese women’s movement in exile. However, this assertion should in no way be used to gloss over the injustices and the suffering associated with confinement in camps, or poverty and lack of legal status in border cities and towns. In future research, keen attention to the nuances and contradictions of how various marginalized spaces and locations shape opportunities to engage in insurgent citizenship practices is essential, not least in analyses of refugee and migrant activism.

Notes

1. In this article, Myanmar rather than Burma is used to refer to the country. Since 1989, Myanmar is the official name of the State, but Burma is preferred by many of the women activists and other interviewees included in this study. Therefore, Burma is used when quoting interviews where this name is used. Further, ‘Burman’ is used to refer to the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, while ‘Burmese’ refers to all men and women from Myanmar, regardless of ethnic identification.
2. There are also Burmese labour migrants in Thailand who hold temporary work permits, providing a degree of protection.
3. Organizations of Burmese women exiles have also been active along the borders with India, Bangladesh, and China, but Thailand has been the main site of activism.
4. Interview with women’s activists Thailand, Mae Sot 1 November 2010.
5. Interview with women’s activists Thailand, Mae Sot 1 November 2010.
6. Interview with UN worker, Bangkok, 26 April 2010.
7. Interview with UN worker, Mae Sot, 11 November 2011.
8. Interview with women’s activists Thailand, Mae Sot 1 November 2010.
9. Interview with women activist, Chiang Mai, 1 December 2016.
10. Myanmar signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1997.
11. Interview with women’s rights activist, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.
12. Representative from women’s organization, cited in Olivius and Hedström (forthcoming).
13. Representative from women’s organization, cited in Olivius and Hedström (2019).
14. Representative from women’s organization, cited in Olivius and Hedström (2019).
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