Time to go home? The conflictual politics of diaspora return in the Burmese women’s movement

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ABSTRACT

The initiation of political reforms and a peace process in Myanmar has fundamentally altered the conditions for Burmese diasporic politics, and diaspora groups that have mobilized in Myanmar’s neighbouring countries are beginning to return. This article explores how return to Myanmar is debated within the Burmese women’s movement, a significant and internationally renowned segment of the Burmese diaspora. Does return represent the fulfilment of diasporic dreams; a pragmatic choice in response to less than ideal circumstances; or a threat to the very identity and the feminist politics of the women’s movement? Contrasting these competing perspectives, the analysis offers insights into the ongoing negotiations and difficult choices involved in return, and reveals the process of return as highly conflictual and contentious. In particular, the analysis sheds light on the gendered dimensions of diaspora activism and return, demonstrating how opportunities for women’s activism are challenged, debated and reshaped in relation to return.

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Introduction

Myanmar is in the midst of an unfinished democratic transition and a peace process that is facing severe challenges. After more than 60 years of armed conflict, some areas of the country are now in a post-conflict phase where issues of reconstruction and development as well as return and reintegration are on the table. Since the onset of political reforms and the initiation of a peace process in 2011, a range of diaspora groups such as human rights organizations, exile media groups and political parties have started to return to Myanmar. Many of these groups have been part of a broader opposition in exile formed during the long period of military rule and civil war in Myanmar. Having fled political repression, ethnic persecution and armed violence, they have reported about the conflict, documented human rights abuses, and lobbied foreign governments and international agencies to push for change in Myanmar. Now, despite ongoing conflict in Northern Myanmar and recent large-scale violence against ethnic Rohingya in Western Myanmar, many of these diverse diaspora groups nevertheless appear to
find that the situation in their homeland has changed sufficiently to make return feasible. This indicates that many former exiles are reasonably confident that transitions towards peace and democratic governance will continue. At the same time, external factors, such as dwindling donor support to diaspora groups, also create pressures to return in order to sustain funding and relevance.

Taken together, it might be argued that recent political changes in Myanmar constitute a critical juncture that has shifted ‘the strategic centre for pursuit of a homeland-oriented goal from “outside” to “inside” a homeland territory’, thereby reshaping the conditions for diaspora politics. However, among the Burmese diaspora, there is no agreement on whether the ‘strategic centre’ has shifted: not all groups based in exile agree that the time is right to return. The process of adjusting strategies, identities and political goals to new realities is contentious and conflictual. Indeed, diverging perspectives and decisions in relation to return have had a highly disruptive effect on Burmese diaspora politics, dividing previous alliances and fracturing relationships.

The disruptive effects of return and the need to reinvent itself in the face of new realities has been deeply felt by the Burmese women’s movement, a significant and internationally renowned segment of the Burmese diaspora. This movement is composed primarily of organizations that have emerged in exile in the border areas surrounding Myanmar, representing women from ethnic minorities that have been heavily affected by armed conflict. Now, in response to changing political circumstances, most of these organizations are in the process of relocating their work and establishing themselves as political actors inside Myanmar.

For the women’s movement, return is especially contentious and risky. The transnational diasporic space 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 unimaginable. With such changes yet to be achieved in Myanmar, and violence against ethnic minority communities still ongoing, debates about the stakes of return are contentious and divisive. Will return offer an opportunity to advance feminist goals and expand the movement inside Myanmar? Alternatively, will return to Myanmar put the movement’s hard-won gains in jeopardy, forcing activists to modify their behaviour and their politics in relation to conservative social norms, the still limited space for political dissent, and a fragile security situation?

This article explores how return to Myanmar is debated, contested and negotiated by Burmese women’s activists in exile. Based on interviews conducted in 2016 and 2017, the analysis outlines three competing perspectives on return articulated by women’s activists: return is represented as the fulfilment of diasporic dreams; a pragmatic choice in response to less than ideal circumstances; and as a threat to the very identity and the feminist politics of the women’s movement. Examining and contrasting these competing perspectives, the analysis offers insights into the ongoing negotiations and difficult choices involved in return, and reveals the process of return as highly conflictual and contentious.
The article makes two distinct contributions to literatures on diasporas, peace and conflict. Firstly, this growing literature has not substantially explored the question of why, when and how diasporas return – or choose not to – when armed conflict ends or the political conditions that forced them into exile change. This research gap is especially surprising given the emphasis on a longing for the homeland and a desire to return in canonical definitions of diaspora. However, numerous studies have documented the fact that diasporas do return to post-conflict and transitional contexts: for example, research has noted the significant role of returnees in post-conflict reconstruction and governance in cases such as Rwanda, Somaliland, Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, these studies do not explore the political dynamics of the process of return itself. Thus, this study contributes to a better understanding of the process through which diasporas become returnees: when and why do diaspora individuals and groups opt for return to post-conflict and transitional contexts, and what are the choices, dilemmas, contestations and negotiations involved in this process?

Secondly, the growing body of research examining the different ways in which diasporas engage in conflicts and peacebuilding has remained overwhelmingly gender blind. Despite the existence of a wealth of feminist research that has thoroughly explored the gender dimensions of armed conflicts and their resolution, these insights have not significantly informed the literature on diasporas, peace and conflict. Feminist scholars have demonstrated how men and women are differently positioned and affected in all phases of conflict and peacebuilding, and how gender relations and ideologies shape, and are reshaped by, conflicts and peace processes in fundamental ways. Yet, very little is known about women’s political activism in diaspora or about the gendered impacts of diaspora engagements in homeland conflicts and peace processes. Addressing this research gap, this article explores the gender politics of diaspora engagements in homeland conflicts through a focus on the political activism of Burmese diasporic women’s organizations, and the way their feminist agendas are challenged, negotiated and reinvented in relation to return.

The article is structured as follows. Next, the case of the Burmese women’s movement is introduced, with a brief overview of its emergence and evolution in exile since the 1990s. The analytical points of departure as well as the materials and methods that underpin the analysis are then presented. This is followed by the analysis, outlining three competing and contrasting perspectives on return articulated within the diasporic Burmese women’s movement. The concluding section discusses the implications of the findings for understanding diaspora return as well as the gender politics of diaspora engagements in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

The Burmese women’s movement in exile

For the first time in modern Burmese history, an organized women’s movement started to emerge in the borderlands of Thailand, Bangladesh and India in the 1990s. The context from which this movement emerged, and a crucial aspect of the political opportunity structures that enabled it, was a broader exile-based opposition movement composed of ethnic 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. 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. Consequently, several new women’s organizations were founded, and some older women’s organizations, originally established as ‘women’s wings’ of armed movements, were reinvigorated. The majority of these organizations’ membership were based on ethnic identification, and the organizations were closely embedded in the ethno-nationalist politics of armed insurgencies struggling against persecution of minorities and for ethnic self-determination.

In 1999, 12 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). By doing so, they hoped 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. Since then, WLB has established itself as a prominent actor in terms of leadership in the exiled opposition as well as skilful international advocacy.

In the 1990s, the emergence of a Burmese women’s movement was only possible in exile. In Myanmar, governed by a military regime, oppositional political activity was a life-threatening endeavour, and space for civil society organizations was close to nonexistent. In contrast, the borderlands, especially along the Thai-Burmese border, provided a more fruitful space for political organization and mobilization, as well as communication with the international community. Operating out of exile, Burmese women’s organizations have had access to a transnational political space that has enabled them to articulate new identities and narratives, speaking out about the situation in their homeland in ways that would have been impossible or placed them at great risk if they had been based inside Myanmar.

Holding elections in 2010, the Myanmar Army initiated an unprecedented transition to semi-civilian government in Myanmar. The elections were not considered free and fair. Nevertheless, shortly after taking office in early 2011, the new semi-civilian government led by General Thein Sein embarked on an ambitious reform programme and initiated ceasefire negotiations with a number of key ethnic armed groups (EAOs). The onset of Thein Sein’s reform agenda and renewed peace efforts came to mark a critical juncture, reshaping the relationship between Burmese diaspora groups and their homeland. For diasporic women’s organizations, opportunities to work openly inside the country, implementing programmes and building networks, improved significantly as the likelihood of violent repression decreased. Further, the 2015 signing of a national ceasefire agreement (NCA) and the subsequent democratic election of a civilian government, headed by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, reinforced the momentum for return and made state institutions, like the Department for Social Welfare, more accessible to women’s organizations. Moreover, a shift of donor attention and funding towards the state was accelerated.

The transition to semi-civilian government and the ongoing processes of democratization and peace negotiations has fundamentally altered the political opportunity structures for diaspora politics, instigating debates about as well as actual processes of
diaspora return. Women’s organizations are increasingly moving their operational work from the border areas into Myanmar. Notably, in March 2017, the WLB decided to relocate its main office from Chiang Mai, Thailand, to Yangon. Moreover, while the border areas in Thailand still constitute an important node for the Burmese women’s movement, the number of women’s organizations and networks based inside the country, particularly in Yangon, is rapidly expanding as a response to the changing political situation.\(^\text{20}\) In contrast to women’s organizations founded in exile, which are strongly linked to broader ethnic minority struggles and has focused primarily on issues related to the armed conflict and the situation of ethnic minority women, emerging Yangon-based networks are dominated by ethnic Burman women. Their activism is targeting the state rather than the international community, and does not generally frame women’s rights issues as related to armed conflict or ethnic relations. This shift is fundamentally redrawing the political landscape of the Burmese women’s movement. This article explores the politics of diaspora return precisely at this moment of transition, reappraisal of strategy and reconstruction of diasporic political identities.

Exploring the politics of diaspora return

Conventionally, diasporas are understood as groups that have been territorially dispersed from an original ‘homeland’, sometimes by events such as war or ethnic persecution, but who retain a sense of collective identity and are united by a strong attachment to and longing for the homeland, often expressed through a desire to return.\(^\text{21}\) As noted in the introduction, the salience of the homeland and the dream of return to or restoration of the homeland is thus a key defining feature in common understandings of diaspora. This study departs from a constructivist approach to diasporas, conceptualizing them as ‘transnationally-organized “imagined communities’’.\(^\text{22}\) Thus, migration or transnational dispersal in itself does not necessarily constitute a diaspora: in addition, imaginations of community or shared identity that unite people across territorially separate locations, as well as images of and political visions for the homeland, must be constructed and mobilized.\(^\text{23}\) In the case of Burmese exiles, it can be discussed whether they make up one Burmese diaspora or rather several ethnic minority diasporas, mobilized around struggles for autonomous ethnic homelands. While the latter interpretation is certainly valid, the struggles of different ethnic minorities are unified and interlinked through their common experience of ethnic persecution and their common vision for ethnic self-determination within a future, federal Myanmar and through various alliances and cross-ethnic organizations. Thereby there is arguably enough of a common identity and vision for Myanmar as homeland to speak of a broader, albeit diverse, Burmese diaspora.\(^\text{24}\) The Burmese women’s movement, specifically the Women’s League of Burma, is a case in point. For Burmese women exiles, experiences of violence and abuse of ethnic minority women at the hands of the Burmese military was essential in mobilizing a cross-ethnic gendered political consciousness, making the emergence of a diasporic women’s movement possible.

This article focuses on processes of mobilization, negotiation, contestation and conflict related to ongoing or prospective return of diaspora groups to their homeland. Taking inspiration from social movement theory, the contentious process of diaspora
return, triggered by a critical juncture such as the end of conflict or a repressive regime, is here understood as involving diverse diaspora groups responding to changing political opportunity structures, as political conditions in the homeland, including the conditions that induced their migration, are in transition. The concept of political opportunity structures refers to the structural and institutional conditions that enable the rise of social movements, like the formation of diaspora groups. For example, conditions in the countries of residence such as legal status, political freedom and means of communication shape the opportunities for diaspora groups to form and articulate claims to community and common identity.

For the women’s movement, the diasporic political space provided more favourable political opportunities to organize as women and draw attention to Burmese women’s rights and experiences in comparison to the political situation in Myanmar. For example, diasporic women activists gained access to the language and tools of international policies and norms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and to international arenas for lobbying and raising awareness about women’s situation in Myanmar. In line with theories of feminist transnationalism, the political opportunity structures in diaspora has enabled Burmese minority women’s organizations to mobilize transnational spaces, relations and norms and make them useful in their struggle for change in Myanmar.

Here, the concept of political opportunity structures is used as an analytical entry point to capture the political dynamics of diaspora return in the context of Myanmar’s ongoing peace process and political transition. Thus, based on their considerations of the existing political opportunities, diaspora groups choose their strategies – for example whether they will opt for return or stay in exile at a given point in time. However, the nature and implications of existing political opportunities is not self-evident or objectively observable. Indeed, as the analysis of the Burmese women’s movement demonstrates, multiple, contradictory and conflictual interpretations of political opportunities are at the centre of disagreements and contestations around return. The choice of strategies is not merely a rational decision based on the political situation at hand, but is also shaped by concerns relating to the identities, norms and values of diaspora groups and activists. Therefore this study focuses on analysing how individuals and organizations within the Burmese women’s movement perceive and interpret changing political opportunity structures differently, and consequently argue for different responses and strategies in relation to return.

The importance of this analytical focus is underlined by Missbach’ study of the Acehnese diaspora after the signing of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005, which demonstrates how the diaspora responded to the end of conflict in diverse ways. Some returned, voluntarily or due to host state pressure, and some lost interest in political, collective diasporic activities. Both of these tendencies contribute to a process of de-diasporization, defined as the loss of diasporic coherence and decreasing mobilization. Others, however, rejected the outcome of the MoU and continued to mobilize for the independence of Aceh, sometimes using new connections and avenues made possible by the end of conflict and the return of parts of the diaspora. Thus, changes in political opportunities brought about fundamental diasporic transformations, but these were not unidirectional or uniform, and the process of de-diasporization was highly divisive and contentious.
As noted above, given that political opportunity structures in the Burmese diaspora has proven very useful for mobilizing feminist organization and promoting a feminist agenda, the stakes of return are high for the women’s movement. The question of return prompts a fundamental rethinking of movement strategies, identities and goals, as considerations about how the space for feminist politics may be affected by return must be weighed against the decreasing salience of a political platform in exile. Therefore, in order to understand the political dynamics of diaspora return, it is essential to explore diverging perspectives, negotiations and contestations around whether and why diaspora groups return – or choose not to.

**Material and methods**

The analysis presented here is primarily based on interviews with activists from Burmese women’s organizations based in Northern Thailand, but in most cases in the process of relocating their work into Myanmar. All of the organizations represented in the material are member organizations of the WLB. Most of these organizations have a membership of women from a particular ethnic minority group, but some are multi-ethnic. Their offices and leaders 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 areas of Myanmar. The Thailand-based activists interviewed for this study generally hold leadership positions within their organizations, and some of them hold, or have held, leadership positions within the WLB. 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. Further, interviews were conducted with women’s organizations based in Yangon, Myanmar and representatives of exile-based women’s organizations who had already returned to Myanmar and were based in Yangon. Interview narratives from women activists on both sides of the border – those still in exile and those based inside Myanmar – constitute a rich source of experiences and perspectives that can provide new insights into the dynamics of diaspora return, as well as timely new knowledge about the ongoing political transition in Myanmar. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with women’s activists in Thailand and in Yangon.

In order to add a wider range of perspectives on the ongoing process of return that are reshaping the Burmese women’s movement, an additional five interviews were conducted with other organizations close to the women’s organizations, such as ethnic human rights organizations; Burmese exile media; and donors. Many other organizations hitherto based in exile, for example exile media groups and human rights organizations, were also in the process of relocating, or considering to relocate, into Myanmar, and their narratives thus provide a broader context for the specific case study of the Burmese women’s movement. Interviews with donors are essential for grasping some of the changing political opportunity structures that women’s organizations are affected by and respond to.
A total of 26 interviews were conducted by the author in 2016 and 2017. Out of these 26 interviews, 23 were conducted during fieldwork in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Yangon, Myanmar. Three of the interviews were conducted by phone. Telephone interviews were used when a face to face meeting failed to be arranged during fieldwork, and in one case to follow up on events occurring after the completion of fieldwork. Respondents were identified through initial contacts with women’s organizations and other organizations, and thereafter through a snowballing sampling technique. Before the interviews, 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. The length of interviews ranged between 20 minutes and 2 hours, with most lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interviews focused on the role of diasporic women’s organizations in peace-building activities in Myanmar, the political goals of the organizations, and the interviewees’ views on the current peace process and their visions for their homeland. Discussing these themes, questions around the pros and cons of exile, and diverging perspectives on the right conditions and timing for return, emerged as central and salient issues in all of the interviews. This clearly demonstrated that the movement is at a crossroads where debates and choices related to return are at the core, and emphasized the importance of exploring the politics of diaspora return.

**Debating return: three competing perspectives**

Interviews with Burmese women’s activists reveal the contentious and divisive nature of return. While some movement activists perceive the prospect of return as long-awaited and welcome opportunity, others take a more cautious approach and feel that while return may be a pragmatic choice given changing circumstances, it is risky and perhaps premature. Yet others resist return, strongly arguing that it will jeopardize the movement’s hard-won gains and undermine its feminist politics. Below, these three competing perspectives on return are outlined and explored.

**Return as long-awaited opportunity**

A more open political climate in Myanmar has generated opportunities to contribute to change in the country in new ways. Despite the shortcomings of the peace process so far, women emphasize that it has made it possible to travel and work openly inside the country. Throughout the period of military rule, women’s organizations in exile has always stayed connected to and involved in supporting their members and ethnic communities inside Myanmar. Thus, while their offices have been in exile, women’s organizations have always been covertly present inside the country. After 2011, women’s organizations have been able to openly conduct training and deliver aid and services in many areas of the country, and local communities are no longer afraid of associating with organizations currently or previously based in exile. This has opened up opportunities for women’s organizations to make their work more effective through intensified networking at the grassroots level, mobilizing support as well as building new alliances: ‘we can be closer to our targeted women and targeted areas, our partners,
and also many alliances. We can be closer and we can be more cooperative, and that will lead to stronger and more productive work.\textsuperscript{29} For many activists who favour return, the possibility of mobilizing communities and more effectively expanding the movement at the grassroots level is a key argument.

Moreover, the rapid growth of women’s organizations and networks in Myanmar also motivates some exile activist to turn their attention towards networking in Yangon, seeing an unprecedented opportunity to build one, unified women’s movement in their homeland: ‘this is the movement that we wanted: we used to be the border based movement, now we want to build a national movement’.\textsuperscript{30} Events such as the 2013 Myanmar Women’s Forum in Yangon, jointly organized by WLB and the Yangon-based Women’s Organizations Network of Myanmar constitute important steps in this direction.\textsuperscript{31} Joining forces with women activists working within Myanmar is also invested with strong emotional and symbolic significance by some exile activists. Describing her experience of a first meeting with an activist from Myanmar, an exile activist remembers strong feelings of connection and sisterhood, as well as grief over having been separated for so long. In this context, working together and creating one movement is seen as an urgent task for the movement.

Becoming an established political actor inside Myanmar, rather than being seen as ‘outsiders’, is also seen as key to having an impact in national policy processes as well as peace negotiations. This is important not least because the political utility of international advocacy, a form of activism that has been foundational for the women’s movement, is rapidly declining. As one activist in Yangon puts it, ‘no international government is sanctioning Burma anymore, so we don’t have the same opportunity to rally international governments or other actors to put the same kind of pressure on [...] I think that ship has sailed’.\textsuperscript{32} As a result, women’s organizations have to find new ways of pushing for the political changes that they hope to see, including by establishing themselves as actors in national politics in Myanmar. Emphasizing that it is now possible for women’s organizations to work in Myanmar, a senior activist questions the reluctance of other activists within the women’s movement to return. To her, continuing their work in the territory of the homeland represents the fulfilment of what the women’s movement has been fighting for from exile: ‘when we started this border movement it was to go back home. Now, you can go home so why are you sticking here, not moving? I don’t get it’.\textsuperscript{33}

The ongoing transition and peace process has reshaped the conditions for diaspora politics by making return a viable option and created new opportunities to build networks and work for women’s rights in Myanmar. The time for diaspora politics, some exile activists argue, is past and the movement should turn its attention to these new opportunities. This perspective is supported by some women’s activists working in Yangon, who concur with the view that being present in the country is necessary to be able to shape ongoing processes of change. Commenting on the changing dynamics of the Burmese women’s movement, an international adviser to a women’s network in Yangon questions the continued utility of a position in diaspora:

I don’t know, how at this point they can make the change from the outside. I don’t know how you put pressure weekly on actors in the country when there is so much activity inside the country, so much going on at this point.\textsuperscript{34}
Comment like this echo the theoretical points made by scholars such as Shain and Koinova about the decreasing political effectiveness of a position in diaspora when political conditions in the homeland change. As expressed by Simon Turner, ‘as the gravity of the political field shifts back into the territory of the nation-state, the diaspora has to reinvent itself and redefine its raison d’être’. Within the Burmese women’s movement formed in exile, this moment of transformation is embraced by some, who are willing to abandon old ways of working, adapt to the political context in transitioning Myanmar, and reinvent the movement and its role. For example, activists in favour of return acknowledge that return requires the movement to replace its outspoken, critical style of advocacy with a more diplomatic approach:

The position does not change, only the way we work. The way we talk, used to be very vocal, condemning and condemning all the time, now we have to change a bit [...] Working along the border I learned how to advocate, how to be vocal. Now, I am working inside Burma, and I know how to be a bit diplomatic [...] you cannot act like in Chiang Mai or in the US. If you cannot change your language or your body language, you will not get anywhere.

For this activist, changing the style of communication and becoming more diplomatic does not imply giving up political positions but rather makes it possible to pursue the same goals in new political circumstances. Those who oppose return, she argues, do so because of nostalgia and an unwillingness to change their ways: ‘they don’t want to change the way the think, the way they talk’. However, as we will see below, this issue remains a key point of disagreement and contention.

The perspective on return outlined in this section aligns with theoretical expectations in the diaspora literature, where a dream of return is represented as a central aspect of the homeland orientation of diaspora groups. For Robin Cohen, one of the defining features of diasporas is their commitment to the idea that ‘when conditions are favourable, either they or their descendants should return’. The women who articulate a perspective in favour of return see it as the fulfilment of both personal and political aspirations, and clearly represent being in exile as a condition compelled by war and repression, which is now no longer needed. However, as the following sections will show, whether and when conditions are favourable for return is not self-evident. These questions lie at the heart of the contentious and divisive politics of return.

**Return as pragmatic but premature choice**

A second perspective on return, prominent among those activists who still remain in diaspora, is more cautiously weighting the potential benefits of return against the limitations and risks it entails. In the years following 2011, most diasporic women’s organizations initially opted for a strategy of partial return where operational activities and staff were gradually relocated into Myanmar, but a main office was kept in exile. While many have chosen to give up their space in exile by now, some still seek to take advantage of new opportunities inside Myanmar while keeping a presence in exile as a safeguard in the context of still ongoing conflict and an unfinished and insecure democratic transition:
Most of the organizations along the borders are moving back to Burma, but some of the women’s organization still have a small office in the border because we don’t trust the situation one hundred percent. And most of the women organizations are working on quite risky issues. For example, some of the women’s organizations are working on sexual violence committed by the army. And we have quite a strong political position and criticism of the government so I think that we still need some space in exile.

Using this ‘one leg in Thailand strategy’, many diasporic women’s activists travel frequently across the border, engaging in programme development and community mobilization in Myanmar but keeping an organizational hub, as well as a home, in Thailand. These ‘semi-returnees’ emphasize the risks associated with openly criticizing the military, in particular its use of sexual violence against ethnic minority women, and argue that the continuation of these aspects of their work requires a location outside Myanmar. Moreover, practical issues such as ease of financial transactions, reliable internet connection and the lower cost for office space in Thailand also play into organizations’ decisions to opt for partial return.

In addition, expanding the work of women’s organizations at the grassroots level in Myanmar also comes with challenges and limitations. The assertive, young activists who have grown up within the exiled opposition are well versed in the language of international women’s rights norms and well connected to transnational feminist networks, and the encounter with the conservative social norms in rural Myanmar is not always easy:

Because the exile movement is quite open, you can even criticize your own leaders […] Working inside Burma after 2010 it has become a challenge for us because we have to, if we want to mobilize the community, first we have to gain the trust from them so then we have to be like them. They need to see us as one of them, so that is why we cannot practice what we have been practicing in the exile movement. So sometimes, someone has an idea that is different from ours and she is a lot older than us. So if we are complaining back then the community will see that these young people are telling back to the older generation, it is not very polite, something like that, then they might not trust us. It is really limiting our ability to implement our activities.

Thus, for activists accustomed to the political freedom of the diasporic, transnational space, negotiating these hierarchies and norms upon return has not been easy. In this context, a strategy of partial return is seen as key to retaining a critical, feminist position in relation to the armed conflict and the ongoing political reforms in Myanmar, even though compromise and acquiescence may sometimes be necessary in interactions and alliance building at the grassroots level.

An event that sharply divided those within the movement who welcome return and the more cautious pragmatists discussed here was the 2017 decision to relocate the entire WLB office to Yangon. Prior to this, WLB had established a presence in Yangon, but kept the main office in Chiang Mai, in line with the ‘one leg in Thailand strategy’. However, at the congress in March 2017, a majority vote among the 13 member organizations changed this. Clearly, the majority did favour return, but several member organizations voted against it. Discussing the congress decision, one activist who voted against the majority argued that return is not ideal and the time is not right – nonetheless, it is a pragmatic and perhaps necessary response to changing political opportunities in diaspora. The peace process, in particular the 2015 signing of the NCA,
has created new divisions within the exile opposition movement. Some armed groups have decided to join the official peace process; others have been excluded from it; and yet others have opted out citing the lack of inclusiveness and other limitations of the process. These developments have broken up previous alliances and undermined the political platform for the women’s movement in exile:

When I look at the current political situation, then it is not a right time [to return]. But, still, the current political reforms and the peace process has made many messes I can say, that has actually destroyed the platform that WLB can work with to continue with their own position. Because there is not a platform anymore for WLB to continue outside. The ethnic armed groups are really divided [...] So this is one of the very sad and disappointing circumstances that actually pressure us to go inside, even though we know that it is not the right time. 

Here, return is not represented as an opportunity to be welcomed, but as a pragmatic response to a less than ideal situation. Return is prompted by weakened diasporic cohesion, which makes a political platform in exile less effective. Further, the activist cited above explain, in the face of widespread divisions in the broader exile movement it was necessary to accept the WLB majority decision to return in order to avoid breaking up the coalition. Thus, while she did not consider the time right for return, she argues that premature return was the necessary price for preserving the unity of the women’s movement.

Another factor pressuring women’s organizations to return, despite doubts about whether the time is right, is declining donor interest in supporting Burmese diaspora groups. Shifting donor priorities, where channelling aid through the government is increasingly prioritized, have made it challenging for diaspora organizations to attract and retain funding. From the perspective of many donors, ‘if you work with the government you cannot really defend also supporting exile organizations. That would be a contradiction’. Thus, determining that it is now politically defendable to cooperate with and channel aid through the Burmese government, donors seem to conclude that diaspora groups are superfluous: ‘there are opportunities to work in the country now’, a representative of a European donor agency in Yangon argues. However, many women activists make a radically different assessment of the situation:

Most of the big donors, international donors, are just seeing like ‘oh Burma is totally changing to democracy’. Actually, it is not. And they think we all can move into the country and then work freely, actually we...for example for social work it is okay, but political activities we cannot do freely in the country. Most of the people do not understand that.

As exemplified here, women’s organizations and activists still based in exile feel that donors underestimate the risks and limitations of working within the country, particularly when being openly critical of the military and government. While many women’s organizations are willingly returning to Myanmar, others find the political costs of return to be too high and prefer a strategy of keeping one leg in exile. These organizations find themselves struggling with dwindling support, and an international environment where few actors want to hear their reports from the conflict zones: ‘there is less and less interest in the lives of the people who are in the conflict areas’. Thus, changing donor priorities and policies towards the Myanmar government is a key
aspect of the changing political opportunity structures that push the Burmese women’s movement towards return, despite the fact that a significant segment of the movement consider abandonment of the diasporic space premature and risky.

**Return as the co-optation and de-politicization of the movement**

The third perspective on return, articulated by a minority of exile-based and often rather experienced and influential activists, agrees with the pragmatists that the main problem of return is that working within the country risks silencing open criticism of the government and military. Rather than concluding that return may nonetheless be a pragmatic choice, these activists strongly argue against return, representing it as a fundamental threat to the identity and the feminist politics of the movement. The identity of the movement has, since its emergence in the 1990s, been closely linked to a commitment to ethnic minority women and ethnic rights; a critical position in relation to the government and military; a strategy emphasizing international advocacy; and a confrontational, outspoken style of advocacy. At the heart of controversies and conflicts around return are questions about if and how the movement’s political positions and strategies must be revised to work from inside Myanmar, and if so what the consequences of such revisions will be. While those in favour of return claim that an outspoken style of advocacy can be replaced with a more diplomatic approach without giving up on key political goals, those who argue against return disagree. Notably, they argue that it is still not possible to criticize the military without jeopardizing the personal security of activists:

> I am quite concerned about whether WLB will be able to voice their concern over the issue of the sexual violence against ethnic women because this is a very sensitive issue. If WLB is already inside Burma and if they continue to be so strong on this issue, then there will be a lot of risk.\(^{52}\)

Speaking in the months after the WLB decision to relocate to Yangon, an activist remaining in Thailand expresses her concern over this issue. Indeed, several women’s activists relate examples where military intelligence have intervened with their activities after return, indicating that this concern is not unfounded. A few months after the move of the WLB secretariat to Yangon, another activist in Thailand felt that her fears that WLB would no longer be able to continue to give voice to ethnic minority women in conflict areas were becoming reality:

> WLB used to be the strongest women organization, when it comes to the human rights violations and the offensives in ethnic areas. And when it comes to sexual violence committed by the military. But now it has become very quiet, apart from focusing on project activities. It is not like before because once you are inside the country the situation is not like when you were here.\(^{53}\)

Thus, activists arguing against return feel that the WLB move is proving them right; return is forcing the women’s movement to quiet down and thereby prevents them from effectively promoting ethnic minority women’s rights and speaking out against military abuses. Commenting on the internal policy work of the WLB in the first months after moving to Yangon, a leading activist is strongly critical of proposals to ‘soften the tone’ in order to adapt to the national political landscape in Myanmar:
After we moved inside Burma, some people started talking: shall we soften our tone, should we change the words, should we not use ‘military offensive’. But I clearly said stand with the people, don’t change the position. If you change, that means that you are already within the given platform, the given structure. That means your original movement and commitment is not there anymore […] So, there are only two options, I told them. If you want to say something, say it based on what is happening. If you want to soften the tone in the statement or whatever, then my suggestion is do not write any statement, because it is useless.54

Thus, while some argues that a changed style of communication is necessary in order to get the message across in the national political landscape of Myanmar, others reject this and contend that being less outspoken and less critical constitutes an abandonment of the movement’s political positions and goals. As indicated above, this is seen as silently legitimizing the current political order. In particular, activists critical of return argue, such changes of strategy leaves ethnic minority women and their communities still suffering at the hands of the Burma Army without anyone to speak out for them:

I am afraid that they are abandoning their roots and their original communities. Because the communities are still at war. And by going into Yangon and pretending, you know playing that game, it is not[…] certain people they would justify themselves as well, you know, we can talk to this government, we can go slowly, we can talk to the donors. That is what they would say, but in reality, I think they have just opportunistically gone in and joined a growing NGO elite.55

As exemplified by this senior, Thailand-based activist, critics of return strongly argue that the political goals of the women’s movement cannot yet be pursued from a position in Myanmar, due to ongoing conflict and military dominance. They claim that return is a result of organizations’ and their leaders being seduced by promises of influence if they ‘play the game’ and go along with the government agenda for reforms and peace. Further, from this perspective cooperation with women’s organizations inside Myanmar, which have adopted a more diplomatic approach, is seen as leading to a ‘watering down’ of key messages regarding armed conflict, political visions and the situation of ethnic minority women. Whereas activists in favour of return feel that joining forces with their ‘sisters’ in is in itself an important goal, other activists see such cooperation as creating pressure towards taming the critical political stance of the diasporic women’s movement. Illustrating this ambivalence towards close collaboration with Yangon-based organizations, WLB was a founding member of a network focusing on women’s participation in the peace process, Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, in 2014. However, in 2016 WLB decided to leave the alliance. As explained by an activist at a leading position in WLB, this was because AGIPP wanted to go ahead with promoting women’s participation regardless of how the peace process evolved. WLB, on the other hand, condemned the peace process as being too exclusionary when only eight EAOs ended up signing the NCA in 2015.56 Thus, at this time WLB was not willing to separate the goal of women’s participation from its broader visions for ethnic self-determination within a federal, democratic state, and took a step back from collaboration with other women’s organizations in Yangon.

In essence, activists critical of return argue that being in exile, and retaining a degree of independence from women’s organizations inside Myanmar, is necessary to continue to criticize the military and promote agendas for peace and political change that are not
confined by the institutional structures and terms of debate drawn up by the government. As such, return is seen as bringing about the co-optation and de-politicization of the movement as it adapts to the dominant political order and structures of power, and thereby legitimizes them. As an activist still in Thailand asks, ‘if this [peace] process is going on without including or mentioning the human rights violations, what kind of peace are we expecting in the future?’

The resistance to return, and the argument that return legitimizes an unjust political order, must further be seen in light of the shift of donor funding towards the Burmese government mentioned above. The establishment of an international peace and development industry in Myanmar is strengthening the position of the government and military at the cost of EAOs and other actors representing ethnic minority communities. As argued by Ashley South, this is an effect of the application of standardized aid and peacebuilding approaches geared towards strengthening the state. These technocratic discourses and practices of international aid tends to privilege the government and discredit EAOs and their allies, who propose more comprehensive forms of political change that are not easily accommodated in standard liberal peacebuilding packages. This has severe consequences for diasporic women’s organizations, who are often closely linked to ethno-nationalist armed resistance movements. Besides feeling the pressure to move inside Myanmar to retain donor support, the de-politicizing logics of international aid are also pushing them to downplay radical agendas for political change. International peacebuilding actors, one activist scornfully remarks, expect women to act as ‘neutral women in the middle’ – but when women take a strong political position in relation to the conflict issues, they are seen as threatening. In this context, some activists conclude that staying in exile is the only option that enables them to criticize the ongoing peace process, speak out about women’s suffering, and articulate alternative political visions.

Concluding discussion

The three competing perspectives on return outlined here clearly testifies to the disruptive and contentious nature of the return process, and the difficulties of reinventing diasporic identities and constructing a new political platform after return. Thus, while the diasporic Burmese women’s movement has sustained a strong commitment to change in their homeland and nurtured a collective dream of return for decades, this does not mean that all diasporic activists actually do return as soon as return becomes possible. In a context like Myanmar, where the armed conflict is not over, despite an ongoing peace process, and where the democratic transition is flawed and partial, weighting the potential benefits and risks of return is difficult. Striking a balance between staying true to the ideals of the movement while retaining political relevance in a rapidly changing political landscape is precarious. Thus, analysing the conflictual politics of return within diasporic movements is crucial to a more nuanced understanding of its dynamics.

While the case of the diasporic Burmese women’s movement vividly illustrates the contentious and conflictual nature of return, it is notable that the movement, with the WLB as a key organizational node, has managed to stay united through the transition from the diasporic political space to the national political scene. Out of the three
perspectives on return outlined here, a position in favour of return currently has the upper hand, but with significant dissent. Given the divisive discussions and divergent positions that exist within the movement, its continued unity is notable. However, the process of return is still ongoing and time must tell whether and how the formerly diasporic women’s movement will be able to establish itself as an effective political force in Myanmar. Moreover, time must tell to what extent the reinvention of the movement will mean that those who fear the co-optation and de-politicization of the movement will be proven right.

Further, the analysis of the Burmese women’s movement sheds new light on the hitherto unexplored gender dimensions of diaspora engagements in homeland conflicts and post-conflict transformations, showing how the potential consequences for the movement’s ability to successfully advance their feminist politics is at the heart of disagreements around return. This must be understood in relation to how the transnational, diasporic space has been particularly fruitful for feminist organization and activism. Being in diaspora has enabled the movement to become highly integrated in transnational feminist networks; mobilize international spaces and norms in their struggles; and garner international attention and support. These findings add to previous feminist literatures that has demonstrated how the disruptions of conflict and displacement can provide opportunities to challenge unequal and confining gender relations and norms.61 Highlighting how the diasporic political space has provided a window of opportunity for the advancement of women’s equality adds a key dimension to the understanding of why and how return is such a contentious and difficult process, as a context conducive to feminist mobilization must be left behind for something new and uncertain.

Notes

1. In this article, Myanmar rather than Burma is used to refer to the country, although both names are frequently used. Since 1989, Myanmar is the official name of the state, but Burma is preferred by many of the diaspora groups 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. Thawngmhun, "Signs of Life in Myanmar’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement?"
3. Egreteau, “Burma in Diaspora”; Williams, “Changing Burma From Without.”
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Rohingya Emergency”; Kachin Women’s Association Thailand, A far Cry From Peace.
5. Koinova, “Critical Junctures and Transformative Events,” 2.
6. Burmese women’s organizations and activists most frequently describe themselves as exile-based or border-based. In this article, the terms diasporic, exile-based and border-based will be used interchangeably, based on the understanding that all these terms in the context of this analysis describe Burmese individuals and groups located in Myanmar’s neighbouring countries but actively connected to and engaged in shaping developments in Myanmar.
7. See Gender Equality Network, Raising the Curtain, for a comprehensive overview of the situation for women’s rights in contemporary Myanmar.
8. Koinova, “Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction”; Brinkerhoff, “Diasporas and Conflict Societies”; Smith and Stares, Diasporas in Conflict.
9. For notable exceptions, see Missbach, “The Acehnese Diaspora after the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding” and Turner, “The Waxing and Waning of The Political Field.”
10. Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies”; Cohen, Global Diasporas.
11. Hansen, “Khat, Governance and Political Identity”; Shindo, “The Hidden Effect of Diaspora Return”; Turner, “Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding.”
12. Pirkkalainen and Abide, The Diaspora-conflict-peace-nexus; Al-Ali, “Gender, Diasporas and Post-cold War Conflict.”
13. Sjoberg, Gender, War and Conflict; Tickner, Gendering World Politics; Enloe, Maneuvers.
14. Hedström, “We Did Not Realize about the Gender Issues.”
15. Women’s League of Burma, “The Founding and Development of the Women’s League of Burma.”
16. Today, WLB consist of 13 member organizations. See www.womenofburma.org for a current list.
17. Women’s League of Burma, “The Founding and Development of the Women’s League of Burma”; Hedström, “We Did Not Realize about the Gender Issues.”
18. O’Kane, “Blood, Sweat and Tears.”
19. See note 2 above.
20. Faxon, Furlong, and Sabe Phyu, “Reinvigorating Resilience.”
21. Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies”; Cohen, Global Diasporas.
22. Adamson, “Constructing the Diaspora,” 28; Anderson, Imagined Communities.
23. Sökefeld, “Mobilizing in Transnational Space”; Adamson, “Constructing the Diaspora.”
24. See also Egretanu, “Burma in Diaspora” and Williams, “Changing Burma from Without” on Conceptualizing Burmese Communities in Exile as a Diaspora.
25. Sökefeld, “Mobilizing in Transnational Space”; Tarrow, Power in Movement.
26. Zwingel, “How Do Norms Travel?”, Reilly, “Cosmopolitan Feminism and Human Rights.”
27. Orjuela, “Mobilising Diasporas for Justice.”
28. Missbach, “The Acehnese Diaspora after the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding.”
29. Telephone interview with activist from women’s organization, 18 May 2017.
30. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 18 November 2017.
31. Women’s League of Burma, “Herstoric Women’s Forum.”
32. Telephone interview with international adviser from women’s organization, 20 March 2017.
33. See note 30 above.
34. See note 32 above.
35. Shain, “The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation or Resolution” and Koinova, “Critical Juncures and Transformative Events.”
36. Turner, “The Waxing and Waning of the Political Field,” 743.
37. See note 30 above.
38. Ibid.
39. Cohen, Global Diasporas, 6.
40. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 16 December 2016.
41. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 8 December 2016.
42. Missbach, “The Acehnese diaspora after the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding,” 192.
43. See note 40 above.
44. Democratic Voice of Burma, “Women’s Group Appoints New Leaders, Plans Move to Burma.”
45. See note 2 above.
46. See note 29 above.
47. Bächtold, “The Rise of an Anti-Politics Machinery.”
48. Interview with representatives of donor agency, Yangon, 30 January 2017.
49. Ibid.
50. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 8 November 2017.
51. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 7 November 2017.
52. See note 29 above.
53. Interview with activist from women’s organization, Chiang Mai, 6 November 2017.
54. See note 51 above.
55. Interview with women’s rights activist from NGO, Chiang Mai, 13 November 2017.
56. See note 40 above.
57. See note 53 above.
58. South, “‘Hybrid Governance’ and the Politics of Legitimacy.”
59. See note 47 above.
60. See note 55 above.
61. Enloe, Maneuvers; Grabska, “Constructing ‘Modern Gendered Civilized’ Women and Men”.

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