Feminist Mobilization, Resistance and Movement Building

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CHAPTER 4

Feminist Peace Building at the Grassroots

Contributions and Challenges

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Women's organizing efforts at the community level have emerged in the context of protracted conflict in Myanmar and associated outmigration from Myanmar to neighbouring countries. Women's groups, on their own and in partnership with each other, have focused much of their energy around providing for the basic needs of their communities. As a result, they have worked at a grassroots level to build holistic peace and have brought these issues to discussions concerning peace in the country. Women's holistic peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level have laid the groundwork for an effective women's movement in Myanmar that is built across ethnic lines and invested in peace and human security and which relies on gendered frames for legitimacy and acceptance. However, the necessity of focusing on immediate human security needs, in no small way a necessity created by the lack of sustainable and consistent funding, has to some degree hindered women's organizing efforts by preoccupying their energies and by resulting in activist women being underestimated as political actors. This is worsened by the legacy of the colonial idea that women in Myanmar enjoy freedoms unparalleled elsewhere in neighbouring countries, an idea that renders women's organizing for rights largely invisible (Ikeya, this volume).

Women's inclusion, if women are included at all in formal processes of building peace, is fundamentally shaped by cultural norms surrounding femininity and women's work, as is the case elsewhere (Sa'ar 2016). This framing of women's peacebuilding work is necessary because of the political priorities of men, who have a vested interest in the exclusion of women from formal peace negotiations because those negotiations constitute the arbitration of power dynamics between and within ethnic groups. Thus, by marginalizing women, they create the conditions under which women

are not able to use the transition to peace to advance their own interests. In response, the discourses leveraged by women's movements in transitional periods often engage gender essentialisms and norms to appeal to supporters and to achieve acceptance. Feminist scholarship on women's activism and organizing has clearly demonstrated that women play a significant role in civic and political life, while their activism is shaped by socially-constructed gender norms (Ferree and Mueller 2004; Moghadam 2005; Ray 1999; Waylen 2007). Social movements may leverage frames, ideologies, and categories that are advantageous, but there is also a risk that the movement will lock itself into and reify categories by doing so. In particular, we have seen women in Myanmar leverage their identities as mothers and victims in order to gain traction in public life (Olivius and Hedström 2019). These identities are expressed, in part, through the grassroots work that women and women's organizations perform in an effort to build localized peace in the broader context of the previous peace process in Myanmar.

This chapter shines light on women's grassroots organizing in Myanmar and on the Thailand–Myanmar border as a form of holistic peacebuilding, albeit with consequences for women's rights organizing. The aim is to uncover the ways in which conflict has shaped the emerging women's movement in Myanmar, in order to bring attention to a facet of peacebuilding and peace activism that is often overlooked both by actors in formal peacebuilding spaces and by observers of peacebuilding. The chapter further seeks to uncover the ways in which a necessary focus on human security issues at the grassroots can hinder women's rights movement development, as women activists are constrained by the gendered social norms that shape their work and occupy their time and resources (see also Gagnon and Hsa Moo, this volume). Please note that, while I do not contextualize and historicize the activism of women from various ethnic groups and situate their activism in their unique conditions, I do not view all ethnically-identified women and groups to have the same priorities. However, an in-depth analysis that takes this diversity into account is beyond the scope of this chapter. I do not identify the ethnic group affiliation of my interlocutors. This is a conscious choice made to protect their anonymity.

The chapter begins with a discussion of existing scholarship on women's movements in transitional contexts, feminist conceptualizations of holistic peacebuilding, and women's peace activism at the grassroots. A brief context and discussion of the methods used in this research follows. Data, deriving

primarily from interviews, is presented in two parts. The first examines the holistic peacebuilding efforts that are led by women at the grassroots level in the context of displacement from Myanmar. The second discusses the ways in which such peacebuilding efforts and the ways in which they are framed as 'women's work' encumber women activists and impede their progress in advocating for women's rights. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the implications of the findings.

Before proceeding, I must note that this chapter was drafted prior to the February 1, 2021 military coup in Myanmar (for further discussion, see Hedström and Olivius, this volume). At the time of data collection and analysis, the peace process was continuing to take place, though progress was slow. This chapter should be understood to have originated in that context, though I believe that the analysis and issues raised stand as valid and useful now, and are perhaps even more pertinent than they were prior to the coup. This is in part because human insecurity has increased with the instability brought on by the coup, intensifying women's grassroots efforts to alleviate the consequences of that insecurity.

Women's Political Activism and Holistic Peacebuilding at the Grassroots

Violent conflict and its aftermath are characterized by relative instability, and scholars have argued that it is this instability that creates possibilities for significant change in both social and political life (Berry 2018; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Collier and Collier 1991; Hedström and Olivius, this volume; Pierson 2004). Scholars of social movements have noted that political transitions and disruptions can provide an unprecedented opportunity for women's movements to engage in political life and civil society in several ways, including as citizens, nationalists and feminists (Waylen 2007). Women's movements in transition are not necessarily limited to movements that are founded on essentialisms (Viterna and Fallon 2008). However, such essentialisms do dominate and shape women's inclusion or justify their exclusion. Women's activism for peace, though it may rely on essentialisms, brings women into the public sphere, thus challenging prevailing gender norms that hold that women's sphere is that of the home and family (Aye Thiri Kyaw, this volume; Kaufman and Williams 2013). This is reinforced by policy and discourses at both the local and national level in other contexts as well

as by international nongovernmental and inter-governmental organization interventions (Stienstra 1994; Hawkesworth 2018).

Entering the male-dominated public sphere by gaining access to formal political institutions and a seat at the table in political processes is not the only way in which women can have influence and exercise power (Elshtain 1981; Sharoni 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997; Gal and Kligman 2000; Berry, 2018). In fact, the power of women's informal networks has been noted by feminist scholars as being highly influential (Frydenlund and Wai Wai Nu, this volume; Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004). Though some scholars have warned against over-estimating informal political action and organizing (Abu-Lughod 1990; Bayat 2010; Berry 2018), this research asks how women are involved in building peace and finds that recognizing women's organizing is key to understanding gender dynamics in the processes of building peace. Further, such recognition is essential to the effort to understand women's peacebuilding work in the wider context of ongoing transition.

Peace processes as conceived of by the international community and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 tend to assume that peacebuilding happens in formal spaces, through formal channels. What follows from this is the idea, expressed in many policy circles, that if women are brought to the negotiating table and become part of the peace process at a formal level, then the gender problem will be solved (Hunt and Posa 2001). This is inaccurate, however, as it fails to acknowledge the localized, specific and often informal ways in which women organize to influence the world around them. The weaknesses of this line of thinking have become apparent and a subject of discussion in Women, Peace and Security spaces. In response, there has been an effort to look to the local in thinking about peacebuilding and to incorporate a gender perspective in order to understand how peace processes can both empower and limit women's peace-oriented activities (George 2018).

Feminists have argued that feminist conceptualizations of peace are more holistic than prevailing masculinist understandings (Paarlberg-Kvam 2018; Reardon and Snauwaert 2015), and that women's peace activism is often built around broad visions of holistic peace (Reardon 1993). This approach to thinking about peace can be attributed to what Confortini (2006) calls feminist positive peace, which draws on Galtung's ideas. According to Galtung's work, peace is often conceptualized in terms of 'negative peace' or the absence of violent conflict (Galtung 1964: 2). However, the concept of

'positive peace' is at least as useful to thinking about peace and encourages a more holistic view of peace. Positive peace, as defined by Galtung, is a condition where people are able to realize their full potential, unimpeded by structural violence (Galtung 1969: 168). This understanding of conflict and its impacts takes into consideration the consequences of violent conflict that extend beyond direct forms of violence to include structural damage caused by that violence and conditions impeding human development resulting from conflict. Confortini's (2006) expansion of this work specified a feminist positive peace that includes consideration of gender alongside the more holistic conceptualizations of what peace could or should look like.

If we conceptualize peace as experienced by individuals at the local level holistically, then we become able to recognize grassroots-level work that strives to build peace within communities. Localized experiences are not necessarily sufficient to constitute positive peace, as positive peace also relies on institutional and systemic change, but they can demonstrate feminist holistic peacebuilding in action. In this view, the impacts of armed conflict become salient and the experiences and lived realities of non-combatants become important. This creates room for other actors in peacebuilding, including those who are not involved directly in the armed conflict but who are affected by it. Further, building holistic peace involves rebuilding a world where human potential can be realized and where health, education, food security and other aspects of human security become central. It is around these issues that some women's peace activism is expressed, as this chapter demonstrates.

This chapter uses the idea of a holistic feminist peace to frame thinking about women's contributions to the process of building peace in Myanmar. While women are included and excluded in a variety of ways in formal peace process activities, they do contribute substantially and in material ways to the development of peace within their communities, around the peace process when they are not included, and within the peace process when they are included. It is important to note that I, and other feminist scholars, do not necessarily subscribe to the idea that women are somehow naturally more peaceful than men. However, we do recognize that the ways that people of differing genders are positioned in society has a substantial effect on their engagement with peace and peace activism (El-Bushra 2007; Hedström, Olivius and Zin Mar Phyo, this volume). Further, the attention this chapter pays to grassroots women's work for human security as peacebuilding work should not be taken to suggest that this is all that women contribute to peace.

Instead, this chapter seeks to bring attention to the work that women do to build peace within their communities and beyond, which is often rendered invisible (Zin Mar Phyo and Mi Sue Pwint, this volume).

Intersectional feminism has engaged and challenged hegemonic visions of feminist power. These feminists argue that layered oppressions connected to class, race, ability, sexual orientation and a great number of other factors that are context-specific may be as important or more important than gender to some women and require intersectional analysis (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1991; Naples 2009). Harnois (2015) argues that membership of other marginalized groups (e.g. marginalized ethnic groups) can raise levels of gendered political consciousness, which may partially explain the context in which strong ethnic women's organizations have emerged in Myanmar (Hedström 2016; Olivius and Hedström 2019). These diverse contributions have brought theoretical attention to the importance of identities and power, and provide a theoretical foundation for engaging gender, ethnic and other identities in exploring the processes of political inclusion and peacebuilding in transitioning societies. Gendered political consciousness is a key aspect of women's peace activism at the grassroots and of their localized efforts to improve human security, efforts which often engage with particular discourses.

Human Security Deficits and Collecting Data on Women's Activism

Prior to the February 2021 coup, Myanmar was in the midst of a contested peace process, through which the country's multiple ethnic groups and the Bamar majority-run centralized government sought to reach a conclusion to the civil conflicts that have raged in the ethnic areas of the country since 1949 (Fink 2009; Cheesman and Farrelly 2016; Hedström and Olivius, this volume). One impact of the decades of violent conflict has been high rates of forced outmigration to bordering countries, with Thailand receiving many refugees and migrants (Grundy-Warr 2004). Since the 1980s, refugee camps and accompanying international humanitarian aid organizations have populated the Thailand–Myanmar border. Thailand houses more than 91,000 refugees from Myanmar in nine camps along its border (The Border Consortium 2021). As a result of high levels of migration, the borderlands of Thailand and Myanmar have become a site of cross-border organization and resistance for people from multiple ethnic backgrounds (Banki 2015).

This has been the case both within and outside of refugee camps. Refugee political activism is a phenomenon that has been noted as highly influential by scholars in other locations (Malkki 1995; Holzer 2015). In this context, migrants and refugees make up the Myanmar activist population in Thailand, and while much of their work seeks to support those living in exile from Myanmar, many organizations and initiatives use the relative safety and stability of Thailand as a base of operations for human rights activist work within Myanmar as well. It is in this cross-border context that many human rights organizations, including ethnic women's organizations, have emerged as influential civil society actors (Olivius 2017).

The peace negotiations and transitional process changed the dynamics of women's activism to some extent. As Myanmar has been perceived to be increasingly open, funding has been redirected from the borderlands to efforts inside of the country. As a result, in order to keep operating effectively, many women's organizations have shifted their base of operations and many of their members of staff away from the borderlands in Thailand and into Myanmar, reducing some of the services and organizing efforts on the border (Olivius 2019).

This chapter uses data collected during 14 months of fieldwork in total conducted in the Thai cities of Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, as well as in Myanmar in Yangon and Kachin State, between 2015 and 2019. This fieldwork resulted in 65 interviews with a wide array of participants, including women's rights activists, ethnic women's group representatives, NGO representatives, and refugee and migrant women from local communities. Participants were identified based on their affiliations with or knowledge of women's organizations and women's rights activism using a snowball sampling method whereby interview participants were asked to suggest other individuals or organizations that would be able to speak on women's activism and local peacebuilding.

Interview participants had the option of speaking with me alone in English, or with an interpreter in Burmese or the ethnic language with which they were most comfortable. Interpreters were essential to this work. They served as invaluable cultural brokers and were recruited based on past work in the area and through recommendations from trusted local organizations. Interviews were recorded with permission and were later transcribed for analysis. Audio from interviews conducted through interpreters in Burmese and Karen languages were double-interpreted by a third party interpreter

who used the audio recordings to transcribe the entire interview in English. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all interview participants.

Data was also collected through participant observation, facilitated by volunteer positions with local grassroots organizations. This work is further informed by my time spent as a volunteer with two grassroots advocacy organizations on the Thailand–Myanmar border between 2016–2017 and as a humanitarian aid worker in the area from 2007–2008, as well as my master's thesis research conducted as a consultant to a large international nongovernmental organization in refugee camps on the Thailand–Myanmar border in 2011.

Transcripts along with detailed fieldnotes were analysed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Data were coded following a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006) to allow themes to emerge from the data through open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Preliminary findings were reported back to selected interview participants and participating organizations for correction and triangulation purposes.

Women's Holistic Peacebuilding in Displacement

Women's organizations, especially ethnic women's organizations, are powerful networks that exist throughout Myanmar and on the Thailand–Myanmar border. 13 groups are united under the umbrella organization of the Women's League of Burma (Women's League of Burma 2011). Aside from these organizations, there are non-member ethnic women's organizations such as the Mon Women's Organisation and the Chin Women's Organisation, as well as many other ethnically-identified women's organizations, such as the Kachin Women's Peace Network and the Kachin State Women's Network. Further, there are organizations that are not organized around ethnic identity specifically, but rather around gender and peace, including the Gender Equality Network and the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process. Alliances between women's organizations that cross ethnic and other identity boundaries are not uncommon in peace activism; it is, rather, a phenomenon that has been noted in multiple contexts including the Balkans and Northern Ireland (Cockburn 1998).

The work of ethnic women's organizations includes acting as advocacy organizations for women and children, as auxiliary organizations in support

of and as critics of ethnic armed organizations in some cases, and as activist organizations for human rights. These organizations can be peripheral players in state-level ethnic armed organization and nationalist politics, often receive funding from international organizations, and serve as the primary advocates for women in their communities (Salai Isaac Khen and Muk Yin Haung Nyoi 2014). Despite the wide range of their activities and the influence that results, women's organizations and representatives from those organizations, whether ethnically affiliated or not, have often been relegated to peripheral roles in the formal peacebuilding negotiations at the national level (Pepper 2018). Still, women's activism through ethnic women's organizations is influential politically, particularly in local contexts, where representatives from such organizations are often able to gain entry to decision-making spaces and have a voice in community concerns.

In the refugee camps on the Thailand–Myanmar border the activism of ethnic women's organizations extends into several arenas. Such work is directed towards immediate short-term needs and longer-term goals and engages women as symbols of cultural and national identity and tradition (Enloe 2000; Jok 1998; Giles and Hyndman 2004). Women's informal networks can emerge and develop power in contexts of insecurity to become highly influential agents for change (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004), and this is evident in the ways in which ethnic women's organizations have arisen in the context of conflict.

To contextualize their work, it is important to note that the Republic of the Union of Myanmar was ranked 147th out of 169 countries by the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report in 2020 according to the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program 2021). Decades of conflict coupled with a highly isolationist government have resulted in widespread underdevelopment in Myanmar, with the worst effects felt in the ethnic areas of the country. Violence, from the domestic to the political, is pervasive in Myanmar (Cheesman 2018; Davies and True 2017) and poverty has led to poor health outcomes (Ne Lynn Zaw and Pepper 2016) and low levels of educational attainment (Ang and Wong 2015; South and Lall 2016) throughout the country. In Thailand, the impacts of these conditions carry over with the displaced, and though health services and educational opportunities are available to refugees and migrants, access can be limited.

These conditions create women's drive to engage in political life through their work. As one prominent ethnic women's organization founding member commented during an interview, as we sat in a meeting room together drinking 3-in-1 coffees:

> This is why I started [the organization]. We were without food, clothing, shelter, safety. Our children were hungry and had no school. We were not citizens in Thailand. So I decided that I must do something to change our life. Together we started [the organization] to help women and our children. This is also how we made our voices heard.[1]

As she says, it is in this context of dispossession and displacement that ethnic women's organizations arose, to meet the basic needs of their communities, and through that work they emerged as political actors. She indicates that is by virtue of engaging in community-based human security work that her organization gained legitimacy and a platform to engage in political life.

We find a similar origin story from another well-known woman activist turned political leader. In a published interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, a former leader in the Karen National Union and, before that, a key leader in the Karen Women's Organization, she noted:

> When I came to live in Mae Ra Mu camp, I saw that it was necessary to reorganise the women's organization to address the needs of refugee families. We used to live in the jungle, where we had unlimited space and freedom of movement. However, the refugee camp was cramped and crowded so we need to change our living style. I set up a women's group in each section of the camp to make a list of their needs in the household and coordinated collection and distribution of essential items for pregnant women, new mothers and infants. I opened nursery schools and summer schools for children to learn basic reading and writing skills as well as to educate them with necessary health and hygiene knowledge.
>
> (Thawnghmung 2013: 261)

Importantly, Naw Zipporah Sein's activism and leadership with the Karen Women's Organization led to her rise as a key political figure in the Karen National Union. Through the the example of her experience, we can see very clearly how human security work, as she describes it above, can translate to political influence. This resonates with the account of another member of

1 Ethnic women's organization representative, Chiang Mai, 15 January 2019.

an ethnic women's organization whom I met in a refugee camp office. As we spoke, with the sounds of camp life around us, she described her mobilization within the organization and explained that their work has garnered recognition and legitimacy for herself and her colleagues, as political actors within the camp community:

> When I came here, we had nothing. Even [the aid organization] couldn't help us to obtain all that we needed. So we organized ourselves to help our community and to help our people [belonging to the same ethnic group as ourselves]. Now we can join in the camp committee and in decision-making because we are so important within the community. Our work is very important for the [ethnic group]. We provide for our life, so we can be safe, and now even the men listen to us.[2]

Their social projects, aimed at addressing fundamental needs within the refugee community, include the establishment and management of orphanages, the provision of safe houses for women escaping domestic violence and training for traditional birth attendants. Thus, they contribute to building a holistic peace at the community level by addressing conditions of structural violence that emerged in the context of violent conflict and associated displacement. These efforts are in areas that are often coded as 'women's concerns', though they are fundamentally about human security needs at a basic level. This coding, unfortunately, leaves women activists and women's organizations largely at the side-lines when it comes to political power, despite the deeply political nature of their work, which is carried out on behalf of women and also addresses the security needs of their ethnic groups more broadly.

The work of women's organizations is intended to address social and structural oppressions that appear in the forms of deficits in human security as well as exclusion on the basis of gender and ethnicity. This is in contrast to the male-dominated peace process, which focuses instead on the explicitly militarized and political aspects of the idea of peace. One woman activist, a member of an ethnic women's organization, explained it to me in this way:

> For them [men], the peace process is only about discussing about political issues and things like weapons. They do not think about the social sector and they do not think about the women and children who are affected by the armed conflict.[3]

2 Ethnic women's organization representative, Mae La, 10 July 2015.

3 Ethnic women's organization representative, Chiang Mai, 24 November 2017.

She notes that the core of the peace process is focused primarily on masculine-coded concerns, and that more holistic conceptualizations of what peace could look like or what should be at stake in the peace dialogues are absent. This is a missed opportunity, as this work for human security is a key aspect of developing a sustainable peace that addresses structural as well as direct violence.

Through ethnic women's organizations, women prioritize serving the needs of women and children within their ethnic groups. By strategically adopting and emphasizing socially-constructed and accepted gender stereotypes in framing their key claims, identities, interests and goals, women can engage in seemingly depoliticized acts that can be conceptualized as activism, while making their activism palatable to those who might resist women's political involvement (Erickson and Faria 2014; Ray 1999). While these relationships and the opportunities they afford are based in essentialisms, they do allow for ethnic women's organizations to wield a certain amount of authority when it comes to social issues (Olivius and Hedström 2019). In turn, these essentialisms have become a way for women to assert their right to be included at the level of ethnic politics and in broader processes, such as the ongoing peace talks (Pepper 2018). The work done by ethnic women's organizations at the refugee camp level constitutes a meaningful contribution to building the conditions for a holistic peace within their communities in response to the structural and conflict-related violence they have experienced as ethnic women.

Peace Advocacy and the Future of Women's Rights

In addition to the material concerns and human security gaps that have arisen as a result of displacement and conflict, women's organizations are also concerned with structural issues that are of great importance to the future of women in Myanmar. Many of the women I spoke to emphasized the linkages between peace and rights for women and ethnic groups. A representative of an ethnic women's organization based in Thailand with operations in Myanmar noted:

> Peace, if we have a peace, that also includes women's rights, so that is what we are working for – women's rights and also peace and also justice. If we do not have justice, it will be a fake peace.[4]

4 Ethnic women's organization representative, Chiang Mai, 22 November 2017.

As this interviewee noted, a meaningful peace must include attention to and provisions for women's rights in the Myanmar that will hopefully emerge from the transitional period. A call for justice is also evident here, as key to building sustainable and meaningful peace. Attention to a justice mechanism is an aspect of the peace negotiations that has been lacking. However, women activists have had their lives affected tremendously by violent conflict, and they note that without justice, the peace that may be achieved will be lacking in legitimacy and will fail to address many of the concerns of women in the peace process. Despite the February 1, 2021 coup, it is possible to see how this comment still stands as significant. Women have been key players in the protest movement rejecting the coup, and have kept women's rights at the forefront of the movement.

In addition to attention to women's rights and justice, women activists from Myanmar are also concerned with ethnic rights, as many of them are members of ethnic groups that have experienced oppression and conflict at the hands of the Myanmar military. One ethnic women's organization representative put it this way:

> As ethnic women we struggle for two things. One is women's rights and the other is ethnic rights. If we have ethnic equality, we can also fight for women's rights. It's easier. That's strategic.[5]

She notes that women's rights and ethnic rights go hand in hand in their imagining of an eventual effective peace settlement and a future that moves ahead, away from violent conflict in the country (see also Cardénas, this volume). Another representative of a different ethnic women's organization operating within Myanmar noted:

> [There are] exactly 135 ethnic groups with distinct cultures and languages in their areas. The previous government, they ignored the importance of diversity. We believe that diversity is beauty, so we have to recognize it. In our vision, we also mention that we want to have a society that produces good government and a culture that rejects violence as a means of, as a method of, dealing with differences.[6]

For both of these women, ethnic issues are at the heart of what will constitute a meaningful peace resolution and forms the basis of much of

5 Ethnic women's organization representative, Chiang Mai, 17 May 2017.

6 Female activist, Myitkyina, 25 June 2019.

their activism. This demonstrates how women's activism in this context is shaped by both their identity as women and their identity as members of an ethnic group, something that was noted previously by Olivius and Hedström (2019; see also Ikeya, this volume). This is further proof of how the networks built between diverse women through their activism could be leveraged to support building sustainable peace.

Despite clear evidence that meaningful and lasting peace settlements are those that include women and minority groups in the peacemaking negotiation process, it has been a struggle to achieve the inclusion of women in peace dialogues in Myanmar at the national level (Pepper 2018; Salai Isaac Khen and Muk Yin Haung Nyoi 2014). However, women activists have continued to push for inclusion and are highly motivated by the conviction that their involvement is necessary in order to create a peace that is inclusive. The following quote is representative of what many women told me in the course of fieldwork and interviews:

> We don't want to take over, but we want to be involved. This is especially important for ethnic women because their history is different, their experience is different, their current situation is different – but we are still very much tied together by the Women's League of Burma.[7]

As this ethnic woman activist, who has worked with several different grassroots organizations, has articulated here, the idea is not that women should control the narratives that are included in the peace process, but rather that their perspectives and lived experiences offer something valuable to the process, which could contribute to greater future stability in the country.

Despite ongoing activism in the face of routine exclusion, marginalization and siloization within formal peacebuilding processes, particularly at the national level, women have persisted in calling for their voices to be heard and have worked strategically through their respective ethnic organizations to find ways to elevate their concerns and ensure that they are part of the dialogues. However, this effort has not been without detriment to women's outlook in relation to the process and to the future of Myanmar. Several interview respondents expressed frustration, pessimism and disappointment when discussing the future of women's rights and peace in Myanmar. One leader of an ethnic women's organization noted:

7 Ethnic women's organization representative, Chiang Mai, 15 January 2019.

> Actually, I am a pessimist when I think about women's rights and the future. They keep us busy dealing with immediate problems for women so we can't work to a bigger political picture. We have to plug this hole and that hole and it's exhausting. In this way, they prevent the women's rights.[8]

This statement is important because it demonstrates one of the ways in which women's grassroots organizing and interventions lead to women's exclusion. This takes place both because their work for human security and holistic peace leaves them with less resources and energy for organizing for rights on a different level, but also because their work addressing 'women's problem' leads to their marginalization at higher levels of politics. Echoing her frustration, another activist said:

> It is very difficult to think about the future of women in Burma. You ask me about our future and I want to say our future will be strong, but it is very difficult to work and work for our voices to be heard and to have no chance. Now I am not sure about our future, but I know I will keep working, and [the organization] will keep working to make a better future for women and our children.[9]

Doubt and disappointment are evident in these quotes. And these were not unique responses to the question 'what do you think will be the future for the women of Burma?' The majority of interviewees who work at the grassroots in women's organizations and women's movements expressed this type of frustration and fatigue. But, as expressed in the second quote, they were also unanimous in their conviction that the only way forward was to keep working and advocating for women in their communities at the local, regional and national levels.

What is evident from these women's comments is a commitment to addressing basic human security needs for their communities both as both a form of resistance and as an act intended to counteract the impacts of violent conflict. What is more, these activities are highly effective at working towards holistic peace in their communities and at establishing these women as leaders. However, it is also clear that, while these women also see the advancement of women's rights through the peace process and their inclusion in that process as an extension of their work at the grassroots, they often find themselves excluded and their advocacy efforts side-lined. In

8 Female activist, Mae Sot, 3 July 2015.

9 Ethnic women's organization representative, Yangon, 15 June 2019.

part, this is because they have established themselves so effectively in their communities as having legitimacy as women and mothers that they are seen by men in positions of power as irrelevant to a peace process focused on violent conflict. This is not to suggest that their peacebuilding work within their communities is not valid and essential, but rather to point out that it has not led to a corresponding level of inclusion in the formal peace process. This is a symptom of the wider problem of women's organizing in Myanmar, which is highly effective but also emphasizes their identity as women, and is thus overlooked as valid peacebuilding work. Were it recognized by those in power, it would logically lead to greater inclusion of women in formal peace processes, as they would be viewed as essential to peacebuilding efforts in the country.

Conclusion

'War, at its most fundamental level, is an accelerated period of social change' (Berry 2018: 210). I suggest further, along with other scholars, that the negotiations to conclude war and move society out of a period of war into something resembling peace is an extension of that period of social change (Klem 2018; Krause, Krause and Bränfors 2018; Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017). Thus, violent conflict and the processes of resolution of conflict and transition to peace contain opportunities or openings for the advancement of the interests of different groups, in this case ethnic women.

Central to understanding the changes that women's activism have undergone in the Myanmar context is paying attention to the ways in which transition has changed women's peace activism. As discussed above, this is in part a function of the transition, which leads to changes in security and to funding trends that have favoured work within the country rather than from exile, as was the case until relatively recently (Olivius 2019). Further, the transition and the associated peace process have created openings for women activists both to continue to promote peace and to use the platform they have constructed for themselves through their peacebuilding work to advocate for women's rights and advancement in the country. In the years of conflict that have plagued Myanmar, women's groups organized around ethnic identities have built connections and partnerships that have strengthened their individual groups' ability to make claims, as well as created a foundation for a unified women's movement through the peace process. However, this

has not necessarily translated into gains for women's rights advocacy, in part because women leaders are viewed as performing 'women's work', which is viewed as irrelevant to masculine-coded public and political life.

The implication of this research is that attention to apparently depoliticized activities can generate knowledge concerning the political activities and impact of those who are most marginalized. Attention to the margins is indeed a feminist project that yields perspectives that are often unheard or are undervalued. It further reveals the importance of recognizing grassroots organizing as meaningful in peacebuilding. This suggests that this type of organizing leads to real consequences, both material and political, and opens up possibilities for collaboration. At a minimum, this work demonstrates that the political lives of seemingly depoliticized subjects should be taken seriously in contexts of political transition.

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