



Burmese Refugee Women in India: Victims and Agents of Empowerment*

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Abstract

The experiences of Burmese refugee women in India have been largely understudied. While reports from Delhi regularly focus on the marginalization, discrimination, medical and housing issues, as well as gender-based violence that refugees face, less is known about the attempts at reconstruction and adaptation within the existing refugee networks. What needs to be studied is not just the predicament that women refugees find themselves in after fleeing Myanmar but also the encounter and engagement between Burmese refugee networks and communities with the Indian state, NGOs, Burmese pro-democracy groups and the UNHCR. Little is also known about the issues of transition and the construction of gender among refugee women, their negotiation with their personal experiences of trauma, memory and exile along with the cultural and socio-political issues of the refugee experience. This paper thus focuses on issues of resettlement, cultural adaptation, adjustments of belief systems and gender roles, sexual and racialized violence and their subsequent political and economic mobilisation.

Author Profile

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Introduction

The experiences of Burmese refugee women in India provide a uniquely interesting angle from which to explore the linkages between the active agency of refugee women in reconstructing their lives and negotiating the possibilities of belonging and the effects of discursive practices and institutional, structural processes that continue to perpetuate their 'outsider' status. This study challenges the stereotypical discourse that has surrounded academic and popular knowledge of Burmese refugee women by interrogating their positions as "symbols" of a larger socio-political struggle in the wider arena of transnational feminism, human and women's rights and democracy. The study thus problematizes the very status of Burmese refugee women - conceptualising them as racialised, sexualised displaced "others" both within their "home country" and an "alien" host country which has been hostile to the influx of refugees into their capital city and the state of Mizoram. This paper aims to provide deeper insights into the gendered nature of refugee life - the manner in which identities, traditions, cultural and gender roles have been negotiated (and continue to be renegotiated) by the Burmese in the process of reconstruction, integration and re-creating a "place/space" for themselves as a refugee community.

The study situates the predicament of the Burmese women refugees in India within the larger global experience of women refugees. This involves an investigation of the manner in which Burmese women refugees have represented themselves and their cause and have been represented by various parties including: the UN, women NGOs, legal associations, political organisations, ethnic women's organisations and the media. Their participation in the global dynamics of feminist politics and women's rights movement suggests a willingness to go beyond the traditional cultural and gender roles, identities and expectations and instead work in a larger transnational context for socio-political change. This calls for tracing the trajectory of the struggle of (a segment of) Burmese women and their roles in women's activism - whether for human rights or for political agendas. Their experiences - both distinct and universal have resulted in displacement and destabilisation - but has also afforded them newfound space in which to represent themselves and their community, to articulate their demands, exercise their rights and engage an international audience.

Although precise statistics are not available, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) currently recognises the presence of 8,800 Burmese refugees in Delhi while local civil society groups, refugee organisations and international non-governmental organisations estimate the number to be between 10,000 - 11,500 and a further 70,000 undocumented refugees in the north-eastern state of Mizoram.¹ This paper focuses primarily on the urban Burmese refugee population in Delhi which includes Burma's many ethnic groups including Chins, Burmans, Kachins and Arakanese.² Majority of who are from Chin

¹ As of December 2011, UNHCR recognises 8, 800 refugees in India (limited to Delhi as UNHCR does not have access to Mizoram and the border areas). See 2011 UNHCR Country Operations Profile - India, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/page?page=49e4876d6>. Higher figures are reported by local and international organisations like Chin Refugee Committee Website, <http://crcdelhi.wordpress.com> and Chin Human Rights Organisation Website, <http://www.chro.ca>. There are an estimated 4,000 women and 3,000 children refugees in Delhi.

² While the country was renamed Myanmar by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), this article utilises the pre-SLORC moniker, Burma. "Burmese" is used to denote nationality, thus incorporating all ethnic nationalities, and "Burman" refers to the majority Burman ethnic group.

state, the poorest state in Burma, although they belong to different sub-tribes (Matu, Hakha, Falam, Zomi, Lushai, Mizo, Zo, Asho, Lai and Khumi). Women (and men) refugees have fled to India for many reasons including ethnic civil war, severe human rights abuses inflicted by a ruthless military regime, discrimination against and the isolation of ethnic minorities, the policy of Burmanisation, forced labour, religious and political persecution, silence on political dialogue, economic mismanagement, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and the daily struggle for survival in a climate of fear. Women in particular leave the country due to gender-based violence, including rape, harassment, forced marriages to military officials or border trafficking.

Living in New Delhi: Circumstances and Challenges

Women refugees arrive in India after being subjected to various forms of violence. While most are responsive to being interviewed, many are also hesitant, wary and cautious about revealing information due to the sensitive nature of their experiences in Chin State, the traumas of making perilous journeys over border areas or simply out of fear of confiding their thoughts. Commenting on the politics of fear in Burma, Monique Skidmore notes how fear is the most common emotion evoked by the regime to subdue the population engendering a reaction of being “pressed down, indicative of the experience of feeling trapped and pinned down.”³ Abuse of ethnic minorities which also includes beating, torture, imprisonment, and systematic rape and abuse of women is part of a larger strategy by the Burmese regime to terrorize them and curtail their freedom of religion and participation in political activities.

Women suffer the greatest burden of these systematic attacks as they are oppressed on the basis of their gender as well as their ethnicity. There is also a direct connection between rape and migration: some women flee Burma because they have been raped, others do so to escape being raped. Sexual violence by the army is widespread in Chin State; women experience rape as soldiers patrol villages, during forced labour, whilst farming and as retaliation when family members are suspected of anti-government activities. In most cases, victims have received no legal recourse as most were afraid to report abuses for fear of further abuse in military-controlled villages which makes these cases difficult to document.⁴ Like most conflict contexts, the issue of rape remains taboo amongst Burmese people, even though it has been alleged that SPDC has used rape systematically to subjugate the population. The SPDC has refuted the reports of rape against ethnic women and International NGOs and UN agencies continue to be denied access to at-risk populations in Burma.

Gender violence against women is but a symptom of a more deep-rooted phenomenon – the interplay of traditional and cultural values that not only support a patriarchal society but tacitly sanction a fundamental disregard for women’s rights. Sexual assault by the military is but a tactic of war, an assertion of masculine power to terrorise and reinforce the

³ Monique Skidmore, “Darker than Midnight: Fear, Vulnerability, and Terror Making in Urban Burma,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2003), 14.

⁴ See documented cases by Women’s League of Chinland, *Unsafe State: State Sanctioned Violence against Chin Women in Burma* (March 2007), <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/reports/UnsafeState.pdf> and ALTSEAN Burma, *Special Briefing: Women’s Report Card on Burma* (Bangkok: April 2000). For similar cases of other ethnic groups, see Karen Women’s Organisation, *State of Terror: The Ongoing Rape, Murder, Torture, Forced Labour Suffered by Women Living under the Burmese Military Regime in Karen State* (February 2007), <http://www.karenwomen.org>; Veronika Martin and Betsy Apple, *No Safe Place: Burma’s Army and the Rape of Ethnic Woman* (Washington: Refugee International, 2003).

vulnerability of the opponent, as ethnic women come to symbolise the honour and weakness of the ethnic minorities. These more overt forms of violence against women are reinforced by subtle forms of cultural and structural violence, discrimination and inequality. Women in Burma continue to be valued primarily for their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The Burmese saying “Respect son as Master and husband as God” continues to hold in Burma and women are “responsible for the general well-being of each member of the family. In the face of poverty, women are expected to make sacrifices for the family. “Good” women are rarely single; they are expected to marry and bear children.”⁵

Women’s social roles, adherence to gender stereotypes and a lack of women’s rights within the family domain are further reinforced due to the crisis and poverty. Even with steady disintegration of family structures, traditional ideologies continue to hold sway. Women are expected to carry dual responsibilities as home-makers and to become primary earners when their husbands are imprisoned, killed or leave to join resistance movements. Poverty means that families prioritise sons over daughters to attend school. Confiscation of land, livestock and crops by the military has also made working on farms unsustainable for women. NGOs also note how the deteriorating situation in Burma in terms of women’s economic and personal rights, forced marriages, high maternal mortality rates and lack of health infrastructure in conflict areas continue to impinge upon their status in a patriarchal society.⁶ As a woman refugee explained during an interview, women had no conception of what women’s rights were until they came to Delhi and were exposed to these new ideas. A woman refugee’s narration of the situation reflects the interrelation between forced marriages, gender norms and patriarchy:

In my childhood, I used to hear that soldiers would be promised of promotion if they could marry a Chin Christian girl. As no Chin will marry a Burmese soldier willingly and since they can’t marry the girl and they want to be promoted, soldiers will rape these Chin women. And in Burma, we have a patriarchal society so once you get married, you will follow your husband’s religion and tradition. So the Chin woman would have to convert and be forced to marry. The social stigma of being dishonoured is there unless you get married. And if you are raped by a Burmese soldier, no Chin man will willingly marry you again. So women are forced into marriages by sexual violence and this is still going on. Patrolling soldiers are the ones who rape women and leave. If women show resentment, even in silent expression, her father and brothers will be beaten or all their cattle will be taken away.⁷

In Delhi, their outsider status has continued on multiple fronts – by virtue of being ‘refugees’, an ethnic minority and their gender. Women refugees are aided by the UNHCR

⁵ Women’s League of Burma (WLB), *Breaking the Silence*, Paper submitted to the forty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2002), 3-4. Available at http://www.womenofburma.org/Report/Breaking_the_silence.pdf.

⁶ ALTSEAN Burma, *op.cit.*, 3. The report highlights how the government’s policy of encouraging soldiers to marry ethnic nationalities compromises on their rights. Given that the ethnicity of children is determined by that of the father’s, the government promises monetary rewards and promotions for marriages which contribute to the program of Burmanisation. Forced marriages result in women and their children being abandoned in their villages when the troops are rotated to other areas (15). WLB also notes how poverty and the state’s expenditure of less than five percent of GDP on health has resulted in poor health and nutrition levels and an alarming rise in abortions and maternal mortality ratio. An estimated 580 deaths occur per 100,000 live births and due to the lack of contraception, illegal abortions, around 2,000 per day are carried out in unsafe conditions. WLB, *Breaking the Silence*, 12.

⁷ Personal interview with Tialte (pseudonym), Member of Burmese Women Delhi (BWD), Delhi, September 6, 2011. Tialte arrived in Delhi in 2006 at the age of sixteen.

and its local Implementing Partners (IPs), Don Bosco Ashalayam (DBA), Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC). These IPs facilitate refugees' access to health, education (YMCA), employment and training (DBA) and legal services (SLIC). Due to the increasing number of refugees, UNHCR outsourced the registration of refugees to SLIC in August 2009. In India, refugees fall under the Foreigners Order of 1946 which grants the government the power to restrict movement, limit employment and the mandate to *refoule* (return) refugees, actions which are barred by the Refugee Convention. Considered 'alien' according to the Constitution of India and the Foreigners Act, refugees are nonetheless granted the right to religious freedom, non-discrimination, personal liberty, freedom of housing and are granted identity and travel cards. India has signed a number of international conventions which impose several obligations including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 and the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, India has neither ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1961 Protocol despite housing one of the world's largest refugee populations. Therefore, no formal arrangement exists between the government and UNHCR even though India is a member of the Executive Committee in Geneva and allows the UNHCR to conduct operations from the capital city. Due to the absence of a national refugee law which excludes them from the right to work and leads to discrimination in all areas of daily life including access to healthcare, legal services education and housing Burmese refugees continue to suffer on several counts.

Many Burmese refugees therefore hope for third-country resettlement, especially to the United States and Canada, but the chances of such resettlement remain slim. The hope for a better future for their children with improved educational and employment opportunities make resettlement to a third-country a desirable end. However, resettlement is granted in rare cases and priority is given to those who are especially vulnerable. UNHCR is unable to guarantee resettlement due to factors out of their control, for much depends on the responsiveness of host governments who may lack the capacity to absorb large numbers of refugees. Bureaucratic policies, possible domestic political costs, absorption capacity of the host community, national security considerations and the need to maintain good international relations are some of the factors which hamper resettlement.⁸ In recent years, the UNHCR has been stressing integration with the local community over resettlement as a more viable option for refugees in Delhi, so that refugees can become naturalised inhabitants who can engage with Indian society while maintaining their community identity and achieving self-sufficiency. Such an approach, it is believed, would give refugees an impetus to integrate, achieve financial independence and also dispel local prejudice. This is also based on the pragmatic understanding that a refugee's arrival to a third-country host is not an end in itself for they will continue to encounter socio-cultural and economic barriers as they rebuild their lives in a foreign environment.

One of the strategies UNHCR adopted for facilitating this reintegration was the gradual phasing out of monthly Subsistence Allowance (SA) for refugees from 2002 and a new approach which encourages self-sufficiency through employment and "active integration" with local society. Since 2010, monthly SA's to the refugees were terminated after three months to encourage them to find employment. However, the IPs continue to provide free vocational and skills training. Currently, only Extremely Vulnerable Individuals receive assistance, however it is interesting to note that while the policy was in operation, female applicants for the SA were entitled to the full amount only if they were single. Once married

⁸ See Karen Jacobsen, "Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes," *International Migration Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1996): 655-678.

and considered a dependent on her husband, women received only Rs. 600 month instead of the full Rs. 1,400. Not only was this policy based on gender stereotypes, reinforcing “the sexist idea that men should be the dominant figure in a marriage and a family, and forces the woman into a state of utter dependency on her husband,” this was also in contravention of the principles laid down by the UN.⁹ Although the self-sufficiency of refugees through employment is a key goal – there are many obstacles which hamper their efforts. Employers hesitate to hire illegal workers and women are pushed into the informal labour market where they work in low skill and low-paying jobs at factories, restaurants and as cleaners and domestic helpers.¹⁰ Others are self-employed, stitching traditional clothes and bags or undertaking small scale catering services. Some have found employment under the Koshish Enterprise at the Don Bosco production centre in Vikaspuri where they are trained in weaving and sewing. However, women refugees mention various problems at the workplace including language barriers, exploitative working conditions, inequality in payment and assault.

While in theory, access and assistance to healthcare, education and legal services are available, there remain many hurdles. Lack of language skills, long waiting times, intimidating bureaucratic structures and perceived discriminatory treatment at government hospitals lead many refugees to opt for the free volunteer refugee clinic such as Yamuna Clinic and the Women’s Rights and Welfare Association of Burma (WRWAB) clinic in West Delhi.¹¹ Even though trained midwives and nurses run these clinics, well qualified medical practitioners are lacking and so are supplies of medicine, a basic community health surveillance system, family planning, birth control and information on STDs. The result is high prevalence of malnutrition, common illnesses, respiratory problems and treatable gynaecological diseases that are caused by poor diet, overcrowded accommodation and unhygienic living conditions. Women also suffer significant psychological trauma and depression from experiences of abuse, forced exile, breakdown of family and social support systems and difficulty in adjustment and household maintenance in an insecure environment. Dr. Tint Swe, who founded Yamuna Clinic in 2002 notes,

More than 63 % of my patients are women. Most of them are with child, so most of the cases are pre-natal issues and pregnancy cases. Both men and women, young and old, have anaemia, vitamin deficiencies because they come from underdeveloped areas. Communicable diseases are very common and flu, Hepatitis A, dengue and malaria are

⁹ South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, *Human Rights Feature: Burmese Refugees in New Delhi: Denied Refugee Status, Subsistence Allowance*, <http://www.hrhc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF37.htm>. The report notes that “not all refugees receive the same amount of SA. The head of a household (most often male) currently receives Rs. 1,400 per month; an additional Rs. 600 is given for each of the next three dependants, regardless of age. An additional Rs. 450 is given for each of the next three dependants, and Rs. 250 is given for each additional person in the family. Although a female primary applicant is given the same amount of SA as a man, if she later marries she is then considered as his dependent, and receives only Rs. 600 a month. A man, however, not only retains his full SA after he marries, but he receives additional money for his “dependent” wife.” The Refugee Women and International Protection Act (NO.39 [XXXVI]-1985) recommends “that States, individually, jointly and in co-operation with UNHCR, redefine and reorient existing programmes and, where necessary, establish new programmes to meet the specific problems of refugee women, in particular to ensure the safeguard of their physical integrity and safety, and their *equality of treatment*.” UNHCR, *Basic Legal Documents on Refugees Fourth Edition* (Delhi: The UN Refugee Agency, 2002).

¹⁰ A survey notes that those with no knowledge of Hindi and English earn about Rs. 1, 400 monthly while refugees fluent in English can earn up to Rs. 2,200. The Other Media, *Batting to Survive*, 53.

¹¹ Both clinics operate three times a week, providing free treatment and medicine. WRWAB (established in 1996) receives its medical supply from YMCA and is supported by Women for Civil Society, made up of a coalition of Burmese women’s groups. YMCA works to reimburse the costs of medicine, runs a shuttle service to facilitate access to hospitals, provides interpretation services and offers counselling for women and minors.

very common amongst Burmese refugees because of living conditions which are substandard level, so they are prone to infections. The most common diseases apart from that are gastro-intestinal diseases, diarrhoea and dysentery and chest infections of different types are very common, from cold to pneumonia to tuberculosis. The incidence of morbidity is increasing...Extremely insufficient healthcare services are provided by UNHCR. Refugees are forced to visit government hospitals and dispensaries... Professionally speaking, I noticed that the quality of medical care from government hospitals is questionable.¹²

Language barriers and cultural differences prevent assimilation and women are particularly concerned with their children's education. Government schools are available for refugees, however, cases of bullying and Hindi medium instruction result in many opting to send their children to schools catering for the Burmese community such as Prospect Burma. YMCA also runs Hindi and English language classes along with Mathematics and computer training. Women are forced to live in overcrowded accommodation in highly unsanitary conditions. Unable to pay full rent and to offer support to newly arrived refugees, majority live in shared accommodation which often means up to six people living in a single room in urban villages located at Bodella, Jeewan Park, Vikaspuri, Janakpuri and Tilak Nagar (located in West Delhi). Additionally, women refugees face gender-based violence in Delhi including domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape. Ms. Akhu, in charge of the India branch of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the "Women Against Violence" programme notes that,

women continue to suffer domestic violence as men think that they can beat women anytime if they don't obey – the same thinking in Chin state and similar to that of our grandparents and fathers. We have started a safe house for women where we provide food, security and counselling. Once a victim is in a safe house, we give counselling to their husbands about women's rights and we explain the Indian law. Most cases are due to arguments between partners, overcrowded accommodation, shortage of money, unemployment and alcoholism. Some women are HIV positive and we also give them counselling.¹³

Women refugees echoed similar sentiments and shared that:

Room rent is very expensive. On top of that the local landlords do not like Burmese people because we have a different culture and different food. For example, when we cook pork, there is a little smell. But we want to eat our traditional food, but they do not allow us to. It may be very trivial, but it can be a problem...we have to stay in big groups and sometimes the landlord evicts us. They treat us like animals, whenever their mood is not good, they shout at us. At work, local [peoples'] salary is more than ours because we are refugees, but we are doing the same thing. I earn Rs. 6,700, which finishes after paying for room rent and food and to take care of my younger sixteen year old brother. It is difficult to maintain our culture since we have different looks and dress. If we wear our cultural dress, there will be some awkwardness with local people, so we have to adapt sometimes. For me, I used to wear kurta sometimes, the Indian cultural dress. It makes us more comfortable.¹⁴

¹² Personal interview with Dr. Tint Swe, Founder of Yamuna Clinic, Delhi, September 15, 2011.

¹³ Personal interview with Ms. Akhu, Women's League of Burma, Delhi, September 20, 2011.

¹⁴ Personal interview with Mang Dol Tial, Community Animator at DBA, Delhi, October 1, 2011. Currently working at DBA where she acts as an interpreter of information, she arrived in New Delhi from Chin State at

Mang Doi Tial, Community Animator, DBA

*When my children play outside, local children throw stones and pebbles at them. Once, one of my sons was seriously injured and a Chin elderly brought him home. It's worse than Burma here, I do not feel safe.*¹⁵

Maw Maw, Member, Zotung Women Development Network (ZWDN)

*I came to Delhi in 2006. I got admission into university with the help of Chin Student Union and Mizo Student Union and I also got a scholarship from UNHCR. It's really nice out here, you get exposed to ideas and you can be open about your views. But on the other hand, it is really difficult as a refugee to study in an Indian university where you have to hide your identity all the time because as a refugee you have no rights to study in university. I tell people I'm a Mizo from India and I have also picked up some of the language. They might look at me with different eyes, with pity, which I don't want. A lot of refugees have problems at university such as identity crisis, financial issues, and language barriers.*¹⁶

Tialte (pseudonym), University Student and member of BWD

*Majority of them are villagers from Chin state – uneducated, illiterate, no skills, so to adjust to daily life in a city is so difficult. Plus they do not have money, they cannot speak the language so they cannot communicate well with the local people. So every day, they face problems – they are beaten up, sexually abused at workplaces, at the night markets, raped by neighbours. They also have no access to the Indian legal system. Drinking and domestic violence are also major issues, the stresses of life are taken out on women. The UNHCR also issues refugee certificates on a family basis which makes divorce cases very messy. Women's organisations have to work with SLIC to resolve these cases. There are also many young girl refugees who are unaccompanied by family members. They also face many problems when they share accommodation and a lack of privacy is also not good.*¹⁷

Thin Thing Aung, Presidium Board Member, Women's League of Burma and
Mizzima News

At nearly every interview with refugee women, one heard stories of unpleasant experiences on the streets, harassment during visits to night markets and cases of sexual assault which are indifferently treated by the police due to the inability to identify the perpetrator. Burmese women refugees seem to be targeted as easy victims because of their perceived vulnerability, helplessness and inability to converse in local languages. Their distinct socio-cultural backgrounds and looks are also identified as reasons for why they are targeted. In a recent newspaper report, Cing Deih Lam Siang from Bodella states that "it is very demeaning. Just because we dress differently and look different, people stare at us and sexually harass us."¹⁸ These cases, while not reported by mainstream media are often

age 23. She is also enrolled in a distance learning course in Public Administration at Indira Gandhi National Open University.

¹⁵ Personal interview with Maw Maw, member of ZWDN, Delhi, September 13, 2011. Maw Maw arrived in Delhi in 2010 after her husband was taken away by government soldiers and she has four children. She is also the leader of the Women's Wing in WZDN.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Tialte (pseudonym), member of BWD, Delhi, September 6, 2011.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Thin Thin Aung, Presidium Board Member, Women's League of Burma and Mizzima News, Delhi, September 20, 2011. She arrived in 1990 as a political refugee.

¹⁸ Kim Arora, "Fear Stalks Myanmar Refugees," *The Times of India*, Delhi (November 15, 2011), 10.

highlighted in online reports.¹⁹ More disturbing is the perceived nonchalance on the part of authorities and the IPs to look into their cases and the sense of passivity which accompanies women refugees' fear of sexual assault. This is evident in the case of Mang Doi Tial who states,

*We go to the night market after 10pm. They tell us not to venture out at night, but this can't be helped, as we have financial problems. But on the way there we face harassment by the locals. Even in the daytime, sometimes they follow us on bikes and molest us. I have faced this problem four or five times. I requested help from SLIC and UNHCR's Women Protection Centre but there is no response. Maybe it is because we can't identify the culprit. But it is a common problem so maybe that is why it is neglected.*²⁰

Apart from the frustration at the gender insensitive attitude displayed by authorities and agencies, refugee women also reveal a keen sense of being a "racial, cultural other" when they speak of their experiences. From Tialte's fear of being discovered as a refugee by fellow students, to Maw Maw's anguish at the discrimination her children face and Mang Doi Tial's awareness of local hostility towards Burmese food, living arrangements and cultural dress which sets them apart, women display feelings of alienation and disempowerment. While facilities are in place to help refugees, financial instability, unfair wages at work and social barriers continue to plague their efforts. The primary struggle for most refugees in resettlement countries, as Egon Kunz notes, is the lack of cultural compatibility between the host society and the refugee community which determines the extent and success of integration.²¹ There is a need for concreted solutions and effective programs that do not reinforce social inequality and unfair power dynamics.

Although encouraged to send their children to public schools, refugees prefer sending them to informal refugee schools where they are not pressured to learn Hindi and face less hostility, suggesting that specialised schools are needed to cater to refugee children who are often older than their classmates and may suffer psychological stress in a new environment. Similarly, while the UNHCR and its IPs work towards the goal of early self-sufficiency for refugees, which both legitimises the organisation's authority and justifies its policies, it needs to avoid romanticising refugees' agency by acknowledging that they face significant hurdles while living at the margins in Delhi. Although many women refugees are employed, they are underpaid and have no savings, which thus begs the question whether financial independence and employment are realistic measures of self-sufficiency. Legislation which treats refugees as foreigners despite residing in the country for many years hampers efforts at integration and supports the politics of exclusion. It affects the ability of refugees to access justice when faced with discrimination and unfair treatment.

Refugee households are 'survivalist' households where earnings are spent immediately on basic necessities thus resulting in little or no savings, leaving women with no financial

¹⁹ Many reports stress the lack of action taken over cases of rape by either the UNHCR, SLIC or the Delhi police. See: Refugee International, "India: Burmese Chin Refugees Experience Sexual Harassment," (December 16, 2009), <http://www.refintl.org/blog/india-burmese-chin-refugees-experience-sexual-harassment>; Burma News International, "Chin Refugee Raped in New Delhi India," (April 5, 2011), <http://bnionline.net/index.php/news/khonumthung/10473-chin-refugee-raped-in-new-delhi-india.html>; Chin Refugee Committee New Delhi, "Myanmar Women Stalked, Assaulted in Delhi," (November 10, 2011), <http://crcdelhi.wordpress.com/2011/11/10/myanmar-women-stalked-assaulted-in-delhi/>.

²⁰ Personal interview with Mang Doi Tial, Community Animator, DBA, Delhi, October 1, 2011.

²¹ Egon Kunz, "Exile and Resettlement: Refugee Theory," *International Migration Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (1981): 47.

independence. Due to the disruption of the agrarian lifestyle and family structure, women are forced to go into non-traditional fields of work (cleaning, factory work). Often they are forced to bring their young babies to work due to the lack of childcare facilities or relatives to look after them and cannot afford to take childcare leave for fear of antagonising their employers. Women continue to shoulder the burden of domestic duties and child-rearing. As Thin Thin Aung notes, women in abusive households are unable to resort to divorce or separation due to UNHCR rules on resettlement and issuing refugee certificates. Cases of domestic violence have increased in recent years and women are at a distinct disadvantage as they remain linked to and dependent on their husbands for purposes of verification and resettlement chances. Women refugees continue to lack access to birth control and also do not practice it due to religious reasons (abortion is not encouraged amongst the community), thus resulting in unwanted pregnancies. While they may find employment in Delhi, women refugees continue to be disadvantaged by religious beliefs and traditional gender norms.

Burmese refugee women, however, are not helpless, demoralised victims of suffering and although vulnerable in their host country, are simultaneously engaged in processes of change and liberation in a new environment. Despite the struggles they face, women refugees acknowledge the freedom of expression they enjoy, the ability to freely practise their faith and freedom of movement. Many women report that they find great solace in Christianity, their family and their cultural traditions which remain primary markers of self-identity. While Western discourse on refugee and migrant gender relations often presupposes that ethnic women continue to be oppressed and have limited rights in their host environment, for Burmese women refugees, freedom *consists of* the ability to *actively and openly* practise their religion and customs. They continue to define themselves through their family relations, traditions, religion and take great pride in their ethnic identity and loyalty to Chin State. Christmas (*Khrismas*), the New Year (*Kumthar*) and Easter (*Tho*) remain important social festivities for the community and Chin National Day (February 20) and Chin Sports Festival are celebrated annually in Delhi.²² Religion is a main source of motivation for women refugees and many are active participants in Christian fellowships. The refugee community patronises different Christian fellowships by ethnic sub-tribes, including the Delhi Burmese Christian Fellowship, Chin Believers Church, and Zotung Christian Fellowship (See Table 1).

In the face of religious and ethnic persecution in Burma and the constant fear that the Chin culture would be “lost” in subsequent generations due to the process of refugee migration and resettlement to different countries thus causing an eventual erosion of ethnic and community ties, perhaps it is not surprising that refugees continue to hold firm their cultural roots, dialects and community-based networks. Integration with the local community is therefore made difficult due to an acute self-awareness of being culturally different. Women interviewed seemed resigned to the need for personal sacrifice but their primary concern remained that of self-sustenance. Their current situation, highly revealing of how national tragedies come to be reflected at the family and personal levels, is also a result of an independent act and the decision to leave – a symbolic assertion of their human rights and

²² Chin National Day was conceived at the first Chin National Conference in 1948 and is celebrated annually by Chin communities worldwide. Large scale ethnic community gatherings and activities are not allowed in many parts of Chin State and celebrations in the capital city are not permitted. In Chinland, Chin National Day has been celebrated as ‘Chin State Day’ for political reasons ever since General Ne Win assumed power in 1962. See Mizzima News, “Chin National Day Turns into Chin State Day Celebration in Burma,” (February 20, 2009), <http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/1747-chin-national-day-turns-into-chin-state-day-celebration-in-burma.html>.

the importance the community places on human dignity, freedom and equal treatment as nationals of Burma.

Name of Church	Ethnic Affiliation	Name of Church	Ethnic Affiliation
Burmese Roman Catholic Fellowship	All ethnicities	Lai Christian Church	Hakha and Thantlang
United Pentecostal Church	Chin-Pentecostal	Chin Believers Church	Hakha
Delhi Burmese Christian Fellowship	Falam	Delhi Chin Baptist Church	Hakha
Gospel Baptist Church	Falam	Chin Christian Fellowship	Zotung, Zophei, Mara, Loutu, Senthang
Zotung Christian Fellowship	Zotung	Kachin Christian Church	Kachin
Zophei Christian Fellowship	Zophei	Burma Mizo Christian Fellowship	Lushai
Mara Fellowship	Mara	Seventh Day Adventist	Zomi, Matu, Mizo, Falam
Khumi Christian Fellowship	Khumi	Matu Christian Church	Matu
Delhi Matu Christian Fellowship	Matu	Bethel Assembly of God	Zomi
Zangiat Christian Fellowship	Falam	Zomi Christian Fellowship	Zomi
Zomi Baptist Convention of Myanmar Church	Zomi	The Truth Mission Evangelical Fellowship	Lushai

Table 1: Churches and Fellowships established by the various ethnic groups/tribes of the Burmese refugee community in Delhi

Burmese Women Refugees as Activists

Besides challenging the conventional constructions of victimhood in the refugee experience, the case of Burmese refugee women also reveals the need to reconceptualise their identities as multiple and fluid as they regenerate themselves as socio-political and historical actors. As Frances Tomlinson notes, “the label ‘refugee woman’ is inherently multiple, indicating not only gender and placement in a category replete with political overtones, but also a position as ‘not from here’, and thus able to be placed in some minority, ethnic or cultural group.”²³ The complexities of the female refugee experience, however, involving both loss and regeneration, disruption and re-integration, has resulted in providing opportunities for activism, independence, building social interconnectedness in a new location and inculcating a sense of ethnic consciousness and belonging. “‘Regeneration’ can be traced in the resilient ways people work through the effects of trauma by generating counter forces which potentially motivates their agency.”²⁴ In the case of female Burmese refugees in Delhi

²³ Tomlinson, “Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging,” 282.

²⁴ Sean Field, “Beyond ‘Healing’: Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration,” *Oral History*, Vol. 34, No.1 (2006), 40.

this is illustrated via their bonding over shared past experiences, social identification as an ethnic community and the desire to help the community and raise awareness about its socio-political issues by forming community organisations. The organisations comprise large women's organisations with transnational links, mainstream women's community organisations and small informal ethnic refugee organisations. While those who run these organisations hold official posts and work full-time, others work on a voluntary basis or contribute as regular members.

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Women's League of Chinland (WLC) are two examples of large women's political organisations with transnational links. They maintain links with refugees and human rights groups along the Thailand, India, China and Bangladesh borders and have several regional offices. While WLB focuses on providing peacebuilding training workshops and networking at international conferences, their primary objectives include the political empowerment of women in Burma, promoting democracy and eradicating gender-based violence.²⁵ The WLC focuses specially on Chin women, advocating women's and political rights, lobbying and conducting health awareness workshops and educational programs for children and women along the border areas and within Chin State. The organization's blend of ethnic focus along with the rhetoric of globalization and transnationalism provides interesting insights into the continued engagement and ties between migrants, activists and those in Chin State.²⁶ As Inge Brees notes, the workshops and training programs conducted at border areas and within refugee communities abroad have "the potential to influence social hierarchies and fixed mindsets in the home community, thus transnational activities on a household level can have political consequences. For example, gender awareness raising activities in Thai refugee camps can lead to a transfer of these ideas to family members at home and, as such, to growing concern about female participation in political matters in Burma."²⁷

Within the refugee community in Delhi, organizations such as Burmese Women Union (BWU), Burmese Women Delhi (BWD) and Women Rights and Welfare Association Burma (WRWAB) play a more active role. These organisations are community-based networks which provide advocacy support, intervention in cases of gender-based violence, interpretation services, conduct research and discussion sessions, and liaise with Indian civil society groups to conduct workshops and training in the fields of women's rights, refugee rights, human rights and raising awareness of health, legal and employment concerns. BWD, for instance, is supported by Hope Adelaide, an international NGO which funds their monthly workshops and programs (conducted in ethnic dialects) which conduct programs on female-empowerment emphasizing the value of women's work, legal rights, reproductive health and birth control. Besides giving women an opportunity to rebuild their lives via active engagement, these organizations are a key source of support for incoming refugees as they are culturally sensitive and recognise the barriers that refugees face. Women refugees have also further organized themselves into smaller informal refugee organizations catering to every sub-tribe/ethnicity in the community so as to act as a bridge between mainstream organizations and these groups and also to serve the communities better. These include the Chin Women Union, Burma Mizo Women Organisation, Kachin

²⁵ Women's League of Burma, <http://womenofburma.org/>. Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the WLB collectively comprises of thirteen different ethnic-based women's organisations.

²⁶ Women's League of Chinland, <http://www.chinwomen.org/>.

²⁷ Brees, *op.cit.*, 288-289.

Women Organisation and Rakhaing Women Union amongst many others (See Table 2).²⁸ They provide assistance with counseling, housing, translation of official documents and fund-raising for needy refugee families. Collectively, these smaller organizations are vital in ensuring refugees do not feel isolated, by providing social assistance, defending collective interests and promoting socio-cultural bonding. On their work within the refugee community, two women describe the nature of their participation and service thus:

*We provide training on family planning, vaccinations and hygiene. We have workshops once a month and we tell people about family planning and how it will help their future. We make them understand that it is difficult to have a large family with a very small income of Rs. 2,000 – Rs. 3,000. I joined because I have experience and I can speak some Hindi and English. I am sympathetic to their cause and so I help.*²⁹

*When I first came, BWD helped me and so now I want to help Burmese refugee women. Once a month we have meetings and workshops at different refugee settlements in Delhi. Each month we have different themes, this month we teach healthcare, the next we teach human rights and so on. I also used to work at Refugee Healthcare three times a week because in our Burmese community there are many patients. The UNHCR wants to help us I think, but there are so many of us... I didn't want to die in Myanmar so I fled here, but here there are also many problems. In Burma, we don't know about women's rights and human rights. But now I can help other people, so it's a little bit better.*³⁰

For many of the women activists interviewed, living in Delhi has allowed them to take on new roles and responsibilities. While some employed label of 'volunteering' which stressed their motivation in helping their community, for others, the appeal of working in refugee organisations lay in the flexibility allowed, and an escape from the informal employment sector where they become subjects of multiple discriminations in occupations that deskill and declass migrants. Community-based ethnic women's organisations are in many ways gendered spaces and act as support systems which provide a sense of the familiar in terms of ethnicity and language as women rebuild their lives. Being able to communicate in their ethnic dialect removes a structural barrier to women's participation in empowerment projects within the refugee community (a hurdle many civil society groups and agencies still face in their interaction with refugees). Working alongside women of their own community enables an empathetic understanding of the practical concerns and constraints on their participation while also providing women an important base to develop as community leaders and gain valuable organisational skills. Apart from raising gender consciousness in the struggle against women's inequality, they actively perform a range of services vital to the community, such as assisting with disputes and initiating new refugees into the city, within the more personal and private space that informal refugee community organisations allow for. More crucially, volunteers see their active participation as a way of giving back to their community, a moral and practical duty to ensure the well-being of their people. In the face of organisational indifference and limited aid from agencies, they play a critical role in refugees' lives and in rebuilding a sense of community for them in Delhi.

²⁸ They also work in co-operation with other organisations including CHRO, Chin Student Union, Chin Refugee Committee and the Kachin Refugee Committee. For a full list of community based organisations and women's organisations see Table 2.

²⁹ Personal interview with Mary, member of Women for Women Healthcare (sponsored by Austrian Burma Center), Delhi, October 1, 2011. In 2010, she was in charge of women's issues at CRC. She has also served as co-ordinator for the Central Chin Women's Organisation (1996-7).

³⁰ Personal interview with Cherry, member of BWD, Delhi, October 1, 2011.

Beyond the practical duties and support they extend on a daily basis, Burmese women refugee organisations are concurrently active in political activities such as report releases and the occasional demonstration, such as on World Refugee Day. They are politically aware and continue to follow the progress of democracy in Burma. On her participation in demonstrations, Mang Doi Tial notes that, “the power of the group is important. But at least we participate and demand something during demonstrations. I hope to see a good situation and good government in Burma, without corruption and discrimination.”³¹ They are also simultaneously involved in efforts to raise awareness of their community’s predicament in collaboration with NGOs to resolve hostile local attitudes by positioning themselves as people who are yearning for better lives and genuine democracy. This is a community which remains deeply invested in events back home. In many ways, theirs is a femininity which encompasses an active agency and subjectivity which empowers them to speak up, serve and fight for justice on behalf of their community. With their transnational ties and links to border camps, NGOs, international refugee agencies, resettled kin in third countries, these refugee women are beginning to make an impact on the larger mainstream struggle for democracy and human’s rights in Burma, a domain once dominated by the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi and the resistance groups.

There are, however, constraints to the impact and influence of these smaller organisations, especially in circumstances when resources and funding are inadequate and when traditional gender stereotypes hold women back. While women refugees in Delhi are more vocal and articulate in sharing concerns, uneducated women refugees tend to be less active in engaging with socio-political affairs and see themselves as subordinate to men. Majority of the women interviewed claimed that they face no opposition from their family members when participating in workshops organised by women’s groups, but they do not attend political demonstrations and events because of insufficient knowledge about politics. Says Tialte, “Women in my community do not want to speak, do not want to interact and give their own views, so I am not so optimistic.”³² Women refugees are still regarded as purveyors of tradition and community identity and this is especially clear at social events and community gatherings where they take the lead in cooking traditional food, participating in cultural performances and selling ethnic wear and goods.

These refugee women challenge the construction of women refugees as victims of conflict and forced migration, for their experiences have also opened up new avenues for them to develop agency. Prominent political activist Thin Thin Aung who came to Delhi to continue the struggle for democracy in 1990 also notes the difficulty Burmese women face when participating in politics, “my family was against what I was doing, they do not support my activism.”³³ She acknowledges that it is easier to be a political activist without the responsibility of having children and family. Political repression, along with traditional gender norms made it difficult for women to be politically active in Burma, but Delhi has provided a safe haven for female political activists, although those with family obligations are necessarily restricted. Many volunteers and members of these women’s organizations have been subjected to sexual violence and faced financial difficulty, yet by stepping forward, they have reshaped their experiences as mere victims. Their service in education, health, income-generation projects, fund-raising and raising political awareness constitutes important humanitarian work which supplements the work of IPs. Their tireless promotion

³¹ Personal interview with Mang Dol Tial, Community Animator at DBA, Delhi, October 1, 2011.

³² Personal interview with Tialte (pseudonym), Member of BWD, Delhi, September 6, 2011.

³³ Personal interview with Thin Thin Aung, Presidium Board Member, Women’s League of Burma and Mizzima News, Delhi, September 20, 2011.

of women's and human rights has larger significant implications for the future of gender relations within the community as they provide gender sensitive training and perspectives. Their protestations against trivialisation of rape and sexual assault by authorities and protection agencies ensures that gender-based violence against women refugees continues to remain in the public eye.

	Women's Organisations	Location in New Delhi
1	Burmese Women Delhi	Bodella
2	Women Rights and Welfare Association Burma (WRWAB)	Bodella
3	Kuki Women Human Rights Organisation	Bodella
4	Central Chin Women Organisation	Sitapuri
5	Hakha Women Union	Jeevan Park
6	Zotung Women Development Network	New Delhi
7	Khumi Women Advancement Organisation	Chanakya Place
8	All Burma Democratic Lushei Women Organisation	Bodella
9	Burma Mizo Women Organisation	Asalatpur
10	Chin Women Union	New Delhi
11	Mara Women Organisation	Janakpuri C-1
12	Matu Women Union	Sitapuri
13	Zomi Women Union	Bodella
14	Kachin Women Organisation	New Delhi
15	Falam Chin Women Development Society	Bodella
16	Rakhaing Women Union	New Delhi
17	Burmese Women Union	New Delhi
18	Women's League of Burma (WLB)	Bodella
	Refugee Community-based Organisations	Location in New Delhi
1	Chin Refugee Committee (CRC)	Chanakya Place
2	Kachin Refugee Committee (KRC)	Ashalatpur
3	Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO)	Ashalatpur
4	Chin Student Union	New Delhi
5	All Kachin Student & Youth Union	Asalatpur
6	Kuki Student Democratic Front	Bodella
7	Zomi Community Committee (Tiddim tribe)	Bodella
8	Matu Youth Organisation	Sitapuri
9	Burma Lushei Organisation (Lushei tribe)	Vikaspuri
10	Naga Youth Organisation (Naga tribe)	Bodella
11	Burma Mizo Community (Haulngoi & other Mizo tribes)	Asalatpur

Table 2: List of Burmese Women's Organisations and Community-based organisations in New Delhi

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