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BURMESE REFUGEE WOMEN AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF EXILE, RECONSTRUCTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

This research paper examines the predicament of Burmese women refugees in India and explores the complexities of the female refugee experience. Combining theoretical perspectives with personal narratives and oral histories, this paper provides a view of the struggles faced by refugee women as both victims of circumstance and agents of regeneration. More significantly, the case of Burmese refugee women challenges traditional stereotypes and gendered binary constructions of victimhood associated with the refugee experience. Their participation in community-based refugee organisations and the larger women's rights movement has provided refugee women with new scope for action, activism, social interconnectedness, cultural nationalism, transnational linkages, and economic and political mobilisation.

About this paper

This paper is the result of research conducted during the author's Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia) Research Fellowship with Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) in New Delhi, India, in 2011. Organised by the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies (the NTS-Asia Secretariat) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the annual NTS-Asia Research Fellowship allows young scholars to conduct research on non-traditional security issues in any of NTS-Asia's 20 member institutes. Find out more about NTS-Asia at www.rsis-ntsasia.org. More information about the RSIS Centre for NTS Studies can be found at www.rsis.edu.sg/nts.

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Biography

Sheena Kumari recently graduated with an MA in History from the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include interdisciplinary approaches towards the study of gender and women's history, post-colonialism, intellectual and cultural history, theories of travel, literature, and narrative studies. The history of Southeast Asia, South Asia and British imperial history are among her areas of focus. She has several publications (forthcoming) based on her research on British women's travel writing about Southeast Asia and is currently working on a project documenting the oral narratives of the Burmese refugee community and their collective memories and history.

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Introduction

The experiences of Burmese refugee women in India provides a uniquely interesting angle from which to explore the nexus 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. Although precise statistics are not available, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) currently recognises the presence of 7,500 Burmese refugees and 8,800 Burmese asylum-seekers in Delhi.[1] Local civil society groups, refugee organisations and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) estimate the number of undocumented refugees in the north-eastern state of Mizoram to be around 100,000.[2]

This research paper focuses primarily on the urban Burmese refugee population in Delhi. Among these refugees are members of Myanmar's many ethnic groups, including Chins, Burmans, Kachins and Arakanese. The majority are from Chin State, the poorest state in Myanmar, and belong to different sub-tribes (Matu, Hakha, Falam, Zomi, Lushai, Mizo, Zo, Asho, Lai and Khumi). The proximity of Manipur and Mizoram (in India) to Myanmar's border territories accounts for the predominance of Chins and of minorities from Kachin State and Sagaing Division (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The India-Burma border.

Source: The Other Media, *Battling to survive: A study of refugees and Burmese asylum seekers in Delhi* (New Delhi: The Other Media, 2010), 17.

[1] These figures are as of December 2011, and represent numbers for Delhi only as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not have access to Mizoram and the border areas. See: Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'India', in *UNHCR Global Appeal 2011 Update* (2011), 202, http://www.unhcr.org/4cd96e919.pdf

[2] The US Department of State estimates that there are up to 100,000 Chins in Mizoram State. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, 'Background note: Burma', US Department of State, 3 August 2011, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm

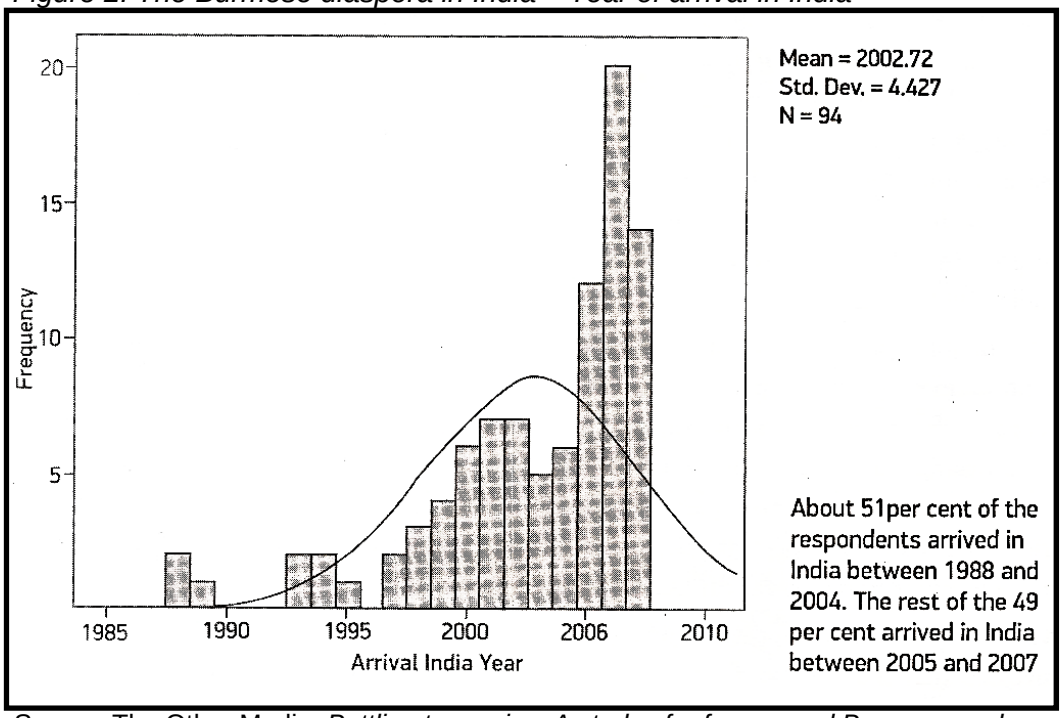
Refugees – women (and men) – flee to India for many reasons: ethnic civil war, severe human rights abuses inflicted by a ruthless military regime, discrimination against and the isolation of ethnic minorities, the policy of Burmanisation, forced labour, religious and political persecution, the silencing of 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 such as rape, harassment and forced marriages to military officials, or to escape border trafficking.

Refugee movements are not temporary, isolated events and must be understood within their socio-political contexts, the historical trajectory of a country's development, the legacies of colonialism and push factors arising from political crises or government policy. As Peter Rose notes, 'refugees do not live in a vacuum. They are part of an intricate socio-political web that must be seen as the background against which any portrait of their travails must be painted and any dissection of their innermost thoughts and feelings must be pinned.'[3]

The first major refugee exodus occurred in 1988, after a military crackdown on countrywide political demonstrations against the flawed policies of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, now referred to as the 8888 Uprising. In May 1990, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to recognise the overwhelming victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy in the country's multi-party parliamentary elections and placed her under house arrest. Since then, deteriorating political rights and civil liberties have caused dissidents to flee the country while increased militarisation, human rights violations and protracted low-intensity conflicts in the border areas have caused ethnic minorities to seek refuge in Thailand, Malaysia and India. In a direct co-relation with political clampdown and repression in Myanmar, the next major waves of refugee movement into India occurred after the December 1996 student demonstrations (and the closing down of universities) and in the wake of the 2007 Saffron Revolution. According to a field survey of 95 refugee households conducted by the civil society group, The Other Media, the number of refugee arrivals in India escalated after 1996 and 2007. Figure 2 highlights the pattern of arrival of Burmese refugees into India.

[3] Peter I. Rose, 'Some thoughts about refugees and the descendants of Theseus', *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1 (2001): 11.

Figure 2: The Burmese diaspora in India – Year of arrival in India



Source: The Other Media, *Battling to survive: A study of refugees and Burmese asylum seekers in Delhi* (New Delhi: The Other Media, 2010), 15.

The Chin community essentially regards their homeland as having always been an independent entity until its incorporation into the British Empire in 1895. Their sense of identity and shared heritage as a community is reinforced by Christianity, the first Chin Christians having been converted in the late 1800s with the arrival of American Baptist missionaries. In 1947, along with General Aung San and the leaders of other ethnic minorities, Chin leaders signed the Panglong Agreement, which guaranteed a constitutional process and the development of a federal union that would ensure the rights and autonomy of ethnic groups in independent Myanmar. With Aung San's assassination, the institutionalisation of military rule and the government's policy of '*Amyo, Batha, Thathana*' (One Race, One Language, One Religion) in seeking a population identified by the three Bs, 'Burman, Burmese and Buddhism', this has not materialised. Chin refugees in Delhi often speak of attacks on their livelihood, culture and religion, describing the exploitation of people and resources; the destruction of crops, livestock and churches; arbitrary arrest; targeted rape of women; and efforts to Burmanise and convert the Chins to Buddhism by disrupting services and forcing Christians to build Buddhist pagodas.[4]

Chin students were active in the 1988 uprising and later formed resistance movements such as the Chin National Front and Chin National League for Democracy. In the 1990 elections, Chin nationalist parties won all the seats in Chin State. However, the results were annulled, the leaders were jailed and many activists had to leave the country. Chin students and activists have continued the fight for self-determination and democracy both as part of resistance groups at the borders and as refugees abroad.

[4] For more detailed documentation, see: Salai Za Uk Ling and Salai Bawi Lian Ming, *Religious persecution: A campaign of ethnocide against Chin Christians in Burma* (Ottawa: Chin Human Rights Organisation, 2004).

Women remain the worst affected by the oppressive practices of the junta in Myanmar and will continue to be as long as there is a lack of effort and political will on the part of international governments to pressure the government due to political and geostrategic reasons. The phenomenon of Burmese women refugees are but a product of the political and socio-cultural marginalisation of ethnic minorities. There is a need for far-reaching constitutional reforms in Myanmar, and for a genuinely representative government that will ensure the rights of minorities and women, and thus a sense of national unity. With the recent 2010 elections and efforts towards a partial democracy in Myanmar, there is perhaps hope for change, but change will only fully materialise when Myanmar and its people move beyond conceptualising democracy as simply the casting of an electoral vote, to understanding the need to engage all segments of society and for the government to be accountable for how it treats those under its rule. In turn, the international community, including those hosting Burmese refugees, must support the efforts of those who remain invested in seeking change so that they can return to their homeland, by demanding that respect for basic human rights form the foundation of the nation in Myanmar.

Literature survey, methodology, aims and objectives

The arresting, tragic figure of 'the refugee' displaced by conflict, confrontation and the processes of state formation was thrust into the international spotlight in the aftermath of the Second World War. The growth in ethnic conflict and political repression resulting from civil wars, the Cold War, and nationalist and separatist movements during the 20th century saw an escalation – numerically and geographically – of refugee movements and displacement which showed no signs of abating. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) defines a refugee as:

> [a person who] owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.[5]

While the 1951 Refugee Convention was formulated to address the needs of refugees in Europe, a Protocol adopted in 1967 removed the Convention's geographical and temporal limits. From its inception, the field of refugee studies was regarded as 'a comprehensive, historical, interdisciplinary and comparative perspective which focuses on the consistencies and patterns in the refugee experience'.[6] The urgency of assessing the reasons for, and consequences of, forced migration led to a flourishing academic field where anthropology, sociology, international politics, development studies and diaspora studies provided nuanced examinations of refugee processes.[7]

While earlier studies dealt with the complexities of ethnic conflicts, international laws and the role of the UN, more recent works discuss the refugee predicament within the context of deterritorialisation, cultural identity, notions of space/place, the politics of belonging and exclusion, and transnationalism.[8] Scholars such as Aihwa Ong, Liisa Malkki and Karen

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[5] Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Basic international legal documents on refugees, Fourth edition* (New Delhi: UNHCR, 2002), 5.
[6] Barry Stein and Silvio Tomasi, 'Foreword', *International Migration Review* 15 (1981): 5.
[7] For a comprehensive literature survey on the history of refugee studies and its development since the 1940s, see: Richard Black, 'Fifty years of refugee studies: From theory to policy', *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 57–78.
[8] Relevant works include: Lance Clark, *Early warning of refugee flows* (Washington, DC: Refugee Policy

Jacobsen began to address the gaps in literature with regard to refugee settlement, integration, issues of race, the politics of humanitarianism and the roles that host communities and power structures play in refugees' lives, providing nuanced assessments of contemporary refugee issues.[9]

Women refugees

Despite constituting more than half of the world's refugee population, it was not until the early 1990s that international institutions and academics began addressing the plight of women refugees. Until then, as Tina Wallace notes, refugee women, their problems and their roles were largely invisible.[10] From situations of extreme pre-migration violence, gender-based assaults, traumatic journeys, to the challenges of resettlement, women refugees often bear the brunt of war, conflict and migration while still forming the backbone of their refugee community in their various feminine and maternal roles. In response to increasing instances of violence against women and children, the UNHCR implemented a directive entitled *Sexual violence against refugees: Guidelines on prevention and response* in 1995 – to both curb and raise awareness of human rights violations against women and of the use of rape and torture as weapons of modern warfare and as an instrument of ethnic cleansing.[11] Complementing the UNHCR's comprehensive programme, therapists, policymakers, and scholars of immigration and gender filled the gap within the refugee literature through their examination of the specific problems faced by women refugees. Among the areas of focus are issues of identity and adjustment, patterns of psychological distress, and gendered analyses of the use of rape and violence in conflict zones as a manifestation of gender power imbalances.[12] More significantly, a shift resulted both within academia and the international arena as scholars and

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Group, 1989); Gil Loescher and Laila Monahan, eds, *Refugees and international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Richard Black, 'Refugees and displaced persons: Geographical perspectives and research directions', *Progress in Human Geography* 15, no. 3 (1991): 281–98; B. Harrell-Bond and E. Voutira, 'Anthropology and the study of refugees', *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 4 (1992): 6–10; Jeremy Hein, 'Refugees, immigrants, and the state', *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993): 43–59; Aristide R. Zolberg and Peter M. Benda, eds, *Global migrants, global refugees: Problems and solutions* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001). For in-depth studies of refugee communities, see: Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, 'Ethnicity and the force of faith: Christian conversion among Khmer refugees', *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (1994): 24–37; Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and exile: Violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Rachel Hinton, 'NGO's as agents of change? The case of the Bhutanese refugee programme', *Cambridge Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (1995): 24–56.

[9] See: Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing displacement: Refugees and the politics of humanitarianism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries: Refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 377–404; Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is hiding: Refugees, citizenship, the new America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Karen Jacobsen, 'Livelihoods in conflict: The pursuit of livelihoods by refugees and the impact on the human security of host communities', *International Migration* 40, no. 5 (2002): 95–123; Erin K. Baines, *Vulnerable bodies: Gender, the UN and the global refugee crisis* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

[10] Tina Wallace, 'Taking the lion by the whiskers: Building on the strengths of refugee women', in *Changing perceptions: Writings on gender and development*, ed. Tina Wallace and Candida March (Oxford: Oxfam, 1991), 61.

[11] Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Sexual and gender-based violence against refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons: Guidelines for prevention and response* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2003), http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3f696bcc4.pdf

[12] Relevant multidisciplinary literature on refugee women include: Inger Agger, *The blue room: Trauma and testimony among refugee women: A psycho-social exploration* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994); Judith C. Kulig, '"Those with unheard voices": The plight of a Cambodian refugee woman', *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 11, no. 2 (1994): 99–107; Roberta Julian, 'Invisible subjects and the victimized self: Settlement experiences of refugee women in Australia', in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed. Ronit Lentin (London: Zed Books, 1997).

activists began to address the lived realities of refugee women and the shortcomings of international human rights laws and institutions in protecting refugee women and their rights.

Contemporary studies on women refugees have focused on their inspiring capacity for resilience in the face of immense struggle and on more theoretical understandings of the gendered dimensions of the refugee experience. More importantly, an understanding that women refugees continue to face problems such as sexual violence, emotional trauma, isolation, lack of social support systems, language barriers, racial intolerance and limited job opportunities in their host societies has seen the literature examine their integration into host societies, with their specific historical experiences and cultural identities taken into consideration. Discarding the oft-held stereotype and representation of refugee women as oppressed, passive victims, scholars have emphasised how economic and political mobilisation and the need to be self-sufficient on foreign land have given women refugees new scope for activism and a 'voice' to articulate their concerns. While historians of nationalism and women's history seek to restore the place of women refugees within national histories by analysing social constructions of memory, identity and nationalism, scholars of social work and politics challenge the effectiveness of top-down methods of aid, stressing the need for dialogue and self-reliance as a way to restore dignity, self-sufficiency and respect to women refugees, making them vital members of society.[13] Although the vast body of literature on refugees has contributed greatly to our understanding of refugee experiences, the focus remains skewed geographically and few studies have examined the predicament of Asian, and more specifically Southeast Asian, refugee communities.

Urban refugees

In response to the growing recognition of the long-term existence of urban refugees and the need for comprehensive policies to address their concerns, the study of urban refugee experiences has expanded in recent years. Scholars have gleaned crucial insights into the complexities of the experience of the urban environment, an experience drastically different from that of refugee camps where assistance and protection are readily available.[14] The nature of city life, with refugees often dispersed geographically, has often meant that refugees learn to be self-sufficient in their new surroundings much quicker, in order to meet their basic needs when institutional resources are unevenly distributed, not forthcoming or insufficient.

The study of urban refugees presents interesting opportunities to examine their engagement with NGOs and international organisations, their attempts at integration, their shifting patterns of identity, trans-local forms of socio-political organisation, the formation of transnational ties with diasporic networks, and, often understudied, their interaction with the local population.

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[13] For relevant contemporary literature on the experiences of refugee women, see: Bruna Irene Seu, 'The woman with the baby: Exploring narratives of female refugees', *Feminist Review* no. 73 (2003): 158–65; Susanne Binder and Jelena Tosic, 'Refugees as a particular form of transnational migrations and social transformations: Socioanthropological and gender aspects', *Current Sociology* 53, no. 4 (2005): 607–24; Doris Warriner, 'Language learning and the politics of belonging: Sudanese women refugees *becoming* and *being* "American"', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2007): 343–59; Frances Tomlinson, 'Marking difference and negotiating belonging: Refugee women, volunteering and employment', *Gender, Work and Organization* 17, no. 3 (2010): 278–96.

[14] Relevant case studies and theoretical scholarship on urban refugees: Marc Sommers, 'Urbanisation and its discontents: Urban refugees in Tanzania', *Forced Migration Review* no. 4 (1999): 22–4; Sally Peberdy and Zonke Majodina, '"Just a roof over my head?": Housing and the Somali refugee community in Johannesburg', *Urban Forum* 11, no. 2 (2000): 273–88; Natalie Briant and Andrew Kennedy, 'An investigation of the perceived needs and priorities held by African refugees in an urban setting in a first country of asylum', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 4 (2004): 437–59; Karen Jacobsen, 'Refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas: A livelihoods perspective', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 273–86.

Studies on refugees in the urban areas of developing and middle-income Asian countries remain limited despite the increasing numbers of refugees to be found in Asian urban centres.[15] Moreover, to date, few works have examined the *female* urban refugee experience, resulting perhaps from the early misconception that urban refugees tend to be predominantly male.[16]

About this study

This study aims to contribute towards addressing the gap in the literature on refugees in Asia, and particularly the women refugees in the region, by studying the unique circumstances of Burmese women refugees in the urban environs of Delhi. While scholars such as Yoko Nakama and Karen Leiter have shed light on the pressing medical issues and situation at the Thai-Burmese border and in Delhi, it is the civil society group, The Other Media, that has provided the first detailed account of the challenges that urban Burmese refugees encounter in Delhi, addressing the structural and institutional barriers that the refugees face on a daily basis. However, apart from examining language barriers, transportation issues, challenges with regard to healthcare and education, as well as providing recommendations on ways to alleviate the situation encountered by the refugees, little has been done by way of a gender perspective on women's issues. Kamini Karlekar's comparative study of Afghan and Burmese women refugees in Delhi adopts a gendered analysis of women's experiences and roles but stops short of an in-depth examination into their active involvement in NGOs and political activism.[17]

In Delhi, the experiences of men and women refugees are undeniably different on a range of dimensions, the latter being particularly affected by the disruption of traditional gender roles and the dangers of urban life. They are also disadvantaged in terms of access to information and resources. However, as this study of Burmese women refugees in Delhi shows, although urban integration remains an unsettling process for the majority of these women, it has allowed them to make dynamic transitions (social, psychological, personal and emotional) as

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[15] Dale Buscher notes that 40 per cent of all persons of concern to the Office of the High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) live in refugee camps while 13 per cent reside in urban areas (47 per cent remain in rural areas or are unaccounted for). Ascertaining who rightfully constitutes an 'urban refugee' is complicated by the population also comprising economic migrants, opportunistic migrants and the marginalised. Dale Buscher, 'Case identification: Challenges posed by urban refugees' (NGO note for the agenda item presented at the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, Geneva, Switzerland, 18–19 June 2003), http://www.unhcr.org/3ee6dcc34.html

[16] While acknowledging that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has no consistent definition of an 'urban refugee,' and that inadequate and incomplete registration prevent the compilation of accurate statistics, a report in 1995 states that 'urban caseloads tend to comprise predominantly young, single (or separated) males'. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'UNHCR's policy and practice regarding urban refugees, a discussion paper' (Evaluation Reports, 1 October 1995), http://www.unhcr.org/3bd4254e7.html

[17] Relevant literature on Burmese refugees include: J.H. Hre Mang, *Report on the Chin refugees in Mizoram State of India* (New Delhi: Other Media Communications, 2000); Yoko Nakama, 'Reproductive health among refugees: Case studies from New Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 51 (2005): 5380–5; Kamini Karlekar, *Victims and agents: Refugee women of the Afghan and Burmese community in Delhi* (New Delhi: Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), 2006); Karen Leiter et al., 'Human rights abuses and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS: The experiences of Burmese women in Thailand', *Health and Human Rights* 9, no. 2 (2006): 88–111; Susan Banki, 'Burmese refugees in Tokyo: Livelihoods in the urban environment', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 328–44; Amy Alexander, 'Without refuge: Chin refugees in India and Malaysia', *Forced Migration Review* no. 30 (2008): 36–7; Inge Brees, 'Refugees and transnationalism on the Thai-Burmese border', *Global Networks* 10, no. 2 (2010): 282–99; The Other Media, *Battling to survive: A study of refugees and Burmese asylum seekers in Delhi* (New Delhi: The Other Media, 2010).

they are exposed to new ideas and urbanisation, and as they form transnational ties with international organisations and diasporas in third countries and other urban nodes.

While time and operational constraints did come into play in the decision to focus specifically on Delhi, a more significant reason was the prevalence of women's rights groups, refugee organisations and human rights organisations based in the capital as well as the presence of the UNHCR. The existence and activities of these groups and organisations provide fascinating insights into women's activism and engagement on a larger platform.

While most Burmese refugees choose to stay in the north-eastern states of Mizoram and Manipur where there is cultural and ethnic familiarity, many choose to make their way to Delhi to acquire a UNHCR refugee certificate, which guarantees them protection and offers hope for subsequent third-country resettlement. Others move to Delhi to seek vocational training, employment and health services. The transition is made easier due to pre-existing ethnic enclaves and a strong Burmese refugee social network in West Delhi.

The experiences of Burmese refugee women in India have been largely understudied. While reports from Delhi regularly focus on the various problems faced by refugees – marginalisation, discrimination, medical and housing issues, and gender-based violence – less is known about the attempts at reconstruction and adaptation within the existing refugee networks.[18] What needs to be examined 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, and 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; and 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 racialised violence; and the long-term effects of their past experiences in a new location.

First, this study challenges the stereotypical discourses that have 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. This study thus problematises the very status of Burmese refugee women – conceptualising them as racialised, sexualised displaced 'others' both within their 'home country' and an 'alien' host country hostile to the influx of refugees into their capital city and the state of Mizoram. It is important that gender not be simplistically read as simply pertaining to 'women' rather than to relations of power and prestige informed by notions of maleness and femaleness. Thus this article aims to shed greater insights into the gendered nature of refugee life – and the manner in which identities, traditions, and cultural and gender roles have been negotiated and continues to be renegotiated in the process of reconstruction, integration and re-creating a place/space for themselves as a refugee community.

Second, this study situates the predicament of 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 such as the UN, women NGOs, legal associations, political organisations, their own ethnic community organisations for women, and the media.

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[18] See: Naoko Obi and Jeff Crisp, *Evaluation of UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban areas: A case study review of New Delhi* (Geneva: Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, November 2000); Nakama, 'Reproductive health among refugees'; The Other Media, *Battling to Survive.*

Their engagement with the global dynamics of feminist politics and the women's rights movement suggests a willingness to go beyond their cultural and gender roles, identities and expectations to work in a larger transnational context for socio-political purposes. This then calls for a re-look into the trajectory of the history 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. This has also afforded them newfound space in which to represent themselves and their community, articulate their demands, express their rights and engage an international audience.

The theoretical framework for this paper draws upon global feminist scholarship, women's activism and refugee studies, and the intersections between gender, human rights, race, nationhood and displacement. These are paradigms which cut across borders and cultural contexts while taking into consideration the unique experiences and consciousness of female Burmese refugees.

Interviews were conducted among Burmese refugee women based in Delhi over a three-month period (September–December 2011). Interviewees chosen were representative of the community in demographic variables such as age, occupation and marital status.[19] The interviews were conducted and translated with the assistance of community interpreters. The focus was on collecting personal narratives related to their reasons for migration; their experiences and perceptions of transition; adjustment issues; political affiliations and future aspirations. As is the case with oral interviews, issues of selective memory, silencing, forgetting and repressing must be taken into account, yet oral histories of migration remain compelling in shedding light on a refugee consciousness which transcends geographical and temporal reference; and in providing insights on the complex processes of transition, resettlement, and the loss of belonging, family connections and status. Ultimately, combining theoretical perspectives with first-hand insights and oral histories provides a rare overview of the struggles faced by refugee women as both victims of circumstance and agents of regeneration. Not only can we generate public recognition of a community's collective historical experience (which has hitherto been silenced, forgotten or ignored), these stories, as Alistair Thomson eloquently puts it, 'capture priceless evidence about prior experience and lived histories … and the stories are themselves constantly evolving and moving, presenting living histories in every sense of the term and a unique resource and opportunity for social and historical understanding.'[20]

Burmese women refugees in Delhi: Circumstances and challenges

Women refugees arrive in India after being subjected to various forms of violence, from forced labour, to violence in detention and sexual violence. While most were responsive to being interviewed, many were 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. Monique Skidmore notes how fear is the most common emotion evoked by the regime to subdue the population,

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[19] The women I interviewed have diverse backgrounds and experiences, ranging from the unemployed to those working as teachers and nurses in refugee schools and clinics. Some work in Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-appointed organisations or in the informal employment sector. A small number are students pursuing degrees or professional certificates. Others have extensive experience working as teachers and missionaries in Chin State or Yangon. Some are activists for women's organisations or have established community-based women's organisations.

[20] Alistair Thomson, 'Moving stories: Oral history and migration studies', *Oral History* 27, no. 1, Migration (1999): 35–6.

engendering a reaction of being 'pressed down, indicative of the experience of feeling trapped and pinned down'.[21] Abuse of ethnic minorities – beating, torture, imprisonment, and systematic rape and abuse of women – is part of a larger strategy by the Burmese regime aimed at terrorising ethnic minorities and curtailing 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 also is a direct connection between rape and migration: women flee Myanmar because they have been raped or to escape being raped. Sexual violence by the army is widespread in Chin State; women experience rape as soldiers patrol villages, during forced labour, while farming and as retaliation against family members suspected of anti-government activities. In most cases, victims received no legal recourse. Most were afraid to report abuses for fear of further abuse in military-controlled villages, which also makes these cases difficult to document.[22] Even though this has been a practice of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) for decades to subjugate the population, the issue of rape remains taboo among Burmese people: rape is seen as a shameful experience, survivors fear stigma within their community, women are seen as 'unclean', men feel impotent when it comes to protecting their families, and communities are reminded that they are oppressed by their country's military. Successive governments have always refuted the reports of rape against ethnic women and despite the number of international human rights instruments to which it is obligated to comply, no action is expected to be taken to cease the widespread violence against women. International NGOs and UN agencies continue to be denied access to at-risk populations in Myanmar as well.

Gender violence against women is a symptom of a more deep-rooted disease – the traditional and cultural values that support a patriarchal society along with a fundamental disregard for human and women's rights. Sexual assault by the military is but a tactic of war, an assertion of masculine power to terrorise and a way to reinforce the vulnerability of the opponent. Violence against ethnic-minority women symbolise the destruction of honour, and the weakness, of the ethnic minorities in the face of dominant power.

These more overt forms of violence against women are reinforced by subtle forms of cultural and structural violence, discrimination and inequality. Women in Myanmar 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 Myanmar and women are 'responsible for the general well-being of each member of the family. In the face of poverty, women are expected to sacrifice for the family first. "Good" women are rarely single; they are expected to marry and bear children.'[23]

Women's social roles, adherence to gender stereotypes and a lack of women's rights within the family domain are reinforced in situations of crisis and poverty. Women are expected to

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[21] Monique Skidmore, 'Darker than midnight: Fear, vulnerability, and terror making in urban Burma', *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 14.

[22] See: Women's League of Chinland, *Unsafe state: State sanctioned violence against Chin women in Burma* (Women's League of Chinland, March 2007), http://burmacampaign.org.uk/reports/UnsafeState.pdf, and Alternative Asean Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma), *Special briefing: Women's report card on Burma* (Bangkok: ALTSEAN-Burma, April 2000). For similar cases involving 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://karenwomen.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/state20of20terror20report.pdf ; Betsy Apple and Veronika Martin, *No safe place: Burma's army and the rape of ethnic women* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, 2003).

[23] Women's League of Burma, *Breaking the silence* (Paper submitted to the forty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2002), 3–4, http://www.womenofburma.org/Report/Breaking_the_silence.pdf

carry dual responsibilities as home-makers while working. They become primary earners when their husbands are imprisoned or killed, or leave to join resistance movements. Hence, while there has been a steady disintegration of family structures, there has been no corresponding diminishment of traditional ideologies. Poverty means that families prioritise sons over daughters in decisions on schooling. With land, livestock and crops being confiscated by the military, women are no longer able to sustain their livelihoods through working on farms. NGOs also note that the deteriorating situation in Myanmar – in terms of a lack of women's economic and personal rights, forced marriages,[24] high maternal mortality rates and deficiencies in health infrastructure in conflict areas[25] – continues to impinge on the status of women within a patriarchal society. As a woman refugee explained to me, women had no conception of what women's rights were until they arrived in Delhi and were exposed to these new ideas. A woman refugee's narration of the situation reinforces the interrelation between forced marriages, gender norms and patriarchy:

> In my childhood, I used to hear that soldiers would be promised a 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 [Myanmar], 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.[26]

In Delhi, their outsider status has continued on multiple fronts – by virtue of being 'refugees' and an ethnic minority, and due to their gender. Although women refugees are aided by the UNHCR and its local Implementing Partners, namely, Don Bosco Ashalayam, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Socio-Legal Information Centre,[27] they continue to suffer due to the absence of a national refugee law. The lack of such a law 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.

Refugees in India fall under the 1946 Foreigners Act which grants the government the power to restrict movement, limit employment and the mandate to *refoule* (return) refugees, actions barred by the Refugee Convention. Significantly, India has neither ratified the 1951 Refugee

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[24] In Myanmar, the ethnicity of children is determined by that of the father's. Given this, the government seeks to further its Burmanisation programme through encouraging soldiers to marry ethnic nationalities in return for monetary rewards and promotions. These forced marriages result in women and their children being abandoned in their villages when the troops are rotated to other areas. ALTSEAN-Burma, *Special briefing: Women's report card on Burma*, 3 and 15.

[25] The Women's League of Burma notes how poverty and low state expenditure on health – less than 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) – have resulted in poor health and nutrition levels and an alarming rise in abortions and the maternal mortality ratio. An estimated 580 deaths occur per 100,000 live births. Also, due to the lack of contraception, illegal abortions are common, with around 2,000 per day carried out in unsafe conditions. Women's League of Burma, *Breaking the silence*, 12.

[26] Personal interview, Tialte (pseudonym), Member of Burmese Women Delhi, Delhi, 6 September 2011. Tialte arrived in Delhi in 2006 at the age of 16.

[27] These Implementing Partners facilitate access to health and education (Young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA), employment and training (Don Bosco Ashalayam) and legal services (Socio-Legal Information Centre). Due to the increasing number of refugees, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) outsourced the registration of refugees to the Socio-Legal Information Centre in August 2009.

Convention nor the 1961 Protocol despite housing one of the world's largest refugee populations. No formal arrangement exists between the government and the UNHCR even though India is a member of the UNHCR's Executive Committee in Geneva and allows the organisation to conduct operations from the capital city.

However, although considered 'alien' under the Constitution of India and the Foreigners Act, refugees do have certain rights, including the right to religious freedom, non-discrimination, personal liberty and freedom of housing, and are granted identity and travel cards. India has also signed a number of international conventions that affect its obligations towards refugees, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Many Burmese refugees hope for third-country resettlement to the US and Canada as they would like a better future for their children, one with improved educational and employment opportunities. However, the chances of that happening are slim. Resettlement is granted in rare cases and priority is given to those who are especially vulnerable. The UNHCR is unable to guarantee resettlement due to factors out of their control; much depends on the responsiveness of host governments who may themselves lack the capacity to absorb large numbers of refugees. Bureaucratic policies, possible domestic political costs, the absorption capacity of the host community, national security considerations and the need to maintain good international relations are some of the factors that hamper resettlement.[28]

Thus, in recent years, the UNHCR has been stressing integration with the local community (over resettlement) as a more viable option for refugees in Delhi. Refugees are encouraged to become naturalised inhabitants and to engage with Indian society as well as achieve self-sufficiency while maintaining their community identity. Such an approach, it is believed, could help dispel local prejudice. The approach is also based on the pragmatic understanding that resettlement to a third country has its own challenges. The problems faced by refugees do not end when they arrive in a new host country; they will continue to encounter socio-cultural and economic barriers as they rebuild their lives in a foreign environment. The primary struggle for most refugees in resettlement countries, and one that determines the extent and success of their integration into a host society, is, as Egon Kunz notes, the lack of cultural compatibility between the host society and the refugee community.[29]

Major difficulties facing Burmese women refugees in Delhi

Employment

Due to budget cuts and the new approach which encourages self-sufficiency through employment and 'active integration' with local society, the UNHCR gradually phased out monthly Subsistence Allowances for refugees from 2002. From 2010, monthly Subsistence Allowances were terminated after three months to encourage refugees to find employment. However, the Implementing Partners 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 Subsistence Allowance were entitled to the full amount only if they were single. Once married and considered a dependant of her husband, women received only Rs. 600 month instead of the full Rs. 1,400.[30] Not only was this policy based on gender stereotypes, reinforcing 'the sexist

[28] See: Karen Jacobsen, 'Factors influencing the policy responses of host governments to mass refugee influxes', *International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 655–78.
[29] Egon F. Kunz, 'Exile and resettlement: Refugee theory', *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981): 47.
[30] South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, 'Burmese refugees in New Delhi: Denied refugee status,

idea that men should be the dominant figure in a marriage and a family, and [forcing] the woman into a state of utter dependency on her husband', this was also a contradiction of the principles laid down by the UN.[31]

Although the self-sufficiency of refugees through employment is a key goal, there are many obstacles hampering their efforts. Employers hesitate to hire illegal workers and women are pushed into the informal labour market where they work in low-skilled and low-paying jobs, at factories and restaurants, and as cleaners and domestic helpers.[32] 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. Women refugees mention various problems at the workplace including language barriers, exploitative working conditions, inequality in wages, and assault.

Figure 3: Women refugees at work at the Don Bosco production centre.

Credit: Sheena Kumari.

Subsistence Allowance', *Human Rights Features*, 18 May 2001, http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF37.htm. The report further notes that '[a] man, however, not only retains his full [Subsistence Allowance] after he marries, but he receives additional money for his "dependent" wife'.

[31] The conclusion on Refugee Women and International Protection (No. 39 [XXXVI]-1985) recommends 'that States, individually, jointly and in co-operation with UNHCR [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees], 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*' (emphasis added). Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Basic legal documents on refugees, Fourth edition* (Delhi: UNHCR, 2002), 258.

[32] 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, *Battling to Survive*, 53.

Health and education

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 see many refugees opting to visit free volunteer refugee clinics such as the Yamuna Clinic and the Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma clinic in West Delhi.[33] Even though trained midwives and nurses run these clinics, proper medical facilities are lacking and so are supplies of medicine, a basic community health surveillance system, family planning, birth control and information on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Along with malnutrition, common illnesses, respiratory problems and treatable gynaecological diseases due to poor diet, overcrowded accommodation and unhygienic living conditions, women also suffer significant psychological trauma and depression from experiences of abuse, forced exile, a breakdown of family and social support systems, and difficulties in adjustment and household maintenance in an insecure environment. Dr Tint Swe, who founded the Yamuna Clinic in 2002, shared his experience:

> [M]ore than 63 per cent 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 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.[34]

Language barriers and cultural differences prevent assimilation and women are particularly concerned about their children's education. Refugees may attend government schools. However, cases of bullying and the Hindi-medium education result in many opting to send their children to schools catering for the Burmese community such as Prospect Burma. The YMCA also runs Hindi and English language classes along with Mathematics and computer training.

Living conditions

Women are also subject to living in overcrowded accommodation in highly unsanitary conditions. Unable to pay full rent and to offer support to newly arrived refugees, the majority share a single room (often up to six people) in urban villages in West Delhi – at Bodella, Jeewan Park, Vikaspuri, Janakpuri and Tilak Nagar.

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[33] Both clinics operate three times a week, providing free treatment and medicine. The Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma clinic (established in 1996) receives its medical supply from the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and is supported by Women for Civil Society, a coalition of Burmese women's groups. The YMCA reimburses the costs of medicine, runs a shuttle service to facilitate access to hospitals, provides interpretation services and offers counselling for women and minors.

[34] Personal interview, Dr Tint Swe, Founder of Yamuna Clinic, Delhi, 15 September 2011.

Figure 4: Many Burmese refugees live in urban villages, often sharing rooms with extended family members. A family of seven in their one-room abode is pictured here. Photograph taken on 15 September 2011.

Credit: Sheena Kumari.

Gender-based violence

Additionally, women refugees continue to face gender-based violence in Delhi which range from domestic violence to sexual harassment and rape. Ms Akhu, who is in charge of the India branch of the Women's League of Burma and the Women against Violence programme, notes that traditional attitudes prevail:

> [W]omen 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.[35]

At nearly every interview with refugee women, I heard narratives about unpleasant experiences in the streets, harassment when they visit 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 lack of local languages. Their distinct socio-cultural backgrounds and looks are also identified as reasons. In a recent newspaper report, Cing

[35] Personal interview, Ms Akhu, Women's League of Burma, Delhi, 20 September 2011.

Deih Lam Siang from Bodella stated that 'it is very demeaning. Just because we dress differently and look different, people stare at us and sexually harass us.'[36] These cases, while not reported by mainstream media, are often highlighted in online reports.[37] More disturbing are the perception that the authorities and the Implementing Partners have a nonchalant attitude when it comes to looking into their cases, and the sense of passivity that accompanies women refugees' fear of sexual assault, sentiments which come across in the interview with Mang Doi Tial:

> [W]e 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 [the Socio-Legal Information Centre] 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.[38]

Alienation and disempowerment

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. Women display feelings of alienation and disempowerment at being discriminated against due to their looks, language and status. The narratives in Box 1 illustrate this, from Tialte's fear of being discovered as a refugee by fellow students, to Maw Maw's anguish at the discrimination faced by her children and Mang Doi Tial's awareness of local hostility towards Burmese food, living arrangements and cultural dress. While facilities are in place to help refugees, financial instability, unfair wages at work and social barriers continue to plague their efforts. There is thus a call for more concrete solutions and for effective programmes that do not reinforce social inequality and unfair power dynamics.

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[36] Kim Arora, 'Fear stalks Myanmar refugees', *The Times of India*, 15 November 2011, New Delhi edition, 10.

[37] Many reports stress the lack of action over cases of rape, either by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Socio-Legal Information Centre or the Delhi police. See: 'India: Burmese Chin refugees experience sexual harassment', Refugees International blog, entry posted 16 December 2009, http://www.refintl.org/blog/india-burmese-chin-refugees-experience-sexual-harassment ; 'Chin refugee raped in New Delhi, India', *Burma News International*, 5 April 2011, http://bnionline.net/index.php/news/khonumthung/10473-chin-refugee-raped-in-new-delhi-india.html; Dwaipayan Ghosh, 'Myanmar women stalked, assaulted in Delhi', *The Times of India*, 10 November 2011, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-11-10/delhi/30381434_1_reclusive-military-leader-junta-5678

[38] Personal interview, Mang Doi Tial, Community Animator at Don Bosco Ashalayam, Delhi, 1 October 2011.

Box 1: Extracts from interviews with Burmese refugee women in Delhi – Alienation and disempowerment.

There are common threads to the experiences related by the refugees, in particular, the experience of being a foreign 'other' in their host country, perceived hostility and discrimination towards their status, ethnicity and cultural norms, and the disempowerment arising from traditional, patriarchal norms when they are institutionalised. Alienation and disempowerment are encountered in nearly every aspect of daily life:

> 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, the local 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 16-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.
>
> *Mang Doi Tial*[39]
> *Community Animator at Don Bosco Ashalayam (DBA)*
> *Delhi, 1 October 2011.*
>
> 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 person brought him home. It's worse than [Myanmar] here, I do not feel safe.
>
> *Maw Maw*[40]
> *Leader of the Women's Wing of the Zotung Women Development Network*
> *Delhi, 13 September 2011.*
>
> I came to Delhi in 2006. I got admission into university with the help of the Chin Student Union and Mizo Student Union and I also got a scholarship from the UNHCR [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees]. 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

[39] Mang Doi Tial works at Don Bosco Ashalayam, where she acts as an interpreter of information. She arrived in New Delhi from Chin State at the age of 23. She is also enrolled in a distance learning course in Public Administration at the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

[40] Maw Maw arrived in Delhi in 2010 after her husband was taken away by government soldiers and she has four children.

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.

Tialte (pseudonym)
University student and member of Burmese Women Delhi
Delhi, 6 September 2011.

[The 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 [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] also issues refugee certificates on a family basis which makes divorce cases very messy. Women's organisations have to work with [the Socio-Legal Information Centre] 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.

Thin Thing Aung[41]
Presidium Board Member of the Women's League of Burma; and Finance and HR Director at Mizzima News
Delhi, 20 September 2011.

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 where they face less hostility, suggesting that specialised schools are needed to cater to refugee children who are often not of appropriate age for their education and may suffer psychological stress in a new environment.

Similarly, even while the UNHCR and its Implementing Partners work towards the goal of early self-sufficiency for refugees, which both legitimises the UNHCR's authority and justifies its policies, they need to avoid romanticising the refugees' agency – they need to acknowledge that these refugees 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 of whether financial independence and employment are realistic measures of successful self-sufficiency. Legislation that treats refugees as foreigners despite their having been in the country for many years hampers efforts at integration and supports a politics of exclusion, affecting the refugees at everyday micro levels when they face discrimination and unfair treatment.

[41] Thin Thin Aung arrived in 1990 as a political refugee.

Even where refugee women are sole providers for their family, the traditional gender power structure remains, as seen in many cases examined in this paper. 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 independence. Due to the disruption of their agrarian lifestyle and family structure, women are forced to go into non-traditional fields of work (cleaning, factory work). They have to bring their young babies to work due to the lack of childcare facilities and relatives to look after them and because they 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 noted in her interview (Box 1), women in abusive households are unable to resort to divorce or separation due to UNHCR rules on resettlement and for issuing refugee certificates. Cases of domestic violence have increased in recent years and women are at a distinct disadvantage for 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 practise it due to religious reasons (abortion is not encouraged in 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.

Sources of identity and agency

Burmese refugee women are, however, 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 possess, the ability to freely practise their faith and their freedom of movement. Many women report that they find great solace in Christianity, their family and their cultural traditions – these remain primary markers of their self-identity. While Western discourses on refugee and migrant gender relations often presuppose that ethnic women continue to be oppressed and have limited rights in their host environments, for Burmese women refugees, freedom *consists of* the ability to *actively and openly* practise their religion and the customs of their home societies.

They continue to define themselves through their family relations, traditions and religion, and they take great pride in their ethnic identity and loyalty to Chin State. Christmas (*Khrismas*), the New Year (*Kumthar*) and Easter (*Tho*) remain important social festivals for the community and the Chin National Day (20 February) and Chin Sports Festival are celebrated annually in Delhi.[42] Religion is a main source of motivation for women refugees and many are active participants in Christian fellowships. The refugee community patronise 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 Myanmar 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 causing an eventual erosion of ethnic and community ties, it

[42] 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 Chin State, Chin National Day has been celebrated as 'Chin State Day' for political reasons ever since General Ne Win assumed power in 1962. See: 'Chin National Day turns into Chin State Day celebration in Burma', *Mizzima*, 20 February 2009, http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/1747-chin-national-day-turns-into-chin-state-day-celebration-in-burma.html

is perhaps 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. The women who were interviewed seemed resigned to the need for personal sacrifice but their primary concern remained that of economic sustenance. Their current situation, which is highly revealing of how national tragedies come to be reflected at a family and personal level in the lives of women refugees, is also a result of an independent act and decision to leave, a symbolic assertion of their human rights and the importance the community places on human dignity, freedom and equal treatment as nationals of Myanmar.

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

Name of Church	Ethnic Affiliation	Name of Church	Ethnic Affiliation
Burmese Roman Catholic Fellowship	Open to all ethnicities	Lai Christian Church	Hakha and Thanthlang
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

Burmese women refugees as activists and active agents of regeneration

Besides doing away with binary 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 of cultural group.'[43]

[43] Tomlinson, 'Marking difference and negotiating belonging', 282.

The complexities of the female refugee experience, however, involving loss and regeneration, as well as disruption and re-integration, have provided opportunities for activism and independence, and for 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.'[44] In the case of Burmese women refugees in Delhi, this is illustrated through the formation of refugee community organisations run by women, which allow them to bond over shared past experiences, to reinforce their social identification as an ethnic community and to realise the desire to help the community and raise awareness of socio-political issues. The organisations comprise larger women's organisations with transnational links, mainstream women's community organisations and smaller informal ethnic-based 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 and the Women's League of Chinland are two examples of large women's political organisations with transnational links. They maintain links with refugees and human rights groups along the borders of Thailand, India, China and Bangladesh, and have several regional offices. The Women's League of Burma focuses on providing peacebuilding training workshops and on networking activities at international conferences, and their primary objectives include the political empowerment of women in Burma, the promotion of democracy and the eradication of gender-based violence.[45] The Women's League of Chinland focuses on Chin women. They are advocates of women's and political rights, and are involved in lobbying and conducting health awareness workshops and educational programmes for children and women along the border areas and within Chin State. The organisation's blend of ethnocentrism, along with the rhetoric of globalisation and transnationalism, provides interesting insights into the continued engagement and ties between migrants, activists and those in Chin State.[46] As Inge Brees notes, workshops and training programmes conducted at the 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'.[47] Those attending workshops on gender awareness and women's equality transmit these ideas within their families, communities and extended networks, a process which has been accelerated with the use of Internet communication. This could lead to discussions and a call for change within communities and at the socio-political level.

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[44] Sean Field, 'Beyond "healing": Trauma, oral history and regeneration', *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (2006): 40.
[45] Women's League of Burma, http://womenofburma.org/. Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the Women's League of Burma comprises 13 ethnic-based women's organisations.
[46] Women's League of Chinland, http://www.chinwomen.org/
[47] Brees, 'Refugees and transnationalism on the Thai–Burmese border', 288–9.

Table 2: Burmese women's organisations and community-based organisations in Delhi.

	Women's organisations	**Location in Delhi**
1	Burmese Women Delhi	Bodella
2	Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma	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	Bodella
	Refugee community-based organisations	**Location in Delhi**
1	Chin Refugee Committee	Chanakya Place
2	Kachin Refugee Commitee	Ashalatpur
3	Chin Human Rights Organisation	Ashalatpur
4	Chin Students 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

Within the refugee community in Delhi, organisations such as the Burmese Women Union, Burmese Women Delhi and the Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma play a more active role. These organisations are community-based networks that provide advocacy support, intervention in cases of gender-based violence and interpretation services. They also 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 and human rights, and in raising awareness of health, legal and employment issues. Burmese Women Delhi, for instance, which is supported by Hope Adelaide, an international NGO, provides monthly workshops and programmes (conducted in ethnic dialects) on female-empowering themes such as 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 organisations 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 organised themselves into smaller informal refugee organisations catering to every sub-tribe/ethnicity in the community so as to act as a bridge between mainstream organisations and these groups and also to serve the communities better. These include the Chin Women Union, the Burma Mizo Women Organisation, the

Kachin Women Organisation and the Rakhaing Women Union, among many others (see Table 2).[48] They provide assistance with counselling, housing, translation of official documents and fund-raising for needy refugee families. Collectively, these smaller organisations have a vital role in ensuring that refugees do not feel isolated – by providing social assistance, defending collective interests and promoting socio-cultural bonding.

For many of the women activists interviewed, living in Delhi has allowed them to take on new roles and responsibilities. While some employed discourses of volunteering that stressed their motivation to help their community (see Box 2), for others, the appeal of working in refugee organisations lies in the flexibility allowed and the fact that it is 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 support systems that provide a sense of the familiar in terms of ethnicity and language as they rebuild their lives.

Being able to communicate in their ethnic dialects removes a structural barrier to these 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 allows them to develop an empathetic understanding of women's practical concerns and the constraints on their participation while also providing them with 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. Ensuring the well-being of their people is viewed as a moral and practical duty (Box 2). 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 in Delhi.

[48] They also work in cooperation with other organisations including the Chin Human Rights Organisation, the Chin Student Union, the Chin Refugee Committee and the Kachin Refugee Committee. For a full list of community-based organisations and women's organisations, see Table 2.

Box 2: Extracts from interviews with members of Burmese organisations.

On their work within the refugee community, two women describe the nature of their participation and service:

> 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 to 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.
>
> *Mary*[49]
> *Member of Women for Women Healthcare (sponsored by Austrian Burma Center)*
> *Delhi, 1 October 2011.*

> When I first came, BWD [Burma Women Delhi] 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.
>
> *Cherry*
> *Member of Burmese Women Delhi*
> *Delhi, 1 October 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 noted 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.'[50] They are also involved in efforts to raise awareness of their community's predicament in collaboration with NGOs and in attempts to resolve hostile local attitudes by positioning themselves as people who are yearning for better lives and genuine democracy. This is a community that remains deeply invested in events back home. In many ways, theirs is a femininity that encompasses an active agency and subjectivity that empowers them to speak up, serve and fight for justice on behalf of their community. With their transnational ties, and with their links to border camps, NGOs, international refugee agencies and resettled kin in third countries, these refugee women are

[49] In 2010, Mary was in charge of women's issues for the Chin Refugee Committee. She has also served as coordinator for the Central Chin Women's Organisation (1996–1997).
[50] Personal interview, Mang Dol Tial, Community Animator at Don Bosco Ashalayam, Delhi, 1 October 2011.

beginning to make impact in the larger mainstream struggle for democracy and human's rights in Myanmar, a domain once dominated by the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi and resistance groups.

There are, however, constraints on the impact and influence of these organisations for Burmese women refugees, especially in circumstances where resources and funding are inadequate or 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. The 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. Tialte noted that '[w]omen in my community do not want to speak, do not want to interact and give their own views, so I am not so optimistic.'[51] Prominent political activist Thin Thin Aung who came to Delhi to continue the struggle for democracy in 1990 noted another difficulty Burmese women face when participating in politics: 'my family was against what I was doing, they do not support my activism.'[52] She acknowledged that it is easier to be a political activist without the responsibility of having children and family. 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 foods, participating in cultural performances and selling ethnic wear and goods.

In sum, this paper challenges 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. Political repression, along with traditional gender norms had made it difficult for women to be politically active in Myanmar, 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 organisations have themselves gone through incidents of sexual violence and faced financial difficulty, yet by stepping forward, they have reshaped their experiences beyond being 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 the UNHCR's Implementing Partners. Their tireless promotion 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 continual emphasis on the trivialisation of rape and sexual assault by the authorities and protection agencies ensures that gender-based violence against women refugees remains in the public eye.

Conclusion and recommendations

The case of Burmese women refugees clearly shows how they defy the common stereotypes typically associated with refugee women as they rebuild their lives and strengthen social ties among their refugee community in Delhi. Particularly interesting in the Burmese female refugee experience is the fragile balance with which women hold on to gender expectations and demands within their cultural group while also simultaneously fashioning for themselves a more 'global' transnational identity as they interact and negotiate with international organisations and networks that call for empowerment, self-expression and human rights.

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[51] Personal interview, Tialte (pseudonym), Member of Burmese Women Delhi, Delhi, 6 September 2011.
[52] Personal interview, Thin Thin Aung, Presidium Board Member of the Women's League of Burma and Finance and HR Director at Mizzima News, Delhi, 20 September 2011.

However, while there are self-help structures in place to help Burmese women refugees, they suffer from a lack of resources, direction, and ultimately, from the continuing international, national and social frameworks that have cemented their position as 'outsiders'. Fundamentally, 'refugees are marginalized … because they make visible a transgression of the social contract between a state and its citizen. As someone "out of place" – that is, without the protection of the state – a refugee is an anomaly whose status needs to be brought back into place by either naturalization or repatriation.'[53] While this necessarily places on nation-states a duty to offer humanitarian assistance, it must be noted that by no means should nation-states be the ultimate protector or provider of human welfare. Instead, frameworks should be erected for refugees to attain self-sufficiency.

Implementing a legal protection framework

With India not signing the Refugee Convention, refugees are left with a perpetual 'outsider' or 'foreigner' status even if they remain in India for years. Thus, the focus must be on a national law or refugee protection framework in India to complement the efforts of the UNHCR. Ratification of the Refugee Convention or the creation of a national law would give refugees property rights and access to courts, employment, welfare, housing, education and naturalisation as well as ensure *non-refoulement*.

Addressing criticisms of the UNHCR

One cannot take away from the fact that mass refugee movements are essentially to the result of government oppression and atrocities. People flee when safety in their homeland is no longer assured. As long as the political situation does not improve in Myanmar, there is no immediate solution and returning home is not an option, thus leaving integration as the way forward. Currently, the UNHCR's policy with regard to refugee protection in urban settings focuses on community-based initiatives that strive to mobilise and draw upon the resourcefulness and skills of the refugees in establishing a self-sufficient community. The local Implementing Partners liaise with refugee organisations, thus establishing the organisations as equal partners and not simply beneficiaries of the UNHCR. Regular open-house meetings with UNHCR officials and discussions with community representatives facilitate dialogue.

Given that the UNHCR no longer directly provides services to Burmese refugees, the refugees deal only with the Implementing Partners, which are locally staffed and promote government services. In the face of racial prejudice from society and dissatisfaction with policies regarded as culturally insensitive to Burmese needs, ethnic community solidarity has taken increased and taken root, spurring the community to launch their own initiatives, seek NGO support and publish their own reports both online and in print. Tensions between the UNHCR and the refugee community are perhaps a result of what Malkki terms a 'dehistoricizing universalism':

> Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child, and, taken together, universal family … The problem is that the necessary delivery of relief and also long term assistance is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims.[54]

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[53] Yen Le Espiritu, 'Towards a critical refugee study: The Vietnamese refugee subject in US scholarship', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 421.
[54] Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries', 378.

The UNHCR's strategy of utilising Implementing Partners is also ineffective in urban areas with a large, dispersed refugee community that is difficult to monitor. Their current strategy works better in enclosed camps where the refugee population and their needs can be tracked and people can assess easily what needs to be done, where resources need to go and which family needs to be helped first.

There is an urgent need for an independent body to report the success and failures of UNHCR policies. While responsible for the protection of refugees, UNHCR's protection activities are likely to put pressure on the organisation to under-report protection failure, in order to safeguard the agency's public image and funding, and as a defence against criticism.[55] Hence, there must be an independent, non-political, human-rights based organisation responsible for reporting the success and failure of policy and protection and to monitor the Implementing Partners. While it is idealistic to assume that an organisation can be immune to political pressure and have no political agendas, a human-rights based organisation that does not depend on the funding of powerful states may achieve this objective.

Other recommendations

Tackling prejudice and discrimination

- There is need to build bridges between the local community and the refugees, and to promote affinity and not difference. Social events and programmes should be organised to dispel attitudes of prejudice and discrimination held by the host society and to raise awareness of the refugee experience and the cultural practices of refugees.

Expanding the role of NGOs and civil society

- Refugee organisations need to strengthen their networks with local and international NGOs so that outreach programmes can be implemented and data collection can be improved. A thorough population census needs to be undertaken so that documented and undocumented refugees can be tracked. This would make protection work more manageable.
- Given the budgetary constraints and limitations faced by the UNHCR, there is a need for more civil society organisations and NGOs to step forward to assist refugees and provide support to refugee organisations. While the UNHCR has less direct access and means to track refugees in an urban setting, local organisations, which can work the ground, would be able to provide critical support and increased advocacy on behalf of the refugees, which would improve their welfare. This would also dispel the myth that refugees are completely self-sufficient by virtue of being in an urban setting.

Providing appropriate infrastructure and services

- There is a need to ensure that refugees have adequate housing facilities considering the uncertainty that is associated with low-income urban housing in Delhi and the constant threats of evictions and exploitation. Refugees should have access to basic services such as water and electricity.

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[55] Gil Loescher, 'The UNHCR and world politics: State interests vs. institutional autonomy', *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 50.

- Public institutions such as hospitals and schools need to practise the core values of cultural sensitivity, inclusiveness, respect, collaboration and accessibility so that refugees can integrate into local society.
- Schools and educational institutes should ensure that institutional support is provided to refugees so that they can overcome personal and social barriers as they adapt to and integrate into their new environment.
- It should be recognised that women refugees have unique concerns and that a gender-sensitive approach is necessary, for instance, at hospitals, interviews and medical check-ups.
- Improving living and working conditions, and addressing police misconduct, bureaucratic indifference as well as the rights of children and youth and all forms of gender-based violence need to be urgently addressed. Skills training, education and communication about access to health services would also need to be provided.