



Women Building Peace after Forced Migration: The Case of the Myanmar Diaspora in Norway

While research and policy has increasingly focused on women's peacebuilding roles in conflict-affected countries, less attention has been paid to the roles of refugee women in diaspora groups as peacebuilding actors in their countries of origin. Using the case of the Myanmar diaspora in Norway, this policy brief illustrates how women in diaspora can contribute to their countries of origin through transnational engagements. The case study finds that women in the Burman and Chin ethnic groups in the Norwegian-Myanmar diaspora engage in economic and social remittances to support education and contribute to peacebuilding in Myanmar.

Brief Points

- People forced to migrate can play many roles in addressing the root causes of their flight through their transnational engagements.
- Economic remittances to developing countries are one of the most significant ways in which diaspora groups worldwide can bring about change in their countries of origin.
- Diaspora groups can also transfer non-material resources such as skills, knowledge, ideas and values, known as social remittances.
- Women in the case study of the Norwegian-Myanmar diaspora engage transnationally through economic and social remittances to support access to and provision of education in Myanmar.
- Education that is democratic and of good quality is perceived by women in the case study as critical to transforming society and building peace in Myanmar.

Introduction

In studying women's contributions to peace, most studies focus primarily on the peacebuilding roles of women in conflict-affected countries. Fewer studies look at how women contribute to peacebuilding after violence and armed conflict have forced them to leave their countries of origin.

Through the case of the Myanmar diaspora in Norway, this policy brief illustrates how refugee women in diaspora groups can contribute to peacebuilding in Myanmar. The question of women's peacebuilding roles in the context of forced migration is especially relevant when looking at Myanmar, where forced migration has been one of the main consequences of decades of armed conflicts and political repression under successive military regimes.

The findings presented here draw primarily on data collected for a small-scale case study using a mixture of qualitative, primary data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and secondary data from documentation. Data was collected during spring 2015, and interviews were conducted with six women and three men from the Burman and Chin communities in the diaspora. Two Norwegian civil society actors who work closely with the diaspora and a local Myanmar politician were also interviewed.

Women and Diaspora Building Peace

While women are overrepresented in among those most adversely affected by armed conflict and forced migration, they are underrepresented in formal efforts to resolve these problems. Women have traditionally been excluded from conflict resolution and peacebuilding, evident both in the low level of women's participation in formal peace processes and the poor recognition of women's peacebuilding roles.

Increased recognition has been given, however, to the significant and often informal contributions of women in laying the foundations for sustainable peace. Evidence from sixteen case studies published between 1998 and 2010 by Conciliation Resources (2013) and covering a range of armed conflicts shows that women's peacebuilding activities, in particular, add value to transforming underlying causes of conflict. Women's activities have also been found to broaden the scope of peacebuilding through actions that promote consensus and inclusion, address a broader range of social injustices, and which 'go beyond

the negotiating table'. These can have transformative effects on conflict-affected societies.

Similar to the increased recognition of women's peacebuilding roles, a growing body of academic and policy literature looks at the roles of diaspora groups in affecting change in their countries of origin. Resettled refugees, for example, can contribute to both fuelling and resolving conflicts in their countries of origin through their transnational engagements towards those countries.



Women in an ethnic minority state in Myanmar. Photo: Julie Marie Hansen

Diaspora groups can add value to the peacebuilding efforts in their countries of origin. In a handbook for practitioners and policymakers, Horst et al. (2010) outline the many ways in which diaspora groups add value to peacebuilding efforts. Key among them is the bridging role that diaspora can play between their countries of settlement and origin. They often have context-specific knowledge of and transnational networks across the two locations. Development and peacebuilding contributions by diaspora are also more likely to be long-term engagements, as diaspora members are often more committed and motivated for emotional and personal reasons. This commitment and motivation is especially valuable to peacebuilding, which is a long-term process of transforming the root causes of conflict to achieve lasting peace that goes beyond a peace agreement.

Taking transnational engagements into account is useful in identifying how women forced to migrate can contribute to peacebuilding 'at home'.

Forced Migration from Myanmar

Forced migration has been a key feature of Myanmar's recent history. Myanmar, also known as Burma, was for many years considered to have one of the world's worst refugee situations. Since independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, Myanmar's development has been characterised by decades of violent struggles for democracy and ethnic minority autonomy.

One of the main drivers of forced migration within and outside Myanmar is ethnic armed conflicts. Myanmar comprises a union of ethnic majority regions in the centre of the country and ethnic minority states around the border areas. Ethnic diversity in Myanmar is among the highest in the world, with the population comprising of around 135 ethnic groups. The Burman ethnic group is the largest, accounting for around two-thirds of the population, with other ethnic groups comprising 33–40 per cent of the population. Tensions between successive Burman-majority military dictatorships and marginalised ethnic minority groups struggling for autonomy have been the source of armed conflicts in the border areas. These conflicts have been further fuelled by official Burmanisation policies aimed at making the union homogenous. As a result, many from the ethnic minority groups have been made internally displaced or have fled across borders to refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Other drivers of forced migration from Myanmar include political repression. Pro-democracy activists, many of whom belong to the Burman majority group, have been repressed through violence and imprisonment, leading to many political exiles. Increased violence and persecution against the Muslim Rohingya population in Myanmar has led to more recent forced migration from the country.

The global Myanmar diaspora population, including refugees and economic migrants, is estimated to be 2–3 million people. Within the global refugee population at the end of 2014, around half a million originated from Myanmar. In the past decade, refugees from Myanmar have comprised the largest group of resettlement refugees globally. According to UNHCR figures from 2015, refugees from Myanmar account for 27 per cent of all resettlement refugee populations between 2005 and 2015.

The Myanmar Diaspora in Norway

According to figures from Statistics Norway at the start of 2015, around 3,400 individuals born in Myanmar reside in Norway. Many have migrated to Norway as refugees through Norway's national quota scheme, where priority is given to resettlement cases referred by UNHCR. This refugee resettlement through the UNHCR programme has taken place primarily since 2005. Others from Myanmar migrated later through family reunification with their relatives residing in Norway and, more recently, as asylum seekers due to persecution against Rohingyas.

The high degree of ethnic diversity in Myanmar is reflected in the heterogeneous character of the diaspora in Norway. The diaspora is comprised primarily of people from the Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen and Rohingya ethnic groups. Within these different groups, on the other hand, communities are relatively homogenous. Research participants reported their social networks as being made up primarily of others from the same religious and ethnic backgrounds as themselves. For example, many Chins in Norway are Baptist Christians, which is a religious minority in Myanmar where the majority of the population is Buddhist. These Chins have formed a close community where social life revolves around the church and religious activities. The distinct ethnic and religious identities within the diaspora bring into question the relevance of referring to the group as a whole as the 'Norwegian-Myanmar diaspora'.

Diversity along ethnic lines is also the source of fragmentation within the larger diaspora group. This fragmentation is also a common feature among Myanmar diaspora groups in other countries. Such divisions are reflected in the diaspora's transnational political engagements. While political activism among diaspora individuals and organisations as a whole has declined after the optimism following the start of a transition towards democracy in 2011, members of the Chin community, for example, have become increasingly less politically active compared to those from the Burman community. This may be due to what many in the Chin community perceive as an over-emphasis of diaspora political activities on so-called "Burman issues", such as democracy, to the exclusion of ethnic minority concerns that deal with autonomy and federalism.

The influence of the diaspora's fragmentation on political engagements may explain why women

in the case study, in particular those from the Chin community, are less active in political activities, such as lobbying politicians and participating in demonstrations in order to influence Norwegian policies towards Myanmar. These more explicit political activities are more common among women from the Burman community who were pro-democracy activists in Myanmar prior to migration. Nevertheless, women from both communities are active in terms of economic and social remittances primarily to support education. While not as explicitly political, these kinds of remittances can also have political purposes and outcomes.

"The Foundation is Education"

A key feature among research participants' understanding of peacebuilding is an emphasis on education. The women in the case study view education as the foundation for transforming unequal and violent relations in Myanmar society. The women also consider improvements in the *quality* of education, and *more democratic* education to be especially relevant in the Myanmar context, as these interview excerpts illustrate:

"Only educated people understand their rights and what should be done in the country. That's why I am supporting education."

Interview with Chin woman, Oslo, 2015

"In Burma, when we study, there is a test and we have to memorise everything – parrot learning. You don't know what you learn. But you memorise it, without analysing, without really knowing what you know. I would like that to be improved in Burma. I think that by memorising, you only learn one person's perspective."

Interview with Chin woman, Oslo, 2015

"In our country, the teacher gives the student a novel and then the teacher writes down what they learn. We cannot change any words in the exam. We have to memorise by heart every word, we have no right to free thinking. We have to change education from primary school to university to have free thinking."

Interview with Burman woman, Oslo, 2015

The women view education as important in empowering people and moving towards achieving an equal and inclusive society. The significance of education is also evident in studies of women's peace work in other parts of the world, including in Myanmar itself. Peacebuilding activities among women in southeastern Myanmar, as shown in a recent study published by UN Wom-

en (2015), include running informal education centres in order to counter a lack of education and information that is perceived to have created and sustained armed conflict.

The emphasis given to education by the women in the case study is strongly reflected in their transnational engagements in economic and social remittances that have the potential to support access to and provision of education in Myanmar.

Economic remittances to support education

Economic remittances are one of the most significant ways in which diaspora groups worldwide affect change in their countries of origin. Money sent from people and organisations in diaspora to developing countries have surpassed levels of official development assistance. Sending money to support family and friends in the country of origin is a form of individual-based, private remittances. Money can also be sent to the country of origin collectively in the form of donations. The significance of economic remittances in contributing to the country of origin is also seen in the Myanmar diaspora both globally and in Norway. The women in the case study send money to Myanmar individually as a form of family support, and collectively by donating money through organisations.

Among the women in the case study, money is sent mainly to close and extended family members. The women also send remittances both to development and relief organisations working in Myanmar and to development and reconstruction projects in their local communities of origin. The women raise and send their donations within both formal and informal arenas. For example, Chin women donate to several development organisations by fundraising through the women's wing of the Norwegian Chin Christian Federation (NCCF), a diaspora organisation formed by the Chin community in Norway which was established in 2003 and comprises 18 member churches. The NCCF fundraises at social events as part of church activities, reflecting the importance of religion as a factor in remittance practices. Some of the women in the study also raise donations through smaller, informal groups formed within their own social networks.

The main purpose for sending economic remittances as expressed by the research participants is primarily to support education services. Some women pay for the education of their younger siblings, nieces and nephews in order for them to access better quality education. The money is

intended to cover the costs for extra tuition, private education or education abroad. In terms of donations, money is sent to local communities in Myanmar to fund the rebuilding of schools. Many from the Burman community support organisations in Myanmar such as the Daw Kan Gyi Foundation, which works in the health and education sector, and Mother House, an organisation that runs free education centres. Women in the Chin community donate primarily to Partners Relief and Development, a Christian faith-based organisation from Norway that works on education and other issue areas in Myanmar.

Social remittances with a focus on education

In addition to sending material resources such as money, diaspora can also transfer non-material resources such as skills, knowledge, ideas and values, which are commonly referred to as social remittances. Social remittances can be transferred through a number of channels including temporary return, or visits, and regular contact with family and friends in the country of origin. Returning permanently to the country of origin may also be considered one way in which diaspora members can influence conditions in their country of origin using the knowledge and skills, for example, acquired in the country of settlement. The women in the case study transfer these kinds of resources through visits to and regular contact with Myanmar, and possibly through permanent return in the future.

Some of the women in the case study have been travelling to Myanmar on a regular basis where they visit their local communities of origin and work voluntarily to repair schools that have become run-down and unsafe to use. Other women share their experiences of living in Norway with family and friends through regular contact, where they share information about the Norwegian education system, for example. Communication takes place primarily via telephone but also more recently through email and social media channels after internet access in Myanmar



A run-down school in a conflict-affected ethnic minority state in Myanmar. Photo: Julie Marie Hansen

became more widely available. Many of the women also talked about current or future plans to build knowledge and skills through their access to higher education in Norway, and contribute these resources through teaching if and when they return to Myanmar on a permanent basis.

Women in Forced Migration as Peacebuilding Actors

The increased recognition of the peacebuilding roles of women and refugee diaspora groups reflects a shift in perspectives on people affected by violence; that they are not only passive victims of their circumstances, but also agents capable of changing those circumstances. Yet in policy and research, greater recognition of and support for the peacebuilding roles of women in refugee diaspora groups in particular is needed.

Through the case of the Norwegian-Myanmar diaspora, this policy brief highlights the agency and peacebuilding roles of women in diaspora. With-

out making any assumptions that women possess inherent peacebuilding qualities, or that women or diaspora groups *should* engage in peacebuilding, this policy brief argues for increased knowledge and recognition of women in refugee diaspora groups as potential peacebuilding actors, such as by supporting quality and democratic education in their country of origin. ■

Further Reading

Conciliation Resources (2013) *Accord Insight: Women building peace*. Conciliation Resources.

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