

## Blood, Sweat and Tears: The Political Agency of Women Activist-Refugees of Burma

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### Introduction

1. Women activist-refugees from Burma, displaced to Burma's borderlands with India and Bangladesh, have been working to create networks of women's political and social welfare organisations from their position of effective statelessness. The formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) in 1999, an umbrella organisation consisting of twelve border-based women's organisations, has facilitated a dramatic increase in women's participation in Burma's opposition movement. The production of reports and documenting systematic gender-based human rights abuses in Burma by WLB and other women's organisations has particularly embarrassed Burma's ruling military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in international circles and has raised the profile of the organisation and its members.[\[1\]](#)
2. Increasingly, interest is emerging in post-positivist international relations (IR) theory concerning the subjectivity and agency of people in refugee-related situations and how that the site of refuge provides valuable insights for understanding contemporary political and social life and how it is transforming.[\[2\]](#) Political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, suggests a starting point for understanding and exploring new forms of political subjectivity, that moves beyond the stifling logic of sovereignty, lies with 'the refugee.' This figure, he argues, is banished by regimes of sovereign power to a zone of exception, a zone where distinctions between inside and outside, law and fact, and exception and rule break down and lose their meaning.[\[3\]](#) In these ambiguous spaces, where the politico-legal order is permanently in suspension, refugees are subject to power/knowledge regimes that depoliticise their agency and cast them into a state of 'bare life.'[\[4\]](#) As Agamben argues, however, '[i]t is on the basis of these uncertain and difficult terrains, these difficult zones of indistinction that the ways and forms of a new politics must be thought.'[\[5\]](#) It is such a zone of indistinction—namely, Burma's inter-borderlands—that women activist-refugees from Burma inhabit and from which the first modern women's movement has emerged.
3. In this article, I theorise how women activists displaced in Burma's borderlands are understood as political agents. I identify the ways in which sovereign power regimes attempt to capture and depoliticise these women and how, over time, they develop strategies to renegotiate violent sovereign relations to reinstate the possibility

non-violent political resistance. Women activist-refugees of Burma represent new forms of political agency and subjectivity. These new forms are significant because they disrupt the state-centric categories of agency and subjectivity through which sovereign regimes of power—the Burmese military dictatorship and the international humanitarian and refugee regimes [6]—gain authority and exercise control. [7] This argument is the claim that Burma's interstate borderlands where women refugees live, are structured, in an Agambian sense, as states of exception, as zones of indistinction.

4. In this study I apply concepts of trauma, sovereign relations of violence, and transgressive political practice to women activists located in the interstitial position of international borderlands and between boundaries of human-citizen, ethnicity and gender. So, I contribute to the field of feminist IR in two ways. First, through an empirical study of women activist-refugees of Burma, I draw attention to a gendered set of political practices in which refugees as political agents engage in a broader way than has been previously discussed. [8] Secondly, this discussion reinforces a feminist IR argument that the concept of power and politics is necessary to capture a fuller range of power relations and to appreciate the agency and power of both dominant and non-dominant actors.
5. This article is structured into four main sections. First, a brief background of the WLB is provided. Second, I draw on Agamben's concepts of 'bare life' and 'state of exception' to show how ontological categories associated with sovereign power are imposed on women activist-refugees of Burma to limit their capacity for political action. Third, I focus on transformative dimensions of trauma and the significance of political agency in constituting one's identity to explain how women activists reform their political subjectivity. And finally, this new subjectivity is discussed as a line of flight beyond the hegemonic control of sovereign relations of power. Two examples of transgressive political strategies are given to illustrate this new political subjectivity and agency.
6. The substantive data is derived from interviews with twenty-four women activists in the Thailand-Burma borderlands between 1999 and 2001. [10] The participants were between 20 and 55 years, identified themselves as belonging to nine ethnic nationalities from Burma: Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Pa-O, Padaung, Burman, Kachin, Tai Lue, and Burmese. [11] These women have lived on the borders for varying lengths of time, many having experienced a variety of circumstances. [12] They each have their own paths to becoming activist-refugees in Burma's borderlands, but they are brought together by their shared gendered experiences of political violence and 'bare life' as well as their common decisions to act to address these injustices.

### **Burma and woman activist-refugees**

7. Space for political activism in Burma is all but closed given that opposition to the military regime is a life-threatening pursuit. In Burma, a state of emergency where the political order is suspended has been the rule for several generations. Relations

the ethnic minority groups and the Burman-dominated state quickly deteriorated. Violence shortly after Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 and insurgent counter-insurgent warfare has been on-going around Burma's border areas ever since. A military dictatorship permanently installed itself as the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1962 and in response to the 1988 civil uprisings a state of emergency was declared. The national constitution was suspended and a 'temporary' military government currently called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), continues to rule by decree.[\[13\]](#)

8. While ethno-political and pro-democratic resistance (as opposed to violent resistance) in Burma continues, these activities are treated by the state as criminal. Politicians and activists are detained under decrees of martial law. Leading political opposition groups such as the National League for Democracy's (NLD) Aung San Suu Kyi and the Shan State National League for Democracy's Khun Htun Oo are either jailed or imprisoned under house arrest. NLD members are surveilled and harassed, driving most political opposition underground. Imprisonment is to be expected for political activists, as this woman activist explains recalling a visit to her friend, an NLD member.

Her first question was, 'What do you think about prison for political activists? Are you afraid?' My answer was, 'Yes, I am afraid of the prison, I am afraid of being arrested by the military. It encouraged me not to be afraid...' That is the normal life— the normal life for politicians and activists.'[\[14\]](#)

9. The emergence of a rights-based women's movement in Burma, as I have argued elsewhere, has only been possible in Burma's borderlands. This is particularly true in the Thailand-Burma borderlands, because of their political, social, geographic and historical characteristics.[\[15\]](#) Many women's organisations have emerged or have been reinvigorated amongst the displaced communities located in Burma's borderlands. Some have their beginnings as the women's branches of the traditional ethnic political leadership structures; others have developed in relation to conditions of on-going displacement and life-threatening poverty in Burma. In a triple, sometimes quadruple, sense, women's leadership and politics merges in the subjectivities of these women activists: as women, as members of politicised ethnic minorities and pro-democratic opponents to the military regime. The WLB focuses on building cooperation and understanding between ethnic and political differences, and developing programs on peace, women and violence, capacity building and political empowerment.[\[16\]](#) It has a particular focus on advocacy campaigns designed to link global, international and local activities.

### **Women Activist-Refugees and Sovereign Relations of Violence**

10. Women activist-refugees of Burma are mostly located in Burma's territorial and borderlands. As areas involved in armed conflict, mass human displacement and the creation of special economic zones, Burma's interstate borders are intensely politicised. For those displaced by state-related violence in Burma, interstate borderlands

extreme states of exception; they are ontologically structured as spaces of per anxiety and liminality.[\[17\]](#) These are spaces of exclusion, confusion, uncertain indiscriminate violence, where nothing is resolvable, fixed or sure. Pressure on and communities caught in these zones is amplified by the permanent suspense normal state of affairs; or, in other words, a permanent 'state of exception'. The relational characteristics of borderlands overflow into the socio-political lands more broadly span interstate borders.

11. The position these women occupy within the nation-state system is exemplified by a gendered form of Agamben's figure of 'bare life' or *homo sacer*. Banished by sovereign power to the state of exception, the *homo sacer* is one who:

is excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he [sic] cannot participate in the rites of his gens, nor...can he perform any judicially valid act. His entire existence is reduced to a bare life, stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing a crime. He can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous state of exception with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to a state of exception: an unconditional threat of death. He is pure *zoe*[\[18\]](#) but his *zoe* is as such caught in the sovereign power. He must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude or deceive it. In this sense, the life of exiles and bandits know well, is more 'political' than this.[\[19\]](#)

12. Sovereignty's production of 'the refugee' as subject, Jenny Edkins argues, not only produces an order of governmentality but also an order of sovereign power. In the production of 'the refugee' as outside but simultaneously entrapped by the logic of sovereign power, sovereignty is produced.[\[20\]](#) Those banned from political community by a sovereign regime because they challenged its legitimacy must also be prevented from challenging the same regime from the 'outside.' Hence, strategies to capture and control figures subject to the sovereign ban are necessary in order for the state to retain its legitimacy. When people in refugee-related situations attempt to define their own terms, and, more radically still, act upon it, they run the grave risk of exposing the arbitrary and contingent nature of sovereignty's architecture.[\[21\]](#) They risk exposing the violence inherent in sovereign regimes' strategies to maintain the status quo. Women and refugees embody, in this South-Southeast Asian context, the very figure of 'bare life' which Agamben argues modern sovereignty is founded on.[\[22\]](#) Understanding the political in this way illuminates the highly sensitive and gendered responses of non-citizens, particularly non-citizens who engage in political activities on the border.
13. While crossing beyond the territorial limit of Burma may have been a relatively straightforward (though neither easy nor safe) task for these women activist-refugees, beyond the limits of sovereign power regimes is not. Sovereign regimes of power employ multiple ways to capture and forcefully reassert their control over individuals. Those who qualify as 'persons of concern'[\[23\]](#) in neighbouring states, for example, may be held in camps on the condition they do not pursue political activities. Those excluded for political reasons from receiving humanitarian support, such as the Shan, Muslim migrant workers who are at constant risk of arrest, detention and deportation.
14. Through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), individuals

refugees can apply to resettle to third countries and eventually gain citizenship. In this way, the UNHCR—by its nature an inter-state agency—functions as a *de facto* part of the nation-state system's regime of belonging. An effect of these programs is to undermine the growth of political activism by people displaced in Burma's borderlands. As Anne McNevin highlights in the case of non-status migrants in the United States, the radical potential of activist-refugees' political agency becomes significantly diminished if they are returned to the 'legal fold.'<sup>[25]</sup> Women active within the 1988 student movement described the Thai Government's attempts to dissolve Burmese student political organisations through resettlement programs. Consequently, decisions by some individuals to resettle in third countries caused tensions within some border-based organisations. As this woman activist recalls:

At the beginning, we didn't like the UNHCR policy. At that time, we were trying hard to build our own organisation. But the UNHCR gave the chance to go to a third country. Many of our friends and colleagues left. So we hated the UNHCR!<sup>[27]</sup>

15. Living in refugee camps, and outside, decisions about life and death in the borderlands become arbitrary. As Agamben appreciated, when living in this state of exception, 'whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civilised or un-civilised ethical sense of the authorities who police them who temporarily act as sovereigns.' Moreover, the lack of official political status leaves activist-refugees vulnerable to various forms of physical and psychological violence committed by anyone with impunity. In this way, people in this void are forced to confront the fact of their own naked, unsheltered humanness. As a woman activist explained in the early days of her displacement:

On the border I found myself fighting for my own existence, just because I was of a different ethnicity from the locals and just for being a woman. I felt more in fear of my own personal security. Fear of being raped by anyone—it could be my own friends, Karen soldiers, BSPP soldiers. This.<sup>[29]</sup>

16. As Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat point out, the relation of sovereign power to the borderlands is not a relation of power in any political sense, but a relation of violence.<sup>[30]</sup> The borderlands power affords no meaningful space for activist-refugees to express their political agency, but instead, responds to their presence with various forms and degrees of force. Violence is explicit or immanent in the state's dealings with women activist-refugees in Burma and in the borderlands. Their narratives resound with incidents of the gendered, often intensely sexualised and even fatal, character of encounters between women and agents of sovereign power regimes and these women's politically unprotected agency. Inside Burma, these acts and threats include the use of rape and other forms of violence as weapons of war against women of ethnic minorities.<sup>[31]</sup> Pro-democracy activists have testified to the gendered and sexualised techniques the military dictatorship uses to interrogate and torture women political prisoners.<sup>[32]</sup>
17. Women activist-refugees move to the border areas to escape the authority and control of the Burmese military regime. Many come specifically in search of space to pursue their political activism. In neighbouring countries, women activist-refugees are no

sought out as direct targets of state violence as they are in Burma. Instead, they are treated as aliens whose movements require containment and control. They have been treated longer as citizens of a state in pursuit of a political cause, but as 'refugees,' 'illegal' and 'undocumented migrants.' The discursive power carried through these state categories is highly successful in presenting people in these refugee-related situations as voiceless, passive and helpless on the one hand, or errant and deviant on the other. While their treatment by sovereign regimes of power in the borderlands is not as violent as in Burma, women activist-refugees are nevertheless still treated as people with no unqualified life and decisions of life and death remain arbitrary. Incidents of sexual exploitation and other crimes are frequently reported from encounters with state security agents and citizens of neighbouring states.<sup>[34]</sup> Women have no effective recourse for protection without risk of arrest and possible deportation.

18. Thus in sovereign states of exception women activist-refugees are faced with sovereign power regimes that mobilise multiple strategies to recapture their bodies and subjectivities. Recast as 'outsiders' of the state and the international political system, women activist-refugees are predominantly treated by state security forces, refugee and humanitarian workers, and local societies as lacking legitimate political agency and identity. In the early years of the women's movement, women activist-refugees experienced displacement in the borderlands as a form of trap.

At the beginning we felt [bad] having to stay in the border; we have no country, we have no citizenship...We cannot stay freely in the neighbouring country and we cannot go back to our home country. So it was a really disappointing problem, a really big problem for us when we arrived in the borderlands.

19. The recourse to violence by sovereign power regimes in relation to women activist-refugees demonstrates how the logic of sovereign power functions to extinguish the possibility of genuine political relations. Where relations of violence operate, the possibility of effective political resistance is suffocated. This is not to suggest, however, that resistance stops. Rather, it is necessary to find new ways, new paths, or new forms of flight to access political space. For women of Burma in refugee-related situations to continue to be or become activists they must, as Peter Nyers says, make a break with the state of exception.<sup>[36]</sup> They must find a way to *repoliticise* their subjectivities and reclaim their agency. Rather than running from and trying to forget the traumatic events and experiences caused by sovereign regimes of violence, activist-refugees face this trauma head-on. Speaking publicly about their experiences and on behalf of those they represent in human rights discourses, they find recognition in international circles that legitimises their narratives of trauma and hence gives them political leverage.

### **Trauma and hard decisions**

20. Whether expressed directly or left unsaid, trauma dominates women activist-refugee narratives of political struggle. These women have all experienced trauma as a result of violent encounters with regimes of sovereign power, both inside Burma and in the interstate borderlands. Traumatic events and their consequences surround the

have come to structure their daily lives and constitute important dimensions of their identities.

21. Whether acted upon immediately or after some time, experiences of trauma as Edkins describes, points of no return.[\[37\]](#) Within the context of fear, insecurity, uncertainty and silence—and across refugee camps, migrant and political displacement communities—women activist-refugees' experiences of violence and powerlessness gradually led to realisations of the thoroughly gendered character of the operation of sovereign regimes of power. Repeatedly, it was the *gendered* character of living conditions of statelessness that were cited by the women I interviewed as a primary reason they decided to pursue women-focused forms of activism. This was exemplified by one of the woman leaders.

There are so many big issues. Trafficking and the abusive situation in the work places [for women] and refugees. They have no rights. And domestic violence. All that![\[38\]](#)

22. Traumatic experiences of 'bare life' sometimes have forced women activist-refugees to make political choices about what to do with memories they cannot forget, and to make sense of in relation to their expectations of the way the world should be. As Slavoj Žižek argues, trauma requires the traumatised to confront that which did not take place as well as that which did. The missed opportunities that could have been alternative histories are also constitutive parts of what did take place.[\[40\]](#) In the wake of traumatic events around which women activist-refugees' lives have formed around political moments where the radical contingency of their existing social order was exposed only to be violently reinstated.[\[41\]](#)
23. It is the existential need to remain true to trauma and the knowledge that things could have been and almost were, different—and possibly better—that drives women activist-refugees to overcome the demobilising fear that engenders silence and inaction. Their memories of trauma drive them to overcome the fear that greases the operation of sovereign power and constitute them as 'bare life.' In this way, they engage in a fundamental political act of our time: far from seeking to escape power relations, they attempt to reinstate them, and with them the possibility of politics.[\[42\]](#)

### **Acting politically**

24. Resisting subjectification by a powerful outside force simultaneously involves the act of creating one's own new subjectivity. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Edkins theorises this process as the act of 'self-constitution' as subject.[\[43\]](#) In contrast to a more ordinary rule-following nature, Edkins identifies this as the most intimate and political act.[\[44\]](#) The political character of these acts of self-constitution as politics derives from 'the burden of decision in a situation which, so to speak, *force[s]* one to invent new solutions and make unheard-of moves without guarantee in "general historical development" [original italics].'[\[45\]](#) It is in these impossible moments of openness and undecidability, with the force of history pushing down, that the

subject, which Žižek calls the 'unfathomable X,' is called upon to be responsible and accountable for urgent decisions that establish new political realities.[\[46\]](#) In the moments when they are faced with seemingly impossible decisions of whether to remain silent or speak out about political trauma from a position of effective statelessness, a new subjectivity of the woman activist-refugee is formed.

25. This process, Žižek explains, involves the self-presupposing the existence of the current or social order that has not yet come into being but which one must imagine in order to make sense of one's actions. In contrast to ordinary rule-following acts, 'the political act is a move that defines its own conditions and then retrospectively defines the ground on which to justify it.'[\[47\]](#) As Edkins writes, '[t]he act has to take place without justification or any foundation in knowledge, without guarantee or legitimacy. It cannot be grounded in any ontology: it is this "crack" that gives rise to ethics.'[\[48\]](#) Speaking out from the stateless or depoliticised position of statelessness necessarily breaks the rules of sovereign power but is driven from within the subject by a need to remain true to traumatic experience. In making this break—in speaking out about injustices perpetrated by sovereign regimes—actors crack through the barrier of the sovereign account of the world and political to bring forth a new form of political subjectivity. The ethics this ontology of the 'crack' gives rise to is deeply appreciated by those forced to inhabit the sovereign exception. This state has been eloquently described by one of the women activist-refugees.

There are other words—stateless, illegal, guilty or not guilty, against the law. But no one says 'it's right or wrong, you know. People talk about rules and regulations, yeah, but is it right or wrong to have no rights to be or no rights to be? People don't talk about it like that! We talk about dead or alive, against the rules, illegal, stateless...People should think about it more. They could get a lot of things.'[\[49\]](#)

26. Significantly, activist-refugees' assumption of an identity as legitimate subjects with human rights, articulated through drawing on a specific language of human rights, enables them to assert a new status. It is on the basis of this self-defined identity and not on the basis of the state that they claim a right to be recognised as legitimate political actors without any formal recognition by the state.[\[50\]](#) Further, as McNevin argues, it is their integration into (globalised) society while remaining technically 'illegal' that is the radical potential of their non-state identity.[\[51\]](#)
27. Women activist-refugees displaced from Burma assume multiple and complex identities, which take little account of their legal status: political activists, human rights activists, and women's rights and empowerment activists. They act and identify themselves in ways other than those expected of 'refugees' or 'illegal aliens.' A mixed sense of naïveté and defiance towards the rules of sovereign power regimes is conveyed in the way they go about their work. As this Burma activist notes:

There is a certain naïvety in what they [activist-refugees] do, how they approach things. I still get affronted when the Thai authorities crack down on them. It's like the rules don't apply to them.[\[52\]](#)



28. The radical nature of the political act, as Žižek points out, is by definition illegitimate. It necessarily violates the laws of the existing social order.<sup>[53]</sup> Prioritising their political cause and all it entails, sovereign rules that exclude women activist-refugees realising their rights are seen as logistical problems, as this woman leader illustrates:

We selected an organising committee from members of different groups for the next year. But the women were really afraid to do that. They said we have no passport, no identity cards, no money, how can we arrange a congress?<sup>[54]</sup>

29. As Jean-Claude Milner has written of the nature of this political act, 'the aim is not to blind oneself sufficiently to be able to strike the right way that disperses.'<sup>[55]</sup> It is the merging of a new gender consciousness and the experiences of 'bare life' with a decision to act in resistance to sovereign power that forms the basis of emerging gendered, non-sovereign forms of political subjectivity and agency in Burma's borderlands. Through their decision to act on their trajectories of tremendous constraints enforced by sovereign regimes of power, women activist-refugees are forced to create new paths to pursue justice outside the conventional sovereign state framework. And further, they are forced to do so without precedents or models or clear paths laid before them.

### **New lines of flight: women activist-refugees and transversal politics**

30. The process of self-constitution as pro-democracy and gender equality activism among women activist-refugees upon their arrival at Burma's interstate borderlands. Through constant trial and error they have learnt and continue to learn that a substantial part of their rising influence is grounded in their ability to make new connections across politicised and legalised divides and across time and space. Through the pursuit of these activities from the interstate borderlands, women activist-refugees of Burma are becoming something 'other' than refugees, ethnic minorities, migrants, or activists. Their activism represents a particular process of deterritorialisation, no longer shaped by the boundaries of existing nation-states and sovereign regimes. Activist-refugees represent an ontological divide between citizen and non-citizen. They blur the barriers between interlinking sovereign power regimes of the state and nation-state system and cannot fit into the symbolic order of either. They, therefore, carry the real potential to reveal the contingency—and hence the insecurity—of both narratives. In this way, they are creating what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to as 'new lines of flight'. This Deleuze and Guattari mean a shift towards another quality of life or life through another degree of intensity that carries with it revolutionary and emancipatory potential.<sup>[57]</sup>

31. While women activist-refugees are sensitive to dominant state-centric discourses and practices that work to disempower and depoliticise them, they continue to struggle to find language that can accurately express their new forms of subjectivity and agency. They seek a new language to express their demands and new forms of community that allow them to escape the circuit of power between sovereign power regimes and 'bare

One woman explained this.

If we think we are refugees, all we can do is wait; who will support us? Who will help us? these meanings. We believe everybody should have hope. Every person can try for what *very difficult for me to say who I am*. I am a Burmese person who wants to support the improvement of our society [my emphasis].[\[59\]](#)

32. Edkins and Pin-Fat argue that depoliticisation and the production of 'bare life' involves drawing political lines or boundaries and excluding people accordingly. Thus, an important form of resistance to sovereign regimes entails a refusal to draw lines and distinctions between the forms of life upon which sovereign power relies.[\[60\]](#) Repoliticisation depends on a refusal to draw those same lines and be excluded. Women activists rely on this strategy in their activism in three main ways. First, they do not make a distinction between citizen and non-citizen—a distinction on which sovereign power and the nation-state system depends. Instead, they place the interests of women in Burma at the centre, wherever they may be located. Second, they hold complex relationships across ethnic difference. Finally, they depend on activists in global movements to similarly refuse to draw the same lines.
33. The refusal to draw lines according to the categories that sustain sovereign power opens new opportunities for transversal political action for women activist-refugees in the borderlands. Roland Bleiker understands transversal dissent as the ability to transgress political and mental boundaries erected by international relations, to challenge the sovereign political order itself.[\[61\]](#) The merging of ideas, values, and co-ordinated action across interstate boundaries results in spatial and temporal reconfiguration of political space, including the reconfiguration of the local area such that it no longer makes sense to categorise political space in this way. Transnational forms of dissent, Bleiker explains, unleash their power only through a long process that entails digging, slowly, underneath the foundations of authority. Continual, patient, and subtle campaigns of information dissemination gradually transform the basis of power and ideas to prepare them to take action for change. The following examples illustrate strategies of women activist-refugees' transversal activism that derive their political impact from the subversion of the condition of 'bare life.'
34. With the assistance of women's Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and the operations of the Burmese Opposition Movement, border-based women activists have become engaged in United Nations human rights processes as one method that directly contradicts the regime's claims to political legitimacy. UN human rights bodies such as the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) provide a forum where these women can challenge the authority of the state. One of these activists explains the increasing global interconnectedness of the world and the state system that opens spaces to pressure the Burmese political regime.

The SPDC don't like our delegations being present at international conferences...When the opposition representatives in meetings and conferences, they get really angry. So we are not don't want us to come to the international level. We should try to do more of this kind of work at the international level, one country cannot stay separate. So every country tries to communi

together. Every country is trying to do that. This is a really big point for SPDC, to contact international community.[\[62\]](#)

35. Developing skills and strategies to attend UN forums has enabled women activists to confront representatives of the Burmese military regime without their own bodies being at immediate risk of violence. In these forums, they are no longer constituted as 'bare life,' but are in a position to exert political pressure on the regime through demonstrating the regime's failure to adhere to international values. As such, they have successfully transformed themselves into legitimate subjects and have reinstated a political relationship with the regime at the international level.
36. As a second example, the campaign centred on Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday, held on 19 June each year, is gaining global recognition because of her continued harassment by the Burmese military regime. On 18 July 2006, in a Thailand-Burma border town, a political campaign took the form of a blood donation drive amongst the local Burmese community. It was organised by a local Burmese health care clinic with support from a local Thai hospital and in conjunction with women activist-refugees. Hundreds of mostly migrants from Burma, lined up to donate blood, wearing yellow ribbons in support of Burma's pro-democracy movement. At the heart of the campaign were two main themes. One was a health concern, as it provided an opportunity for the health care institutions to replenish blood supply.[\[63\]](#) The other was an opportunity for the migrants to express their political desires in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and for political change in Burma.
37. Constituted by sovereign regimes of power as 'bare life,' the campaign was an opportunity for these undocumented migrants and activists—belonging to the same displaced community—to express their political beliefs and desires through subverting the power attributed to their politicised 'bare life.' Donating blood to health care clinics in their displaced community, people gave their blood to repoliticise their identity on their own terms. Instead of having their blood spilled in encounters with sovereign power, they gave blood—gave life—back to their political community in honour of Aung San Suu Kyi. As these migrant communities flow across the Thailand-Burma border, so do the messages from this joint health and political campaign.

## **Conclusion**

38. In this article, I have theorised the political character of women activist-refugees in Burma's interstate borderlands. They resist their subjection to discursive and political practices that work to ban them from sovereign political spaces and constitute them, in Agamben's terms, as politically unqualified or 'bare life.' Driven by a need to remain true to their traumatic political experience in Burma and in the borderlands, they decide not to remain silent but to act. This decision to act comes from the rules of the sovereign power in two ways. Firstly, it breaks the rules of sovereignty by acting politically from a position of effective statelessness. Secondly, their political

also forces them to develop strategies for political action that avoid and negotiate restraints of sovereign power regimes. The very possibility of emancipatory practices by women activists of Burma is grounded in their ability to create alternative spaces of collectivity, belonging and recognition.<sup>[64]</sup> Thus, it is argued, their new non-sovereign political subjectivity and agency can be understood as an alternative political act.<sup>[65]</sup>

39. Assuming political identities as activists from the position of 'bare life' merges supposedly antithetical ontological categories into a new subjectivity. Consequently, the distinction between inside and outside sovereign spaces becomes blurred, undermining borders upon which sovereign power regimes depend for their legitimacy. In this way, these activist-refugee women become something other than 'refugee' or 'activist' and become activist-refugees. From this novel position, new forms of transversal political agency are opened up, whereby struggle for change becomes possible. The significance of their activism lies in their demonstration that it is possible to engage in politics from the position of 'bare life' and the state of exception. Their self-conscious activism represents a subversion of the foundations of sovereign power.<sup>[66]</sup>
40. There are obvious limits to the degree to which Burma's border-based women can renegotiate the terms of their relations with sovereign power regimes in these alternative forms. The way to overcome the perpetual temporariness of this alternative political subjectivity has yet to be imagined. State sovereignty remains the hegemonic political organisation. This is evidenced by women activist-refugees' desire to return to the 'normal' citizen-state relationship.<sup>[67]</sup> Nevertheless, the activism of women in Burma's borderlands is one site to examine the intrinsically co-constitutive relationship between 'informal' and 'formal' political spaces, and how they can transform each other.

## Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> For reports produced by the WLB and its member organisations, see '[Women's League of Burma](http://www.womenofBurma.org)', <http://www.womenofBurma.org>, site accessed 28 March 2006. Thanks to Anne McNevin, Alison and anonymous referees for invaluable and constructive feedback. Thanks also to Jan Jindy Pettma, Devetak, Sue Blackburn, Dave Mathieson and Vicki Squires for important feedback on earlier drafts that shaped the paper's eventual form and Vera Mackie and Sarah Pinto for on-going encouragement.

<sup>[2]</sup> Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 122.

<sup>[3]</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 133–35.

<sup>[4]</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 126–35.

<sup>[5]</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 187.

<sup>[6]</sup> There are very significant differences between the sovereign practices that constitute these states of exception. It is not appropriate to attribute a moral equivalence to practices by which the

military dictatorship constitutes its perceived enemies as 'bare life,' and the practices of the human refugee regimes and host states to do this to these same people. It is not my intention to conflate forms of the state of exception, but to focus on the nature of both these spaces through which refugees are subjected to sovereign regimes' attempts to constitute them as 'bare life.' Thanks to Vickery for clarifying this point.

[7] Thanks to Anne McNevin for clarifying this point.

[8] Studies concerning the political agency of refugees mostly concern the 'politics of protection' in liberal democracies. See: Peter Nyers, 'Abject cosmopolitanism: the politics of protection in the deportation movement,' in *Third World Quarterly* 24 (2003): 1069–093; Anne McNevin, 'Non-state and the question of political frame,' unpublished paper presented at the conference on Politics and Recognition: Identity, Respect, Justice, Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, July 2005; Peter Nyers and Michelle Lowry, *Global Movements for Refugee and Migrant Rights*, *Special Issue: Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees* 21 (2003). Importantly, Nyers explores the refugee politics of 'refugee warriors' through the case of the Afghan *muhajirin* in Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, especially pp. 1–5.

[9] Aili Mari Tripp, *Changing the Rules: The Politics of Liberalization and the Urban Informal Economy in Tanzania*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 15.

[10] In all cases, the women interviewed were colleagues (and friends). I worked with the WLB between May 1999 and February 2001 and again in 2006. Discussion of issues concerning the relationship can be found in Mary O'Kane, *Borderlands and Women: Transversal Political Agency in the Thailand Border*, Monash Asia Institute Working Paper Series, Working Paper No. 126, Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 2005.

[11] I refer to 'Burman' as the (dominant) ethnic group of Burma and 'Burmese' as the political identity which many people from Burma, including Burmans and many whose ethnic heritage is mixed identify themselves.

[12] Some women had been on the border for most of their lives, displaced by ethno-political conflict-related, life-threatening poverty, arriving at refugee camps or border villages as young Others arrived in the aftermath of the 1988 pro-democracy civil uprisings.

[13] Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2002.

[14] Interview with 'Lynn,' Chiang Mai, 26 June, 2001.

[15] O'Kane, *Borderlands and Women*, p. 1.

[16] 'Women's League of Burma.'

[17] Here I extend the use of the term 'ontology of anxiety' used by Jasmina Husanovic. Jasmina Husanovic, 'In search of agency: beyond the old/new' biopolitics of sovereignty in Bosnia,' in *Sovereign Life: Global Politics*, ed. Jenny Edkins, Veronique Pin-Fat and Michael Shapiro, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 211–38.

[18] Agamben's theoretical insights are based on the distinction made in classical Greece between the separation of *zoe*, or 'bare life' common to beings, and *bios*, or politically qualified life. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 3–4.

[19] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 183–14.

[20] Jenny Edkins, 'Sovereign power, zones of indistinction, and the camp,' in *Alternatives* 25(1) 15.

[21] Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, pp. 129–30.

[22] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 131.

[23] As Thailand has not ratified the UN 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or its 1967 F Thai Government does not recognise refugees on its territory. Instead, the UNHCR uses the term 'concern' to refer to people displaced from Burma who qualify for refugee status according to the Convention.

[24] The Thai Government does not officially recognise armed conflict as occurring in Burma's does not permit Shan to establish refugee camps. Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF), *Chang Exodus from Shan State*, SHRF, 2002, URL: <http://www.shanland.org/resources/bookspub/human> accessed 1 July 2006.

[25] Anne McNevin, 'Non-status migrants, neoliberal geographies and spatial frontiers of "the unpublished paper presented at Oceanic Conference on International Studies, University of Melbourne 5–7 2006.

[26] An estimated 10,000 students and pro-democracy activists fled to Burma's border areas after military's crackdown on nation-wide civil demonstration. Fink, *Living Silence*, pp. 50–60.

[27] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai,

[29] June, 2001.

[28] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 174.

[29] Interview with Myint Myint San, Bangkok, 20 June 2001.

[30] Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat, 'Introduction: life, power, resistance,' in *Sovereign Life Global Politics*, ed. Jenny Edkins, Veronique Pin-Fat & Michael Shapiro, New York and London: 2004, pp. 1–21, p. 8. This argument takes a relational understanding of power as articulated by Foucault where power is dispersed and not possessed, and that where there is a relation of power also resistance or the possibility for resistance. See Michel Foucault, 'Power and norms,' in *Micro Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, Sydney: Feral Productions, 1979, pp.

[31] Brenda Belak, *Gathering Strength: Women from Burma on their Rights*, Chiang Mai: Images A For documentation reports concerning systematic use of rape as a weapon of war in Burma see Women's Action Network (SWAN) and Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF), *License to Rape* SHRF and SWAN, 2002; Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), *Shattering Silences*, KWO, 2004, URL [www.womenofburma.org](http://www.womenofburma.org), accessed 4 April 2004.

[32] Assistance Association from Political Prisoners (AAPP), *The Darkness We See: Torture in Bur Interrogation Centers and Prisons*, Mae Sot: AAPP, 2005.

[33] Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, Minneapolis: U Minnesota, 1999, pp. 4–9; Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, especially Chapter 4.

[34] Belak, *Gathering Strength*, pp. 57–71.

[35] Interview with 'Moh Saw Meh,' Chiang Mai, 30 June, 2001.

[36] Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, p. 121.

[37] Edkins, 'Sovereign power, zones of indistinction, and the camp,' p. 3.

[38] Interview, Chiang Mai, 1 July, 2001. Name and pseudonym not given.

[39] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 8–21.

[40] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 189.

[41] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

[42] Edkins and Pin-Fat, 'Introduction,' p. 7.

[43] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, pp. 189–93.

[44] Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p. 137.

[45] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

[46] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.

[47] Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, p. 137.

[48] Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, p. 141.

[49] Interview Chiang Mai, 1 July, 2001, name and pseudonym not given.

[50] Anne McNevin, 'Political belonging: non-status migrants in a globalised age,' Ph.D. thesis, National University, February 2006, p. 211. Thanks to Anne McNevin for raising this point.

[51] McNevin, 'Non-status migrants, neoliberal geographies and spatial frontiers of "the political"', p. 211.

[52] Interview with Burma activist, Mae Sot, 20 January 2006.

[53] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 192.

[54] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.

[55] Jean-Claude Milner, *Les Noms Indistincts*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990, p. 16, cited in Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 192.

[56] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Continuum, 1987, pp. 3–25.

[57] Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 87.

[58] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 8.

[59] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.

[60] Edkins and Pin-Fat, 'Introduction,' p. 3.

[61] Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics*, p. 9.

[62] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.

[63] For discussion concerning health issues affecting people in the Thai-Burma borderlands, r  
[Clinic](http://www.maetaoclinic.org/), online: <http://www.maetaoclinic.org/>, assessed 10 May 2007.

[64] Husanovic, 'In search of agency,' p. 225.

[65] Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations*, p. 137.

[66] Thanks to Anne McNevin for helping me to sharpen this point.

[67] All interviews with activist-refugees conducted between 12 November 2000 and 8 July 2001  
Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son.



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