Militarized nationalism as a platform for feminist mobilization? The case of the exiled Burmese women's movement

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ABSTRACT

Feminist scholars have convincingly demonstrated how militarism and nationalism rely on the (re)production of gendered hierarchies. As a result, feminism is often assumed to be at odds with these political projects. In this article, we demonstrate that this is not always and not necessarily the case: in contrast, militarized nationalism may even constitute fertile ground for the mobilization of feminist organization and activism. We make this argument drawing on an in-depth case study of the emergence and evolution of an exiled Burmese women's movement from within armed ethno-nationalist struggles in the borderlands of Myanmar. Drawing on interviews with women activists, we examine when and how militarized nationalism can provide a space from which feminist agendas can be articulated and successfully pursued. This case demonstrates that militarized nationalism does not only have the potential to mobilize women's participation, but can provide a platform for feminist organization and activism that transcends, challenges, and eventually reshapes militarized nationalist projects in ways that advance women's rights and equality. These findings call into question generalized assumptions about the conflictual relationship between feminism, militarism and nationalism, and contributes to advance feminist debates about women's mobilization in contexts of armed conflicts and nationalist struggles.

Introduction

Feminist scholars have convincingly argued that the logic of militarization and war is fundamentally gendered. It relies on deep-rooted ideas about male aggression, violence and the need for the protection of peaceful, delicate, and non-violent women (Ehlstain, 1987; Sjoberg, 2010). This research shows how militarization and war build on and produce polarized, hierarchical gender relations. These dynamics are especially salient in contexts of militarized nationalism, where women's roles and bodies are constructed as the symbolic and material boundaries of ethnic or national identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997, 2009). Essentialized gender roles receive a central importance in these political projects of belonging and boundary-making (Banerjee, 2006; Narayan, 1997). This leads to the perception of feminist agendas as threatening to the objectives and aims of militarized nationalism (Cockburn, 2007; Enloe, 2000; Korac, 1998; Sjoberg, 2014; Tickner, 2001).

Consequently, many feminist scholars, particularly in Europe and North America, have described feminism as a political project that is at odds with war and militarism, especially when these projects are infused with nationalist ideologies and identity politics. Cockburn argues that in contexts of armed violence, feminist activism is mobilized as a reaction to war and militarism: "a feminist consciousness is readily generated by close encounters with militarization and war" (Cockburn, 2010: 143). In Cockburn's account, the type of feminism that is generated by such encounters is anti-militarist, pacifist, and disloyal to nationalist identity projects. Similarly, Yuval-Davis argues that feminist struggles frequently find themselves in oppositional positions in relation to "political projects of belonging" such as nationalism. This is because such political projects strive to naturalize gender roles and relations, positioning these as an essential aspect of the construction and maintenance of group identity and boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2009: 8). Feminism instead seeks to question and upset normative gender roles, and as a result, feminism and nationalism are often described as antithetical to one another.

Yet, in many non-western contexts, nationalist struggles have been crucial for the political mobilization of women and the articulation of indigenous feminisms. In South Korea, Nepal, Turkish Kurdistan and Northern Ireland, feminist scholars argue that nationalist movements have provided a space to organize women for political ends (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018; Herr, 2007; Manchanda, 2004; O'Keefe, 2013). However, feminist analysis of these and other cases also illustrate how women's mobilization is frequently exploited and instrumentalized by nationalist struggles in ways that run counter to the realization of feminist goals. Often, women participants in nationalist struggles are expected to

revert back to domestic roles upon the cessation of conflict. This suggests that, while nationalist projects may mobilize women politically, these are problematic and unreliable sites from which to advance women's rights and equality (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011; Jacoby, 1999; Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991; Parashar, 2011). Feminist scholarship on women in armed conflict has similarly demonstrated that war and post-war reconstruction can both generate opportunities for the transformation of unequal gender relations *and* intensify forms of oppression and violence against women (Bouta & Frerks, 2002; Meintjes, Turshen, & Pillay, 2001; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004). These observations points to the importance of better understanding when and why feminist mobilization and transformation can be successful under conditions of armed conflict, militarization, and nationalist struggles.

In this article, we explore the complex relationship between militarized nationalism and feminist mobilization through an in-depth case study of the emergence and evolution of the exiled Burmese women's movement. This movement developed in the context of oppositional, primarily ethno-nationalist, armed movements located in the border areas surrounding military-ruled Myanmar.[1] Most of Myanmar's independent history has been marked by its long civil war, during which multiple ethnic minority armed groups have fought against the government for ethnic self-determination (Min Zaw Oo & Win Min, 2007). As successive military governments have attempted to suppress diversity in the name of national unity, Burman majority nationalism has been violently contested by oppositional ethnic minority nationalisms (Smith, 1999). Competing nationalist projects characterized by the maintenance of exclusionary ethnic boundaries and the promotion ethno-nationalist political visions have been at the heart of the armed conflict in Myanmar.

Drawing on the case of the exiled Burmese women's movement, we add to previous literature on women's participation in armed struggles and nationalist movements by demonstrating that militarized nationalism does not only have the potential to mobilize women, but can also provide a platform for the development of a feminist politics that transcends, challenges, and eventually reshapes militarized nationalist struggles in ways that advance women's rights and equality. In our analysis, we identify two key explanations for why Burmese women active in the exiled movement have been able to make use of militarized nationalist projects for feminist mobilization and transformation, largely resisting the pitfalls of instrumentalization and exploitation so often noted in feminist scholarship.

First, the context of armed oppositional politics in the borderlands surrounding military-ruled Myanmar was key for the emergence of a feminist movement loyal to yet critical of the agendas of non-state armed groups. This context constituted a space of relative political freedom that opened up new avenues for political involvement and activism. While the mobilization of women's labour for military objectives was a critical site from which women's initial political mobilization took place, the transnational space of the border areas also brought women into contact with new women's rights norms and networks that they made useful for their own agendas. This supported the emergence of a feminist activism that was more independent of the objectives of the armed groups.

Second, women activist made strategic use of this context by carefully negotiating between loyalty to ethno-nationalist movements and promotion of their own agendas for change. Notions of traditional

femininity have been utilized to legitimize women's participation and leadership, thereby reaffirming women's loyalties towards the nation while at the same time transgressing their marginalization from the political/public sphere. At the same time, women's organizations have skillfully drawn on their successful international advocacy, and the resources and connections this has generated, to gain increased autonomy from and respect within armed groups. By leveraging their positions as insiders to armed struggles in combination with their transnational links, women have been able to change the nature of militarized nation-building projects from within, reshaping notions of appropriate gender roles as well as visions for new political orders.

While the relationship between the women's movement and armed resistance groups has been complex and at times fraught with tension, it nevertheless challenges predominant theoretical assumptions about the incompatibility of feminism with militarism and nationalism. Through our analysis of this case, we aim to re-examine and nuance feminist debates about the relationship of feminism to militarism and nationalism, and contribute new insights into the dynamics of women's mobilization during armed conflict. The analysis moreover makes an important contribution to knowledge of the conflict in Myanmar, which has to date been largely gender-blind, providing new insights into the gendered dynamics of this particular conflict and highlighting the multiple and sometimes contradictory roles of women in armed conflict in South-East Asia.

To make these theoretical and empirical contributions, our analysis specifically focuses on the emergence and evolution of the exiled women's movement from its consolidation in the late 1990s until about 2011. The initiation of a semi-democratic transition and a peace process in 2011 significantly reshaped the landscape of Burmese women's activism; since then, a multiplicity of new organizations and networks have emerged inside the country, and many exiled organizations are beginning to return in response to a more open political environment in Myanmar (Olivius, 2019). These recent developments however fall outside of the scope of this analysis.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review feminist scholarship on feminism, militarism, and nationalism and present our analytical points of departure. We next provide an overview of the methods and materials used for this study. The analysis then follows, exploring Burmese women's experiences of feminist organization and activism in the context of militarized nationalisms and armed conflict. In conclusion, we consider how this analysis advances theoretical debates about the relationship between feminism, militarism, and nationalism beyond the case of the exiled Burmese women's movement and the armed conflict in Myanmar.

Feminism, militarism and nationalism

For decades, feminist scholars have demonstrated how militarism and war are intertwined with polarized notions of masculinity and femininity, where men are constructed as aggressive and prone to violence with a duty to protect home and hearth – the latter symbolized by women, constructed as non-violent, fragile "beautiful souls" in need of male protection (Ehlstain, 1987). In such narratives women's need to be protected justifies the fighting of wars and requires men ready to fight, and possibly die, for the homeland and for "their" women (Enloe, 2000; Sjoberg, 2014). However, while militarism constructs women as revered objects of protection on a symbolic level, these gendered discourses simultaneously deny women agency and justifies their exclusion from decision-making in matters of war and peace (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Militarism and subordination of women, Cockburn argues, are constitutive parts of the same "social totality" of power and inequality (2010: 142).

The hierarchical gender discourses and relations that are produced by, and produce, militarism and war are further reinforced by nationalist political projects. Often, the preservation of ethnic identity is conflated with the preservation (or invention) of "traditional" gender

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[1] In this article, Myanmar rather than Burma is used to refer to the country, although both names are frequently used. Since 1989, Myanmar is the official name of the state, but Burma is preferred by many of the exile groups included in this study. Therefore, Burma is used when quoting interviews or documents where this name is used. Further, "Burman" is used to refer to the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, while "Burmese" refers to all men and women from Myanmar, regardless of ethnic identification.

roles, which frequently relegate women to domestic spaces as the biological and social reproducers of the group (Narayan, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997, 2009). These constructions, where women's bodies and behaviour come to symbolize ethnic or national identity and its boundaries, have especially grave consequences when sexual violence against the women of the "other" is used as a weapon of war, to symbolically and literally destroy the group (Korac, 1998; Sjoberg, 2014). They often continue to constrain women's agency upon cessation of hostilities, detrimentally affecting women's everyday lives in multiple other ways even after the signing of peace accords. For example, the persistence of ethno-nationalism in the post-war political order in Bosnia-Herzegovina has brought about a conservative backlash against women's rights and activism, a re-traditionalization of gender relations, and high levels of violence against women (Björkdahl, 2012; Cockburn, 2013). This has led many feminist scholars to argue that nationalism is antithetical to feminist goals of gender equality and the transformation of constraining gender roles and relations (Cockburn, 2007, 2010; Korac, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997, 2009).

However, this understanding of the relationship between feminism and nationalism is decidedly Western in origin. A more complex picture emerges through case studies of women in armed conflict and nationalist struggles in non-Western, and particularly post-colonial, contexts (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018; El-Said, Meari, & Pratt, 2015; Fluri, 2008). Indeed, Jacoby claims that the "merging of feminism and nationalism is a precise starting point for distinguishing non-Western feminisms from their Western counterparts" (1999: 513). In non-Western settings, women's struggles have frequently been interwoven with broader struggles for justice, for example as part of de-colonization and national liberation movements (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1984; Katto, 2014; Magadla, 2015; Spurlin, 2010). In postcolonial contexts, feminist analyses of violence have been rather ambivalent towards the political violence of resistance movements, often justifying it as means towards dismantling oppression and injustice (Roy, 2009). Jayawardena (1986) and Hasso (1998) both suggest that at least some forms of feminism has been highly compatible with anti-imperialist, post-colonial nationalist projects that aim to "modernize" the nation. As argued by Jacoby (1999), these are forms of subordinate nationalisms, characterized by struggle against an oppressor such as a colonial power or authoritarian regime. As such, subordinate nationalisms rely on the mobilization of entire societies or communities towards a common emancipatory project, and may therefore be more conducive to women's participation and public roles in the struggle. In contrast, dominant nationalisms seeking to uphold the current order may rely more heavily on traditional elites and coercive capacities. This dynamic begins to explain why an assertive, feminist Burmese women's movement could emerge from within exiled ethno-nationalist military projects. The limited mobilization of women in Myanmar at the time was tightly controlled by the military regime (Hedström, 2016). However, also in subordinate nationalisms evident in post-colonial struggles, elements of national identity are frequently articulated through the control and subordination of women (Jacoby, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1991). Thus, while women's struggles have at times been able to take advantage of nationalist movements, nationalist discourses often attempt to reinscribe traditional gender roles (El-Said et al., 2015).

Interestingly for the purposes of this study, Hasso (1998) argues that feminist mobilization has primarily been compatible with nationalist projects where grassroots mobilization, not armed struggle, has been the key movement strategy. Indeed, empirical studies suggest that in settings of armed liberation struggles, like Algeria and Zimbabwe, women's active participation as soldiers or revolutionaries has not translated into greater post-war social or political equality for women (Lyons, 2004; Turshen, 2002). In relation to these findings, the case of the Burmese women's movement provides an interesting point of departure for exploring when and how nationalism can be conducive to feminism, even in the context of militarization and armed struggles. While Niranjana (2007) recognizes that nationalist movements can

enable women's political participation, she maintains that "they also create for them a fixed position in national culture" (2007: 2). Considering the case of the exiled Burmese women's movement, we argue that this position is ambiguous and dynamic rather than fixed: it can be expanded and negotiated, even in the context of militarized nationalism.

While existing scholarship clearly show that militarized nationalist projects can mobilize women's political participation and be inclusive of women, many studies also emphasize the limited ability of such mobilization to translate to greater equality and changes in gender relations and norms. We build on this literature, but seek to push theoretical debates about the relationship between feminism and militarized nationalism further by examining when and how women are not only able to participate in militarized nationalist struggles, but to make them useful as platforms for the pursuit of feminist transformation. Based on the analysis of our case, we contend that feminist organization and activism is not necessarily at odds with militarized nationalism, but can at times be facilitated by it. As we suggest in this analysis, feminist movements can emerge both in opposition to *and* co-exist with armed groups, within the framework of nationalist military projects. However, this does not mean that militarism and nationalism is always beneficial for women or conducive to feminist politics. On the contrary: the feminist scholarship surveyed above demonstrate how militarism and nationalism as political projects are intertwined with, and rely on, gendered hierarchies that subordinate women. Our aim is not to dispute these feminist theoretical advances, but to add to them by illustrating how feminist movements can arise from within militarized nationalist projects, subverting them, and making them useful, *despite* their repressive and constraining nature. Indeed, as argued by O'Keefe (2013), the evolution of feminism from within nationalist struggles may partly be incited by these struggles' male-dominated structures. Thus, the claim that feminism may be facilitated by militarized nationalism should not be taken to mean that these struggles encourage women's rights and influence within these nationalistic movements. On the contrary, efforts to suppress women's activism and influence may nurture the growth of feminism (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018).

In our effort to explore when and why militarized nationalism has the potential to not only mobilize women's participation but also facilitate the pursuit of feminist change, we agree with Al-Ali and Tas (2018) that advancing theoretical debates about the relationship between feminism and nationalist struggles cannot be done in the abstract. Rather, analysis needs to be grounded in specific historic and empirical contexts. In this article, we therefore take the experiences of exiled Burmese women activists as our point of departure for re-examining the relationship between feminism, militarism, and nationalism. Following the lead of feminist international relations scholars, we contend that attention to the experiences of people who live through war are needed to extend theorizations on conflict, revolutions, and political upheaval. Understanding "war as experience" as Sylvester urges us to do, require that we place women's knowledge of conflict at the centre of our analytical endeavours (2013: 484). With Enloe, we insist that "it is by taking women's experiences of militarization seriously […] that we are most likely to understand it fully" (2000:3). Consequently, we aim to advance feminist scholarship on the relationship between feminism, militarism, and nationalism by exploring Burmese women's experiences of feminist activism within the context of ethno-nationalist armed resistance movements.

Methods and material

The analysis presented here is based on a case study of Burmese women's organizations and their emergence in the borderlands surrounding Myanmar. These organizations were at the time of the interviews based in Northern Thailand, but with significant cross-border activities undertaken in Myanmar. Members of these organizations span vast areas on the Thai-Myanmar and China-Myanmar border, including

refugee camps, cities, and rural areas in Myanmar, Thailand, and China. All of the organizations we met with were united under the umbrella of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), which is an alliance uniting thirteen separate women's organization. The majority of these organizations represent ethnic minority women, although two of the organizations are multi-ethnic and accept membership from majority Burman women. The WLB aims to unite women's voices across ethnic and political divides in order to advocate for women's rights and participation in both exiled and national politics (including the armed struggle). While individual groups under the umbrella may differ in their emphasis on specific issues and how they pertain to ethnic minority rights, the leadership structure requires all thirteen-member organizations to collectively agree on decisions taken by the WLB. Importantly, in their efforts to sustain the alliance through collective decisions-making practices, the member organizations have fostered a multi-ethnic women's movement, based on women's shared experiences of conflict and violence. This does not mean that the movement is homogenous, but illustrates how a strategic deployment of gender to further the aims and development of a collective women's movement has taken place.

Methodologically we move between primary interviews and analysis of movement literature, including annual reports, advocacy material, and media statements collected between 2012 and 2017. Within the framework of several research projects focusing on the position of women's organizations and activists in relation to processes of armed conflict, oppositional politics and peacebuilding, interviews were conducted with women active in women's organizations. Broadly defined, the interviews focused on the emergence of the women's movement, the role and objectives of the organizations and their relationship to each other as well as other actors and stakeholders. Further interviews were conducted with a range of other organizations close to the women's movement, discussing their perspectives on the history, role, and impact of the women's groups. These organizations include ethnic human rights organizations; Burmese exile media; armed groups; and women's rights organizations based in Yangon, Myanmar.

In total, the analysis presented here draws on 44 interviews conducted between 2011 and 2017 by both authors. In most cases, interviews were conducted in English. While the use of English was felt to hamper communication in some cases, the use of a translator would have brought other challenges, such as inaccurate translation and loss of information. As many women activists are extensively involved in transnational networks and international advocacy work, communication in English is a regular feature of their work. Before each interview, respondents were informed of the focus and aims of the research; the voluntary basis of their participation; their right to withdraw at any time; and their opportunity to access the results of the research if they would like to. The length of interviews was, on average, between 1 and 2 h. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the few cases when recording was felt to be too intrusive or when it was declined by the respondents, notes were taken and reviewed after the interview.

The women activists interviewed for this study generally held, at the time of the interviews, leadership positions within their respective organizations, and came from a variety of ethnic minority background, with some identifying as Burman. While the older generation of activists interviewed have, for the most part, participated in higher education, none of the women interviewed have graduated from university.[2] The vast majority of the younger women interviewed have only accessed education sporadically while in exile or while living in refugee camps, with most coming from rural areas, and representing a lower socio-economic class. It can therefore be said that the women interviewed provide a grassroot perspective on activism, nationalism, conflict, and women's rights in Myanmar.

Research in conflict environments, where research-participants are likely to be vulnerable to a range of insecurities, amplifies the ethical challenges of informed consent, confidentiality and risk-benefit analysis faced by all field researchers (Campbell 2017; Hedström, 2018). While the areas in which we undertook interviews do not experience armed conflict, Burmese women activists in Thailand frequently lack legal status in their host country, and are engaging in work that challenges the regime in Myanmar. This precarious position must be taken into account when undertaking research. Therefore, research-participants were always allowed to select the place for the interview, enabling them to judge potential risks and take precautions they considered reasonable, and were carefully informed of how their information would be used prior to the meeting. Further, we have kept the names as well as location and organizational affiliation of individual respondents confidential. While this choice may cause the analysis to lose some specificity and detail, our responsibility to ensure the anonymity and protection of research-participants is our overriding concern.

One of the authors has been working with the movement since 2005 in various positions ranging from volunteer teacher to adviser and researcher. This position as an 'outsider-insider' enabled a deeper contextual analysis by adding observation and experience to the examination of interview data, and facilitated for feedback loops to emerge between research participants and researchers. For us, sustaining relationships over time and continually seeking to communicate research results back to women's organizations and activists, as well as allowing their feedback to shape the direction of our analysis, constitute a key component of our research ethics and methods.

These materials and methods allow us to closely examine how Burmese women activists have experienced their position as simultaneously located in a multi-ethnic feminist movement *and* ethno-nationalist military projects. In our analysis we draw on their narratives and experiences in order to consider how this complex, ambiguous, and dynamic position has shaped their feminism. We explore the extent to which this position has enabled the women's groups' to advance women's rights and destabilize the ethnic armed projects of militarized nationalism from which the feminist movement originally emerged. We suggest that the armed groups were critical in mobilizing women, although this relationship has not been without tensions. Our study provides in-depth insights into the gendered dynamics of the conflict in Myanmar and contributes to advance theoretical debates about the relationship between feminism, militarism, and nationalism more broadly. It is to further exploration of this that we will now turn.

Militarized nationalisms and the Burmese women's movement in exile

Aiming to explore the relationship between militarized nationalisms and feminist organization and activism in the context of Myanmar, the following analytical section is divided into three parts. First, we demonstrate how the emergence and formation of a women's movement took place within the context of ethno-nationalist armed movements in Myanmar's borderlands, and we argue that this context was instrumental for the mobilization of women's activism. Second, we examine women's experiences of combining and negotiating their positioning as members of both ethno-nationalist movements and the women's movement. Here, we demonstrate that ethno-nationalist goals and women's empowerment are not generally experienced as conflicting goals; rather, ethnic equality and gender equality are constructed as interlinked and indivisible, and as reliant upon armed struggle. Third, we focus on the ways in which the women's movement has been able to change the nature of militarized nation-building projects from within, reshaping notions of appropriate gender roles as well as visions for new political orders.

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[2] One woman leader interviewed completed, after the interview, a distant education undergraduate course in social sciences offered for free by Open University.

The emergence of the exiled Burmese women's movement

The work of women activists and scholars have revealed widespread patterns of structural, customary, and normative discrimination against women in Myanmar (Gender Equality Network, 2015; Harriden, 2012; Ikeya, 2011). This reality contrasts sharply with a long-standing official rhetoric about Burmese women's "inherent equality" with men; a narrative that has been employed more to bolster the legitimacy of Myanmar's governments than to improve women's lives (Ikeya, 2005; Than, 2014). As part of its instrumental use of women's rights issues, the military regime created official women's organizations, often led by wives of key generals. These organizations promoted ideas about women's proper roles in culture and tradition, rather than challenging unequal gender relations (Hedström, 2016). Repressive rule and a general lack of political space for civil society activism or any form of oppositional political activity prevented the emergence of an organized, independent women's movement in the country throughout the period of military rule (Author forthcoming).

In contrast, in the 1990s a multitude of women's groups were formed along Myanmar's borders, especially in Thailand. The Thai-Myanmar borderlands were a key site for Burmese oppositional politics as well as armed insurgency, and the women's exiled movement emerged from within this political environment. In some cases, women's organizations were started in protest against male dominance within armed groups; in other cases, organizations were founded more independently of, but still with close personal links to, armed groups; and in yet other cases they evolved from women's wings of armed groups into more independent organizations in the 1990s, at a time when the emergence of a broader women's movement were gaining momentum (Women's League of Burma, 2011).[3] In 1999, separate organizations of women identifying with different ethno-nationalist armed insurgencies joined together in a multi-ethnic umbrella organization, the Women's League of Burma (WLB).[4] The growth of WLB was enabled by strategic acts of solidarity-building, including several workshops and meetings organized between individual women from different backgrounds, living in areas controlled by the armed groups (Hedström, 2016). Membership in the alliance was granted based on the political vision of each member organization, who were committed to advancing women's rights politically, and independently of male-dominated groups. This meant that political parties, women's wings under the control of armed groups, and organizations working solely with income generating or health activities were excluded from membership (WLB, 2011).

Out of the founding twelve-member organizations, ten represented ethnic minority women, and all twelve had a relationship to a non-state armed group, currently or recently engaged in warfare. This suggests that the women's movement did not emerge in opposition to armed conflict or militarism as such; instead, our interviews show that the women's movement partly grew out of a frustration to male dominance in the exiled armed opposition. This resonates with the findings of O'Keefe (2013) as well as Al-Ali and Tas (2018), where male dominance in nationalist struggles is described as spurring the evolution of feminist agendas in a dialectical relationship.

The evolution of feminist organization and activism within armed insurgencies meant that women's initial political mobilization and cross-ethnic networking generally took place within and through the organizational structures of the armed groups. This is evident in the following quote by one of the founders of the WLB, where she describes how she went about establishing communication with women from other ethnic groups:

> [To organise women] I first had to talk to the male leaders in the same ethnic groups, to get their approval and suggestions for whom to contact, whom to invite. At that time, there was no email and often no phone, so I tried to send letters. The male leaders worried about what are we were going to do, excluding men from our activities. So we had to explain what we were doing, to tell the men not to worry. [For example] we talked to [the leader of the Karen armed group]…and he became a little supportive, and we wrote a letter for him to give to [Karen women] leaders. And he explained to [them] that they have to reply to us; he gave some kind of pressure.[5]

Although armed ethno-nationalist movements provided a key political opportunity structure for the emergence of the women's movement, this relationship was by no means straightforward. Initially, the effort to organize as women, and through this, move beyond the agendas of armed groups, was controversial within the exile movement. In particular, when it became clear that the ambitions of new women's organizations extended beyond being supportive "women's wings" of armed groups, male leaders found them hard to accept:

> In the beginning it was just to create another organization, another branch, [and] the leadership at that time didn't think that this group was going to grow. They thought like "oh, my little sister…doing the thing". But then it grew, and some of the leaders couldn't accept it.[6]

As this quote suggests, when women's demands for equal rights within their communities were seen as competing with ethno-nationalist agendas, they were at times met with hostility, and women activists were accused of detracting from the "real" struggle. In relation to these dynamics, Burmese women activists striving to carve out space for autonomous political action have had to negotiate their demands carefully within the ethnic armed movements. This is clear in the following narrative by a senior activist:

> We work with the armed group, trying to build a relationship, trying to work together with them. Slowly. Even though some think we are under their control, we [challenge this]. We point out to them what is not right for the people, for women, for youth. Yes, we speak out on behalf of [women]. The women's wings are not there to speak out, because the armed group control them. But for us, we speak out, yes, for our rights, for our women's rights.[7]

Despite initial resistance from male leaders, a collective political identity as women emerged within the bounds of overarching ethno-nationalist projects, embedded in the social networks, and sometimes institutional structures, of armed groups engaged in warfare against the Burmese military (Hedström, 2016, Ferguson 2013). In other words, women's loyalties to a collective identity as women coexisted with loyalty and belonging to their ethnic communities from the inception of the movement, complicating common assumptions that feminism is at odds with nationalism or militarism. Through linking their demands for women's rights to their experiences of conflict and discrimination, women activists have been able to make their claims part of ethno-nationalist armed struggle against inequality and oppression in military-ruled Myanmar. Thus, the armed struggle for ethnic and political rights has informed and shaped the struggle for women's rights in Myanmar. The armed movements have been key for the growth of the women's movement, although this has been – and continues to be – a relationship marked by tensions and negotiations. While the Burmese women's movement at times has reinforced militarized nationalism, at

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[3] Women's wings are, in this context, organizational units within ethnic armed groups (EAOs), that support armed groups through tasks such as cooking, logistics, and production of uniforms. They are frequently also engaged in social welfare activities within the ethnic community.

[4] Although officially formed on the Thai-Myanmar border it is important to recognise that the WLB was, and still is, inclusive of organizations active also on the China-Myanmar, Bangladesh-Myanmar and India-Myanmar border.

[5] Interview with women's right activist, Chiang Mai, 7 February 2012.

[6] Interview with journalist, Chiang Mai, 4 January 2017.

[7] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 8 December 2016.

other times it has challenged it. It is to further exploration of this multifaceted position that we will turn next.

Negotiating militarized nationalisms and gendered political identities

While the context of ethno-nationalist military projects was instrumental in mobilizing women and giving rise to a women's movement, this context also meant that the women's groups had to negotiate their loyalties towards "their" armed groups and "their" ethnic communities and their loyalties to the women's movement. As noted by one of the trainers and advisers who have been with WLB from the beginning, this did pose challenges in the process of forming a multi-ethnic alliance:

Some of the ethnic groups said we cannot support [a movement] because it is not strong enough on ethnic issues. There was a lot of fighting over the ethnic issues. One or two strong women's groups led the way, like [Shan Women's Action Network] and [Karen Women Organisation], and they managed to convince other [ethnic] groups to join, but not all ethnic groups joined. Some women groups walked out … But we talked about women's issues, such as rape, sexual violence and health, saying it is not an ethnic issue but an issue of women.[8]

Mobilizing as women and uniting across ethnic divides challenged militarized nationalisms, which saw ethnicity as the primary basis for political organization and claims-making. In line with findings from other contexts, women's feminist activism was seen as diverting attention from the ethno-nationalist struggle, and women activists were perceived – by other women as well as men – as disloyal to this cause (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011; Manchanda, 2004; Narayan, 1997). As feminist scholarship on armed conflict, militarism, and nationalism has demonstrated, women's roles and sexuality are politicized as symbols of group identity and boundaries in times of conflict, in particular in contexts characterized by strong nationalist or ethno-nationalist sentiments. In such contexts, feminist politics can be highly contentious, as proposals for changes in women's opportunities and roles are seen as threatening to group identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997). At its founding, the formation of WLB was contentious for precisely these reasons, as this quote from ethnic women's activist highlights:

Basically, the concern was, yes they wanted to work together as women but at the same time the ethnic women perceived themselves as ethnic women, part of a community that were struggling for ethnic rights. [To] just to jump into [WLB] was a bit like "what are we doing? We know that our various political organizations in the name of our ethnic groups are resisting, are fighting, and do we want to be part of a Union of Burma anyway, so why are we jumping into a union, even though we want to fight for women's rights?". Some of the ethnic people want independence, not a union, hence a Burmese Union, or a League of the Burmese was seen as very contentious.[9]

As evident here, ideas about ethnic identity and ethnic self-determination were positioned as key frames of interpretation and representation for the women at the inception of the movement. Gradually however, women united across ethnic lines in pursuit of gender justice, and ethnic minority women activists have come to explicitly conceptualize the pursuit of women's rights as an inherent aspect of the struggle for ethnic self-determination, equality, and a just peace. Ethnic equality and gender equality are seen as intertwined struggles against oppression and injustice, as exemplified in this woman activists' narrative about how she came to be involved in a women's organization:

I was born in a conflict area... So when I was three years or four years I heard about the serious conditions for the children that become orphans because their parents are taken as porters by the Burmese military…and also about women who were raped by the Burmese military, and a lot of cases of torture and also you know burning down [villages]… My first commitment was, I want to work for my people to have freedom. And then I worked with my organization and I learned more about women's rights. Because women's rights are very important, I also felt like I'm woman. I also gained more understanding about the women's rights and focus on women rights and also on changing our country.[10]

This woman, like many others, became an activist as a result of her experiences of ethnic persecution and armed conflict. When the focus of her activism gradually turned towards women's rights, she carried her ethnic minority identity and background in a conflict area with her. Consequently, it shaped her conception of gender justice. For example, commenting on the issue of women's participation in the ongoing peace process, the same activist forcefully argues that securing the presence of a number of women in general in leadership is not enough:

Our meaning of women participation is not like that. So not only women, but women that really can take the women's voice from the ground. And are really representing the situation on the ground […] Our position on women's participation is that we are arguing for federal democracy, because of if we have no federal democracy in our country, the women from ethnic areas will still be suffering.[11]

For ethnic minority women, the realization of women's participation and rights cannot be separated from a broader struggle for social change in Myanmar, where ethnic self-determination within a democratic federal union is emphasized as the basis of a just peace and a precondition for the realization of ethnic women's rights (Women's League of Burma, 2011). The feminism of the exiled Burmese women's movement can be characterized as highly intersectional and holistic, linking the goal of gender equality to a broader agenda for social justice and ethnic equality. This echoes Cockburn's description of the feminist anti-war activists that she studied (2007, 2010). However, in the context of Burmese exile politics, feminist commitments have not led women's organizations to position themselves as pacifists; on the contrary, the armed struggles of ethnic armed organizations are seen as the only safeguard against further oppression and abuse of ethnic minority women at the hands of the Burmese army and the Burman majority population. This point is made when a women rights' activist is asked to elaborate on the relationship between her organization's simultaneous work with non-violence as a community peacebuilding strategy and support for the use of violence in the armed resistance:

The [ethnic armed group] is holding arms just to show that we do not agree with the government policy, and also that we are fighting for our rights, ethnic rights, our self-determination. […] if we are not holding arms the Burma Army can destroy all of our people![12]

Support for women's rights and an armed struggle may seem contradictory to conventional feminist theorizing, but ethnic armed groups are seen as essential allies in the women's organizations' struggle for an agenda of equality and social justice, where women's empowerment is a key dimension. As noted by a long-term supporter of the women's movement, to the women's organizations "the ethnic armed groups are representing the aspirations of their ethnic communities, and they are naturally their allies".[13] Reflecting on theoretical assumptions of the "natural" affinity between feminism and pacifism, she makes it abundantly clear that such assumptions are not aligned with the experiences

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[8] Interview with human rights activist, Chiang Mai, 2 February 2012.

[9] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 6 February 2012.

[10] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 1 December 2016.

[11] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 1 December 2016.

[12] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 8 November 2017.

[13] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 13 November 2017.

and realities of local feminist activists:

> You know the Burma Army is in control, has impunity, so one has to fight that, right? […]
>
> On the ground they [ethnic minority women activists] are anti-war, they don't want the Burma Army in there, right? So I would regard that as very abstract. Meaningless, actually. It is easy to be a pacifist if you are sitting in some university, but it does not make sense to me at all […] I would suggest that it is not helpful to have very rigid definitions of what a feminist is. If they are expected to be pacifists that would cause them a lot of trouble in their communities, and the men would quite rightly say that it is all very well for you to say that you are pacifists, but we are defending you![14]

Thus, while the militarism and violence of the Myanmar Army is rejected, armed struggle exerted in opposition to the government is seen as a necessity for, not an impediment to, the realization of feminist agendas for equality, justice and political change.

In the context of ethno-nationalist military projects, women's organizations have challenged notions of women's roles and responsibilities and expanded spaces for women's agency and leadership, as we will discuss further below. Nonetheless, traditional notions of feminine and maternal identities arguably still remain important resources that facilitate women's involvement in a range of issues. In accounts of their humanitarian and social work, women activist frequently refer to notions of feminine duties to care for families and communities and help people in need: "we have a motherly heart, naturally".[15] Similarly, women's ability to act as mediators promoting unity between different ethnic armed organizations is also represented as an effect of their cooperative and communicative skills as women. Women's gender-specific experiences and characteristics are even represented as making them better soldiers and military strategists than men:

> There are two different kinds of men in the armed groups. Some of the men, they don't want to talk with the enemy, they will just fight until they die. Then some other men are like "maybe we will fight but if we have an opportunity, then we will talk to the government and do business and expand our income and our military". But for the women, women hate fighting. But at the same time, women don't think that we can talk to the government easily. Even though we don't like the fighting or the war, we will have to think carefully because we don't want the fighting to come again in the future.[16]

Women's feminine traits are here represented as making women better suited for decision-making and leadership in military matters: conventionally seen as perhaps the prime bastion of male dominance. Interestingly, while the feminine characteristics invoked here are reminiscent of Ehlstain's "beautiful souls" (1987), they are here represented as making women better apt at fighting war rather than non-violent objects of male protection. Because women perceive themselves as caring for and representing the needs and voices of ordinary people, they have sometimes concluded that agreeing to an inadequate, unequal peace is "not the right thing to do".[17] This appropriation of traditional femininity as a resource that legitimates women's participation and leadership can be seen as an outcome of the women's movement's close relationship with ethno-nationalist armed movements where tradition and group identity are privileged values. While (at least partial) adherence to such notions of traditional femininity may continue to constrain women's agency in some ways, it has simultaneously provided an avenue for expanding women's roles within ethno-nationalist projects. This testifies to the possibility of expanding and negotiating the "fixed positions" (Niranjana, 2007) that nationalist projects create for women, and constitute an example of how

dominant discourses and relations of power can be subverted as resources for resistance. This suggests that essentialist notions of feminine identities and qualities have been utilized in strategic ways to upset gender hierarchies and political projects that marginalizes women's experiences (see Spivak, 1988). The strategic deployment of gender to further the aims of the exiled movement, despite its inherent limitations and contradictions, has enabled women to stake out claims in the struggle for political rights. What this has meant for women in Burmese exile politics will be explored next.

Changing militarized nationalisms from within

As detailed above, the context of ethno-nationalist armed resistance movements was instrumental for the emergence of the Burmese women's movement in the 1990s, and women's organizations have remained closely linked to various armed groups until today. However, women have not only been loyal allies, but they have also been able to leverage their position as "critical insiders" of militarized nationalist projects to change them from within, gradually reshaping dominant notions of gender, nationalism, and nation-making.

The women's movement's work on documenting and raising awareness about sexual violence in conflict is an illustrative example. Being highly connected to transnational feminist networks, women activists have sought to exert pressure on the military regime through the mobilization of international support for their cause, while re-affirming their ethnic identity and belonging. International lobbying and advocacy, not least in various UN forums, have helped the women's movement in exile generate funding and establish important support networks. In addition, as noted by O'Kane (2007), being present in UN forums also enabled women activists to reconstruct themselves as legitimate political subjects in relation to the junta: here, they could openly debate with and challenge the representatives of the regime, something that was not possible in Myanmar. While wartime sexual violence was not the only issue raised by Burmese women in international for a, it was especially effective in capturing international attention. The impact of reports about the Myanmar Army's use of sexual violence such as *License to Rape* (Shan Women's Action Network, 2002) raised the international profile of the conflict, and earned women's organizations significant recognition and respect from ethnic leaders:

> Yeah, all the leaders, we get attention from them and they say 'oh we are fighting for over 50–60 years with our guns, but the Burma army or the government they didn't change, but the women's power with the pen is like, they have really got the attention from the global or the international [community]'. So, later, they came to accept women's participation.[18]

Publishing reports documenting the Burma Army's use of sexual violence against ethnic minority women has not only effectively drawn international attention but also strengthened the political position and influence of women's organizations within their ethnic communities. Their ability to attract international attention and funding has made the women's movement instrumentally useful to armed groups and ethnic minority leaders, and opened up new positions of leadership and influence for women within armed groups as well as increased the status of women's organizations within the broader movement. By levering their success in the international area to strengthen their position within the armed movements, the women's groups have expanded their demands for women's rights and equality, thereby upsetting the idea of the political struggle as belonging to male leaders, male soldiers, and male experiences.

However, while the international political salience of wartime sexual violence made it an effective advocacy issue for women activists, this also made it highly useful for rallying continued support for armed insurgencies among ethnic minority communities. Reports and

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[14] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 13 November 2017.
[15] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 6 January 2017.
[16] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 16 October 2013.
[17] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.

[18] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 17 January 2017.

advocacy efforts by women's organizations support a construction of the "raped woman as a metonym of state terror" (Roy, 2012:170) that can be invoked in the construction of the ethnic imagined community, and in framings of military campaigns by ethnic minority insurgents as acts of rightful self-defence against state repression. This has heightened the usefulness of women's advocacy and increased their status, but at the same time facilitates continued exploitation of women's unpaid labour in the service of war in conflict zones. Thus, international advocacy on wartime sexual violence has simultaneously opened up space for women's empowerment and political agency, *and* reproduced gendered forms of insecurity and marginalization (Hedström, 2018).

The issue of advocacy on wartime sexual violence illustrates how the instrumentalization of women's participation for purposes of the armed struggle has occurred in this case, to a certain extent. However, this does not negate the simultaneous expansion of women's leadership and influence in the movement that has also taken place. Rather, these facets of women's participation are sometimes intertwined; because women's activism has been instrumentally useful to military leaders, they have been able to gradually push the boundaries of their claims to increased rights and equality within ethno-nationalist movements. For example, through their position as critical insiders and on the basis of the leverage gained through international advocacy, women activists have been able to raise issues concerning gender-based violence also within their ethnic minority communities:

> I remember in the beginning people didn't talk about sexual violence, then they talk about sexual violence by the [Burma Army]. And then gradually women started to acknowledge that there was domestic violence. And you know what it is like, people didn't want to talk about it, sexual violence or domestic violence in their own community because they saw it as being disloyal to their ethnic group. But gradually they started to have the confidence and say this is an issue, this has to be addressed, we can fight the *Tatmadaw* [the Myanmar Army] and still fight domestic violence….So that is actually quite amazing because we have a feminist, the growth of a feminist movement.

As this quote demonstrates, the position as insiders to ethnic armed struggles has at times caused women's organizations and activists to downplay or stay silent on issues that would be seen as controversial within their communities. This negotiation between challenging and reaffirming dominant norms is analogous to the "bracketing" of sexuality and reproductive rights in the Kurdish women's movement (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018). Clearly, drawing attention to inequality and gender-based violence within ethnic minority communities is far more contentious than exposing the crimes of the enemy, as it challenges the gender relations that are underpinning nationalist projects and identities. Yet, through being loyal insiders but at the same time strengthening their autonomy and status through the resources and legitimacy generated by their international connections, women's organizations have been able to gradually push their critique of inequality and oppression within their communities further (see also Israelsen, 2018). As a result, the broader exile opposition movement has been reshaped, and gender issues have been pushed into the centre of its everyday politics:

> I think if you look at the whole exile movement the last 20-25 years, the women's organizations have really gone very far in the front row. Because you know, when we came out from Burma nobody talked about women's issues. From that position to now normally talking about women's rights in conflict areas and women's situation, as one big issue that we cannot avoid talking about in every big discussion. You know, women and gender equality. So in terms of people's awareness it is from zero to 100.[19]

Through their advocacy efforts targeting international audiences, as well as training programs and lobbying targeting armed opposition groups, women's organizations have established women's rights and gender equality as issues integral to the struggle for democracy, peace and justice in Myanmar. They have mobilized a new narrative of conflict and a new vision for peace, where women's suffering as well as women's agency is central.

Another key example of how women's activism has been able to change militarized nationalisms from within are their success in gaining mainstream acceptance for a quota stipulating that women should make up at least 30% of representatives in decision-making fora. This originated from the negotiations around an alternative constitution for a federal Myanmar that was adopted by exile-based opposition and armed groups in February 2008 (Federal Constitution Coordinating Committee, 2008). The WLB were, as the only women's group, formally part of the constitution drafting committee. Within this process, the WLB pushed for a quota to be adopted across all decision-making levels. Facing resistance from male leaders, the quota provision ended up only referring to the legislature. Yet, as a result of this process, the quota has been accepted as a standard to aspire towards. Moreover, the political dialogue framework informing the current peace process has adopted the language of gender quotas. Importantly, even though the quota has not been implemented in practice, women leaders are drawing on the adoption of quotas to legitimize and demand their participation in decision-making:

> The EAOs, armed organization, they have a kind of policy, they accept that at least 30 percent women participation in peace process, they agree on that. This, we have been pushing a lot. We can say this is one of our achievement because we can organize or we can advocate, lobby, to ethnic leaders rather than the government.[20]

As noted here, this quota has come to inform EAO strategies in relation to peace negotiations with the government, and provide women activists with strategic leverage in lobbying for women's inclusion. Women activists consider the acceptance of the quota, first in the exile Constitution and now in the movement as whole, as a major achievement and sign of the changing status of women within the broader opposition movement. Moreover, in the ongoing peace process, the 30% quota is now promoted by a wide range of actors such as donors, NGOs, and women's networks inside Myanmar. After travelling to a meeting in Yangon in 2016, an exile-based activist expressed her delight and surprise after hearing "everyone" talk about women's participation in the peace process and argue for the quota:

> We can say that at the meeting people were aware. A lot of people were aware of women's participation, women's rights. Especially women, peace and security issues, which WLB have been discussing for a long time. Now it is not only the WLB - now everyone is talking about women, peace and security, 30%. Actually the 30% started from here when the WLB was trying to push for 30% of women in the federal constitution.[21]

This (at least rhetorical) widespread endorsement of the quota and recognition of the importance of women's inclusion is one example of how ethnic minority women's activism has shaped the ongoing peace process through informal channels, despite the low formal representation of women in the negotiations (Pepper, 2018). As noted above, close relationships with ethnic armed leaders and a position as insiders to ethnic armed struggles has been central in enabling women's organizations to exert these forms of informal influence, from a position in exile and in the context of formal exclusion from the peace process.

Through breaking silences around violence against women, by the Myanmar army as well as within their own communities, and by arguing for women's equal leadership and participation in decision-making and peace negotiations, the Burmese women's movement has

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[19] Interview with journalist, Chiang Mai, 4 January 2017.

[20] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 18 January 2017.
[21] Interview with women's rights activist, Chiang Mai, 9 December 2016.

gradually contributed to change militarized nationalist projects from within. With Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) we argue that the Burmese women's groups are "narrating the nation" by articulating demands for access to rights, opportunities, and authority. Nation-making processes are gendered, as particular constructions of ethnic identities rely on particular constructions of gender identities. Changing notions of appropriate gender relations are inherently linked to negotiating the nation that is to be built, and constructing new visions for peace and political order.

Conclusions

Drawing on an in-depth case study of the emergence and evolution of the exiled, ethnic minority-dominated Burmese women's movement since the 1990s, this article illustrates when and how militarized nationalism can provide a space from which feminist agendas can be articulated and successfully pursued. This case demonstrates that militarized nationalism does not only have the potential to mobilize women's participation, but can provide a platform for feminist organization and activism that transcends, challenges, and eventually reshapes militarized nationalist projects in ways that advance women's rights and equality. In relation to previous research on women's participation in nationalist armed struggles, the analysis shows that the tendency for women's issues to be subsumed under nationalist agendas, and subsequent gains in women's status reversed after the struggle, is not inevitable. The tendencies of armed nationalist struggles to instrumentalize and exploit women have been resisted by women's activists and organizations with relative success. While such dynamics have been present also in this case, they have not been able to subsume women's own agendas for feminist change or render them ineffective. These findings call into question generalized assumptions about the conflictual relationship between feminism, militarism and nationalism, underlining the need for further careful, context-specific analyses of how women in armed conflict actually experience, relate to, and make use of nationalist and militarized political projects. Our analysis demonstrates that by building theory grounded in women's lived experiences we gain new insights that highlight the complexity and fluidity of power relations in armed conflict, and reveal the subversive, critical potential inherent even in militarized nationalist projects.

Based on our analysis, we contend that there are two key explanations for why women in our case have been able to make use of militarized nationalist projects as platforms for feminist mobilization and transformation. While these explanations are context-specific, they may nevertheless provide insights that have bearing in other contexts, and contribute to advance theoretical debates about the relationship between feminism and armed conflict, militarization, and nationalist struggles.

First, the context of exiled oppositional politics, including armed struggles, in the borderlands surrounding military-ruled Myanmar provided a political space of relative openness where hierarchical gender norms and relationships could be transgressed. One aspect of this is the character of subordinate nationalist movements, where the mobilization of new groups, such as women, becomes important to enhance the struggle against the oppressor and bolster its legitimacy and support (Jacoby, 1999). This provided new avenues for women to mobilize as political agents, and eventually develop their own agendas independently of the armed groups. Moreover, in contrast to the isolation of Myanmar, the border was a transnational space where exile groups interacted with humanitarian aid organizations, transnational networks, and UN agencies and arenas. As noted in literatures on feminist transnationalism, this provided women's organizations with new norms and networks that they could make useful for their own agendas (Zwingel, 2012).

Second, women's strategic agency in leveraging their position as critical insiders to ethno-nationalist armed struggles was key to their success. The history of the exiled women's movement has been characterized by careful negotiation between loyalty to these broader struggles, and promotion of women's organizations' own agendas for change. The analysis highlights how traditional gendered divisions of labour within armed groups, where women are restricted to subordinated, supporting roles, have despite their limitations provided spaces for women's activism. Notions of traditional femininity have been strategically utilized to legitimize women's participation and leadership. Such acts reaffirm women's loyalties towards the nation, while at the same time transgressing gendered hierarchies that marginalizes their experiences from the political/public sphere. At the same time, women's organizations have skillfully drawn on their successful international advocacy, and the resources and connections this has generated, to gain increased autonomy from and respect within armed groups. By leveraging the combination of their transnational links and their positions as insiders, women have been able to change the nature of militarized nation-building projects from within, reshaping notions of appropriate gender roles as well as visions for new political orders.

Indeed, by remaining "critical insiders" to militarized nationalist projects, Burmese women's organizations have been able to establish themselves as key actors in ongoing processes of negotiation and peacebuilding in Myanmar. However, the women's movement's role in this regard has until now been largely overlooked by scholarship on armed conflict in Myanmar, which has been mostly gender-blind. Further, it has not been well understood by donors and peacebuilding practitioners. This analysis makes a key contribution by generating new knowledge that can enable a better understanding of, as well as more effective support to, women as agents in the pursuit of a just and sustainable peace in Myanmar.

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