Social Exclusion, Livelihoods, and Gender Violence: Burmese Muslim Refugees in Thailand

Mollie Pepper
Northeastern University

Abstract
This work seeks to understand gender-based violence and the connection between violence and livelihoods for refugees living in conditions of social exclusion. Through qualitative research consisting of 40 interviews, a market survey, and observation conducted among Burmese Muslim refugees in Thailand, this work analyzes the connection between livelihoods strategies, social exclusion, and gender-based violence. Muslims are a marginalized group within Burma and experience ongoing discrimination while living in refugee communities in Thailand, which results in risk for several kinds of violence at multiple levels. The experiences of Muslim refugees living in Thailand offer insight into the conditions that shape violence for refugees more generally. Findings show that several factors contribute to the incidence of gender violence, including structural, community, and interpersonal stressors and constraints. These dynamics also shape violence, whether domestic abuse, harassment and assault within the refugee camp, or experiences with Thai authorities. By showing the complex conditions that shape gender-based violence for refugees in this context, this work demonstrates the need for consideration of marginalized groups within refugee populations and the layered nature of the conditions that underpin dynamics of gender violence. This paper concludes with consideration of the implications of these findings for the possibility of refugee return to Myanmar in the context of ongoing ethnic difficulty and livelihoods struggles.

Introduction

Refugee camps are typically thought of as places of safety, spaces where the forcibly displaced are protected and provided for by aid organizations for the duration of their stay. Reality, however, includes a great deal of violence and risk for many refugees, particularly the most vulnerable including women, children, and ethnic minorities. Loss of community structures and changes in livelihoods strategies as a result of displacement increase risk factors for violence for individual refugees and for the refugee community, including gender-based and interpersonal violence. Displacement and insecurity, as well as marginalization, further reduce the refugee population’s ability to respond to violence, and so perpetuate cycles of violence at community and interpersonal levels.

I use the case study of a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand to delve into these questions concerning how social exclusion shapes livelihoods, and how both social exclusion and adaptive livelihoods strategies contribute to gender-based violence. The population studied is the Muslim minority group of...
a predominantly Karen refugee camp. A 2010 assessment of gender dynamics in this community revealed unusually high rates of gender based violence within the Muslim community compared with the total refugee population and other ethnic groups, and also identified limited livelihoods strategies as a primary cause of gender based violence. This assessment served as the foundational work for this paper, which seeks to better explain the processes at work behind those findings.

This work finds that gender-based violence emerges in conditions of social exclusion and limited livelihoods opportunities. Social exclusion for the Muslim community result both from host country policy and from power dynamics within camp. Livelihoods strategies in camp are varied and include strategies that are located inside and outside of camp and they are shaped by social exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exclusion Theory
Social exclusion theory frames social inequality as a dynamic, relational, and multidimensional process. Much of the social exclusion discourse has emphasized a conceptual shift in the framing of inequality from poverty towards exclusion (Room 1995, Barnes 2005). In sociological terms, social exclusion can be thought of as an alternative to, or even synonymous with, marginalization.

It is especially useful to think of social exclusion as occurring in multidimensional ways in order to imagine how social exclusion actually occurs. As Sen argues, this forces researchers to think of exclusion as occurring at multiple levels and in both active and passive ways (Sen 2000). Different thinkers have framed and contextualized social exclusion differently. According to Beland, earlier theorists often thought of it as a process where a group is administratively excluded by a state (Beland 2007). Alternatively, or perhaps complementarily, Jordan offers the idea that social exclusion can be conceived as a process of active exclusion of one group by another in which the excluded are at the mercy of the more privileged (Jordan 1996). In the case of refugee populations, both of these ways of framing social exclusion at state and community levels can be employed to understand the marginalization of refugee populations.

The implications of social exclusion are varied, and have been linked to both violence and restricted access to livelihoods. In their review of the state of livelihoods research, De Haan and Zoomers point out that access to livelihoods depends upon social relations and structural factors (2005). As a result, exclusion or disadvantage within either structural processes or the social construction of a community is a hindrance to a marginalized group in the pursuit of livelihoods and must be considered as an important variable. Connecting their analysis to that of Sen, Room, and Barnes, it is clear that both communities and institutional structures foster marginalization and exclusion, and that the impact of that exclusion is felt in a multitude of areas, including livelihoods, security, protection, and violence between and within communities.
Case Study and Methods

Method
In order to explore the question of how social exclusion shapes livelihoods strategies and relates to gender-based violence, this work utilizes a case study drawn from research completed in Thailand. Research involved eight weeks of fieldwork in the town of Mae Sot and in a Refugee Camp in June and July of 2011. I conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with camp residents focusing on questions concerning livelihoods strategies, community violence, gender dynamics, and experiences of exclusion.

Convenience sampling was used to identify participants. Respondents gave informed consent to be interviewed and were not compensated for their time. No identifying information, including name, was recorded and interview notes and transcripts were coded to ensure confidentiality. Unstructured interviews were also conducted with key informants drawn from community leadership and the NGO community. A brief market survey was conducted in the Muslim market in camp. Participant observation of several meetings and events was also crucial to this work and included a meeting of the Livelihoods Working Group of the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand, a community savings group meeting, and a meeting of the Muslim Women’s Organization.

This research was conducted over eight weeks; the short duration combined with difficulties finding an appropriate translator limited the number of interviews I was able to complete. Every effort was made to speak with people across genders and age groups, but no comparative data was collected. Thus, it is impossible to determine from this data whether the Muslim experience is distinct from that of other religious and ethnic groups.

Case Selection

This case is drawn from the Muslim minority population in a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand. The Muslim community makes up a little more than 10% of the camp population, making it a significant minority group. It is because of its excluded status that the Muslim population is a useful case. They experience the same exclusion that other refugees from Burma do in Thailand, including the same barriers to work, legal status, and education, but they also experience exclusion within the refugee community as a result of their status as an ethnic and religious minority. As a minority ethnic and religious group among Burmese refugees, Muslims experience multiple forms of exclusion. Muslims are excluded from legal status and a multiplicity of rights as displaced persons living in Thailand. They also experience exclusion within the displaced population, the majority of which is ethnically Karen and religiously identified as Christian. This exclusion is evident in the low levels of Muslim participation in camp leadership, and as staff, in camp-based programming and organizations, as well as in the lack of integration into the Karen majority community (TBBC 2010). Muslims experience discrimination and violence within Burma, in particular those of the Rohingya ethnic group from Burma’s Rakhine State.
The Muslim population was identified as experiencing higher rates of gender-based violence than the general camp community in research conducted by the IRC in 2010. That research project was focused on assessing protection issues for women and girls in camp and revealed distinct experiences of both livelihoods strategies and gender-based violence within the Muslim community as compared with the Karen ethnic majority group. It further identified livelihoods as a potential key intervention for the reduction of gender-based violence in the Muslim community and formed the basis for this research (IRC-WPE 2011).

Previous work has clearly established the Burmese Muslim community, both in Thailand and in Burma, as especially vulnerable and often persecuted (Fink 2009; Sidhu and Parnini 2011). Karen relations with the Muslim population in Karen State have been strained and the Karen Human Rights Group has reported ongoing repression of Muslim villagers by Karen communities (Karen Human Rights Group 2002). Within the Karen-majority refugee camps in Thailand, discrimination persists. The Muslim community has been found to have only restricted access to health services, education, and rations within the camps and experiences exclusion on the basis of religion and language. They are under-represented in leadership and program staff in all three camps of Tak Province, for example, which include Nu Po, Umpiem Mai, and Mae La camps (Thai Burma Border Consortium 2010).

One problem is that Muslims are perceived as wealthy compared with the general camp population. However, while many Muslims are successful at maintaining businesses in camp, being Muslim does not guarantee an income. Even those who do run businesses that may appear successful are carrying significant debt and are obligated to pay taxes, both factors decrease the amount of actual income for shopkeepers. Too, because the Muslim population are thought of as wealthy, whether they are in reality or not, they are vulnerable to theft and are also excluded from NGO programming because program coordinators don’t think they need support. In reality, several interviewees indicated that they survive on rations and the generosity of their neighbors and that they are deeply in debt. The situation described by some families is so dire that their children are not in school and are required to work with their parents making and selling snacks or betel nut throughout camp.

In camp discrimination on the basis of ethnic identity is evident, carried over from Burma where discrimination is common and often violent (Fink 2009). Suspicion and tension has led to violence perpetrated on the Muslim community. In the last week of fieldwork for this project, a group of Karen youth came into the Muslim section, beat two men in the street and set three shop fronts on fire. Two different mosques were stoned during the eight weeks of field work and, in May before work began, 3 young Karen men set fire to a home of a Muslim family. This kind of violence was described as common. One community leader said that it happens regularly and has been increasing as the Muslim population gets larger.

**Gender Based Violence and Exclusion**

*Risks Associated with Economic Instability and Limited Livelihoods Opportunities*
However precarious life may be for a female resident outside of the home, home can be a dangerous place too. Husbands, fathers, grandfathers, and even mothers perpetrated violence in ways that are specific to women. Fieldwork revealed that a common perception is that lack of livelihoods opportunities is connected with violence within households. Research participants, from community leaders to household interviewees, discussed domestic violence as resulting or being exacerbated by financial tension and stress related to the lack of livelihoods options. In 22 interviews, participants described economic stress as a significant cause of domestic conflict, often identifying it as the most significant cause. Respondents explained that lack of work and income as well as uncertainty about the future led to an increase in stress in the household, especially for men responsible for supporting the family. Women indicated that if they had more opportunity to work, they could better support their husbands in caring for the family and they felt this would reduce domestic conflict. Respondents explained that lack of work and income as well as uncertainty about the future led to an increase in stress in the household. One interviewee said:

Work is important for the man, but it is important for the woman also, because they can stand by themselves and it reduces domestic violence by reducing hardship on the family.

For this respondent and others, women’s contributions to household survival were described as being important to reducing household conflict. Many respondents specifically suggested that bringing work opportunities into the camps, such as through the introduction of manufacturing jobs or similar, would be beneficial to women in particular by providing income-generation opportunities that would allow them to both support their families and reduce instability, as well as to provide a way for them to seek a measure of independence.

Household stress resulting from economic factors may contribute to domestic violence in conjunction with substance misuse. Use of drugs and alcohol were identified by 8 respondents as being problems within families and as connected to both situational stress and resulting in violence. One described this problem this way:

Sometimes it is not ok in the family, at that time the man has many depression so to disappear their depression they use alcohol and they come back to their house and they hurt their wives.

While substance misuse cannot be said to cause domestic violence, the two were linked by respondents through the problem of economic instability and uncertainty.

An exacerbating factor in situations of domestic violence is a structural and related to camp management and justice. If a case of domestic abuse is reported, camp security may arrest and detain one of the people involved. Invariably, they will be released within a few days, but the household will be responsible for paying jail fees, which are 200 THB. One woman explained:

Some women are hurt in the family. But when they go and tell section leader about it, the security come and put the men in jail. To put in, 100 baht, to take
out, 100 baht. The woman has to redeem her husband for 200 baht. Every time she has to pay.

This cost deters families and neighbors from reporting violence and also creates a situation in which violence must be kept hidden so as to not draw attention. One young man put it this way, “if a couple has an argument, then they are quiet so people don’t ask and the problem is finished by themselves”.

The problem of under-reporting also persists in cases of sexual assault and is also linked to economics. It is reportedly common for people to pay for offenses they commit, which may be considered crimes. One young man described how a “rich man” in camp raped a neighbor girl:

Some men they have a lot of money, so they pay for their problems. So then maybe section leader calls to the woman and her family and says, ‘ok, be quiet’ and there is a payment, 2,000 baht maybe to the family and the section leader. And then the problem is disappear.

Debt is a driver of gender-based violence in two ways: first, as previously discussed, it contributes to the financial stress within a household, and second, it requires repayment in a context with few resources.

Forced marriage is commonly cited as a major concern for women and girls’ protection in camps. Especially in the Muslim community, perhaps because debt tends to be high as a consequence of the prevalence of shop keeping within that group, it was found that girls are often forced to marry or have sex with men in order to repay debts. This fieldwork also found that forced marriage is a concern among women and mothers. No interviewee spoke of direct personal experience with forced marriage, though they often discussed it in abstract. “If the parents say she must go with a man, she must go” was the way one woman explained. Another said:

Sometimes there is a problem with money in the house, like maybe the father has the big debt, then the girl might have to go with the man so that there is no more debt.

This research did not uncover any specific instance of forced marriage though many women mentioned it during interviews and whether it is a problem in reality or rather a common fear is unknown. It is clear that there is a powerful and direct link between the lack of livelihoods opportunities, economic inequality, and gender-based violence.

Stressors and insecurity contribute to incidence of gender-based violence for female camp residents. Women experience similar risks to men, but also face unique challenges and threats. As previously discussed, the connection between livelihoods strategies and risk factors for gender-based violence are well established. However, the connection plays out in particular ways in this context as a result of social exclusion and the livelihoods strategies adopted as a result. While research was conducted primarily with Muslim respondents, there is no clear indication that the reported experiences are specific to Muslim women.
**Risks Associated with Income Generation Activities**

Limited livelihoods opportunities within camp lead to the common practice of leaving camp for a period of time without permission in order to seek work. There are several risks for camp residents associated with this practice, including gender-based risks that impact women. Those who remain in camp while family members leave to seek work may be left behind for several days or weeks at a time. This sometimes means that women and children are alone in their homes for extended periods, or that children are left alone if both of their parents leave to work. Muslim women reported that their ethnicity makes them especially vulnerable in this circumstance, because their community is already subjected to acts of vandalism and violence. Further, they believe that their recourse is more limited than other camp residents because of the underrepresentation of the Muslim community in Camp Leadership and Security, which makes them especially attractive targets.

Women who leave camp face multiple risks. According to respondents, sometimes whole families will go and stay outside of camp while one or more members work. For those who leave camp, but remain at home alone during the day, there is the problem of harassment or assault. Women who work may be propositioned or assaulted by their employers, and are further subject to the same risks of exploitation as other undocumented workers. In these situations, women are especially vulnerable because their illegal status outside of camp restricts their ability to seek assistance or justice.

Another problem is the Thai military and police. As mentioned, those who leave camp without permission are in violation of Thai law and so risk deportation or imprisonment. One woman, for example, reported being caught by the Thai military police when returning to camp. They put her in jail, where she was raped by a guard. She had little to no recourse available to her. She expressed her situation this way:

> I cannot do anything. I am a refugee and I am very small. If they want to send me to Burma, they can do, but I don’t want to go back to Burma so I cannot do anything.

While this was the only specific report of sexual assault uncovered during fieldwork, many interviewees talked about sexual assault in and outside of camp in general terms.

Interviewees often brought up human trafficking. It was described as a risk of leaving camp, and as a particular risk for women. Trafficking was specifically described in 3 interviews in which women were described as being “tricked” or “lied to”, leaving camp to work to find that the job they had been offered did not exist, and being forced to engage in prostitution. Sex work without the element of trafficking or coercion was raised as a concern three additional times and was described as something a woman would choose to do out of necessity rather than be coerced or forced to engage in. The tone around discussions of sex work was forgiving. As one respondent explained, “they have to rent their body, they have to rent their life to manage and survive”.

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Women and girls were also described as vulnerable when engaging in livelihoods activities within camp. Women described verbal harassment and intimidation when walking through camp alone. Many young girls are sent out by their families to sell snacks and betel nut, or go to school alone. They are particularly susceptible to this type of harassment and are even more likely than other women to be targeted because people selling goods around camp may have some earnings with them, and school children typically carry a snack fee, which gives the added incentive of robbery to those who interfere with them.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions
The experiences of Burmese refugees living in Thailand are shaped by social exclusion. Livelihoods strategies are an area specifically impacted by social exclusion, in particular legal status for refugees in Thailand. Those strategies in turn are connected with risks. Vulnerability to violence in particular is tied to many livelihoods strategies, especially those that require refugees to leave the relative safety of camp in order to forage or pursue waged employment. Gender based violence, too, can be directly linked to the livelihoods context. Where households are under a great deal of financial strain women and girls tend to be more vulnerable. Too, the need to pursue unsafe livelihoods strategies outside of camp leads to vulnerabilities to exploitation and abuse for women.

The research conducted for this thesis does not assume to make general assertions about rates of violence or the exact composition of the camp economy. Rather, it draws connections between exclusion, livelihoods, and vulnerability. Data supports this interconnection and offers some explanation of the dynamics at work in camp.

Policy Recommendations
Given that the greatest risks identified and experienced by refugees while pursuing livelihoods are related to working outside illegally, developing safe and legal work opportunities could be a huge benefit to individual households and psychosocial health at the community level. Were Thai policy makers to adhere to the standards set forth by the UN regarding refugees, in particular with reference to rights regarding work and legal recognition as refugees, there could be significant changes in the lived experience of Burmese refugees in Thailand. Legal right to work could reduce risks while increasing worker’s options for seeking help in cases of harassment, violence, or exploitation when they need it. Further, permitting UNHCR registration of Burmese refugees would have a dramatic effect on the sense of security felt by those who have arrived in Thailand since 2005.

In terms of GBV, lack of awareness about gender issues is the primary factor in the exclusion of GBV issues from programming decisions in all areas in most organizations. During this assessment, this was especially apparent in the Livelihoods Working Group of the CCSDPT. The provision of training or the intentional recruitment of gender mainstreaming competency in recruiting efforts could prove
invaluable. Raising awareness of gender issues could be the single most effective intervention to support existing livelihoods and protection efforts on the Thailand Burma border.

Negotiation between NGOs responsible for infrastructure and protection and camp security and justice is necessary. The fee structure for camp jail is counterproductive and increases the vulnerability of families that experience domestic violence. As it stands, it encourages isolation of households that are most vulnerable by making the involvement of authorities financially unwise. An elimination of the fee structure and greater transparency concerning jailing practices and justice procedures could also help protect families by removing barriers to seeking assistance in cases of violence and ensuring that there is accountability on the part of camp justice to victims of violence.

In terms of refugee repatriation to Burma, the findings of this work indicate two central problems. First, any return effort that fails to address sustainable economic opportunities for returning refugees will have significant implications for gender-based violence. Economic instability leads to risky livelihoods strategies which may place women at particular risk and further creates stress within households that is linked with domestic violence and harmful outcomes for girls. Second, social exclusion of minority groups, even in the relatively safe context of the refugee camp, is a serious problem that should be considered in developing any plan for repatriation. Assessment of potential risk to minority groups on their return to Burma is necessary as well as awareness of the demographic changes in the camps that would result from repatriation efforts.
References


ZOA Refugee Care Thailand. 2007. “Refugee Camp Residents and Inclusive Education: ZOA’s Commitment to Educational Inclusion.” Mae Sot, Thailand: ZOA Refugee Care Thailand.

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i The official name of the country is Myanmar, however the participants in this research referred to their country of origin as Burma. I have chosen to follow their lead in choosing language for this work. “Burmese” should be understood as referring to all people from Burma, no matter their ethnic or religious identity.
ii The author recognizes that “Muslim” is not typically used as a descriptor of ethnicity. However, in the context of the Thai-Burma border it is appropriate as individuals self-identify as ethnically Muslim and are recognized by the camp community as a distinct ethnic group. Additionally, the Muslim population is often measured and alongside Karen, Burmese, Shan, etc. ethnicities; indicating that it is standard practice on the border to consider the Muslim population its own ethnic group. Muslims themselves may view their identity differently. TBBC identifies three Muslim groups: Karen- Muslims, Central/Western Burma Muslims, and Thai-Based Muslims. In the assessment of protection issues for women and girls, respondents generally self-identified as either Muslim or Karen Muslim while in this research the vast majority identified as Muslim only.