

Understanding Karen women's experiences in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada

By

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Abstract

In the 1980s, the Karen people began arriving on the Thai-Myanmar border as they fled the ongoing ethnopolitical conflict in Myanmar. Since then, the refugee situation in the border region has become one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world. As there was no clear indication of if and/or when the Karen people could return to the Kayin State, their home state in Myanmar, they began to resettle in third countries. In the mid-2000s, Canada began resettling Karen refugees from the Thai-Myanmar border across the country.

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Karen refugee women living on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. The study analyzes how gender impacted the lived experiences of three Karen refugees and their families. This research is concerned with shedding light on the stories, lived experiences, and resiliency of Karen refugee women on the Thai-Myanmar border and in resettling in Canada. Karen women are not simply passive victims of violence and conflict but are actors for change and peace.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Alissa Wong, Gwendoline Bloomfield, Yip Wong, Winnifred Lowe, and Alice Bloomfield. You are the women who raised me and taught me just how strong and resilient women can be.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Public consciousness of major events come and goes depending on the hot topic of the moment. Conflicts, regions, and issues also arise from the media, dialogue, and the global frame of view. The onslaught of information that society is bombarded with on a regular basis has resulted in the world being more connected than it ever has been while also losing track of events after a certain length of time. The conflict in Myanmar is an example of the way public consciousness shifts and changes depending on the interest of the moment. However, even when society has moved onto the next topic, it does not mean everything is solved and there is peace. Rather, the people within those contexts such as Myanmar continue to live these realities whether the world is watching or not.

On February 1, 2021, the news of a coup d'état in Myanmar swept across the globe. This was the latest in a series of periodic focuses within the media on the context and affairs within Myanmar that has been occurring since the mid-2010s. The news of violence and genocidal actions taken against the Rohingya in Rakhine state saw the country of Myanmar brought into the limelight of worldwide media where it would periodically reappear throughout the latter half of the 2010s when major new developments and events would occur (Wade, 2019). Although the actions taken against the Rohingya are perhaps the most extreme, the persecution of minority groups within Myanmar is not an isolated nor a new reality as other ethnic groups such as the Karen have experienced such persecution for generations.

There are an estimated 82.4 million people who have been forcibly displaced around the world. Out of this number of displaced persons, an estimated sixty-eight percent come from just

five source countries, such as Myanmar (UNHCR, 2021). The Thai-Myanmar border has witnessed for decades a considerable refugee population residing in the gray area between Thailand and Myanmar. The majority of those living within the border refugee camps are from the Karen ethnic group that continue to experience barriers and persecution in the region (Smith, 1991; Loescher & Milner, 2008).

This thesis explores the experiences and resilience of women from the Karen community in two parts. The first, focuses on the experiences of Karen women while living in the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border (Chapter 5). The second explores the experiences and resilience of Karen women as newcomers in Canada (Chapter 6). The research seeks to shed light on the gendered experiences of refugee women and the ongoing persecution and barriers faced by Karen women particularly in the face of new emerging conflicts within the region.

1.2 Significance of study

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been an increased awareness on the seemingly largely ongoing intrastate conflicts around the world (Wolff, 2006). The genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia and the civil war in Syria are but a few of the examples of protracted ethnopolitical conflicts. Many of these internal conflicts have seen the mass displacement of populations. As previously noted, there are an estimated 82.4 million people who are forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2021). Notably, women consist of a significant portion of the refugee population (Freedman, 2015).

This research aims to add to the discourse around the experiences and barriers faced by refugee women on the Thai-Myanmar border and around the world. Additionally, this thesis contributes to the growing narrative that women are more than passive victims, rather they are

contributors to peace and have agency within these spaces. The use of gender mainstreaming has increased in recent years as the voices of women are pushed to the forefront of the conflict and peacebuilding discourse (Sandole-Staroste, 2009). Women are not simply the passive victims of violence and conflict as they actively contribute to peacebuilding processes and can be agents for change within their communities and contexts (Anderlini, 2007; Rothbart & Korostelina, 2009).

In addition to recognizing the experiences and agency of women, the study also aims to contribute to the existing research on the Myanmar conflict and the Karen community. The recent developments within the region such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 1, 2021, coup have had considerable impacts on the Karen community and Myanmar as a whole. The current study, which occurred within the same timeframe of both events, includes an analysis of some of the current impacts on the community.

1.3 Limitations of the study

There are varying limitations to the study. First, I interviewed three participants who provided an account of their experiences within the study context. Additionally, the participants who were interviewed were each comfortable enough conversing in English leaving possible participants that perhaps did not have a moderate familiarity or comfort with the English language to be excluded.

Second, potential participants who are currently located on the Thai-Myanmar border and surrounding areas were unable to participate in this research. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic barred me from travelling to the region and completing research in the field. Additionally, the pandemic has seen an increased workload of grassroots organizations within the region leaving little time in their schedules for participation in research studies. The lack of available resources

such as internet access and the isolation of the camps created further barrier in recruiting participants from the border region.

Third, Karen newcomers in Canada have largely resettled from the Mae La Oon refugee camp. They provide the perspective of a smaller, more isolated camp with specific challenges not seen in larger camps such as Mae La, highlighting a singular camp perspective. The experiences in the camps are not homogenous however, as some participants did spend time in other camps, so that there are intersections in such experiences among the different refugee camps.

Finally, the conflict in Myanmar is an ongoing conflict situation that means that the context is constantly changing with new developments altering the realities within the regions. At the time of writing, there are already new developments emerging within the Myanmar context due to the February 1st coup. The three participants in my study have each been in Canada for a minimum of five years. They acknowledged during the interviews, there has certainly already been changes and developments that could alter some of the things that they experienced while living on the border.

1.4 Outline of thesis

There are seven chapters that comprise the body of this thesis following this introduction (Chapter 1). The second chapter explores the context of Myanmar and the history behind the current conflict and resulting mass displacement of the Karen. The primary focus of this chapter is on the history post-independence and the modern context within Myanmar, and for those displaced persons living in the border. There is also a brief overview of the period of occupation and colonization by the British. Additionally, the chapter emphasizes the history of the Karen people and the impacts and roles they have in the current conflict.

The third chapter is an overview of the literature of the theoretical themes that guided the research. Particularly, Chapter 3 includes a discussion of how the ideas of group identity, gender mainstreaming, and implications of human security relate to the experiences of women and refugee populations. Chapter 4 of the thesis outlines the qualitative methodology used for the research as well as the specific method that was selected.

The following three chapters consist of the empirical portion of the study. Chapter 5 focuses on the lived experiences of Karen women on the Thai-Myanmar border. Chapter 6 examines the experiences of Karen women in resettling to Canada, and the adaptability of newcomer Karen women to the Canadian context. Chapter 7 explores the resilience of the Karen community, particularly Karen women, living on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. The final chapter of the thesis reflects on the overall key findings of the study and potential areas of further research.

1.5 Conclusion

This introduction provided a brief overview of the study, the significance of the research, and the outline of the thesis. The thesis explores the gendered experiences of Karen refugee women in one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world, the Thai-Myanmar border, as well as their experience in Canada. The following chapter provides an overview into the history of the conflict and the refugee situation on the Thai-Myanmar border, and the current ongoing political context within the regions.

2 Chapter 2: Context

2.1 Introduction

To understand the current context from which the study occurred, it is important to first understand the history of Myanmar and the conflict. The conflict in Myanmar can be dated back over 70 years (Burman Link, 2015) and has included various actors including the Myanmar government, the military or Tatmadaw, and various armed factions of ethnic minority groups (Amnesty International, n.d.).

Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world with around 135 recognized ethnic groups. However, the number is higher as there are several unrecognized groups in the country such as the Rohingya (Kramer, 2004). The population can be divided almost in half with one half being the majority Burman population and the other half consisting of the various minority ethnic groups (Dent, 2004). This breakdown of the population also represents the breakdown of parties in the ongoing conflict with the Tatmadaw and central government, who are primarily ethnic Burmans, fighting against the various armed factions of the minority ethnic groups (Human Rights Watch, 2005). The conflict in Myanmar is arguably one of the oldest and longest-running protracted ethnic conflicts in the world (Loescher & Milner, 2008; Kramer, 2010).

2.2 History of conflict

The arrival of the colonizers and independence

The Myanmar conflict, like many other ethnic conflicts around the world, has deep historical roots. Ethnic divides within the country's society can be dated back generations with deep underlying collective memories and traumas. Although the study focuses primarily on the

impact of events dating from the mid-twentieth century onward it is important to understand and recognize the deep-rooted wounds and memories that stem from historical events prior to this period.

As with most non-Western nations, Myanmar is a former European colony that was occupied and colonized by the British. After a series of three wars, dubbed the Anglo-Burmese wars, that took place from 1824 to 1885, the development of what is now understood to be Myanmar began (Dent, 2004). During this time, the British colonizers expanded the borders of the newly occupied territory past the then capital of Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon). As it expanded past the former capital, the British colonizers began to occupy what was called the frontier or excluded areas where many of the minority ethnic groups called home (Smith, 1991).

Burma, the original name given to Myanmar, is believed to have been chosen by the British because most of the population of the country were ethnic Burman. However, there is little proof of whether this name was previously associated with regions of the country as the borders that the global society understands to comprise Myanmar did not exist prior to colonization (Lintner, 2003). Further to creating and renaming the state and assigning a border where none previously existed, the colonizers dismantled and demolished the Burmese monarchy. This had a profound negative effect on the people of Myanmar as it took away an essential part of the region's cultural identity (Topich & Leitich, 2013).

There were existing tensions between different ethnic groups prior to the arrival of the British. However, these tensions were exacerbated by the colonizers as they used methods of classification and governed the different regions separately to divide ethnic groups with some receiving groups receiving preferential treatment from the colonizers (Bergren & Bailard, 2017). Namely, the minority ethnic groups such as the Karen were treated more favorably by the

colonizers than the ethnic Burmans embedding a deep resentment and connection to this injustice within the Burman consciousness (Bergren & Bailard, 2017). During colonial rule, Myanmar was often associated and compared with India, and it was given the name of the “poor relation of India.” This period lasted for 62 years before the country gained independence in 1948 (Dent, 2004).

Under the leadership of Aung San between 1946 and 1947, Myanmar, then known as Burma, sought independence and the creation of its own constitution. There remained the issue of British veto power during this process in addition that there were almost no representatives from Myanmar's minority ethnic groups. The resulting constitution was inconsistent and even left some of the ethnic groups without territory and states to call their own (Bergren & Bailard, 2017). Even though Myanmar gained independence from its colonial rulers, the effects of colonization were unmistakable. The British colonizers had destroyed the former kings and courts that had ruled the region leaving the historic past and glory of the region nowhere in sight (Smith, 1991). The scars left by occupation and colonization would continue to haunt the people of Myanmar for generations to come.

From military rule to democracy

In 1962, a coup d'état orchestrated by the military saw General Ne Win take control of the government and country. During this period, the Myanmar military gained its infamous Burmese name, the Tatmadaw (Bergren & Bailard, 2017). The regime “progressively cut off contacts with the outside world, and retreated into repressive isolationism” (Dent, 2004, p. 88). The isolation from the rest of the world led to the ignorance of the ongoing campaign of suppression occurring within the borders of Myanmar (Dent, 2004). The Tatmadaw sought “a

doctrine of an all-powerful state imposing uniformity” (Dent, 2004, p. 83). The military government would regularly exclude the minority ethnic groups from the political sphere to ensure that the policies and legislations within the country best reflected the agenda of the authoritarian leaders (Jain, 2008).

The minority groups, in a stance against the injustices they experienced from the central government, had chosen to instead stand for the right to practice their cultures, traditions, and live an independent way of life from the vision of the central government (Falise, 2010). However, the military government did not take kindly to this position against their attempts to create a uniform society and increased the violence and persecution against the minority ethnic groups (Bergern & Bailard, 2017). The Tatmadaw implemented an approach called the “Four Cuts” policy in the 1960s (Falise, 2010; Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.). This policy was meant to cut off four main links between the insurgent groups and their families: food, funding, intelligence, and recruits (Canadian Friends of Burma, 2017). Ultimately, the goal of the Four Cuts policy was to remove vital resources from the militant groups and forcefully displace those living in the regions from their homes (The Irrawaddy, 2011). Burma Link (2017) described the Four Cuts policy as being “a slow genocide of ethnic peoples” and compared it to ethnic cleansing (n.p.).

Falise (2010) explained the method behind the Four Cuts policy noting that the military government divided the country into three zones: black, brown, and white. Black zones which were generally all regions controlled by various guerilla units were the most dangerous regions as the Tatmadaw were permitted to shoot people at will. In these zones, the soldiers had long since embraced the total impunity of their actions through this policy. Additionally, acts such as

murder, rape, looting, and destruction perpetrated by the military have remained a norm within these communities (Falise, 2010).

This isolation led the country to become a closed country causing the outside world to become oblivious to what was occurring inside. The military government was under surmountable pressure from the citizens to create a new constitution with a focus on having a democratically elected government. The government obliged and the outcome of the vote was an 82 percent win for the opposition party, the National League of Democracy (NLD). The leader of the NLD party was Aung San Suu Kyii who was placed under house arrest following the outcome of the vote (Dent, 2004). Despite having the appearance of democracy, the military government confined the new leader to house arrest and continued to express its power over the country. In 1990, following pressure from the citizens of Myanmar, the military government was forced to recognize the outcome of the election which saw the landslide win of the NLD (Dent, 2004; Reuters, 2010) Aung San Suu Kyii was released in 2010 after spending fifteen years in detention (BBC News, 2021a).

The making of democracy and the february 1st coup

The civilian-led government took power in March 2016 and were expected to address many of the ongoing issues within the country. Myanmar had high expectations of its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of former leader Aung San who is often regarded as the father of independence in Myanmar (BBC News, 2021a). However, the following years would see a decline in many ways of the overall opinion of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyii.

The most recent outbreak of violence within the Rakhine State against the Rohingya people launched Myanmar back into worldview and shifted the overall global opinion of the

civilian government (Wade, 2019; BBC News, 2021a). Myanmar continued to face difficulties within their government as the Tatmadaw maintained government and military operations and control across the country. BBC News (2021a) reported, “the military continued to hold a quarter of parliamentary seats and controlled key ministries including defence, home affairs and border affairs” (n.p.).

On February 1st, 2021, Myanmar experienced a major devastating setback on its road to democracy and federalism (Han et al, 2021). The news that a coup d'état had occurred in Myanmar rocked the world as the Tatmadaw led by General Min Aung Hlaing detained the civilian government and took control of the country. The new military government declared a state of emergency, initiated a black out on media (Afzal, 2021) disconnected internet connections, and shut down roads (Alexander, 2021). This was the third coup that the country has experienced since gaining independence in 1948 (Cole, 2021).

To rationalize the coup, the military government claimed the November 2020 elections, which saw another landslide win for the NLD, were rigged. However, this claim has yet to be confirmed (Afzal, 2021). The coup sparked civil disobedience, protests, campaigns, and unrest among the people of Myanmar and various diaspora groups that originated outside of the country. Many reporters attempting to capture and record the events unfolding in Myanmar since the start of the coup have been detained in a series of violent crackdowns from the military government (Petras, Loehrke, & Sullivan, 2021). Renewed clashes between minority ethnic groups and the Tatmadaw have occurred across the country leading to the fear of a full-scale civil war (Ratcliffe, 2021a). Al Jazeera (2021) reporting on statements from the Tatmadaw indicated that the military is “the only institution that can unite the ethnically diverse country [of Myanmar]” (n.p.). Reuters (2021) reported that as of mid-July, there were approximately 914

people killed by security forces. This number accounts for people killed during the coup; yet does not account for the number of people who have died due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

As of the summer of 2021, Myanmar has experienced its most severe outbreak of the virus amidst political unrest. Ratcliffe (2021b) reported that Myanmar runs the risk of becoming a super-spreader state potentially causing devastating rates of infection within the Southeast Asian region. Unfortunately, the government continues to block and refuse medical aid and services to the people. At the beginning of August 2021, there were 300,000 reported cases of COVID-19 with 9,300 deaths from the virus (BBC News, 2021b). However, these numbers are contested as, for example, the number of deaths recorded are typically only of those who have died in a medical facility (Tsoi & Myint, 2021). The Myanmar people are experiencing a double pandemic between COVID-19 and the ongoing political unrest.

2.3 The Karen people

About the Karen

The Karen people are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. Karen is an umbrella name for a “heterogeneous ethnic group without a shared language, culture, or religion” (Humanity and Inclusion, n.d.a, n.p.). There are few written records of the origins of the Karen people however, it is estimated that they began to inhabit the hills near the eastern mountainous region of Myanmar around two thousand years ago arriving from regions in Tibet and China (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.). The Union of Myanmar has stated there are about 1.5 million Karen people living within the country however, the true number is believed to be much higher. More accurate estimates place the true population numbers of the Karen people at seven

million people in Myanmar with a further one million Karen people residing in Thailand (International Institute of Minnesota, n.d.). Most Karen people rely on agriculture and reside in small mountain villages where they grow rice and vegetables while raising various animals (Karen Culture and Social Support Foundation, n.d.). The Kayin State, or Karen State, is in the southeastern part of Myanmar sharing a border with Thailand and it is the region where much of the Karen people reside (Smith, 1991; Kramer, 2010).

The Karen people and the Myanmar conflict

The tensions between the majority population and the Karen are not necessarily a new phenomenon but rather has roots within historical relationships and experiences. During the period of colonial rule, Lintner (2003) explained that the Karen people had a positive relationship with the British colonizers and would often help them during this period. This is a reality that the Burmans have not forgotten and has arguably become a part of their collective memory. Dent (2004) noted that the Karen had previously, before the arrival of the colonizers, experienced suffering at the hands of the Burmans and gained a new level of freedom and safety under the British during the period of colonization. Additionally, during WWII, tensions between the Karen and the Burmans further escalated as they found themselves on different sides of the war. The Karen supported the English and the allied forces while the Burmans sided with the Japanese (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.).

When the country gained independence, there was hope among the Karen people that they would be granted their own sovereign nations however, this would never come to fruition, and they were joined to the rest of Myanmar (Oxford Burma Alliance, 2018). The Panglong Agreement (1947) which created the foundation for the constitution in Myanmar was not signed

by the Karen people as they were dissatisfied with the outcome of the agreement. The Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen's political faction, began the rebellion in 1949. The Karen's ongoing rebellion is noted by the International Institute of Minnesota (n.d.) as, "a constant revolution and the longest running resistance today was started in the end of the British Colonial Era" (n.p.). When the country came under military rule, the Karen became subject to the brutal "Four Cuts" policy that began in the 1960s (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.).

A preliminary ceasefire was signed between the government and the KNU with the inclusion of the armed faction of the KNU, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in 2012. However, the attacks on the Karen people did not cease during this time (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) (as cited in Minority Rights Group, n.d.) reported,

...while freedom of movement had increased in the period since the preliminary ceasefire, there was still continuing militarization in [the] Karen State, which can lead to forced labour, forced recruitment, sexual assault, torture, killing and increased risk of being injured by landmines and unexploded ordnance (n.p.).

On January 31, 2021, a day before the latest coup d'état occurred, the KNU held a small ceremony marking the 72nd anniversary since the beginning of its revolution against the central government and the Tatmadaw. Since the outbreak of violence following the February 1st coup, the military has launched airstrikes over Karen villages in the Kayin State, killing innocent civilians indiscriminately (Cole, 2021). These airstrikes are the most significant escalation in the conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in over a decade (Goldberg, 2021). As protests erupted in the Kayin State and across the country, the KNLA took a position to protect the civilians with militia members creating a human barrier between the protestors and the Tatmadaw (Karen News, 2021; The Irrawaddy, 2021a).

The February 1st coup and the resulting protests have raised more complex questions about the state of Myanmar. Landis (2021) reported that many of the protests that one sees in the media targets the liberation of the civilian government and a return to the road towards democracy. However, the reasoning behind the protests and unrest in other regions is not so straightforward. The KNU, which has been locked in a 72-year conflict with the central government, wants more autonomy, the very thing they were promised 72 years ago during independence (Ibid).

2.4 The Thai-Myanmar border

There are nine refugee camps located along the Thai-Myanmar border which house around 97,577 refugees and counting (Asia News, 2019). The majority of those living in the border camps come from the Karen ethnic group (Karen Foundation of Australia, n.d.). Most of the camps are in isolated mountainous regions along the Thai-Myanmar border (Humanity and Isolation, n.d.). Loescher and Milner (2008) described the current refugee crisis on the Thai-Myanmar border as one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world.

The making of a protracted situation

The mass displacement and movement of Karen refugees to the Thai-Myanmar border began in the early 1980s leading to the establishment of temporary refugee camps which would eventually develop into semi-permanent camps (Dent, 2004). Between 1984 and 1992, the Tatmadaw would launch offensives against the KNLA every dry season and retreat during the rainy season (Human Rights Watch, 2018). With the growing unrest and dangers within Myanmar, many of those from the minority ethnic groups would flee over the borders into

neighbouring Thailand. The first significant arrival of refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border arose in 1984 and over the years, refugees would continue to arrive in varying degrees (Women's Refugee Commission, 2006).

When the Karen people first arrived on the border region, they established village-like settlements and were 50 percent self-sufficient as they had the ability to plant rice and gather food in the nearby forests. They were permitted to stay, and they received support from the Consortium of Christian Agencies (CCA) with the understanding that during the following rainy season, the Karen people on the border would repatriate and return to the Kayin State (MacLean, 2012). Since this initial arrival, the refugees on the border sought refuge in the region every dry season while clashes occurred between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, and they would return to Myanmar during the rainy season when the Tatmadaw retreated. This cycle would continue until the late 1980s (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

In 1988, the Tatmadaw made major advances into Karen territory leading to the creation of roads meaning the military offensives and clashes were no longer bound to seasonal cycles. This resulted in the refugee situation on the Thai-Myanmar border shifting from temporary to semi-permanent (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Originally, access to assist the refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border was limited as the UNHCR was only allowed to register refugees. However, in the 1990s, the UNHCR was permitted to provide support to refugees and services but only on a limited basis (Loescher & Milner, 2008).

The camps have long since been deemed a temporary solution for those that have fled the ongoing civil war in Myanmar (Grundy-Warr, 2004). However, 30 years after the establishment of the camps and the civil war in Myanmar continues to wage on with no clear end in sight (Bird, 2021). In 2019, Asia News estimated that around 84 percent of the populations in the camps

were ethnic Karen. Considering the recent developments in the Kayin State, the figures are likely much higher.

The refugees on the border face heavy restrictions on their movements as they are largely confined within the border of the camps. Mae La, the largest of the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, was moved from its original location near the Thai village of Mae La to its current location about an hour outside of the Thai border town of Mae Sot. This was due to ongoing risks of attack from the Tatmadaw against refugees, unfortunately it was not an uncommon story (The Elders, 2014). Mae La has been known to take in refugees from other camps that have closed resulting in the drastic growth of the camp since its creation in 1984 (The Elders, 2014). Mae La is one camp out of the nine located along the border and it is more fortunate in the sense that it is the largest. Other camps such as Mae La Oon or Ban Don Yang are smaller and generally more isolated in the mountains along the border region making them harder for aid organizations to access (The Border Consortium, 2020a; The Border Consortium, 2020b). There has been no clear indication of when the refugees on the border can safely return to Myanmar (O'Brien, 2008), a fact that has only become more apparent with recent developments.

Current context

The camps fall under the control of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) who could cut funding and services and shut down the camps at any given time (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.). Al Jazeera (2021) reported that around 4,000 people had been forced from their homes with 3,000 fleeing across the border seeking refuge in Thailand due to renewed violence and airstrikes. The majority of those displaced and fleeing individuals originated from the Kayin State.

In early 2021, following the coup and the resulting outbreak of unrest and violence, reports of the Thai army pushing back those fleeing the growing violence in Myanmar began to emerge. The Thai military stated it was doing so to prevent cross border contamination of COVID-19 however, there have been global calls for the Thai military to open the border to those seeking asylum and provide protection to those fleeing violence and crackdowns in Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Around 2,000 people fleeing the ongoing violence were reported to have been pushed back by the Thai military. However, the military and the Governor of the Mae Hong Son region that shares a border with Myanmar have stated that the refugees were not pushed back and were being cared for along the border region fringes between the two countries (Goldberg, 2021). Unfortunately, there is concern for the safety of those caught within this fringe area as violence has erupted along the border region with Thailand (Al Jazeera, 2021 March).

Tom Andrews, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, reported that neighboring countries and the international community must support and protect the Myanmar people. His remark highlighted the mandate and international obligation with regards to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) approach (UN News, 2021). The UN Security Council (2021) indicated its support for Myanmar's democratic process and the need for dialogue and reconciliation within the country. Further, the UN Security Council called on all parties to refrain from using violence and to have full respect for the realization of human rights for all within Myanmar.

2.5 Conclusion

Chapter 2 outlined the vast and growing history of the ongoing conflict and civil war in Myanmar. Additionally, the chapter provided a brief overview of the history of the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border from their inception in the mid-1980s to the current context. Like many other modern conflicts, the ethnic conflict in Myanmar did not begin overnight, it is the result of generations of persecution, violence, and trauma which has left deep scars within the fabric of the country.

Recognizing and understanding Myanmar's vast and deep history was an important consideration within this study. By recognizing and understanding this history, the stories and experiences of the participants was contextualized to provide depth, meaning, and a place in the larger history and story of the Karen people.

3 Chapter 3: Review of the literature

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the three core theories that guided this study. Identity, gender, and human security were further broken down and analyzed in relation to the context of the Myanmar conflict. The first section of Chapter 3 explores individual and group identity and the roles these play in ethnic conflict. The second section discusses gender and the use of gender mainstreaming within protracted ethnic conflicts and peacebuilding. The final section articulates the significance of human security and human development with particular interest in the way both concepts relate to mass migration resulting from violent protracted conflict.

3.2 Individual and group identity

The concept of identity is integral to everyday human life as individuals interact with and shape the world around them (Lawler, 2008; Cook-Huffman, 2009; Armstrong, Krasny & Schuldt, 2018). Discussions of identity, both individual and group, and the role it has played in conflict have been a prevalent aspect of post-World War II intra-state conflicts. Long-term modern ethnic conflicts such as Israel-Palestine and Myanmar include identity at the core of the ongoing tensions.

Although the current study emphasizes the role of group identities within conflict, group identity cannot be discussed without first understanding both individual identity and the general concept of identity. As Dunne (1996) noted, although the self and society are often presented as separate from one another, this is not necessarily always the case (cited in Hermans, 2018). Considering this argument, to understand how group identities factor into the current study, one must first understand what identity is and how it relates to individuals within a given group.

Identity is both simple and complex. Nearly anyone can identify what identity is, however, difficulties arise when attempting to assign a specific definition to a person or group (Lawler, 2008). In its most basic understanding, identity is how one sees and understands themselves and the world around them and is one of the most fundamental components of human life (Cook-Huffman, 2009; Armstrong, Krasny & Schuldt, 2018). It is fluid and adapts to the needs of the individual and/or group (Cook-Huffman, 2009). Shao, Lange, Thwaites and Liu (2017) defined identity as “a production process with multiple levels and changes with surrounding factors, such as environment and time” (p. 23) highlighting the multiple factors, influences, and the ever-changing nature of identity.

Elcheroth and Reicher (2017) argued that some identity markers can be linked to biological factors such as one's ethnicity or race. However, Eddo-Lodge (2018) noted that even markers such as ethnicity and race that are commonly associated as biologically influenced aspects of identity are not always defined in this manner. Rather, continuing with these examples, a biracial individual may identify with one or more of their ethnic and/or racial identities over the others. These two arguments illustrate the complexity that exists in understanding the concept of identities.

Lawler (2008) stated that identities are socially produced often being formed through social interactions. In addition, Lüders et al. (2016) noted that identity development occurs when one compares oneself to relevant others. “The self is socially constructed within existing social structures” (Davis & Love, 2017, p. 498), thus society and the environment have an influence over the construction of self. Additionally, one presents themselves in a way they wish to be perceived by those around them while also doing so in a manner that corresponds to their

understanding of their sense of self (Hoggs & Abrams (1988) as cited in Cook-Huffman, 2009, p. 7).

This development of identities begins at a young age and continues throughout the rest of one's life (Cook-Huffman, 2009). One's identity acts to both classify individuals and groups within society while also determining and imposing the norms, values, and behaviours of individual and groups (Carvalho, 2016). In citing the work of Sen (2006), Chowdhury, Jeon and Ramalingam (2016) noted the argument that "identity [is] an attribute that provides a 'strong-and exclusive-sense of belonging' to a group" (p. 108). One does not have a singular identity, rather, humans often have multiple identities that intersect (Armstrong, Krasny & Schuldt, 2018). In this sense, individuals can often have various differing identities contributing to their sense of self.

Group identity and the preservation of the 'us'

The multiplicity of identities is perhaps most clear when considering one's various identities and membership of groups than a single individual may hold. As previously noted, Elcheroth and Reicher (2017) argued that some identities are defined by biological markers such as ethnicity and/or race. This argument factors past the individual into the realm of group identity as individuals may be members of a group based on markers assigned at birth and that develop through life (Armstrong, Krasny & Schuldt, 2018). On the other hand, Eddo-Lodge (2018) noted that even these described biological identity markers have a certain level of individual choice and environmental influence. Based on these opposing arguments, it is evident that there are identity markers and group membership that are chosen while others may at times be preassigned.

Within the realm of conflict analyses, group identities are often an area that are explored and considered. When analyzing the effects of group identity and conflict, common areas that

arise are culture, gender, race, and ethnicity (Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2006). Group identity, or rather perceived threats to group identity, can often be catalysts and/or contributors to the escalation of conflicts (Cook-Huffman, 2009; Chowdhury, Jeon & Ramalingam, 2016). Identity can exacerbate and contribute to conflicts and tensions between groups by emphasizing the differences between them while also working to connect people and groups together (Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2006). Many of the intrastate conflicts within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly since the end of World War II, were internal with many conflicts within this period stemming from the fight for freedom from colonial powers, and the redefinition of identity as states begin decolonizing processes (Volkan, 2001). A critical component of these modern conflicts is the fact that it has become more common that groups in conflict often share physical and even social spaces with one another (Bikmen, 2013). For example, the Tutsi and Hutu people in Rwanda (Carter, Irani, & Volkan, 2009) or Myanmar's various ethnic groups have coexisted uneasily together (Loescher, 2013; Wade, 2019).

Bikmen (2013) argued that it is common for an ethnic group's history of a group to be presented in a way that compliments the identity of the group. The argument utilized the example of Bosnian Muslims who have had their history as a central core of their identity. Histories can be framed in a way to attract and garner support and membership within the people occupying a certain space. Allcorn (2020) used the example of the United States and political affiliations to demonstrate how histories and experiences can be used to attract support and membership of groups.

The idea of 'chosen traumas' explored by Volkan (1997) outlined the amplification in the present of historical experiences of injustice and trauma within a group (cited in Allcorn, 2020). Ratnavale (2009) noted, "for many people, safeguarding memory is integral to saving and

preserving identity” (p. 169). This is further evidenced by Volkan (2019) wherein he stated, “when a traumatized group cannot reverse its feelings of helplessness and humiliation and cannot effectively go through the work of mourning, it transfers these unfinished psychological tasks to future generations” (p. 154). This transfer of trauma, or ‘chosen traumas’ or indeed ‘chosen glories’ are evident in multiple modern contexts such as among the decedents of Holocaust survivors (Volkan, 2019) or during the recent violent conflict in Sri Lanka (Ratnavale, 2009).

Identity can often easily be associated with the questions of security. Perceived threats to security, and in turn to identity, lead to what is called ‘othering’ (Hermans, 2018). The concept of othering was coined as a systematic theoretical term by Spivak (1985). The term is derived from various philosophical and theoretical ideas however, perhaps most importantly, it draws on the concept of self from Hegel’s Slave-Master dialect (Jensen, 2009, 2011). A real-world example of othering and its relation to security is that of Rwanda and the othering of the Tutsis during the 1994 genocide (Hermans, 2018).

Nicholls and Rice (2017) noted that norms specific to a group influence the expectations and tolerances of a given group. If there were an individual or group that violated these determined norms and expectations multiple times, they would be expected to do it again. Such continuous violations of the norms and expectations of a group would lead to negative sentiments towards the individuals and groups that are performing the violations and creating the other. For example, Snyder (2009) noted the challenge of gender-norms among Karen women on the Thai-Myanmar border was met with backlash and negative sentiments from the community as these women were violating the norms and expectations placed upon them and their identities as women.

Many group identities have expanded and further developed because of globalization (Hirsch & Kang, 2015). Even though many identities can cross oceans and span the length of the globe, this is not to say that they share a homogenous set of norms and expectations. Analyses of the impacts of globalization on the current global context have consisted mostly of the economic impacts of globalization. However, the increased exploration of the possible identity impacts has shown the growing global connection in terms of identity-related components such as ethnicity, religion, and culture (Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021). Globalization and the increase in mobility of populations has resulted in the expansion of languages, cultures, traditions, etc. across various regions (Esteban-Guitart & Vila, 2015). The increase in migration has also witnessed both divergences and connections between communities across the globe. For example, Tamils who reside in both Sri Lanka and Canada can arguably be from the same identity group yet there are different elements of their identity due to differing contexts and environments (Ratnavale, 2009).

Chowdhury (2021) argued that one of the most prominent factors for the engagement of various groups in conflict is when identity, namely their identity, becomes involved. At the core of modern conflicts, various forms of identity can often be found. For example, religion, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and economic class are a few variables that are common within the twenty-first century. In some cases, a group's identity can be formed in inequality (Chowdhury, 2021), and inequality can be in some cases the basis for the formulation of disadvantaged and marginalized communities with negative connotations often being associated with such groups. For example, refugee populations quite commonly have negative associations (King, 2018) as evidence following the outbreak of civil war in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis in Europe (Içduygu & Millet, 2016; Afouxenidis et. Al., 2017; Estevens, 2018). The

negative views and concerns held towards refugees are an area that is perhaps best explored under the topic of human security.

3.3 The role of gender

The debate concerning gender has been a topic of interest within the past few years as society's understanding of gender expands, adapts, and develops. It is important to recognize that sex and gender are not the same thing. Sex pertains to the biological markers that an individual has, while gender is a social construct through which individuals are classified and their norms, behaviors, and societal roles are determined (Behera, 2006; WHO, 2020). This modern understanding of gender is a more recent acknowledgment as previous definitions and views have varied greatly. Gender can be a part of an individual's and group's identity so that it is also fluid.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, gender was defined primarily via scientific terminology and understandings. This understanding of gender via sex effectively replaced previous religious rationale in creating socially gendered hierarchies and entrenched them within modern capitalist society by presenting them as scientific fact (Risman, 2018). Until the second wave of feminism, Risman (2018) noted, there was a clear lack of interest or focus on the possibilities of gender inequalities within society, particularly within the workforce. Additionally, there were clear lines and racist roots in the construction of gender at the time. For example, many women of color did not fit these traditional gender norms and were often overlooked or not even considered for jobs.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to explain how different characteristics such as race, gender, class, and status intersect and overlap with one another

(Crenshaw, 1989; Coaston, 2019). Particularly, intersectionality provided a deeper analysis and understanding of how different characteristics contribute to inequality and marginalization of individuals and groups (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Coaston, 2019). In referencing the work of bell hooks (1987), Huff (2016) argues that “ignoring their intersection creates oppression towards women and change the experience of living as a woman in society” (para. 2). In her famed work *Ain't I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1987), hooks analyzes the intersections of sexism and racism in the United States and how this has resulted in Black women becoming the lowest rung of society in the US. Intersectionality is not only a relevant form of analysis when analyzing forms of systemic racism, rather, it is a part of everyday life and the way that individual characteristics factor into day-to-day life and experiences (Hill-Collins, 2019). For example, young women are both young and women which have varying impacts on their lived experiences (Leclerc & Wong, 2021).

The present day understanding of gender norms, as defined by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), are the standards and expectations placed on individuals based on their perceived genders. They are generally expected to conform to the gender norms prescribed to them. These norms are typically learned through interactions with others such as family members, friends, and the community, etc. through a process called socialization (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Corsaro, 2020).

Generally, gender is a portion of an individual or group's identity and which often begins developing at a young age. In most cases, children are socialized and prescribed gender norms even before they are born. Even during pregnancy, the gender of a child is prescribed certain markers such as colors representative of whether the child is biologically a girl or a boy, or will get certain types of toys, clothing, etc. (Kane, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The

socialization of children's gender-norms often affects and defines their behaviors which continues, in most cases, for the duration of their lives (Endendijk, et al., 2017). This practice only intensifies once the child is born, and it will continue throughout their lives. Media and industries such as the fashion industry are the most noted sectors where gender norms are continuously presented and forced onto individuals and groups (Jhally, 2013; Lamb & Brown, 2013). Kroeger, Recker, and Gunn (2019), explored potential issues and concerns for the emotional safety and comfort among children and young people when they experience discontent should they challenge societal approved gender-norms. For example, young LGBTQ2+ individuals can experience negative sentiments in their homes such as homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia from relatives because they do not adhere to the heteronormative values that have dominated society (Wheeler, Price & Ellasante, 2017).

Increasingly, the focus on gender and how the experiences of individuals and groups vary based on gender identities and norms have been included within the conflict, peace, and human rights discourse. This shift has moved more away from the concept of sex and has focused more on gender and the expectations associated with one's gender. The differentiation between sex and gender is an important distinction. Gender is a social construct through which individuals are classified and their norms, behaviors and societal roles are determined. Based on the 'traditional' genders of men and women, individuals are further placed in a hierarchy and expected to fit within the predetermined categories society has prescribed to them (WHO, 2020). On the other hand, sex refers traditionally to the biological makeup of a person and allows them to be scientifically classified based on this makeup (Goldstein, 2001).

Gender, as a concept, is an important factor in conflict analyses and peacebuilding initiatives. Women and men have individual experiences in conflict and different needs and

contributions to peacebuilding initiatives. The implementation of peacebuilding strategies such as gender mainstreaming are beneficial to ensuring that the individual needs of men and women are recognized, considered, and included within peacebuilding efforts and conflict analyses.

Gender mainstreaming

The term gender mainstreaming first arose in the 1970s among feminist development practitioners. Although the term continued to grow in prominence, it was the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing, China in 1995 that truly formalized and set the agenda for gender mainstreaming (Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, 1995; de Waal, 2006; Jamil et. al., 2020).

Gender mainstreaming recognizes that men and women have different experiences, perspectives, needs, and priorities (Sandole-Staroste, 2009; Jamil et. al., 2020). A common misconception about gender mainstreaming, and gender-based analyses in general, is that they are only concerned with women and the rights and needs of women, this is false. Gender-based analyses and strategies such as gender mainstreaming are about all genders and the unique needs and priorities they have (Jamil et. al., 2020). The strategy is concerned with institutionalizing gender equality to ensure equal access to resources, inclusion, and participation at all levels for all genders, and to transform the unequal structures that make up the current society (Rai, 2003; Jamil et. al., 2020). UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (as cited in the International Labor Organization, 2017) stated,

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally,

and inequality is not perpetuated. The goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality (p. 1).

Gender mainstreaming is commonly associated with the political and decision-making spheres (Chan & Mbogoh, 2016) however, it is an important consideration at all levels including at the grassroots level (Korostelina, 2009; Sandole-Staroste, 2009). In addition to the increased meaningful participation and inclusion of women and girls at all levels of society, gender mainstreaming is meant to include women and girls at all points of peace processes including the development, implementation, and monitoring stages (Waal, 2006).

Caglar (2013), highlighting the international commitments following the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, noted that there remain gaps in the implementation of gender mainstreaming methods. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) was a revolutionary document and outcome towards the advancement of women's rights in addition to the mainstreaming of gender. However, women and girls around the world continue to be constrained by their gender and the norms attached to it (Caglar, 2013; Snyder, 2009; Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2019).

What has been called the second generation of gender mainstreaming, learning from the barriers, failures, and lessons of the first generation, includes policies and strategies such as the Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach of Canada (Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018; Government of Canada, 2021). These practices are meant to be "more responsive to the needs of differently situated individuals and groups" (Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018, p. 303).

In conflict environments, women and girls are often labelled as victims and as vulnerable populations within these environments (Rothbart & Korostelina, 2009; Snyder, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2012b). However, these labels do not portray the various complex experiences of women and girls within conflict. Rather, it limits them to being placed under labels such as

'victim' or 'vulnerable populations.' Women and girls disproportionately experience instances of violence, particularly sexual violence, abductions, forced marriage, and slavery within conflict environments (Arostegui, 2013). Sexual violence has become an increasing concern within conflicts with the use of rape as a weapon of war to attack opponents and demonstrate patriarchal power over ethnic groups (UNSC, 2008; Leatherman, 2011; Danjibo, Akinkuotu, 2019). However, women are not simply victims and can be combatants as well as active contributors toward peacebuilding.

Throughout the introduction of her text, Sjoberg (2016) repeatedly stated the phrase "women rarely..." speaking of women, acts of violence- including sexual violence, and conflict environments (p. 1). The use of the word 'rarely' is important as she continues to note that even when discussing female combatants, the word victim still arises frequently. Understanding and recognizing that women are consistently framed as 'victims' despite also being at times perpetrators and peacebuilders themselves is important in understanding the complex experiences of women within conflict.

3.4 Human centered approaches

There has been growing discourse around the topic of human security, particularly since the 2010s. It was first introduced in the 1994 Human Development Report (HDR) and continued to be expanded upon over the years (Breslin, 2015; Gasper & Gómez, 2015). The *2005 World Summit Outcome* (2005), noted the following under section 143 pertaining to human security:

We stress the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. We recognize that all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential (p. 31).

Later, reaffirmed under Resolution 66/290, human security was defined as “an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people” (UNGA, 2012, p. 1). Under this definition, it was specifically noted that people should have the freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity (UNGA, 2012; UN Trust Fund for Human Security, 2016). Hampson, Daudelin, Hay, Martin and Reid (2002) highlighted the fact that human security is more than the securing of basic human rights as it also includes potential threats to rights and “the conditions and kinds of institutions and governance arrangements (domestic as well as international) needed required to sustain human rights” (p. 15). This approach to security “is not a concern with weapons- it is a concern with human life and dignity” (Song, 2015, p. 216).

This form of security calls for a human centered approach, challenging and moving away from the traditional security approaches. There are varying understandings of security such as state and environmental security (Suhrke, 2003). However, the principal form of security that is referenced and remains a key focus around the world is state security (Suhrke, 2003; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006; Battersby & Siracusa, 2009; UN, 2012). Security has historically been closely linked to the idea of state-making and the legitimacy of the state, the security of said state must be ensured including the protection of borders from illegal crossings (Lee, 2014).

The shift in security discourse dates to the 1980s however, it gained prominence following the Cold War. During this period, it became evident that the traditional narrative of security and the protection of the nation state did not apply in the same way as it had during the Cold War period (Edwards, 2009). The idea of human security as being specifically people focused with the objective of “[protecting] the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment” (Alkire, 2003, p.

2) strayed from the way that nations and governments has been approaching security previously. State security, or national security, is defined as the ability and means of a state to protect and defend its people or citizens (Osisanya, 2013). The tendency to overemphasize the threat of armed conflict and violence has been brought into question with the evidence of a decline in interstate violence (Gasper & Gómez, 2015).

A common argument within the current global context is that there are more intrastate (or ethnic) conflicts than interstate conflicts since the end of World War II. Wolff (2006) noted that this is not necessarily the case however, because the number of intrastate, particularly ethnically driven conflicts, cannot be overlooked and remain significant. Kaldor (2011) argued that the shift towards human security saw government departments such as the military focusing less on interstate war and more on policing. This argument shifts the focus away from combat towards the protection of civilians.

A major factor within the human security discourse is that the responsibility to protect civilian populations does not fall solely on a single state. Rather, the agenda places responsibility on the international community to intervene should the state in which the security threat occurs is unable to protect its people (Howard-Hassmann, 2012). However, this is perhaps where some of the weaknesses of the human security approach appear.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), is defined as “an international norm that seeks to ensure that the international community never again fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, n.d.). R2P has three primary pillars: 1) the responsibility of each state to protect its populations; 2) the responsibility of the international community to assist states in protecting their populations; and 3) the responsibility of the international community to protect when a

state is manifestly failing to protect its populations (Šimonović, n.d.). In practice, R2P should be a key part of the human security agenda and overall peacebuilding practices around the world.

Human security, like many other international peacebuilding processes, does not come without its limitations and critiques. Jacob (2014) noted a few of the key critiques against human security such as the belief that the agenda is too narrow in scope and contains a dominant Western narrative and influence. Further, criticism has been levelled against human security as well as the R2P and Protection of Civilians (POC) agendas due to the lack of response and accountability among the international community to intervene and ensure the protection and security of civilian populations in conflict environments (Hultman, 2012). Criticism has been heavily targeted at the UN Security Council and the seeming lack of action on its part, including within the Myanmar context, towards ensuring the security and protection of civilian populations. A longstanding critique of the UNSC is the seemingly strong influence of Security Council members political agendas in its decision-making process, particularly among the Permanent Five members. These limitations and the seeming lack of willingness among member states to intervene and act to support R2P and POC mandates has led to much frustration and doubt about the proper and full implementation of the human security approach (Hultman, 2012).

Other critiques of human security note the seemingly lack of consideration for gender dimensions and of culture and context (Newman, 2016). Perhaps one of the most prevalent critiques of human security, as previously mentioned, is the reliance on states to be the primary human security actors. This critique focuses on issues of politicization and the will and/or interest of states in enacting such security measures, particularly in terms of international interventions (Bellamy & McDonald, 2002; Hultman, 2012; Jacob, 2014; Newman, 2016).

Additionally, the concern over “the [securitization] of everyday life” is a key critique of the human security agenda (Homolar, 2015, p. 844).

Human security and migration

Despite the arguments against and critiques of human security, it remains an important topic within the wider migration and refugee response. As of June 2021, the UNHCR estimated that around 82.4 million people around the world are forcibly displaced, an estimated 26.4 million of whom are refugees. Half of the total number of refugees are reported to be under the age of 18 and 68 percent of the world's refugees originating from five countries, namely Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar (UNHCR, 2021).

Migration, as noted by Jaskulowski (2017), has had a profound impact on the globalization of the world. The influx of migration has caused a shift in the way the nation state is understood and how states control the flows of migration (Jaskulowski, 2017). Additionally, migration, particularly forced migration, has shifted the structure and institutional mechanism of politics, the economy, and society (Estevens, 2018). Shift in security have unfortunately been slow and met with pushback, particularly among Western nations. Two examples come from the rise of xenophobia in Europe and the rise of racism in the United States with the election of Donald Trump.

Pai (2020) reported that the fear of migration in Europe stems from colonial narratives of non-European or Western civilizations being inferior otherwise constructed by the West as the ‘other.’ For example, the implementation of the EU hotspot system which categorizes migrants as either asylum seekers or economic migrants is deeply rooted in racist and anti-migrant narratives. Additionally, the restrictions of NGOs in search and rescue programs around the

Aegean Sea have resulted in devastating rates of casualties for refugees fleeing violence, persecution, and environmental disasters (Pai, 2020). In addition, the US has seen rising rates of racism and the persecution of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The Trump Travel Ban was one of many heinous decisions made during the Trump era of American politics. Countries noted in the US travel ban at that time largely included African and Asian countries with substantial Muslim populations such as Sudan, Nigeria, and Myanmar (Kanno-Youngs, 2020). Migrants are immediately labelled as minorities on arrival in the US. Additionally, the longer immigrants, refugees, and migrants live in the US, the more discrimination and experiences of racism increase rather than decrease perpetuating a feeling of inferiority among newcomers (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019).

The effectiveness of human security has been called into question with the rise in migration since the beginning of the 2010s. One recent example is the outbreak of the crisis in Syria in 2011 which saw the mass movement of individuals as they fled violence and persecution. The UNHCR (as cited in Tolay, 2014) estimated that by mid-December of 2013, around 2,300,000 Syrian refugees had been recorded. Initially, European Union (EU) Member States welcomed the idea of supporting incoming refugees and their borders remained open (Kirisci, 2016; Kreichauf, 2018). Unfortunately, attitudes changed quickly within the EU as refugee response mechanisms failed within the European continent as refugees continued to arrive. First destination countries such as Turkey and Greece became inundated with incoming refugees resulting in a backlogged refugee and migration system and overflowing refugee settlements (Evangelinidis, 2016; UNHCR, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Following the refugee crisis in 2015, right-wing populism grew within the Central-Eastern region of Europe aligning with narratives and ideologies centered around the idea of virulent populist ethnic

nationalism (Kende & Krekó, 2020). However, these sentiments are not exclusive to the Central-Eastern European region. For example, France has been embroiled in alt right populist drama concerning xenophobia in Europe with its implementation of the 'burqa ban' in 2010 (Picheta, 2018; Silverstein, 2020).

A joint agency briefing from the International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Oxfam (2017) reported the closure of EU borders such as the Western Balkan route which has confined many refugees within Greece, unable to resettle elsewhere in Europe. Although the migrant crisis in Europe has slowed as of 2021 with the number of refugees located on the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea falling below 10,000 for the first time since 2015, there remains a long road ahead for Greece, Turkey, and the rest of Europe in fully addressing the refugee crisis (Reuters, 2021).

The refugee crisis in Europe is but one example of many throughout history of the limitations of human security when it comes to states and the international community's refugee response. Battersby and Siracusa (2009) argued that one of the main reasons for such limitations, and at times failures, of human security in refugee responses is the fear of backlash from right-wing political groups within a country. It is not uncommon, particularly among Western nations, for borders to be tightened and restrictions out in place in terms of immigration intake in such situations (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009), and these restrictions and closures have only been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chetail, 2020). It is important that the global community include refugees within their social justice frameworks as agents of social change (Byrne & Thiessen, 2019).

As noted, women make up a significant number of the global refugee population. They are typically regarded as collateral damage within conflicts and traditional security approaches

however, the suffering and experiences of women within these environments should not be so easily overlooked (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009; Anderlini, 2007).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the key theoretical concepts that guided this study. Group identity and its protection, and how it contributes to ethno-political conflicts were explored in this chapter. Additionally, gender, particularly gender mainstreaming, was used to explore the different ways that conflict as well as how the day-to-day lives of men and women differ. Finally, human security was also discussed in this chapter with considerations of the strength and challenges of a human centered approach to ethnic wars, and the limitations that have arisen due to global mass migration. Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology used for the study.

4 Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study utilized qualitative research with semi-structured interviews carried out with Karen refugees consisting of open-ended questions. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and the stories of their families as refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border and in resettlement in Canada. Specifically, the study explores how the experiences of Karen women varied from those of Karen men in both environments. The data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach with the major themes of gender, community, and resilience emerging from the data.

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used for the study. It includes a discussion of the recruitment strategy used, the research design, the data collection method including an outline of the semi-structured interviews and the research questions provided to participants. Additionally, there is an overview of the scope of the study, how current events have impacted the interviews and the study, the inductive data analysis and the emergence of themes, the ethics involved in the study, and my positionality as a researcher.

4.2 Recruitment

Prior to the recruitment of my participants, human ethics approval was sought from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Manitoba. The study, which adhered to all the commitments and requirements for research with human subjects, was approved on March 3, 2020. However, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the original field research which was set to be completed solely on the Thai-Myanmar border was amended due to health concerns and border closures. Approval of the amendment to include Zoom interviews with

Karen newcomers in Canada was approved on April 1, 2020, and approval was renewed on February 22, 2021.

After receiving approval from the REB, the recruitment materials were distributed to various grassroots organizations and faith-based organizations both in Canada and in Thailand. Organizations contacted in Thailand were largely found within the provinces that shared borders with Myanmar such as the Tak province while the materials were distributed to organizations located across Canada. There was additional support offered to me by Karen communities and organizations located in the United States who facilitated discussions with their connections and networks in Canada.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic there were closures across Canada and heavy workloads and closures on the Thai-Myanmar border, the recruitment process stretched over longer periods of time than they typically would have in a pre-COVID world. The study utilized and benefited from the snowball or chain-referral sampling method wherein individuals and organizations recommended and referred other potential participants to me (Stringer, 2014). This style of recruitment is common when the researcher anticipates potential difficulties in recruiting a representative sample, most commonly it is used when researchers are working with marginalized communities (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

In the current study, I recognized that I am not a member of the Karen community, nor do I have a Burmese background, and this caused a barrier in terms of recruitment. Grassroots and faith-based organizations were helpful in paving the path in connecting me with members of the Karen diaspora and opening opportunities for discussion. The three individuals who were interviewed for the study are by no means a complete representation of the Karen diaspora. Rather, and perhaps quite uniquely, they spoke on behalf of their individual experiences and the

experiences of their families. The participants, who each varied in age originally in the refugee camps, lived on the Thai-Myanmar border and then resettled in Canada at varying stages of their lives ranging from children to adults. Their stories and experiences shed a small light on a topic that spans decades allowing some insight into the experiences of the Karen community living on the Thai-Myanmar border and residing in Canada.

4.3 Qualitative research design

The utilization of a qualitative methodology in the current research relied on the stories and experiences of individuals and their communities. Wu, Wyant, and Fraser (2016) argued that qualitative approaches to research “can provide nuanced understandings of complicated phenomena” (p. 405), and they are used to understand the experiences of people utilizing certain services and in certain contexts.

Senehi (2000) noted that stories are a means to elevate the voices of those at the grassroots, presenting experiences that may otherwise be overlooked. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for the participants to share their personal stories and the ones of their families. The format provided them with a form of control and comfort over what was shared in their stories in their own way and at their own pace. In discussing the role of storytelling, Anyeko and Hoffmann (2019) noted,

In telling and retelling our stories, we re-evaluate our circumstances, see ourselves in relation to others, and garner feedback and insights from our audiences. Storytelling helps us to make sense of events, using voice and bodily gestures to articulate the meaning of our experiences. As we listen to stories, we ‘affirm the unique character and voice of each teller as the story is brought to life by a living tongue and breath’ (p. 236).

The central focus of the study was ensuring that participants could share their stories and those of their families during their time spent on the Thai-Myanmar border and in resettling in Canada.

The participants could share their experiences and their perspectives about how gender impacted the lives of Karen women.

The study had both feminist and decolonial research considerations. Qualitative research approaches such as grounded theory focus on including populations directly affected by the research and develops a theory based on the data collected by the participants (Bryant, 2019).

Feminist approaches in research have shifted from the previous perception of women as a homogenous group to recognizing the complexity, divergence, and intersections of the experiences of women with other factors such as ethnicity and class (Olesen, 2016).

Additionally, research that is done through a feminist lens does not portray women under the historical narratives of passive victims who are powerless but recognizes the agency, resilience, adaptability, and that the experiences of women are complex and varying (Olesen, 2016).

The research also took into consideration a decolonial practice. Myanmar, as a former colony, continues to experience the effects of such occupation and colonization. As a Western researcher, it was important to include such a method and ensure that the process was guided by the community. As Smith (2021) noted, the use of storytelling is integral to Indigenous research and allows individuals to express power through their stories. Exley, Whatman, and Singh (2018) in reference to colonial Australia argued that the memories of occupation, dispossession, and colonization can still be prevalent within a community's stories. History can create a negative association with Western researchers so that the current study included the community in guiding the process and determining what and in which way the information is shared with the world.

4.4 Semi-structured interviews

Data was collected via 90-minute semi-structured interviews. Prior to the interview date and time, participants were provided a copy of the informed consent form to review, complete, and return to me prior to the commencement of the interview and I also supplied them with a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix 1). They were both provided to the respondent's a minimum of 24 hours prior to the interviews to allow the participants the time to thoroughly review the documents and identify any questions they may have had about the forms, the procedure, or the questions.

At the beginning of the interviews, the informed consent form was verbally read to the participants with time allocated for them to pose any questions to me. Verbal consent was gained from the participants in addition to consent for the interviews to be recorded via Zoom. Participants were informed verbally, as they had previously been informed within the consent form, that they may choose to abstain from answering any questions and could end the interview at any point should they choose.

Participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure their confidentiality. The pseudonyms: *Bai Gyi* (Uncle), *Daw Gyi* (Aunt), and *Nyi Ma Lay* (Sister), were chosen based on my experiences working with the Karen and Rohingya communities previously. It is common for familial based terms to be used for those both inside and outside of one's family. In my personal experiences as a both an individual with Chinese heritage and in travelling to Southeast Asia, using familial terms such as these are commonplace and are often a sign of respect. Such titles are typically assigned based on the differences in age between the two people. For example, those in close age to myself have typically referred to me as 'sister' whereas those that are quite a few years older than myself would be called 'aunt.'

4.5 Research questions and scope of the study

The two primary research questions that guided the study were: (1) how do the experiences of Karen refugee women differ from those of men on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada?, and (2) how are women actors for change as compared to passive victims of conflict? During the interview process, the following nine questions were used to guide the data collection process:

1. What has life been like for refugee women living along the Thai-Myanmar border?
2. What are some of the challenges that women living in the camp face, and how did you address them?
3. What were your experiences resettling in Canada?
4. How have organizations been working to prevent conflict and acts of violence in the camp?
5. How has the international community been working to support Karen refugee women living in the camp?
6. How has the international community been working to support Karen refugee women relocating to Canada?
7. What do women do to make themselves stronger in the refugee camp?
8. What do women do to make themselves stronger during resettlement to Canada?
9. What are women's best hopes and wishes and worst dreams and worries for the future?

The research questions were designed to foster dialogue and encourage members of the Karen community to share their stories and perspectives on life for Karen women living on the

Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. Probes were utilized to continue the discussion and delve deeper into the experiences of the participants and their families. All the interviews were organized in advance with dates and times chosen by the participants to best accommodate their schedules. The interviews were conducted over Zoom with a copy of the research protocol provided in advance for their review. The Zoom interviews experienced some minor connection issues. In one instance, an interviewee was disconnected in the middle of our interview. When the interviewee was able to reconnect, we did a quick recap of the conversation before the disconnection. I provided time for the interviewee to add any additional information that she wished to. Additionally, there were instances where the audio cut out that necessitated we do a recap of the conversation to ensure that the recording did in fact capture the information accurately and so that the interviewee could add any new information or clarify any questions.

4.6 The impact of current events

The timing of the current research project uniquely aligned with two major events that impacted the Karen communities in Myanmar, on the Thai-Myanmar border, and abroad. The first, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, occurred as the current research was undergoing the final stages of its first human ethics approval. The second, the February 1, 2021, coup d'état in Myanmar, occurred mere months after the completion of the data collection phases for the research. Both events had an impact on the Karen community and certainly impacted the current research.

The initial lockdown and closure of borders in Canada occurred weeks after the approval was received from the University of Manitoba's REB. The research, which was originally set to be exclusively completed on the Thai-Myanmar border, was adapted to accommodate my

inability to travel to the region. It quickly became evident that interviewing those within the border camps and the grassroots organizations that work within the camps would not be possible. Organizations such as the Mae Tao Clinic quickly discouraged non-essential travel to the regions to protect the camps communities and the organizations working to support them from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mae Tao Clinic, 2020).

4.7 Data analysis: The use of grounded theory

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher. Small clips from two interviews consisting of no notable or traceable information that could identify the participants was used to test Canadian online transcription services. Unfortunately, the programs were unable to successfully transcribe the clips provided as it could not recognize the participants' Karen accented English. The samples that were used consisted of a clip from the interview with the participant with the strongest Karen accent and a clip from the interview with the participant with the weakest Karen accent. The interview transcripts were stored on a password protected device during the transcription process. Once the transcripts were completed, the participants were sent copies to review.

Once the transcripts were reviewed and the participants had no changes, a grounded theory approach was employed. The use of grounded theory allowed for the theory to be grounded in the data from the field (Creswell, 2018; Stringer, 2014). Grounded theory allows for the researcher to generate an explanation or theory based on the views and data gathered from various participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of a fluid approach such as grounded theory was ideal due to the focus on social justice (Bryant, 2019), refugee populations (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004), and the active conflict and refugee environments that made up the study

context. I reviewed the transcripts multiple times noting the key themes that arose. I identified themes that related to the core research questions and made note of them using a color coded post-it note system dividing them into major themes. Once the stories of the participants were put together, they were reviewed for connections and core concepts. The theoretical concept that arose inductively from the data was 'community healing.'

The coding process consisted of two phases: open coding and selective coding. Using open coding, "the concepts emerge from the raw data and [are] later grouped into conceptual categories" (Khandkar, 2009, p. 8). Selective coding moves a step further by connecting these themes to form the theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research did not focus on a single theory, but rather was concerned with the stories and experiences of the participants as refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border and in their resettlement in Canada.

4.8 Ethical considerations

1. Informed consent

The consent forms were sent a minimum of 24 hours prior to the interviews. Participants were given the time to review the document and pose any questions and/or concerns about the form or the interview process. Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and the participants were informed that they could abstain from any questions and/or terminate the interview at any point without consequence. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, as they were conducted virtually via Zoom, they were read the consent form verbally wherein they could provide additional verbal consent.

2. *Confidentiality*

The participants engaged in one-on-one interviews for about 90 minutes. They were each assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity throughout the documents and in the publication of the thesis. Participants agreed, prior to the interviews, to the consent form and they signed a confidentiality agreement. All information is kept confidential.

3. *Risks and benefits*

There were no direct risks within the research however, there were two key concerns with regards to potential risks. Due to the ongoing conflict and persecution of the Karen and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar and the fact that many of the participants have friends and family still within the region, precautions were taken to ensure their confidentiality. Participants were informed that any stories and remarks should not explicitly reference a person outside of themselves and their families to protect the safety and confidentiality of others outside of their immediate families and their communities remaining in Southeast Asia.

Additionally, the nature of experiences and the emphasis on gendered experiences opened the possibility for retraumatization of the participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were reminded that they could abstain from any questions, terminate the interviews without consequence, and were directed to the provided list of free mental health and counselling resources should they be needed. The benefits of the study were the opportunity for participants to share their personal and familial stories and shed light on the ongoing situation in Myanmar, on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. Participants were able to inform the international community about a conflict that is no longer largely spoken about and have the narrative shaped by the community.

4.9 Role of the researcher and my positionality

The initial ideas for this project first began in 2017 when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Winnipeg completing an international practicum in northern Thailand. I spent three months teaching outside of the northern most city of Chiang Rai which is about an hour south of Mae Sai where there is a border crossing with Myanmar. During my time living and spending time with members of the local Thai communities, I noticed a tendency to avoid discussions of any Burmese people who crossed the border into Thailand, and I was strongly discouraged to cross the border or to learn more about the communities. These experiences informed my curiosity over the reason for such sentiments among colleagues in Thailand and encouraged me to learn more about Myanmar, a country I previously knew little of.

I do not, however, have Karen or Burmese ancestry and have spent little time in Thailand and even less time in Myanmar. Outside of my experiences, which were exclusively with Thai people, in the summer of 2017, my exposure to the conflict in Myanmar and the resulting crisis was through academic sources from largely Western researchers and the United Nations. This undoubtedly created certain perspectives and thoughts in terms of the Myanmar context despite my best attempts to remain open-minded towards the research. During the middle of the data collection process, I became connected, had conversations, and joined organizations focusing on peacebuilding among Myanmar diaspora communities in Canada, notably the Rohingya. This framed my understanding of the Myanmar context and current affairs in the country following the February 1, 2021, coup.

I did have the personal advantage of understanding certain contexts, ideas, values, and practices within my research due to my own Asian ancestry. Although I am an individual with

Chinese ancestry that was born in Canada, I still have a connection and familiarity with Asian cultures, values, and practices that was an asset during the research process. Particularly, this benefitted my ability to forge connections with participants, understand certain contexts, ideas, and values that were presented during the data collection process, and in working to ensure a decolonial approach to the research.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the research methodology used in this study. It provided insight into the research process and key considerations for the study. The intention of the research process was to have the participants in at the forefront of the study as they guided the process. The goal of the study and its design was to conduct the research and work with the community, not for it.

5 Chapter 5: Lived experiences of Karen women on the Thai-Myanmar border

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 explores the lived experiences of Karen refugee women on the Thai-Myanmar border. During the interviews, participants were asked the following questions concerning life on the border: how do the experiences of Karen women differ from those of men? What are some of the challenges Karen women face on the border? What do women do to make themselves stronger and demonstrate resilience in the camps? (Appendix 1). Throughout the sharing of their stories, memories, and general information about the camps, the participants created an image of day-to-day life for Karen women living on the Thai-Myanmar border.

There were four primary themes that arose during the interviews. 1) Karen women's lack of education opportunities, 2) concerns over sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), 3) the availability of safeguards for women and girls within the camps such as shelters and justice mechanisms, and 4) gaps in medical services such as sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and mental health services. Each of the participants were different ages and resettled in Canada at different points of time. Therefore, although the periods that they lived on the Thai-Myanmar border may have overlapped at some point, they stretched over a period dating from shortly after the initial arrival of the Karen on the border in the 1980s to the late 2000s.

5.2 Karen women's lack of education opportunities

Through the image created by the stories and experiences of participants in the study, it was evident that the camps are an environment lacking work opportunities for Karen women. Within the borders of the camp, many Karen women are trapped with few opportunities to

support themselves and their families. Although, in theory, confinement within the camps is an issue for all refugees on the border, this is an issue that disproportionately affects women.

Basically, women have lesser chance to [...] get out of the camp to find [a] job or anything. They're pretty much [...] stuck at home being a Mom, or they're working like [at] separate women organizations in the camp. Or they [work as] religious leaders [... or as] like a neighborhood mother. [...] helping other kids [...] other people to babysit their kids.

But a lot of that, is just what they can do because they can't really leave the camp to find a job... not easily like men. They can't leave the camp to find a job or anything, but [the men], they do leave the camp. Out of... well [...] they secretly sneak out to find a job somewhere else. But other than that, women don't have a lot of chance to get outside of the camp and do any other [activities] (Nyi Ma Lay).

Officially, those living within the camps are not permitted to leave, however, there are secret agreements that at times can be made with the Thai authorities who guard the camps. However, this is not an option for women as they are more likely to face dangers such as rape and assault should they leave the premises of the camps.

...Men, they have more rights. They can go out... they can do things. [...] They have more rights, as for women, it is hard. If you go outside [...] it's not safe, [for] women it's not safe. [For] men are... it is better. [...] The people, [they're] not very nice to you. [It] can be like [...] sexual abuse. It's happened to some women, [they will be] looking for a job. There are sometimes... it's not safe. So, most of the time, men go out [of the camps] (Daw Gyi).

The tendency for women to remain within the camp confines is a question of gender-norms in addition to ensuring women's safety. Within the cultural context, women are more likely to take on domestic and communal tasks and positions as compared to having jobs and tasks in vocational fields. Within the camps, the common work opportunities for women were either in childcare, looking after their own children or the children of others, or supporting the work of local women's groups and organizations.

How the people earn their life in the refugee camp? It's difficult. We don't know how to get money. Especially for the ordinary people, it's really hard for them. They don't know where to get money. For those who are educated it's a little easier for them. They [can] work in the hospital, they [can] work in the education department, [...] they [can] work in

the organizations, and they [can] work in the camp office. [They] are paid, they get money.

Most of the people, ordinary people, they cannot get money. In order to get money for their family, they get out of the camp illegally and find a job. [Sometimes with] the Thai mountain people. The Thai Mountain people [...] [there] are Karen. Sometimes, the refugee[s] get out of the camp illegally, if the Thai security arrests them, they were sent to jail. I knew that one year, at least two or three people were sent to jail because [they went to work] with the Thai Mountain people [in order] to make money (Bai Gyi).

A key concern for many refugees in the border camps is the question of education. In a study by Ramírez Carpeño and Feldman (2015), it was noted that there were ten grades in the camp education system which provided for some 10,000 school aged children and youth. Participants did note that girls were able to attend school and receive a basic education. There are an estimated four million refugees around the world who are of school age who are unable to receive an education. When there is education available, generally boys will be favored to attend school while girls are expected to remain home and assist with domestic tasks (UNHCR, 2021a).

Where barriers and difficulties arose was in receiving education past the high school level. This is what Nyi Ma Lay had to say on the issue.

I think they have college there but it's not like a big college or anything like that, but usually [the highest grade is] high school [...] but women attend [the college]. [To] get a higher education level. [...] [I think] they do [attend] Bible College to extend their knowledge on [religion]. But for the most part, I think [school ends at] grade ten or high school level is the highest (Nyi Ma Lay).

Although there are Bible Colleges within the border region, Daw Gyi elaborated that for those who perhaps wanted to learn skills such as trades, there were no opportunities available to receive a post-secondary education and learn these types of skill sets. In addition to the limitation on the opportunities available to Karen women and their confinement to the camps, there are also prevalent issues concerning the presence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) within the camps.

5.3 Concerns over sexual and gender-based violence

It is estimated that one in three women experience SGBV in their lifetime (UNHCR, 2021b). Within conflict environments, the brutalization of women has become commonplace, this includes refugee camp environments (Obradovic, 2015). Based on the UNHCR (2021b) definition, SGBV includes acts of physical, mental, and economic harm and can be inflicted in both the private and public sector. Organizations such as the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) (2015) have stated that there is absolutely no question on whether SGBV occurs within the border camps. Daw Gyi noted the following in her story.

In the camp [...] sometimes men think they have more power than women. And that they can do better. In the camp, I know that is men do something [like verbal] abuse or [physical] abuse, [they] abuse the women. As some women, they are very smart, and fight back but some, they just huddle themselves and then, [they] don't even want to say anything [...] their life is very tough. [This is] some women, not every woman. I know that when the[y] physically [abuse them], the husband [is] drunk [and] they physically abuse the women and they [...] they think if they do something, their husbands will leave them (Daw Gyi).

The stories and experiences of the participants presented the presence of SGBV as an almost normal underlying factor taking place within the camps.

We have verbal abuse [in the camps]. Domestic violence is a big one just because a lot of men are there [and they] do a lot of drinking and you know, [that] kind of [leads] them [down] the wrong path. They come home and [there's] a lot of domestic violence. [It also happens] in public. [In] public spaces, [women] get a lot of verbal abuse (Nyi Ma Lay).

The KWO (2015) further supported the stories of the participants as the organization noted that women and girls are far more likely to be targeted for acts of SGBV than men and boys. Even though the KWO knows that SGBV occurs in the camps, there are few resources and services available to prevent the violence and protect women. For example, Ezard (2014) noted that it was considered unacceptable for women to fight back and defend themselves based on the

social and gender norms within the culture and environment. This is what Daw Gyi had to say on the issue.

There is a [women's] shelter but this one, [it's] not like [in Canada]. [...] It's not safe like [in Canada]. [...] Back home in the refugee camp, if [you] are put in a [women's] shelter, [your] husband can come if he wants to abuse [you]. [He] can come and try to continue [the abuse]. But [...] the Thai military, if [your husband tries] to do something, the Thai military [can] come and arrest him. And then they go to jail. I still remember [...] one of the men, he [was] drunk and then [he] murdered his wife.

And then, the Thai authority [arrested] him and put him in the prison. [...] [In Canada], you can call the police, but in the camps, they can't [really] call [anyone]. They have security [but] they don't have someone like here. Sometimes you go [to] a friend's house but it's not safe for the friend either. [...] I know that some people, the security arrests [them], arrests them maybe [for] one day and then [...] when everything is [thought to be] okay, they just release [the men].

[In the camps], you cannot lock the door because, they have a door [but there's] no lock. Here [in Canada], you can lock the door [...] but there, [in the camps], the door-people can get in the house, [they can enter when they want]. Women have to take care of the children so [the Thai security] just arrests the guy. Some women, they don't want to report [though]. Because sometimes [they] fear [that] their husband can threaten them. [Say things like] "did you do something!" (Daw Gyi).

Daw Gyi highlighted an important question in terms of protecting and preventing acts of SGBV. The Thai authorities would provide a certain level of protection however, this is not always the case. A study by the KWO (2015) highlighted the lack of support and justice for refugee women who have experienced SGBV in the camps. The cases were primarily decided by the interior camp justice system with 13 percent of the total cases being conducted by the Thai justice system between 2011 and 2013. Most cases would fail victims and the perpetrators would go unpunished. Any calls to address the ongoing issue of SGBV within the border camps was met with responses such as the issue would be pushed to a later time, the demands were too steep, or organizations such as the KWO were overstepping their mandate (KWO, 2015). Cases such as the one presented by the KWO and the stories from the participants in this study

highlight a recurring environment of danger for not only Karen refugee women but for all refugee women living on the Thai-Myanmar border.

5.4 Gaps in medical services for women and girls

Accessibility to resources and services is an inevitable discussion among refugee women. Questions such as where will these resources come from? Who will provide the resources? How will they be maintained? The experiences in the camps of the participants and their families related to these questions about the lack of resources.

The issue of people's accessibility to healthcare and the types of healthcare available to refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border was the most common. Within the border camps, the healthcare available is rather limited. Daw Gyi reported on the issue in the following manner.

[If you have an] emergency, it's a long way to go. [Getting care] is not fast like [in Canada]. Here, [you] call a number but there, if you have a health [emergency], something urgent, [you would] go to the Thai hospital. But in the camps, its only basic needs. If you need [a] surgery or something urgent [...] it's not easy. It's not fast. I think they worry about everything. In the camps [...] in the camp they don't have the material to do the surgery. [...] You don't have the stuff that you need, they don't have it. Because when, I know that when something [serious] happens- [...you will], maybe stay alive for [a] few years but you, you [would] not survive like [in Canada] (Daw Gyi).

Specifically in terms of women's health, there are gaps in terms of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services available to camp women.

... In terms of health conditions [...] they don't have a lot of like health care systems for them. [They are missing] internal facing [supports] like childbirth or anything related to women's health in general [in the border camps]. Health is [one of the] biggest challenges (Nyi Ma Lay).

The UNFPA (2014) noted that in situations of upheaval, it is common that women lose important SRH resources such as family planning services and they lack general information about SRH. Societal norms have also had an impact on Karen women accessing SRH resources

and services. Women are often discouraged in seeking such services and have even experienced negative repercussions when they have sought out SRH resources (UNFPA, 2014).

In addition to concerns surrounding SRH and physical health, the study found that there were considerable concerns around mental health on the Thai-Myanmar border. Daw Gyi acknowledged that many Karen women who fled Myanmar suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Mentally, [sometimes] they've lost their children [...] back home. [Their children] were killed by the Burmese military. Sometimes [women] have trauma [...] because I know that the women [...] whenever they [see] soldiers [in] uniform, they [are] scared and have trauma [because they believe] they're going to kill them and kill [their] children. Because they witnessed [...] their children were killed in front of them. So sometimes they have trauma and even [if they hear] gunshots [...] they have trauma. It takes time for them to [heal] (Daw Gyi).

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of mental health related issues in the border camps (Fellmeth et al, 2016; Radio Free Asia, 2017). There are limited resources available for refugees on the border as many mental health issues often go untreated which has led to high rates of suicide within the Thai-Myanmar border camps.

The Mae Tao Clinic is one of the key actors on the border in terms of providing medical services to refugees. The clinic, located in Thailand's Tak province, was established in 1989 by Dr. Cynthia Maung and provides health and social services to refugees on the border (WCRWC, 2006; Mae Tao Clinic, 2021). The clinic works to fill in the gaps in the healthcare available to refugees on the border, and it is currently the primary sources of care for border refugees in addition to some IDPs that are willing and able to make the journey across the border (WCRWC, 2006). Participants noted that NGOs such as the KWO and the UNHCR provided some support services but were limited in what they were able to offer to refugees at times.

One of the organizations providing support to the border communities include the UNHCR. UNHCR is in a better position to negotiate with the Royal Thai Government (RTG) to readily get supplies to the refugees in the camps.

UNHCR, they support especially the refugee people. [...] In [Myanmar], the UNHCR [goes] to provide food and clothing, everything. [This] started in 1995. The UNHCR [came to] give and donate food right away [to the people]. The UNHCR [wanted to go] give food [to the people of Myanmar] but the [Myanmar] government stopped them. If the UNHCR want[s] to go, they have to go through the [Myanmar] government. For the Karen [in Thailand, the UNHCR has to go through the Thai government (Bai Gyi).

Due to the nature and locations of the camps, control generally falls under the control of the RTG. This is what Nyi Ma Lay had to say about the issue.

...The Thai government totally [has] control of the camp. Who can leave the camp, who cannot, they have control of that. The Thai police are [at] every corner of [the camps]. I would say [the camps are controlled by] the Thai government, the police, and also the camp leaders. There's a lot of time you don't have a lot of like, you know, a good camp leader. So, most of the time, they are on the Thai side. So, it depends on where, you know, where [the leaders] get their support (Nyi Ma Lay).

Resources and services within the border camps were minimal. The participants noted in their stories that services were minimal and the ability to provide services depended on those in power. The primary form of support for Karen women in the camps, namely grassroots organizations, and the community, are discussed further in Chapter 7.

5.5 Key findings

Chapter 5 sought to present and examine the everyday experiences and barriers faced by Karen women on the Thai-Myanmar border. Five key findings emerged inductively from the data regarding the experiences of the participants about the everyday lives of Karen women on the Thai-Myanmar border.

First, traditional gender norms perpetuated by a patriarchal system confine and control much of the lives of Karen refugee women residing in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. Karen women are confined to the camp and the home as their lives were controlled by the gender-norms that were prevalent within the camp communities. The treatment of women as objects or things is not exclusive to the camp communities as it is also a problem among the Thai security tasked with guarding the camp and keeping the refugees safely inside. Moreover, the patriarchal system's discriminatory gender-norms is perpetuated and imposed within the border camps environment.

SGBV was prevalent within the camp communities. As noted by key organizations within the border camps, SGBV has undoubtedly had a presence and is a part of the camp communities (KWO, 2015). The causes of the exercise of SGBV vary but generally, and in the case of the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, they involve tensions and the exercise of power. Physical and sexual violence is a common practice of men exerting power over women (Merry, 2006; Leatherman, 2011; Obradovic, 2015). In addition to physical, verbal, and sexual violence, as were noted by participants, a study conducted by Justus (2021) found that trafficking and early marriage were other forms of abuse that have been common occurrences taking place within the border camps. Power, as defined by Mackie (1987), is "the capacity of individuals or groups to control, influence, or manipulate others' behavior, whether these others wish to cooperate or not" (p. 10). The protracted situation within the border camps only acts to further exacerbate the tensions and emotions experienced inside the camp environment.

Studies have shown that there are various factors that can trigger acts of SGBV within the border camps. Perhaps the most noted include repeated exposure to the trauma of political violence, lack of opportunities, and high rates of alcohol consumption (Falb, et al., 2013). The

respondents noted similar experiences and circumstances relating to SGBV within the camp communities. High rates of alcohol consumption among men are a particular concern that arose during my conversations with participants and have been noted in various other studies as well, including research conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2006).

The use of violent behavior like SGBV utilized by oppressed and disempowered men to regain power and control over their situations (Leatherman, 2011). Men and women lack control over their lives in the refugee camp environment on the Thai-Myanmar border. The RTG and the Myanmar government have authority over the decisions, opportunities, and lives of the refugees living in the border camps. Karen men's abuse of substances such as alcohol to regain control over their lives and families within the Thai-Myanmar border camps have negative impacts on Karen women who suffer continual abuse (Ezard, 2014).

My interviews identified that hazardous quantities of alcohol consumption can increase both the occurrences and severity of domestic violence. It has been contested that alcohol itself is not a direct cause of domestic violence as often other factors can be identified as possible root causes such as trauma or the civil war (WHO, 2006). Ezard (2014) further supports this point of view in his study of the Mae La refugee camp wherein it was noted that the consumption of alcohol was rarely believed to be the cause of SGBV as other causes and sources of violence escalated male violence against women. Participants in the study noted that women and girls are targets of SGBV within the border camps. This is further supported by the KWO (2015) who noted that in the overall cases that they analyzed, women and girls were the targets of SGBV while men and boys were the primary perpetrators of this violence.

Additionally, the study found that a primary cause for the confinement of women within the camps was the prevalence of traditional gender and cultural norms within the region. A

combination of expectations of women to contribute primarily within the domestic sphere (Hengsuwan, 2017) and the lack of safety for women due to risks of SGBV as well as the patriarchal norm that women are weak and fragile in need of 'protection' resulted in Karen women failing to move outside the borders and seek opportunities (Snyder, 2011). The lack of opportunities provided to Karen women beyond housekeeping, communal development, and family building have left them largely dependent on Karen men in addition to the NGOs that provide them with many essential resources.

Karen women's lack of economic opportunities has left them dependent on aid organizations, as well as their husbands, fathers, and other men within their families. This economic dependency results in the stripping away of women's independence and their agency as they effectively cannot do anything or survive without these support systems. WEAVE (2011) explained that the dependency and the stripping away of refugee women's autonomy in the border camps is perpetuating "[a] cycle has the further negative impact of not only denying refugees the human right to livelihoods, but also eroding their independence and sense of self-worth" (n.p.).

Further, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this situation. The UNHCR (2021c) reported that the pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on the socio-economic situations of refugees around the world. Some of the INGOs hard work towards addressing gender inequality has been eroded by the pandemic that has seen some of the most disadvantaged populations, such as refugee women, disproportionately affected. Thailand has experienced a severe impact from the pandemic on its economy that relies heavily on tourism in the region (United Nations Thailand, 2020). The border camps communities have become further marginalized with the outbreak of the pandemic. Movement is limited within the camps meaning

the opportunities are as well (The Border Consortium, 2020d). This means all Karen people are suffering from lack of access to food and other life necessities because of limited opportunities and their confined movement within the region because of the pandemic,

Second, there is an environment of fear among Karen women within the Thai-Myanmar border camps. The use of violence against women, including SGBV, have perpetuated this environment of fear effectively trapping Karen women in a liminal stasis. Refugee women's fear stems from realities on the ground taking place both inside and outside of the refugee camp borders.

Karen men are using SGBV as a power over strategy over the women within the camps, to regain control over them. My participants outlined the prevalence of SGBV within the border camp environment and the recurring nature of male violence against women. Over the past 30 years, violence against women has become a common part of women's day-to-day lives within the refugee camps. There is little to prevent SGBV from continuing within the border camps without the adequate protection of Karen women from these violent perpetrators.

Additionally, a climate of fear is perpetuated by external actors outside of the refugee camp environments as well. The precarity of the situation on the Thai-Myanmar border is orchestrated by the RTG who do not want to see the Myanmar refugees become "too comfortable" in the Thai-Myanmar border camps (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000, p. 12). As my participants noted, the RTG has primary control over the border refugee camps having the ability to shut them down at any moment and block any funding and resources from entering the camps (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d.).

Further, the renewed armed violence within the Kayin State means that there are violent outbreaks occurring close to the Thai-Myanmar border (Al Jazeera, 2021). The proximity of the

fighting to the border region, and potentially to the refugee camps, could yet prove dangerous for those that have sought refuge from the violence within the region. Both internal actors within the border camps and external forces are contributing to the environment of fear overshadowing those residing within the border camps.

Third, there is a sense of hopelessness among young Karen refugees as a result of the lack of educational and employment opportunities. Women and girls are not explicitly excluded from partaking in education within the border refugee camps. The UNHCR (2021a) noted that globally, there are approximately 7.4 million refugees who are of school age, with 4 million are unable to attend school. When considering statistics such as this, one could perhaps note that the refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border are lucky that their in-camp education system typically allows them to complete a secondary education. Less than half of the world's refugees who are of school age continue to the secondary level of education with the statistics majorly skewed in favor of boys (UNHCR, 2021a).

Despite the overwhelming evidence in favor of boys and men receiving education, the study did not find that this was evident among girls living in camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. Girls and women were not found to have been discouraged from receiving the basic education that was available to young refugees. The general lack of opportunity for further education was also not dependent on gender, as this was the experience of all boys and girls in the camp.

Jolliffe (2017) noted that the environment and educational opportunities influences the overall development of young people, particularly as they shift into adulthood. Kengkuchorn and Hipsher (2010) also argued that the type and level of education that the Karen people receive within the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border "is the single most important element in

the development of the skills of the Karen and other ethnic minority refugees while living in a closed camp setting” (p. 2).

The ability to earn an education up until around the tenth grade within the border camps may be considered an improvement when compared to other contexts, but it does not eliminate the fact that there are few, if any, opportunities for young people past the tenth grade. In a study conducted by Ramírez Carpeño and Feldman (2015), it was remarked upon that for children and young refugees within the border camps, it was felt that the lack of opportunities available to them created an unclear future for many leading to dependence on NGO handouts. Some studies argue that there is some education past grade ten, otherwise known as post-10 (Kengkuchorn & Hipsher, 2010; MacLaren, 2010). However, all have the consensus that the lack of formal post-secondary education is limiting for the Karen people, particularly the young people (Kengkuchorn & Hipsher, 2010; MacLaren, 2010; Snyder, 2011; Ramírez Carpeño, & Feldman, 2015). The lack of access to education was one of the greatest limitations for Karen women, and indeed for all Karen people and other ethnic minority groups residing in the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Fourth, the basic physical and mental health needs of Karen women are not being met in the border refugee camps. External agencies must be able to provide support, services, and resources to the community, and that means that cooperation with and consent from the governments is necessary. Much of the movement in and out of the camps is controlled by the RTG. The Border Consortium (2020) estimated that 90,000 refugees from Myanmar became further isolated on the Thai-Myanmar border with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These isolated communities have been further cut off from essential resources and services because of the tightening of restrictions on movement due to the pandemic. There is a lack of

data available on the infections and death rates for COVID-19 within the border refugee camps. It is not possible for refugees who have jobs to continue to work outside of the camps.

In addition, the lack of resources and services such as SRHR and even medical services is a key barrier for the safety, health, and well-being of the refugee communities. The refugee camps on the border are generally all in remote, hard to reach areas that are far from hospitals and other essential services (Human Rights Watch, 2012a). As noted by my respondents, all non-basic healthcare services would generally require travel to a Thai hospital. If refugees require major medical services and procedures, the travel distance alone could cause great danger to them and/or have long-term consequences for their overall health and well-being.

The loss of SRHR within the context of conflict, upheavals, and refugee situations is not uncommon (UNFPA, 2014). Young women and girls on the Thai-Myanmar border have experienced significant gaps in terms of SRHR and overall healthcare for women and girls, which can result in medical issues later in life (Lee et al, 2017). Prior to 2005, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was the primary source of providing medical care within the refugee camps on the border. After MSF withdrew operations from the region due to the escalation of political violence, Aide Medicale Internationale (AMI) took over medical operations (Srikanok et al, 2017). However, my respondents made no references to either of these organizations even though all the participants were living in the border region when MSF and/or AMI were operating in the camps.

Although not explicitly mentioned by the participants, the gaps in medical resources and services certainly affects disabled refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border. Humanity and Inclusion (n.d.b) is a main provider for refugees with physical disabilities, and the organization indicates that the predominant cause of injuries result from anti-personnel landmines in both

Myanmar and Thailand. The horrific injuries caused by these landmines has resulted in Humanity and Inclusion being one of the key sources in providing programs and services for disabled refugees within the region. The Women's Refugee Commission (2008) reported that there were over 9,000 refugees between the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border that were registered as having a disability. The majority of those injured civilians had a physical disability. The Women's Refugee Council (2008) noted that most of the information concerning disabled refugees within the region was quite broad and did not provide breakdowns of more specific information such as the type of sensory impairment. The lack of information and the limitations experienced by many humanitarian and aid organizations on the Thai-Myanmar border provide additional challenges for all disabled refugees in the region as many of them risk slipping through the cracks in terms of having access to adequate resources and support systems.

However, depression and mental health related issues were found to be prevalent within the border communities. A report from the UNHCR (as cited in Pappas, 2017) noted that depression and anxiety are common among displaced populations. There is a lack of adequate resources available for women and other Karen refugees within the border camps to address these ongoing issues (BBC News, 2017). The BBC News (2017) reported that in the previous year (2016) suicide accounted for half of the deaths of pregnant and new mothers in the Mae La refugee camp alone. The occurrence of depression and suicide have become commonplace within the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border and there is a continuous lack of psychological and counselling resources and services available to support the Karen community.

With the recent outbreak of civil disobedience and conflict in Myanmar following the February 1st coup, there is the possibility of a new civil war breaking out between the military government and the ethnic minority groups. The Mae Tao clinic (as cited in Kobayashi et al,

2021) reported that more than 10,000 refugees have fled to Thailand from Myanmar with the majority being activists, NGO leaders, and participants in civil disobedience movements. On March 27th, 2021, a series of airstrikes began in the Karen state launched by Myanmar's military government (Kobayashi et al, 2021). With the latest outbreak and escalation of conflict, the influx of refugees arriving on the border, and the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic means that resources and services are needed now more than ever on the border.

Finally, there is a need to implement security measures to protect Karen refugee women in the camps. My participants highlighted the lack of adequate shelter system to protect Karen women living in the border refugee camps fleeing domestic violence. The domestic violence shelters in the border camps are generally inadequate and the staff are unable to protect Karen women from irate husbands and partners.

Karen refugee women seeking safety from SGBV perpetrators within the women's shelters are not necessarily safe. My participants remarked that perpetrators can enter the shelters and either forcefully remove the women to continue abusing them or they can continue to abuse the women in the actual shelter itself. Shelter staff members also have security concerns because they too experience security risks at the hands of SGBV perpetrators. "Shelter staff feared for their personal safety, even while residents expressed feeling safe in the shelter. Several providers said that threats of harm and dangerous encounters with perpetrators were serious challenges in their daily work" (Freccero & Seelinger, 2013, p. 77).

Additionally, Thailand has implemented programs that focus on the protection of women from SGBV however, they have noted setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Domestic violence has been increasing in countries around the world however, the situation in Thailand has not been as clear. Langerak (2020) reported that "[data indicates] that the number of clients

appearing at One Stop Crisis Center units in hospitals in April more than doubled from a year earlier, from 85 to 183. These walk-ins include violence both inside and outside the family.”

Although the data remains unclear due to the precarious situation evolving on the Thai-Myanmar border, there is a clear rise in SGBV against women living within the border refugee camps.

My interviewees also noted that there are high rates of mental health related issues including depression and suicide among women (also see Fellmeth, Oo, Lay & McGready, 2016; BBC News, 2017; Fellmeth et al, 2021). The Thai-Myanmar border has one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world (Loescher & Milner, 2008), yet has experienced significant withdrawals of external funding over the past five years. Norway and Sweden, both major funders and providers of resources and services within the border camps, withdrew their financial support. The European Union (EU) has also withdrawn food support leading to cuts in people's food rations for the estimated 100,000 refugees under the program. This financial and resource support was withdrawn because of the protracted nature of the refugee crisis and the shift in interests among donor nations. Organizations and aid workers have been working with half of the funding they had at the beginning of the 2010s (Carroll, 2019).

5.6 Conclusion

My study participants created a portal into the everyday lives of Karen women living on the Thai-Myanmar border. Although it was just a glimpse into the lives of these women, there were key areas that were identified which included both areas of success and existing gaps and barriers. The experiences and stories of my participants outlined the successes that the border camp communities have found in terms of the increased participation of women within leadership roles, the resources and services that have been largely made available to women by

grassroots organisations such as the KWO, and the opportunities these have opened for many women (Chapter 7). However, there were also key gaps and barriers that were identified by my participants. These included the lack of adequate resources and services available to support women in terms of their education, SRHR, SGBV, and the overall limitations placed on women due to gender and patriarchal culture norm discrimination

Although the camp environments have changed and adapted over time, the participants noted that the change has been rather slow. There remain many limitations on women's agency within the culture and society of the camps and they continue to be a vulnerable group living on the Thai-Myanmar border. The successes that have been achieved on the border by grassroots actors are discussed in Chapter 7. These successes are something that should be celebrated yet the truth of the matter remains that the Thai-Myanmar border has one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world. The concerns outlined within the key findings need to be addressed for refugee women living on the border to be adequately supported and protected moving them away from a vulnerable status. Without considering the concerns outlined by my participants, Karen women and all refugee resiliency on the Thai-Myanmar border risk slipping through the cracks.

6 Chapter 6: Adaptability and healing in a new environment

6.1 Introduction

Newcomers are not a homogenous group, their experiences when resettling in Canada vary, there are differing factors in the lives of each newcomer and their family that determine how the resettlement process will go for them. The participants in this study were all different ages when they resettled in Canada and there were differing ages within their families between children and adults. The experiences and stories of the participants were each unique however, there were various overarching similarities between them.

The Canadian federal government sponsored 4,026 refugees from 46 different countries through the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) program between 2005 and 2009. Out of that number, 800 were Karen refugees, a relatively new group to settle in Canada at the time and who were identified by the UNHCR as a group with distinct protection needs (Marchbank, Sherrell, Friesen & Hyndman, 2014). My participants noted that during this period when considerable numbers of Karen refugees were resettling in Canada, most newcomers arrived and would spend at least some time in British Columbia. However, there were other Karen newcomers who settled across the country in other provinces such as Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario.

“The settlement experience of refugees is shaped by factors such as refugee category, age, gender, education, race, and migration history” (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018, p. 104). During the interviews, the experiences and stories of my participants highlighted the importance of these factors that Drolet and Moorthi (2018) outlined. There were four main themes that arose from these discussions: 1) age was a considerable factor in Karen refugees' success in adapting in Canada, 2) education levels were an important factor amongst Karen newcomers, 3) the Canadian education system has a key role in supporting the resettlement process of young Karen

newcomers, and 4) the availability of resources is a key factor in the overall resilience adaptation to Canada for Karen refugees.

6.2 Children and youth's adaptability

Children, in contrast to adults, are better able to adapt to new milieus. In this section, age was important in terms of the adaptability of Karen newcomers. For example, Nyi Ma Lay articulated that language, weather, and culture impact how well Karen refugees adapt to living in Canada, and there are intergenerational differences.

It's easier for [...] kids because [they] can adapt really quickly. It's difficult at first because when [you] first [arrive, you] don't really understand any [of the] language. [...] I think the biggest challenge [...] is [the] language barrier. Second is, I guess, trying to adapt to the Canadian culture and thirdly would be the weather. [...]

[As a] child, it's much better than [an] older person because [you] don't have a lot of connection back home. But for parents, older [siblings], they have [...] they know more people, they're connected to the community back there. They have their family [they are connected to] back home and they [...] always try [to stay] connected to [them] but for [kids] it's totally different (Nyi Ma Lay).

Drolet and Moorthi (2018) highlighted that extended family networks and community are important in terms of resettlement and adaptability of young newcomers, generally they had fewer connections to their home community. Younger Karen newcomers had the advantage of attending school in Canada and being exposed more regularly to English and/or French and mixing with other children and youth in Canada.

[In school], there's no translator [for us]. There's nobody from there [from the community] that can really, you know, back you up. But, you kind of just [...] [you're] trying to adapt to what your friends [in Canada] are doing, what your teacher is asking you to do [in school]. [...] The teacher[s] look out for you and the friends you made [in school] really care for you. [...] You adapt quickly as a kid, you [make] friends with people easier so through that friendship with your classmates and your teachers, you're able to kind of adapt to the English language quicker than what your parents would (Nyi Ma Lay).

Education is described as an essential opportunity for young refugees to develop their knowledge and skills so they can realize their full potential and live independent lives while empowering them to learn about themselves and their new environments (UNHCR, 2021). In terms of language and adapting to environments with new languages, age has been described as a definite factor in newcomer ability to successfully learn and adapt to such changes (Mayhew, 2018). Typically, children are quicker and have an easier time learning new languages. The Government of Canada has moved from a focus on newcomer resettlement and integration into Canada to ensuring their well-being (Ratković et al, 2017).

Pottie et al (2015) noted that first generation newcomers were more likely to experience instances of bullying compared to second generation or later. However, the bullying concern was not something that the participants noted as being an issue for the younger members of their families. This is what Nyi Ma Lay had to say on this issue.

When you first go to school, you do experience bullying. That didn't really bother [us] at all because [we didn't] care what people [said]. [We tried to be] positive people. So, [not letting] every little negative thing people had to say about [us get to us]. But yeah, bully[ing] was not a big deal for [us] at all. [We] only really experienced that [...] in elementary school (Nyi Ma Lay).

Nyi Ma Lay acknowledged that this was not necessarily a normal experience for newcomer children and youth, and that her family was lucky to not have experienced school bullying. As Pottie et al (2015) noted, it is common in Canada for young newcomers to experience bullying in school.

6.3 Karen adult newcomers' adaptability

Whereas younger Karen newcomers have the advantage of attending school, adult Karen newcomers are typically a different story. Although they may have the opportunity to continue

their education in Canada, my participants noted that Karen women generally choose other avenues to gain employment to support their families.

Depends on the education level. Because the education level is high [before coming to Canada]. For Karen women, they don't [usually] have higher education [so] when they come [to Canada], they look for a job, even [if its] minimum wage. They don't mind to work in, like, [a] liver market or general minimum [wage jobs]. Even [if] they have no education, they do not speak English, [they don't know how to] read or write, [they look for work].

[For example,] they work at greenhouse[s] and [when] they get paid [...] they are happy. They can [earn] a living and then, they don't have to worry [...]. They are hardworking. Back home, they just work [...] When they come here, they don't want to continue their education anymore. Instead of going to school, they prefer to work. So most [...] they work. For minimum [wage], even if they don't speak English, they [maybe] just go to school [to learn English], [when they're] able to say a few words, then they work (Daw Gyi).

There were few opportunities for refugees living on the Thai-Myanmar border to further their education past the grade ten level (Chapter 5). For those that have spent a considerable amount of time outside of school, perhaps around a decade or so, they were less likely to return to school when resettling in Canada as per the explanation of Daw Gyi below.

In the refugee camps, you can't do much. You go [to the camps], you enter there, and your future is cut off. Even [if] you want to continue your education. Yeah, it's no further education in the camps. So, just from my experience, because I finished- I graduated high school and wanted to do post-secondary because I [had] no opportunities to continue my education. Like here [in Canada, it] doesn't matter [...] your age, [if] you're married, or you're single, it doesn't matter. You can continue your education (Daw Gyi).

Some Karen refugee women residing on the Thai-Myanmar border have tried to learn English as a second language. Some of these language opportunities were available through organizations such as the UNHCR.

It depends on the education level [...] if a woman [has a] better, higher education, [if] they know English, a little bit of English [was taught] back in the camps, they can adapt very quickly in Canada. Just because she [knows] how to speak their way around and find their way around [in Canada]. [...] I would say it kind of the same [between] men and

women. It just depends on how much they know English. So, [if] they know English more, they would [be] put in a position where they can find a job quicker. If they don't [know English], they just kind of [try to learn over] a couple years [and then] start working (Nyi Ma Lay).

It is common for newcomer organizations to offer courses such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or French as a Second Language (FSL). Language programs can be found across Canada and are offered by a variety of organizations such as the country-wide YMCA or local organizations such as the Immigrant Services Society of BC (Government of Canada, 2021). In addition to learning English, there are other important education areas and support newcomers. Nyi Ma Lay contended that newcomer organizations assisted newcomers in adapting to life in Canada such as learning to cook on a stove.

They do have [newcomer organizations] in our area where they help [people to] resettle in Canada. Dealing with [...] different things they need. So, in terms of like, getting them to school, a lot of adults will not be able to go to like high school or elementary school or university. So, they are able to go to an adult campus. They could open the door to extend their English language or helping them with household items. Like how to cook, how to use the stove, and how to use the bathroom, everything.

Because [...] we were clueless. Like, when we first came, we [didn't] even know how to cook rice because it was [a] pot that was totally different than what we usually use in the camp. [In the camp] you use fire [for] the stove and everything. But [here, you put] in the water and then you click the button and it cooks itself. Everything was totally different [than] what we had to deal with [in the camps]. [Newcomer organizations do] help with a lot of that, helping people to transition into [their homes] or [...] transition to the Canadian society [and] Canadian life (Nyi Ma Lay).

Newcomer organizations have been a key support for Karen refugees in their transition and resettlement into Canada as noted by the participants. Various newcomer organisations across the country offer various sessions and courses to assist newcomers in adjusting to new local environments and cultures. Quite notably, local community organisations were noted as major actors in assisting for the participants and their families. Organisations such as the Saskatoon Open Door Society or the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organisation of Manitoba

(IRCOM) offer various courses such as learning to cook, how to use everyday appliances in Canada, and even how to take care of their banking necessities (Saskatoon Open Door Society, n.d.; Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, n.d.). Newcomer organizations really support Karen women providing them with a variety of much needed services.

[...] There is a lot of training [...] They set up a cooking class. Well, they used to, but now with [the pandemic] everything is virtual, its different. But yeah, [there are] also [...] women's organizations in our city. They help women who aren't able to fund childcare [for their children], or not being able to go buy food and [that] kind of stuff. They give out food to women [in] need, help them [learn] English. [The organizations] did a lot of things that would empower women to be [able to] adapt to Canadian culture (Nyi Ma Lay).

Despite the pause in support programs such as cooking classes in newcomer organizations due to the pandemic, they continue to provide resources, services, and programs for newcomer women in Canada. As Nyi Ma Lay highlighted in her discussion of newcomer programming in Canada, although they are limited, the programs and resources that are available to Karen women are still helpful for these newcomers in Canada.

6.4 Key findings

This chapter sought to outline the experiences of Karen women as they resettle and adapt to life in Canada. Five key findings emerged inductively from the data regarding their experiences during resettlement and adaptability.

First, the study found that the age of Karen newcomers when they arrived and were adapting to life in Canada had an impact on the level of success, they felt in their resettlement process. Younger Karen newcomers had an easier time adapting to overall life in Canada demonstrating their resiliency and adaptability. My participants noted that this was in large part

due to their exposure to other children and young Canadian people. Additionally, young Karen newcomers in contrast to older Karen newcomers do not have the same strong connection to their home community. Nyi Ma Lay remarked that because younger Karen newcomers spent less or next to no time in Myanmar or on the Thai-Myanmar border, they did not have the same time as older relatives to develop connections and a sense of community within the regions. Older Karen newcomers were more likely to worry about their relatives and friends who were still living on the Thai-Myanmar border and in the Kayin State while also missing the communal connections they had established prior to resettlement.

Across Canada, many newcomer organizations offer programming targeted at newcomer children and youth. Many of these programs provide recreational activities and educational support for young newcomers such as providing homework groups. These activities are opportunities for newcomer children and youth to have social interactions with others around their age and build a sense of community with others. For example, in Manitoba, Newcomers Employment and Education Development Services Inc. (N.E.E.D.S) and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM) both offer important programming for young newcomers (N.E.E.D.S, n.d.; IRCOM, n.d.). Nyi Ma Lay, who had more than one young newcomer in her family upon resettlement, highlighted the fact that these children and youth specific programs for newcomers are good in the sense that they expose young people to other young newcomers who may be experiencing the same challenges while also building a sense of local community with local young people.

However, not all young newcomers will necessarily adapt easily to a new environment when resettling in Canada. A key concern highlighted throughout the study was the importance of one's ability to communicate in one of the two official languages of the country. Generally,

language acquisition at a young age helps individuals feel more comfortable and at ease with the language (Valencia, 2015). However, young newcomers arriving from regions where English and/or French are not the primary language can experience negative impacts on their adaption to Canada. For example, Valencia (2015) noted that language spoken can be a significant barrier in terms of building a sense of community and belonging among newcomer children and youth.

Educators have an important role to play in terms of young newcomers' resettlement experience. The study found that educators and the education system itself has an overall positive impact among the participant families. While in school, the young members of the participant families received support from teachers who helped them adapt and build a sense of community with their peers. In the case of Karen newcomers, the schools in the refugees' camps on the Thai-Myanmar border differ from those in Canada, it is also possible that some Karen newcomers have never attended school (Access Alliance, n.d.). Educators should be mindful of newcomer experiences and provide the added support needed for newcomer children and youth to adapt to a new education system or even their first experience with any education system can have positive effects in the long run (School Mental Health Assist, n.d.). In addition to supporting newcomer children as they navigate a new educational system, educators can support young newcomers in terms of socialization, and in building a sense of community and belonging by encouraging social interactions with peers and building a sense of community within their classroom (Valencia, 2015).

The study found that perhaps the most significant factor in younger Karen newcomers more rapid adaption to life in Canada compared to older newcomers was their repeated exposure to other children in the schools and young people within the work milieu. It is mandatory for young people to attend school as children are expected to be in school from primary up until

nearly the completion of secondary (grade eleven or twelve) (University of the People, n.d.). The general age at graduation from school is sixteen yet it can vary across Canada's provinces and territories.

Additionally, the Canadian education system has a universal approach to integrate newcomers into the education system. For example, there are rarely translators available for newcomer children which can pose barriers to them in terms of their education and overall adaptability to Canadian society. Consequently, newcomer children must be resourceful and resilient learning the English and French languages and adapting to the environment out of sheer need.

Second, the study found that the participants experienced culture shock during their resettlement in Canada. They highlighted throughout their interviews the differences between life on the Thai-Myanmar border and living in Canada. Some of the changes were welcome such as shifts in lifestyle, employment, educational opportunities, and attitudes yet newcomer families faced many challenges and hardships such as alienation, depression, and poor job opportunities.

“Many people who travel or live overseas experience what is commonly referred to as “culture shock” when they first arrive in a new country. New sights, smells, sounds, people, and customs can be intimidating or even scary when all experienced at once – especially when they are very different from the country you grew up in” (TIES, 2017, n.p.). Considering that most Karen newcomers in Canada arrive from the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, life is certainly very different in this new environment.

Anwar-Travas (2018) explained that culture shock can be disorienting and is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome when resettling in a new country and host environment. This is particularly true when newcomers have deeply embedded roots within their home culture,

ethnic traditions, and are accustomed to a certain way of life. Maintaining connections to the home culture is important to newcomers' sense of overall resilience (Chapter 7). However, newcomers that are accustomed to their cultures and are rigidly set in a certain way of life can pose barriers to their adaptability to the new host country.

For example, Nyi Ma Lay and Daw Gyi noted that their families experienced a multitude of challenges in Canada ranging from the education system to financial institutions, to simply cooking a meal for the family. When explaining how her family could have burnt down their house due to the lack of familiarity with using stoves, Nyi Ma Lay remarked that these new barriers and dangers pose a direct challenge to newcomers' adaptability to the new cultural milieu. The standard mode of cooking in the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border was generally over an open fire. When Nyi Ma Lay arrived in Canada, her family were not prepared, nor did they understand how to cook food on a stove to feed the family. She remarked that when trying to cook dinner, the fear of setting their house on fire was a reality for them. Yet they were able to learn and eventually cook food for the family without the fear of setting their home on fire with some time and guidance from the community and grassroots organizations.

Another example provided by both Daw Gyi, and Nyi Ma Lay's families was in regards to financial institutions. Prosper Canada (2015) reported that in the first few years after arrival in Canada newcomers face some of the most complex financial decisions. Newcomers are simultaneously trying to learn the financial, legal, and tax systems while also having to make multiple financial decisions such as paying for housing or tuition for their children's education.

Although experiences with culture shock and adapting to cultural norms and societal institutions may seem trivial to some Canadians, it is a major challenge to newcomers who are trying to adapt to a new environment. The study found that experiences of culture shock among

the families had the potential to become major barriers and dangers to them in their resettlement experiences. The stories and experiences that the participants shared with me of how their families tackled these issues together and with the community illustrates their resilience and ability to adapt to life in a new environment.

Third, Karen women are open to working minimum wage jobs to support their families. When resettling in Canada, Karen women are far more concerned with financially supporting their families as compared to furthering their education. My participants remarked that the older Karen women are, the less likely they would want to continue their education in Canada especially if they have children or other dependents. Unfortunately, Karen women have had few opportunities to further their learning and skillsets prior to arriving in Canada due to the lack of educational and training opportunities available on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Daw Gyi emphasized that Karen women were generally open to taking any job to assist in establishing their family's security. She noted that Karen women work in places such as live markets and other minimum wage jobs that most Canadians would see as 'undesirable.' Employment is a crucial part of a newcomer's resettlement process in Canada, and obtaining financial stability and independence is important to them in the first year after arrival (George & Chaze, 2009). Many programs such as the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba's housing program require that all applications must not have resided in Canada for longer than 12 months when they apply (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organizations of Manitoba, n.d. b). Meaning if they fall outside of those 12 months, they are responsible for their own housing and shelter needs.

Financial stability is one of the three key pillars in the overall success of newcomer adaptability to Canada. Newcomer's efforts to gain financial stability does not come without

difficulties as they juggle different priorities and responsibilities to establish themselves in Canada at the same time as they are attempting to gain their financial independence (Ndoping & Morris, 2019). My participants noted that overall, they were generally thankful for the number of economic opportunities available to Karen women in Canada compared to what they experience in the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. In Canada, Karen women were thankful for the freedom to find a job and to gain their own independence despite the fact they often had to take minimum wage jobs that most Canadians would scoff at.

Fourth, community is essential for the successful resettlement and adaptability to a new country. In terms of resettlement overall, family and community are noted as important in refugees' choice of location to resettle (Elkebbe, 2014). However, the participants articulated that for them, the presence of community and family did not necessarily factor into their choice of location for resettlement. Although having family and an established Karen community in the region would have been a great asset for my participants and their families during resettlement, this was not a factor in their choice of location for resettlement.

The first large wave of Karen refugees resettled in Canada between 2005 and 2009 (Marchbank, Sherrell, Friesen & Hyndman, 2014). The fact that community and family did not necessarily factor into their decision of location for resettlement is linked to the fact that their families were likely a part of this initial wave. Had they already had family established in Canada prior to their arrival, their stories and experiences may have differed.

The participants and their families had different levels of community, particularly established Karen communities, around them when they initially arrived in Canada. Those living among a more established Karen community felt more supported and that their experiences in

terms of adapting to life in Canada were easier compared to those with little to no established Karen community in the region they settled in.

The overall experience of migration can be eased and be more successful when there are connections with other refugees from the same group who have had and/or understand experiences (Maharaj & Wang, 2015). In a feature from Access Alliance (n.d.), the individual interviewed remarked that the Karen community are always in survival mode whether that was in Myanmar, in the jungle, or in the refugee camps. There has hardly been a chance for the Karen community to live peacefully and receive a good education in Myanmar or in the refugee camps. The individual in the feature was a Karen newcomer who remarked about how a jarring experience such as resettling in a country like Canada from the border camps can be improved by creating a sense of community with people who share similar experiences (Access Alliance, n.d.).

Instances where there was no established Karen community in the region, newcomer organizations or networks could potentially fill in some of the gaps in terms of support and aid for Karen newcomers. Social capital is important in terms of newcomer resettlement as it aids in the development of their sense of belonging within the new environment (Northern Policy Institute, 2020). Middleton et al (as cited in Kleinhans, Priemus & Engbersen, 2006) defined social capital as “the foundation on which social stability and a community's ability to help itself are built” (p. 1069). The Canadian resettlement process is dependent on newcomers adapting to Canadian society as well as Canadian society adapting to newcomers (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018). My participants noted that although the regions they resettled in did not have established Karen communities, they did have a wider newcomer community with newcomers from various backgrounds and cultures. The communities that they settled in may not have experience

specially with Karen newcomers, but they were familiar with supporting newcomers in a general sense to some extent.

Finally, NGOs and grassroots organizations in contrast to governments are essential in terms of providing resources and services for newcomers in Canada. The study found that participants felt the most supported by NGOs and grassroots organizations who were working within newcomer communities. Grassroots organizations and newcomer participation within these organizations promote community development and foster the creation of a sense of belonging within the community, empowering newcomers. Further, grassroots organizations “make it possible for newcomers to carry out effective actions in order to overcome oppressive conditions, and to create a community setting which facilitates diversity” (Garcia-Ramírez, de la Mata, Paloma & Hernández-Plaza, 2011, p. 104).

Klassen (2012) conducted a study exploring newcomer services in the Ontario area and found that newcomers in Canada were more likely to seek assistance and support from informal sources such as family, the community, religious institutions, and ethno-cultural organizations over more formal ones. Grassroot organizations generally provide more culturally sensitive information and programs compared to government services. The process of adapting during and after resettlement is gradual, newcomers are not a homogenous group, and they have different needs. Newcomers have formed and seek support from various grassroots organizations that are both newcomer-led and serving to avoid experiences of alienation and isolation within Canada (Chekki, 2006).

The term social economy is defined as an initiative “to address pressing needs in the community that are otherwise not being addressed, or being addressed inadequately” (Sormova & Bucklaschuk, 2009, p. 7). Language, isolation, displacement, and limited access to resources

barriers can cause challenges in newcomers' ability to establish themselves in a new environment. Having access to grassroots organizations can provide newcomer with further support to help them overcome these barriers and develop a sense of belonging within their new communities (Sormova & Bucklaschuk, 2009).

Grassroots organizations have offered many possible solutions for the various barriers, and issues that young Karen people are forced to adapt to. My study found that where resources and services were lacking, particularly within education, grassroots organizations would often fill in the gaps. For example, Winnipeg, Manitoba's IRCOM offers a homework program that targets primarily young newcomers in middle and high school. This program features staff members that provide support and guidance to young newcomers and helps them to succeed in completing their school coursework (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, n.d.).

The study found that in the current context, Karen newcomers face barriers in terms of the ability for grassroots organizations to provide them with the resources and services they did in a pre-COVID world. Organizations such as the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM), faced restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic so that it moved its services online with limited in-person interaction (IRCOM, n.d.). Similarly, community support programming for Karen refugees were limited with some programs such as cooking programs paused completely.

6.5 Conclusion

The experiences of each family varied due to the different locations they resettled within Canada. However, there were some key intersecting experiences across each of the participant and their families. Overarching themes of age, education level, language knowledge, exposure to

Canadian society, and the resources and services available within the community were obstacles preventing Karen refugees from successfully adapting to life within Canadian society. Many of these findings intersected such as age and exposure to others in Canada influencing the ease at which Karen newcomers were able to adapt to life in Canada. Each of these examples gave a glimpse into the resources that aid Karen newcomers to best adapt to life in Canada.

The overall findings suggest that community, organizations, and the uplifting of Karen women are critical in terms of their resettlement. The role of community, including newcomer organizations, are a major influence in the adaptability of Karen newcomers to their new milieu. The importance of uplifting Karen women was also a notable finding as it was a key intersecting theme between each of my participants. There are certainly other factors that apply to the adaptability of Karen newcomers to Canada, and they vary depending on the location and community. This chapter serves as an initial glance into some of the needs, considerations, and best ways to support Karen newcomers arriving from the Thai-Myanmar border.

7 Chapter 7: Resilience, healing, and community

7.1 Introduction

Within the analyses of refugee and newcomer communities, the role and importance of resilience is important in the overall well-being and adaptability of these communities. During the interviews, my study participants demonstrated the resilience of both themselves and their families during their time living on the Thai-Myanmar border and the journey that brought them to their current environments in Canada. As participants shared these experiences and stories with me, the resilience of Karen women was clear, particularly as Karen women built up their confidence and became more resilient. At the most fundamental level, resilience is defined as “[the] positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (Herrman, et al., 2011, p. 259). In the case of the current study, the focus on resilience surrounds the ability of Karen refugees, particularly Karen women, in supporting themselves and their families in rebuilding their lives, and in using their experiences for positive social change.

There were two key themes around resilience and the confidence of Karen women who were refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border and who resettled in Canada. The two themes are: 1) The power of community and 2) the challenge of gender-norms.

7.2 Communal connections

A recurring theme within the study was the important role played by grassroots organizations and the community in empowering women on both the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. Bai Gyi reported on this issue as follows:

Some people work in the women's group. They struggle for the women's rights. [...] KWO, the Karen Women's Organization, they struggle for women's rights. [For example,

if] the Burmese try to rape [women], not only Karen [women] but [women from] all ethnic groups, they [will] try to take pictures and videos to let the whole world know [about what's happening]. They're a women's group struggling for [equal rights], for women's rights (Bai Gyi).

The KWO, perhaps the most noted grassroots organizations on the Thai-Myanmar border, was formed in 1949 and is a leading Indigenous organization focused on uplifting women, youth, and girls. The organization has a wide berth of operation with membership spanning from the border refugee camps, to the Karen state, to the wider country of Myanmar (KWO, 2019).

Another key organisation, which the KWO is a member of, is the Women's League of Burma (WLB). The WLB was formed in 1999 following the Pan Long Agreement and the second forum of the Women's Organizations of Burma in December of 1999. WLB aims to uplift women, youth and girls and promotes the full and active participation of women at all levels with interests in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process in addition to overall governance in Myanmar (WLB, 2021). Daw Gyi noted that the KWO provides vocational training to women and teaches them about women's rights.

The women organizations [...] we have a women's organization, [the KWO], that works to [...] they help the women in the refugee camp. I know the organization came, and they try to have vocational training for women so they can find a job. [Organizations] teach us about women's rights [...] how to speak [up] if something is not right. And we received [some] education so we [can] learn more [about women's rights] and [so] women can know their rights better (Daw Gyi).

Organizations such as the KWO have had a profound impact on the local communities in the refugee camps. Their work has ranged from supporting women in need to organizing trainings, to advocating on the global level for the Karen on the Thai-Myanmar border. Nyi Ma Lay reported that the KWO empowers women to ensure that their culture remains vibrant.

What I remember, there isn't a lot of organizations that [deal] with the conflict in the camp. But with the UN, I think they do help around [...] as well, the Karen Women's Organization. They [try] to help prevent [...] violence and the abuse in the camp. [...] We

do see a lot of the Karen Women's Organization present in the refugee camp. [They] empower women to stand up for themselves. [...]

The Karen Women Organization are the grassroots, but they [have] expanded [across] all over the different camps. They support [the] local [community]. [If] there is a local woman [with an] issue, [the KWO] helps prevent that. They [do] a lot of training [for] women and they empower them to keep their culture alive.

[They] create training for the younger generations to know how to weave, how to cook, all those different areas. [They teach them skills and] to keep the [Karen] culture alive. But [they also help] in terms of [...] the needs of the refugee camp in general. [When] the flooding happened in [one of the refugee camps], the Karen Women's Organization [acted] as the voice for [the community] and writing out to [the international community]. [Writing] letters to the Karen community all over the world to help with donations and this kind of stuff (Nyi Ma Lay).

The advocacy work of organisations such as the KWO and the WLB do not come without their own barriers. Deeply entrenched patriarchal systems within Myanmar's culture and society also travelled to the border region along with the people fleeing violence and persecution. At times, those who challenge the traditional patriarchal systems have been met with a backlash from within the community (Snyder, 2009). However, the fight has not been abandoned as organisations continue to fight for the rights of women. The refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nyi Ma Lay explained that many organizations have experienced significant barriers in providing essential resources and services to the refugee camps.

In terms of the camps, it's really difficult right now because you can't have international organisations [working in the camps]. They can't really enter the camps to do any activity, to do their work there. Even the Karen Women Organisation [isn't] allowed to go in there. (Nyi Ma Lay).

This isolation of the camps may be a preventative measure to try and slow the spread of the virus, especially to a vulnerable group, but it has left many on the border without the support and resources they require to survive. The importance of grassroots organizations and the

community are not only relevant on the Thai-Myanmar border but they have also been important in terms of the Karen newcomer community in Canada.

[In Canada] there [are] organizations [with resources such as] trauma departments or mental health departments. [Women also] know their rights and that [if they have relationship or domestic issues], they know how to get out and they can call, or they can also go to women's organizations or social workers. Then [they can get] help or training, also they can go to a shelter to protect themselves. [In Canada, the women], they know where to seek help. There are more resources for them. They [don't] just suffer, suffer, suffer, they [learn] how to speak up (Daw Gyi).

Many of the resources and the training provided to newcomer women are organized by grassroots organizations across the country. Additionally, the Karen community is an instrumental part of newcomer adaptability in Canada. Nyi Ma Lay stated that Karen women had difficulty in adapting to life in Canada compared to other newcomers from different ethnic groups.

It's similar. It's kind of the same as Karen women, but I would [say] they have more opportunities since they have a lot of [people from the community who] arrived [before] in the community they live in. They have people there; their community is set up and people are already [here]. They're [here] to find their needs and help them.

For the Karen women, when we first came, there's not a lot of community support because we don't have a [Karen] community set up [...] I think we were the first group that came from the refugee camps. We [didn't] really have any communities set up to help with anything. But after years, we kind of organized ourselves and set up the community where we can help the [Karen] people that come [to Canada] after us (Nyi Ma Lay).

The Karen only began resettling in Canada in large quantities in the mid-2000s. In regards to wider newcomer communities in Canada, the Karen are newer arrivals in terms of resettling in Canada, and they are also quite spread out across the country.

[The Karen community], it's very spread out across Canada and in each city. It's [overall] a small community and a lot of them are not knowledgeable of the country rules and regulations. [The community] is trying to adapt to the [country]. [They're] trying to help people the way they [were] helped by other communities when they first came [to Canada] (Nyi Ma Lay).

The participants whose families live in areas with higher concentrations of Karen populations such as British Columbia found they were better supported and more connected to their community. On the other hand, those whose families lived in communities with a smaller concentration of Karen people such as in the prairies found they had less support and were more disconnected from their community.

7.3 Reversing gender-norms

I asked the participants about how Karen women move forward building on their experiences and how they demonstrate resilience. Daw Gyi articulated that Karen women use their skills and move out of their comfort zones to embrace new experiences.

I know they have to get out of their comfort zone. [...] If they feel like they can't do anything, [feel like they have] no help, they have to [...] open their eyes so [they] can get out of the comfort zone and move forward. And move forward to [be able to use] the skills that they have already, they have [the skills] and they have to use it [to move forward and be resilient] (Daw Gyi).

It was important for women to build up their skills and have confidence to be resilient and to be leaders in their communities.

There is a lot of training [for Karen women] on being able to use their voice and be able to be confident in themselves to be a leader in their community. There was a lot of training on that. [...] [The training] does help a lot of women to be confident in themselves to find [a] job and also to be a leader in their communities.

As I've seen with other ethnic communities, they do have a lot of women in charge. I mean, even in our community, we have women in the church, but [there are not] a lot of women able to get involved. A lot of them are stuck with their children and they don't really want to [or can't] do anything. You still have a lot of men [in leadership]. Women do have a lot [more] opportunities to be free and lead the community [in Canada] (Nyi Ma Lay).

The confidence and resilience of women has been impeded is through the continuous reinforcement of traditional gender norms. The confinement and inability of Karen women to find jobs due to the traditional gender norms (Chapter 5), has left many women dependent on their husbands and male relations. Additionally, leadership of the communities continues to be dominated by men however, this is an area that has seen change in recent years.

I would say that [gender-norms] are changing now. We do see a lot of women [who] are rising [in] leadership right now and they do have more opportunity to stand up for themselves. I think, when I was living in the camp, we [didn't] get a lot of training on leadership skills or women's rights, anything like that. So, I think it's changing, [organizations like] the Karen Women's Organization are changing that. They are working on helping the women to [be able] to use their voice [and] become the leaders of their communities (Nyi Ma Lay).

In reference to women holding positions of power, Bai Gyi recounted memories of the respected community leader Zipporah Sein. Sein is a female leader in the Karen community and a former leader in the Karen National Union (KNU). She was an instrumental actor in the creation of the WLB and continues to be respected within the country and has done considerable work for her community (AGIPP, n.d.). During the interview, Bai Gyi noted that although Sein is an example of how successful and important it is to have women in positions of leadership, these instances are still few and far between. Women who challenge the gender-norms on the border continue to experience backlash from patriarchal institutions (Snyder, 2009).

Alternatively, the gender-norms among the Karen have seen a dramatic shift in some contexts after they resettled in Canada. My respondents provided examples of how women took control of family matters outside of the domestic sphere such as financial matters.

I could see my family when we first [arrived in] Canada, my Mom is more in charge than my Dad. So, everything that we [knew and needed], my Mom pretty much [stood] up for it. My Dad [backed up] a little and [wasn't] sure what to do but my Mom [was] more taking charge.

So, I guess a lot had to do with her [confidence]. [...] resettling in Canada helped a lot of women to [take] charge of their household. It just- I think it has to do with [confidence]. It

had to do with [confidence] and [adaptability] to the new culture [in Canada]. Yeah, I would say my Mom is more [in charge]. She is more confident [and] adapted to [Canada's] culture [then] my Dad is (Nyi Ma Lay).

Life as refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border and as newcomers in Canada are experienced differently by men and women. Women can occupy leadership positions and advocate for the needs and rights of women that allows for those unique needs that are specific to women to be addressed. Refugee resettlement in Canada does not always mean that gender-norms will shift in favor of women and it could even exacerbate these norms (CCR, 2006). However, my respondents noted that the shift was generally in favor of Karen women when resettling in Canada. One area that has seen a positive shift for Karen women is with regards to SGBV.

[There are] more freedoms [in Canada]. [...] men cannot look down on women [in the same way]. [On the border, women can't do] anything, they just stay home, not contributing anything [financially]. Men cannot say that [necessarily here]. Here, if men want to abuse the women, they have to be careful. If they do something not right, [they cannot do that], they have to treat women equally (Daw Gyi).

Gender equality in Canada, although it does have its own barriers, is an improvement over what Karen women experienced on the Thai-Myanmar border. Generally, Karen women experience more freedom and can exercise their rights more freely in Canada compared to their lives in the border camps.

7.4 Key findings

This chapter explored the resiliency of Karen refugee women on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. There were five key findings that emerged inductively from the data concerning the resilience and agency of Karen refugee women.

First, the study found that it was very important to preserve the Karen culture and traditional practices despite their displacement from their historical territory. Many older generations were noted as making a concentrated effort to preserve the culture and teach younger generations the values, traditions, and practices of the Karen culture. These practices, as noted by the participants, ensured the Karen culture could continue across the generations while also teaching the younger generation different cultural and language skills.

Migration is often cited as a threat to state's national security and identities. It is not uncommon for the term assimilation to appear in dialogue around resettlement and for decades it was the preferred approach for newcomer adaptation (Scheffler, 2007). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demand for newcomers to assimilate into the dominant culture of their new environment was common (Skerry, 2000). This was also the case for Karen newcomers to Canada. However, as the concept of multiculturalism began to be popularized in the West and has continued to evolve, the narratives have shifted (Fries & Gingrich, 2010).

Among a list of factors that promote resilience identified by Mayhew (n.d.) included, family, friends, and cultural connectedness. Among Karen newcomers in the United States, maintaining a connection to their culture and continuing cultural practices provided a sense of comfort and strength as they adapted to life in a new environment (Tonui & Mitschke, 2020). However, maintaining one's culture does not come without its challenges.

A study of Somali refugees in the United States found that whereas traditional cultural practices were a part of everyday life in Somalia forging a natural connection between individuals and their culture, this was not the case for Somali refugees in the US. After resettlement, it was found that traditional cultural practices were not a natural aspect of everyday

life and there needed to be dedicated time and effort to pass these traditional cultural practices onto younger generations (Frounfelker et al, 2016).

However, adults struggled to pass on cultural traditions and practices to younger generations while at the same time, they continued these practices and traditions that had an overall positive impact in the community. Karen newcomers in the United States noted that continuing the practice of weaving while in a new country and passing the skill along to their children helped them build confidence and benefitted their overall resilience during resettlement. Additionally, passing along their culture to their children was important as it reminded the children of who they are, where they came from, and encouraged them to remember all that their people have experienced (Stephenson, Smith, Gibson & Watson, 2013).

Second, the study found that the respondents emphasized the building of confidence among Karen refugee women and that it was one of the primary steps in addressing the barriers Karen women face and it was important in ensuring their resiliency and healing. Herrman et al (2011) defined resiliency as “[the] positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (p. 259).

The building of Karen women's confidence intersects with the maintenance of their culture and traditions. The preservation of Karen culture and traditions has been beneficial to the resilience of newcomers and even provides them with comfort and strength as they adapt to a new environment (Caring for Kids New to Canada, n.d.; Tonui & Mitschke, 2020). Additionally, Chapters 5 and 6 referenced the importance of grassroots and community organizations in empowering the Karen community. Similarly, a study of newcomers in Canada by Schmidtke (2018) noted that, when newcomers were included at the community level, it provided them

agency and voice within their communities and environments elevating their confidence and having positive impacts on their resettlement experience.

Confidence among refugee and newcomer women is not exclusive to adulthood. Having mentoring programs available for girls to express themselves when first arriving in Canada is also beneficial as it can have a positive impact later in life as newcomers grow into adulthood. For example, the Girl's Club in Edmonton provides a safe space for newcomer girls to learn new skills, express themselves, gain confidence, and adapt to their new environments. Some volunteers in the Girl's Club were former participants. They recognized the positive impacts it had on their adaptability, growth, and overall confidence and returned to support a new generation of newcomer girls (Sparrow, 2018).

The study found that no matter the age of Karen refugees and newcomers, having both adult and children's programming was an overall benefit to the building of confidence and well-being of Karen women and girls. Nyi Ma Lay, for example, noted that those of various ages within her family attended newcomers' programs which were overall beneficial to their resettlement experience while helping them to learn new skills and practices to adapt to life in Canada. Additionally, Daw Gyi reported that the programs provided by grassroots actors on the Thai-Myanmar border are an instrumental part of addressing inequalities between men and women while building up the confidence of many Karen women within the region.

MacLean (2012) argued that programs within the border region should ensure that there is an element that focuses on the uplifting of refugees while also guaranteeing the protection of the most vulnerable within the populations and this includes women. The current study found that the programs that focus on uplifting women that already exist within the camp communities are beneficial and have had a largely positive impact on Karen women. However, the current

civil war context has seen limitations with regards to the availability of these important resources and services that impact the overall building of confidence among Karen women living on the Thai-Myanmar border.

The third key finding connects with the idea of building confidence among Karen women. The study found that my participants strongly believed in women occupying and being included in key spaces such as at the decision-making level. Although the participants noted that there has been some headway in recent years in terms of women holding influential and leadership positions within the Karen community, it remains a rare occurrence for them to be in positions of power.

As noted in Chapter 3, Sandole-Staroste (2009) defined gender mainstreaming as recognizing the differences in experiences and needs of men and women. As has been explored in Chapter 5 and 6, women have had stories to tell about their experiences living in both the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. Many of their different experiences were linked to their gender and the norms and expectations associated with it.

McFadden (n.d.) argued that the continuous occupation of men in key influential positions "...is also a serious expression of the backlash against women's attempts to become autonomous of men in their personal/political relationships and interactions" (n.p.). She continues by noting that traditionally, specific narratives have been assigned to certain spaces making them "culturally, religiously, and politically marked as either 'male' or 'female'" (n.p.). The spaces that are "public" are typically assigned as 'male' spaces whereas domestic spaces are described as more 'female.'

McFadden's (n.d.) argument highlights the barriers faced by Karen women living on the Thai-Myanmar border wherein women are generally confined within the camps and have little

opportunities outside of domestic and communal tasks. Additionally, as the participants noted throughout the study, very few women have held positions of power or influence within the camp communities. Karen women have fewer chances compared to Karen men in occupying leadership space and having their voices heard within the communities. Karen women's needs are under addressed and overlooked as their voices are often excluded from these key leadership spaces.

Shirley Chisholm, the first Black US Congresswoman, noted the following with regards to women occupying leadership spaces: "if they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair" (UN Women, 2021). Women need to be included at the table as well as in the dialogue and leadership of peacebuilding and post-peace accord reconstruction and communal decisions (UN Women, 2021). When women do occupy these critical leadership and political spaces however, it can often be met with male backlash as we have witnessed along the Thai-Myanmar border camps. Women who challenged the status quo, as we explored in Chapter 5, were not always met with favorable responses from the community (Snyder, 2009). The inclusion of women, particularly within environments with deeply engrained gender inequality and patriarchal structural barriers such as in the border camps requires a deeper paradigm shift within Karen society. As my participants noted, there is a need for gender norms to change within the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border to ensure the inclusion and full and active participation of women.

Comparatively, Karen newcomer women in Canada have found a new form of confidence that has encouraged them to take more leadership positions in their communities. When Karen women arrived in Canada, their shift in perception in contrast to those living on the Thai-Myanmar border, provided them with a new level of confidence. For example, SGBV and

gender-based discrimination are against Canadian law compared to the anarchy existing within border camp environments. For example, Nyi Ma Lay and her family experienced a shift in the power dynamics in Canada in contrast to the strict gender norms that objectifies Karen women living in the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. Her mother found confidence in Canada and used her skills and knowledge to occupy a leadership position within her family as she strived to ensure that they could learn about, and adapt to their new cultural environment.

Fourth, patriarchal norms continue to limit Karen women's opportunity to hold leadership positions in the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Karen women are often confined to their homes and forced to do other domestic tasks. War and conflict undoubtedly have an impact on the lives and gendered experiences of men and women. James (2010) remarked that "[no] matter what the pathway, armed conflict deeply impacts men's constructions of their gendered selves and threatens masculinity" (p. 277).

In the context of the Karen people living along the Thai-Myanmar border, women often suffer from the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that have defined life in the border camps. These discriminatory practices have only been exacerbated by Myanmar's protracted ethnopolitical conflict and the resulting refugee situation on the border. However, my participants remarked that when they arrived in Canada, they found a newfound freedom from their traditional patriarchal system that dominated their lives in the border refugee camps. That is not to deny that Canada also has its own issues with gender inequality, sexism, and patriarchal norms that devalue and oppress women too.

Karen women found a level of freedom when arriving in Canada that they had not experienced prior. Many women were empowered to challenge traditional gender and cultural norms that were prevalent in the border camp communities. Daw Gyi highlighted that Karen

women felt more protected in Canada compared to their existence in the border refugee camps. Karen women were more likely to know and recognize their human rights appreciating the avenues and resources available to them to ensure that they could access and protect their rights. For example, Karen women had less fear of suffering SGBV in Canada because they knew they could call the police. They had the confidence to reach out and find support and security. They felt better supported in Canada and were able to find safety and security through Canadian law that increased their confidence and their overall sense of well-being.

Finally, the border region has experienced an additional strain from the effects of the February 1, 2021, coup d'état that occurred in Myanmar. As violence has continued to escalate across the country, more people have been displaced often seeking shelter in neighbouring regions and countries. Violence in the Kayin State has resulted in another significant movement of Karen people fleeing violence and persecution seeking shelter on the Thai-Myanmar border. Al Jazeera (2021) reported that around 2,267 refugees fled over the border into Thailand in the last week of April 2021 alone. Many of those seeking refuge on the border were fleeing the latest outbreak of violence between the Tatmadaw and Karen rebel fighters. The U.N. humanitarian office warned that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could further exacerbate the estimated total 56,000 people that have been displaced due to large-scale outbreaks of violence in Myanmar since the February 1 coup. Previously, around 2,000 Karen refugees fleeing the initial airstrikes that occurred in the Kayin State during March 2021 were forced back into the state to then face ongoing violence and persecution (Wongcha-um, 2021).

Wongcha-um and Thepgumpanat (2021) reported that many of those Karen fleeing at the time were blocked at the border and could not seek assistance from aid groups in the region and were instead forced back onto the Myanmar side of the border. The violence continues within

Myanmar with many of the ethnic minority groups such as the Karen continuing to experience persecution from the military junta. Considering the current situation within the region combined with the recommendations from my participants, those refugees living on the border need to be able to access resources and services. Additionally, the current situation calls once again for the UN to recognize the protracted state of the border context, it is certainly not a temporary situation and has not been for many generations.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the situation in Myanmar further as the military government has proven unsupportive in addressing the pandemic. The continued blocking of aid by the Myanmar government has left many in need of medical attention and care (The Irrawaddy, 2021b). As of July 22, 2021, there was a daily infection rate of 6,000 people and a daily death rate of 230 in Myanmar (Lee, 2021).

In April 2021, an appeal was made by a group of organizations and NGOs in the region to the RTG to provide protection to those seeking refuge from the violence in Myanmar (AIPP, 2021). As of July 2021, the Thai military has set aside spaces in the Mae Sot region of the country in anticipation of a mass displacement of people fleeing the ongoing violence in Myanmar (Wongcha-um & McPherson, 2021).

The current unstable violent context has certainly had an impact on the resiliency of the Karen as well of all the people of Myanmar. The potential for democracy evolving within Myanmar suffered under the February 1st coup resulting in negative effects being felt throughout the region and by the international community (Moo Kham, 2021). The Thai military has noted the possibility of clashes taking place close to the Thai-Myanmar border because of ongoing violence in the Kayin State (Wongcha-um & McPherson, 2021). This could lead to possible risks for both new arrivals and long-time residents of the border camps.

The outbreaks of violence within regions such as the Kayin State have once again set back any potential for the Karen people on the Thai-Myanmar border to return to Myanmar. This latest wave of violence and persecution has seen many ethnic minority groups once again fleeing their homes and seeking refuge in the jungle and in neighbouring countries. With no clear end in sight to the over 70 years of conflict in Myanmar, the Karen people must once again show their resilience as they face another wave in a long history of violence and persecution.

The Karen community, alongside other Myanmar ethnic groups are experiencing a dual pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing civil war within Myanmar are undeniable that have seriously impacted various ethnic groups in Myanmar as well as on the Thai-Myanmar border and in other neighboring countries. Their full effects are not fully known and will continue to unfold over the coming months and years.

7.5 Conclusion

There are several ways in which Karen women have demonstrated resilience and strength on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. The strength, healing, and growth of the Karen community was evident through the stories and experiences of the participants. My respondents explored community, addressing narratives, and building confidence in this chapter.

Karen women living on the border or in Canada are working to address the traditional gender-norms that confined and dictated much of their lives in the border camps (Chapter 5). The participants noted the shifting of narratives around gender and the societal roles of women during the resettlement process through the support of the community and their new sense of confidence. Considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the recent outbreak of violence

and conflict in Myanmar, the Karen people must once again prove their resilience as individuals and as a community.

8 Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis explored the gendered experiences of three Karen refugees who lived on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada. The preceding empirical chapters (5, 6 and 7) outlined the key themes that arose from the data. The central findings outlined the barriers faced by Karen women based on gender-norms and the resilience of the community despite such barriers and persecution.

The research aimed to contribute to the growing discourse on the importance of gender within conflict and refugee contexts and the role of women not simply as passive victims but as agents of change. Additionally, the study sought to add and provide some current context to the ongoing persecution and displacement of the Karen community and the impacts that these situations have on Karen women specifically.

8.2 Overall key findings

The study acknowledges that the experiences of the three participants are not homogenous of all Karen people residing on the Thai-Myanmar border, and in Canada. These are but a portion of the larger, diverse experiences of the community over the past 72 years of the conflict and mass displacement of the Karen people. Rather, the study presents the realities, perspectives, fears, and hopes of the three participants and their families. The theoretical concept that emerged inductively from the data was 'communal healing.' The following sections are the overall key findings that arose from the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Community and collectivistic society

A recurring emphasis during the interviews was on the role and connection of community. Within cultural studies, it is common for Western nations and cultures to be defined as individualistic while non-Western cultures are more collectivistic (Dembour, 2001; Yoon, 2014; Triandis, 2018). The concept of individualism and collectivism are complex constructs however, their differences generally depend on the level of connection and loyalty one feels to the identity of one's group (Yuki, 2003). Despite the relative debate about the differences between individuals and collectivism there are general aspects of each that are agreed upon. In reference to one's in-group identity, individualism views the individual as completely autonomous and separate from the group. On the other hand, collectivism views individuals "as aspects of groups or collectives" (Yuki, 2003, p. 167).

Perhaps one of the most prevalent recurring themes throughout the study was the importance of community. Prior to the commencement of the study, I knew that community played a somewhat important role within Asian cultures however, this study illustrated that this connection is far deeper than I originally imagined. Wu et al (2010) found there was a tendency for high resilience among collectivistic cultures such as Chinese cultures and other Asian cultures. Throughout the study my respondents noted the important role of the community and grassroots organizations with communal connections in supporting local Karen communities. Organizations such as the KWO were referenced more often and were spoken of at times even more highly than the UNHCR who is also a key actor within the region.

The idea of community went far deeper than organizations, however in maintaining the gravitas of the Karen culture. Perhaps one of the most notable ways that the importance of community and the collective was emphasized within the study was in the way that the

participants engaged with and responded to me during the interviews. When they provided responses, shared stories, and shared their perspectives, my participants tended to provide answers from a collective perspective rather than exclusively from the individual perspective. During the interviews, it felt to me that I was listening to the perspectives of three individuals who were speaking as the representatives of three families.

Everyday peacebuilding

There was a hesitancy among the participants in referring to themselves as peacebuilders during the process of recruitment and the interviews. Their description of peacebuilders often centred around foreign aid from the UNHCR or from organizations such as the KWO. The stories and experiences of the participants also showed another reality, that of everyday peace.

Mac Ginty (2014) described everyday peace as “the routinized practices used by individuals and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society that may suffer from ethnic or religious cleavages and be prone to episodic direct violence in addition to chronic or structural violence” (p. 549). Additionally, Mac Ginty (2013) argued that everyday peace and everyday peacebuilders can present “authentic and locally relevant” solutions compared to nationally controlled processes (p. 59). Therefore, there is a level of ownership and agency among local communities within these processes. They are built by the community, for the community, and can truly target the needs of the community (Mac Ginty, 2013).

In addition to the return of agency and a certain level of control to the local communities, the inclusion of everyday peacebuilders also adds a level of legitimacy to peace processes (Autesserre, 2014). Who better to identify what the needs of the community are than the

community itself? Another important consideration is the need for decolonizing peace methods (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The traditional peacebuilding practices employed within the West are not necessarily relevant to the Myanmar or Thai-Myanmar border context and risk overlooking the unique needs of these communities. “Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of [Western] ideals and the practices that they generate” (Smith, 2021, p. 2). Such ideals and practices may not be culturally relevant or practical.

Participants denoted that grassroots organizations are key actors within the border communities and in Canada as well. However, despite the unwillingness to admit their roles as peacebuilders, the participants and the wider community are engaging in everyday peace. The study participants are engaged in support education and advocacy for the Karen community on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada, and they have provided insight into the conflict in Myanmar.

The participant's work, the communities, and organizations are supporting what UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda have outlined. The WPS agenda comprises of four key pillars: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. The inclusion of Karen women in leadership roles and in the development and the implementation of the programs that directly affects them are critical to the Karen refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada.

Resiliency Through Knowledge and Skills

Karen refugee women have proven their agency and ability to be resilient in the face of adversity whether that be on the Thai-Myanmar border or in Canada. The participants remarked

that Karen women often had particular skills and knowledge that they had acquired within the context, society, traditional cultural practices, and from their own experiences. These skills have been noted as important aspects within the resiliency of Karen refugee women and have provided them with a means to improve their situations and enact change within their communities.

A study by Lau (2015) reported that knowledge affects the appraisal of one's context influencing whether it will be viewed positively or negatively. When one has more knowledge about how to overcome and address barriers or "aversive situations," the outcome is generally more positive (p. 1). The participants highlighted the fact that it was not necessarily a case of needing to introduce completely new knowledge or sets of skills to Karen women but to promote recognizing the ones they already possessed.

The expertise, skills, and experiences of women, particularly young women, is often overlooked as they are generally not seen as active contributors in peacebuilding (Leclerc & Wong, 2021). However, the study found that in the case of Karen women specifically, they were key actors in addressing barriers and ensuring the resiliency of their communities. Examples such as weaving and cooking, which are traditional skills passed down through generations within the Karen culture, were often utilized by women to earn a living and maintain their cultural practices. Additionally, as some skills such as weaving could be done in groups, they could be used to ensure a continued connection to their community, even when resettled in a new country such as Canada.

Agency and power through storytelling

The participants recognized the underlying importance of the role of storytelling to Karen culture. In reference to the importance of storytelling in peacebuilding, Senehi (2000) noted,

“[storytelling is] significant for facilitating cultural spaces where people can participate in defining their communities, voicing their experiences, healing from the past conflict, and shaping their future” (p. 97).

The participants in the study were eager and interested in sharing their stories with me if for nothing else than to share what they and their families had experienced within the border camps and in Canada. Reimer et al (2015) remarked that people like to share stories, experiences, challenges, and perspectives. It is through these shared stories that one can begin to understand the connection of individuals and communities with contexts and conflicts while also working towards building peace (Senehi, 2000; 2009; Reimer et al, 2015). By telling and retelling stories, individuals and groups can reevaluate their circumstances and contexts and reassess where they are in relation to others. Additionally, stories allow for feedback and dialogue with the audience (Anyeko & Hoffmann, 2020).

Further, my participant's stories challenged certain narratives that have arisen around the context of the Myanmar conflict, the mass displacement of the populations from Myanmar, and Canadian resettlement programs. Senehi (2009) remarked that “power precedes knowledge” (p. 203). Those in power generally have more ability to control narratives and the knowledge that is shared however, my participants indicate how the sharing of stories can challenge such narratives. Such as the largely lauded Canadian resettlement programs which have been attributed as the gold standard for resettlement (Casasola, 2016; Agrawal, 2018). The participants noted that although Canada is highly regarded in the terms of its resettlement policy, there are significant barriers that they and their families have experienced since coming to Canada.

8.3 Future research

This study explored the gendered experiences of three Karen refugees and their families who lived on the Thai-Myanmar border and now reside in Canada. The intention was to contribute to the dialogue surrounding the Myanmar conflict and the resulting mass displacement of the country's populations while also exploring how women are more than passive victims in conflict and refugee situations. However, since the conflict in Myanmar remains active and Karen people face continuous mass displacement, further research can be done on the effects of current situations such as the February 1st coup.

Additionally, the study sought to recruit participants of various age groups both on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada in addition to participants of varying ages. This was not fully possible because of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, future studies can expand the pool of participants to include those living on the border. The ages of the participants in the study did vary however, the participants had each been living in Canada for more than ten years meaning they were more disconnected from the border camps as they had already settled in Canada. A possible future study is to have participants who have been residing in Canada for five years or less and who have more recent experience with the Canadian resettlement programs to speak to their experiences.

There were few mentions of other marginalized groups within the refugee camps other than women and in the Canadian Karen community. Although this may have been due to the specific experiences of my participants, this is a potential further area of study. Some marginalized communities for further research include disabled refugees, LGBTQ2+ refugees, refugee youth, and unrecognized minority ethnic groups in Myanmar. Specifically in the context of Asia, disabled people, for example, are often overlooked or erased from narratives completely

due to cultural and societal norms. Overlooking and erasing marginalized groups experiences and needs are risking them slipping through the cracks. Conducting further research in this area can shine some further light on an ongoing issue within many refugee contexts in Asia.

In addition, it is critical to conduct more research on local indigenous practices and epistemologies in this region as there is a dearth of research on localized peacebuilding, resistance, and social justice. Particularly in terms of more culturally and contextually appropriate and relevant approaches to peace. Traditional Western approaches to peacebuilding may be inappropriate and unsuitable for contexts such as those in Asia, thus further research on local Indigenous practices, approaches, and epistemologies to peace and social justice can open the possibility for expanding the literature on culturally and contextually relevant peacebuilding.

8.4 Conclusion

This study explored the gendered experiences of three Karen refugees who lived on the Thai-Myanmar border and now live in Canada and how women are resilient and possess agency within these spaces. The questions explored included how do the experiences of Karen women differ from men living on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada? How are women active contributors to peace rather than simply passive victims of violence and conflict? The participants emphasized that the community needs women, women at all levels from the familial to the decision-making level. The work to ensure the full and active inclusion and participation of women at all levels must be done with women, not for women to address their unique needs. Additionally, Karen women living in communities on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada, need to be uplifted and supported to realize their full potential to build positive social change in their communities.

It is hoped that this study informs and provide some updated information concerning the experiences of Karen women living in border camps and in the Canadian context. New light can be shed on protracted issues within these communities based on the key findings from the stories and experiences of the participants. Further, the study highlights the agency of Karen women who are in control over their stories that indicate that these women are not simply passive victims in conflict, but they are actors for peace.

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10 Appendix 1

-Participant Interview Protocol-

Participant Pseudonym:	
Date:	
Time:	

Note: All participants should note that questions should not be given with specific information about individuals due to confidentiality concerns. Should the participant wish to refer to situation(s) that concern individuals, they should refer to the individual(s) in a general sense.

1. What has life been like for refugee women living along the Thai-Myanmar border?

Probes:

- a. How have these experiences differed from those of the men?
- b. How do the experiences of Karen women differ from women of other ethnic groups living in refugee camps?
- c. Have their experiences been largely positive or negative? Why or why not?

2. What are some of the challenges that women living in the camp face, and how did you with them?

Probes:

- a. What kind of issue? (i.e., physical, verbal, mental, etc.)
- b. Who was creating the challenges for the women?

- c. Where have these women experienced these challenges (location, i.e., at home, in a public area, etc.)
- d. Why have these women been subjected to these challenges?
- e. Why have there been no challenges for women in the camp?

3. What were your experiences resettling in Canada?

Probes:

- a. How have these experiences differed from those of the men?
- b. How do the experiences of Karen women differ from women of other ethnic groups **who have resettled in Canada?**
- c. Have their experiences been largely positive or negative? Why or why not?

4. How have organizations been working to prevent conflict and acts of violence in the camp?

Probes:

- a. What kinds of conflict, and what kind of violence?
- b. What organizations have been working on these issues?
- c. Who is in these organizations?
- d. How are they conducting their work?
- e. Have they been successful or unsuccessful? Why or why not?

5. How has the international community been working to support Karen refugee women living in the camp?

Probes:

- a. What are the organizations and government doing??
- b. What are they doing to empower women??
- c. Have they been successful or unsuccessful? Why or why not?
- d. What policies/legislations/treaties have been implemented to support women?

6. How has the international community been working to support Karen refugee women relocating to Canada?

Probes:

- a. What are the organizations and government doing??
- b. What are they doing to empower women??
- c. Have they been successful or unsuccessful? Why or why not?
- d. What policies/legislations/treaties have been implemented to support women?

7. What do women do to make themselves stronger in refugee camp?

a. Probes:

- a. What everyday practices or activities do they use?
- b. In what ways are they resilient?
- c. How do they resist conflict?
- d. What do they do to prevent conflict?

8. What do women do to make themselves stronger during resettlement to Canada?***b. Probes:***

- a. What everyday practices or activities do they use?
- b. In what ways are they resilient?
- c. How do they resist conflict?
- d. What do they do to prevent conflict?

9. What are women's best hopes and wishes and worst dreams and worries for the future?***c. Probes:***

- a. For themselves?
- b. For their families?
- c. For their community's?