

## *Policing, Exile and Gender in States' Borderlands*

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Women's stories of policing illuminate much about gendered state practices. While most studies have focused on women located inside their state of origin and recognised by those state institutions as legal members of that nation-state (even if only in a nominal sense), this study focuses on the policing of politically active women<sup>1</sup> situated in the ambiguous and contested borderlands between Burma<sup>2</sup> and Thailand and inside Thailand. In so doing we come to focus on the ways the policing of women's political activism grants insight into the practices of statecraft,<sup>3</sup> sovereignty and the state of statelessness.

Focusing on women's experiences of the borderlands reveals how nation-states depend on the continuous and violent enforcement of territorial boundaries. Women's continuous movement around the borderlands between Thailand and Burma demonstrate interstate boundaries to be abstract, legal constructs that are lived through the material effects of enforcement by state representatives (army, immigration, police, intelligence) on the bodies of migrant peoples.

Second, we will make a preliminary examination of the relation of the exiled with, on the one hand, the state of refuge, and on the other, the state of origin through the gendered practices of the state institutions. In this case, the states are Burma and Thailand.

The women we interviewed were involved in work towards democracy in Burma and/or women's empowerment.<sup>4</sup> The kinds of policing we talked to the women about included policing carried out by Thai intelligence, Thai police, Thai immigration authorities, the Burmese military regime's army, police and military intelligence. This paper touches on some of the larger issues encountered in our research with politically active women living and working along the Thai Burma border and will primarily focus on their experiences of policing by various agencies of the Thai state with particular reference to policing of women's mobility.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Politically active women on the Burma-Thailand border are exiled from Burma. They identify with many ethnic nationalities including Karen, Karenni, Shan, Tavoy, Mon, Pao-O, Lishan, Lahu, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Burman, and women with mixed ethnic heritages.
  - 2 Myanmar.
  - 3 Richard Devetak (2001) writes, 'The opposition between sovereignty and anarchy rests on the possibility of clearly dividing a domesticated political space from an undomesticated outside. It is in this sense that boundary inscription is a defining moment of the sovereign state.' Taking this argument, and starting from a postmodern position that treats the production of knowledge as normative and historically conditioned, statecraft is referred to here as the operation of power by state institutions, enacted by state representatives to enforce, in this case, territorial state boundaries through various technologies including border checkpoints, immigration procedures, army border patrols, establishment of refugee camps, and so on. Also see Weber 1995.
  - 4 Burma's modern history is constituted by violent processes of political oppression such as colonisation by the British, inter-ethnic armed conflict and military dictatorship. Continued civil war (in its 6th decade) and military dictatorship (in its 5th decade) has resulted in the displacement (both internal and international) of millions of people from Burma. Persecution of political opposition has forced opposition groups to organise in Burma's borderlands with India, Bangladesh, China and Thailand.
  - 5 This study is drawn from a series of six interviews with women political activists living and working along the Thai-Burma border. Women identified as being from Tavoy, Burmese, Kachin, Karenni, Shan and Muslim ethnicities and were aged between 20 and 35 years. The interviews were carried out in early November 2000.

In the process of writing this paper, however, we as researchers came to appreciate the extent to which states' hold the capacity to enforce their hegemony of exclusion of not only bodies but also the de-territorialised voices including the academic voice. Given the contemporary phenomenon of increasing numbers of displaced peoples and communities globally, voices of displaced peoples need to be addressed through inclusion. However, we found that raising these issues can render individuals in a position of statelessness hostage to fear of retribution by various state actors, for just telling the truth about their daily lives as human beings excluded from state protection. We have, therefore, written and published this article after extensive consultation with those it may affect and have formulated our approach based on their considerations of safety and well being.

## **Policing Movement, Policing Activism, Policing Gender**

Women's experiences of activism on the border shows up the relationship between immigration, police and intelligence agencies who have different mandates and interests but all perform policing type functions in relation to people living along the Thai-Burma border. The presence, movement and meetings of politically active women are of concern to the Thai authorities in the context of the diverse, shifting and unpredictable social, military and political landscape of the borderlands.

Women negotiate different state institutions at the same time in paradoxically different ways to effectively balance the power of one agency against the mandate of another in their efforts to achieve their goals. In doing so, women move through various layers of complex relationships with the Thai authorities in the process of their work. While women's stories reveal multiple sites of attempted state control, the policing of women's activism is most pointed in relation to restrictions on travel. To know what to do when confronted by one of these policing agencies depends on constant negotiation, experience, and confidence building over time.

At the beginning we are always afraid of the Thai police and intelligence. Especially the police because we are illegal immigrants and they can check for our ID at any time. So if we want to go anywhere, we have to think a lot. At the beginning, everyday, we can hear everywhere — who is arrested and where. That was 1989-90-91. [Interview 6.5]

People are handled differently by the government authorities depending on: their documentation (legal status), gender, the circumstances in which they are confronted (for example the raid of a meeting or conference or being picked up en route to another destination), the culture of the location, where the women are (on the bus or in the street, in a high level meeting with other colleagues, in a prison cell), their attitude, confidence levels, and their ability to communicate (in Thai and/or English). Women need to be confident and fearless without provoking challenge to the state representative.

Confidence is very important for us as a defence mechanism. It helps protect us at many levels. First, if we are confident, then we don't attract the attention of the authorities, they always look for who is not confident, who is not sure of what to do. Second, if we are arrested, and we are confident, we can negotiate better. Third, confidence is some — but not full — protection to stop officials approaching in a violent or sexually abusive manner. Confidence is one of the really important things ... how to travel confidently. [Interview 6.6]

Women activists know the Thai authorities can assault and rape with virtual impunity and that contact with the Thai authorities is not always directly in relation to their political conviction and therefore is not always politically negotiable. While women have developed a variety of strategies and networks to help avoid arrest, no measure is guaranteed and there

are gaps of acute vulnerability between being pulled up by Thai authorities and making contact with their people who can help. At these moments, women's confidence is crucial for their personal safety. One activist described the following experience:

Once when I was on the way back to \_\_\_\_ I had an immigration pass — but the police pulled me off the bus — me and my daughter ... At that time, I was really scared ... they took my wallet, and asked me questions. I snapped, "why did you take that?" ... even though I was scared, I answered them back. There were three police. I was scared because I had heard often that Burmese women in prisons were abused. I thought that when they pulled me off the bus, they would take me to the police station ... But they took us by car into a jungle place ... my daughter looked at me and I looked at her, she was afraid and that made me more afraid. One police guy touched me, like that (gestures to the side of her torso) but I was angry and pushed him away. He made like he was searching but actually he was not searching. So I got angry. But one police seemed to be an honest man ... he made the other police man give back the wallet ... After a while, they sent me back to the bus station ... The woman at the shop was very surprised — she said that I was the only one she had ever seen come back ... Actually I did not negotiate to make the phone call. When they were calling the police station on the walkie talkie, I did not ask — I just went over and used the phone and called myself. [Interview 5.4]

Politically active women often negotiate directly with the Thai authorities which has required the transformation of the women in relation to some cultural norms of public behaviour concerning gender. They have to negotiate (gendered) power relationships with the authorities.

Women have a little more difficulty to form a relationship with the intelligence because most of the intelligence, they like to drink whiskey together like that ...but our women — in our culture — we should not drink ... So most of the women don't want to do that. So the women have a little difficulty to build the relationship. But the men can do more easily, they are very happy to take this opportunity or responsibility (laughs) ... But I believe that all of the men are happy to do that ... And also, for example, (friend's name) — Even though she has a husband and children, they don't care about that. She doesn't want to sit with the drinking group — especially some intelligence or stranger. [Interview 6.5]

At the same time, the gendered way that intelligence officers respond to politically active women promotes gendered strategies from the women to maintain their work regardless of the lack of support. Women sometimes rely on existing and established networks of relations between male colleagues. Women often do not have this option, however, and resort to their own creative initiatives and take advantage of their local environment using gendered disguises. They also refuse to negotiate with the state by often travelling without permission, thus risking harassment, arrest and deportation.

It is important for our movement and our working ... So the intelligence does not guarantee that we will get to our destination, but it protects us from arrest ... The role of intelligence in travelling, mostly they help a lot. [Interview 5.4]

Thai intelligence is interested in information exchange: they want reports of activities in return for permission to travel. This is not to suggest any clear cut or hard and fast method of operational practice exists, but rather the extent to which the authorities are able to monitor and shape women's activism. When considering strategies for travel, women must remain cognisant of the broad patterns of state policing practices. Their awareness highlights the different contingencies of policing in borderland areas compared, for example, to Bangkok. Being so large and diverse, the factor that allows space to manoeuvre in Bangkok is anonymity.

I don't know about the situation in Bangkok, mostly people have passports, or they stay without papers. [Interview 5]

Policing practices differ across locations, and the continual shifts and changes in personnel, in each location requires vigilant monitoring by women. Fluctuations in government policy and its impacts on the local political environment seriously affects women's capacity to operate. Due to locational differences, however, one border area may be strongly and violently affected by these policies, while in other areas the same policy is implemented very differently:

But now in \_\_\_\_\_, the police arrest even the people from the opposition side. They arrest a lot. But what I heard from (colleague), in the past we could negotiate. But now, no negotiation. Also, 2-3 months ago — two guys — they were deported back to Burma, Myawaddy, I heard. So now the situation there is very risky. I don't know what happened to them. Yeah ... So now in Mae Sot is very risky. Our colleagues are afraid to go out. Also, many [SPDC] spies there. [Interview 5.10]

From women's stories it became clear that the various branches of police and intelligence are often unaware of what the other is operationally doing. Intelligence agencies often circumnavigate police and immigration powers highlighting the competition between different intelligence agencies from police, the Prime Minister's office, army etc. Women's stories also noted the difference in institutional culture between the bureaucratic centre and periphery. For example, when Bangkok units come to the border towns local security arrangements become ineffective.

The policing politically active women have experienced highlights the plurality and disharmony between the different branches of the security forces: police, intelligence, army and immigration. It is in this tension that women find space to move. Sometimes politically active women are differentiated by various types of Thai authorities from refugees and migrants and sometimes not. The ambiguity arising here also provides women with opportunity to move and danger.

Women's relations with the police and government authorities is primarily spoken of in terms of fear — women being scared or not scared in moments of confrontation. In Thailand, women feel scared for their personal safety from sexual assault. In Burma women's primary identity was as a political dissident, an enemy of the state. Consequently to attack their gender (their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and their vulnerability to sexual attack and shame) was used to politically break women down. Contact with policing type agencies was directly in relation to their political convictions. In Thailand, the powerful authority for the activist is the police and intelligence (the army focuses largely on national security/border defence) while in Burma, the police are insignificant and the army and army intelligence are all powerful.

When women are arrested or detained for having illegal status they are forced to negotiate their very presence in the shadow of actual or threatened sexual violence and shame. In short, the fear of sexual violence constantly intersects with (at best) a clouded and precarious relationship with the Thai state.

## **Policing Exile, Securing Sovereignty**

Women's stories of policing the border demonstrate the gendered ways in which border points are enforced by state authorities (as borders), and the gendered ways they negotiate border points. They also demonstrate the fiction of the 'border' by the way women negotiate them, for example by walking around border points and avoiding authorities. In women's minds are destinations — not borders and nation-states — although this frames women's activism at more abstract levels.

State practices of enforcing territorial state boundaries can be shown up through focusing on women's experiences of policing to contradict states' meta-narratives of discrete, (assumedly) demarcated, fixed boundaries between two countries. Instead, they illustrate how states may intentionally rely on practising the maintenance of 'flexible' boundaries as a way to pursue various other perceived state interests.

Women constantly negotiate, accommodate and subvert systems of policing as they undertake their work along the Thai-Burma border. In attempting to bring change to awareness of human rights and education to women's lives, women's activism is policed in gendered ways. Politically active women's experiences of policing have served to circumscribe and monitor their activities to the borderlands. Regardless of the many or varied kinds of 'status' they may have in Thailand, it is always a precarious status when the protection of the nation state remains distanced. On the work and bodies of politically active women the Thai authorities police the fringes of the nation state. Such policing depends on the vulnerability that statelessness brings to those who bear that policing.

Finally, we raise the issue of how in the context of the rising phenomenon of global displacement, states actively work to silence agency of politically active displaced people and the role publishing, including academic information, works to rupture public narratives of international relations and jeopardise the political space people are trying to make. This is the tightrope walk of crossing borders.

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