

6. Summary and Conclusion

The world continues to witness the increase in the number of people being displaced, year after year. Most of the displacements happen due to political, social, economic, religious and ethnic unrest in the country. As discussed above, the most vulnerable group of the population are women and children. Very often women seem to be victims however, time and again women have proved to be an epitome of empowerment even in their most vulnerable and pitiful condition. Studies have shown that, women in their state of displacement in a foreign land have their responsibilities of not only looking after the domestic affairs but, extend their responsibilities beyond that. They get empowered politically, socially and economically and empower the other women who are in the same state like that of them. Many of these women or the organization they involve do not get due recognition for their contribution to the society especially, those displaced by war, persecution, genocide and many other reasons.

Therefore, the study entitled “Women in Exile and Empowerment: A Case Study of the Women League of Burma in Thailand” is an attempt to study a Women’s group whose vision and mission are to empower and uplift women, through various activities. In many places across the world, millions of people are forced to flee from their place of birth, where women and children become the most vulnerable. The burden unfolds even more after they have fled to save their lives and taken refuge in a foreign land. This is also, however, a time when transformations take place. The tag of weaker section of the society i.e. women, reverses. Women often take up the job of a provider, defender and giver to the displaced population. Most of their empowerment activities start at their most vulnerable stage which also allow them to gain courage and strength to become active negotiators and advocates of justice and peace. Many organizations start with a good beginning but reduce to become individual organizations and those few which are unitedly working together do not get their required recognition. Though there have been studies done on exiles and refugees, women in exile and empowerment measures taken by them have been rarely studied. Studying and analyzing propaganda

materials also reveal the intentions of the publishers. Some people even view these women organizations as war mongers. Therefore, the present study is focused on two important things, analyzing their activities, contribution and ability to work for unity in diversity to bring about a more effective change to the displaced communities and also analyzing whether, WLB as an organization propagates more of positive or negative reports in the published materials disseminated in their website. Hence, studying the plight of the women in exile and their empowerment activities taking WLB as a case study is an essential piece of research.

Relevant literatures have been reviewed based on the important themes discussed. Displacement caused by various factors especially in Asia is discussed in the first part of the literature review and it deals with works on the forces of migration and forced displacement. The second section of the review is on the changing role of women in exile around the world. The literatures reviewed in this part of the section show about how gender roles change, once women are displaced because of different factors in their country of origin. The changing roles of women, their struggles, and their capability of becoming agents of change are discussed. Thirdly, works detailing particularly, the Women League of Burma at the Thai-Burma borders and the activities on empowerment are discussed. Though there are studies conducted on the women group from Burma at the Thai-Burma border, there is no work done exclusively on the activities of WLB and their propaganda materials. Therefore, the present study is intended to fill the gap in the existing literatures.

The present work which attempts to study the Women in exile and empowerment measures taken by the Women League of Burma, in Thailand as a case study has four key objectives: 1) To analyze the causes for displacement and the role of women exile group. 2) To critically explore the causes for the displacement in Burma and its impact over the period of history. 3) To qualitatively analyze the activities of Women Exile Group from Burma in general and WLB in particular. 4) To critically evaluate the propaganda materials of the WLB applying quantitative technique. The study is based on

both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method uses descriptive, analytical and case study technique, whereas, for the quantitative method, Content Analysis Technique is adopted to analyze the quantitative data of propaganda materials published by WLB. The entire study on “Women in Exile and Empowerment: a case Study of Women League of Burma in Thailand” is broadly divided into six different chapters.

The first being an introductory chapter, gives a brief introduction of the present work and discusses the organization of the study. It also attempts to explain the research problems, the significance and the objectives of the study. The chapter also includes the review of existing literatures. The research methodology to apply, sources of the data collection, the limitation and the delimitations of the study have also been broadly discussed. The chapter also explains in brief the contents of the different chapters for the present research.

The second chapter entitled “Brief History of Exile and the Role of Gender Power in Exile” narrates the theoretical background of the present work to understand the causes of conflict which lead people in different parts of the world towards displacement. The chapter starts with an introduction followed by a broad explanation of the history of exiles/ refugees. History being an important ingredient of any study, the first part of the chapter narrates the historical background, how exiles and refugees came into being in the world since time immemorial to the present day. The definition of exiles and refugees sheds light to the understanding of the well founded meaning and usage of the words exiles and refugees. Displacement around the world is caused by various factors such as religion, ethnic, political, economic, and social conflicts. Each of the cause of the displacement has been broadly and significantly discussed citing examples from different parts of the world. Historical causes of displacement across the continents around the world have been explained in this chapter. The consequences of displacement are never pleasant that, the displaced person or population undergoes countless miseries, such as poverty, homelessness, powerlessness, exposure to severe human rights and many more.

The effect of displacement has been explained in this chapter. Women and children are the most affected in the after effects of these troubles. However, there are instances where there is a shift that these women become powerful agents of change in their state of being displaced.

Many scholars also view that there is a rise of gender consciousness in matters of political, social and economical. Women who are displaced go through a lot of hardships and uncertainties, but these difficulties motivate them to join and be a part of a community that involves in empowering such women politically, socially and economically.

The third chapter entitled “Critical Analysis of Burma Exile Group: a Brief Historical Background” explains the history of Burma. As the present study is concentrated on the displaced women from Burma, this chapter explains the history of Burma. There were several causes of displacement in Burma, such as the failure of the successive Governments, failure of Nation Building, suppression of pro-democracy activists, ethnic conflicts and religious conflicts. The failure of the Government to take up these challenges effectively led the country, which was supposedly viewed by many to become one of the richest nations in Asia after it got its independence from the British, to become one of the poorest countries in the world. The Political situation in the country was going haywire, while the economic situation went to its lowest pit, socially too, Burma was in a chaos and persecutions of the ethnic and religious minorities were becoming more intense. In the urban parts of the country, there were pro-democratic uprisings and towards the rural and interior parts of the country the battle between the ethnic minority groups and the military junta were getting even more severe. The ethnic conflict in Burma is often taken back to the Panglong Agreement that was signed in 1947, where ethnic minority leaders and General Aung San, also known as the father of modern Burma and the father of the present democracy icon Aung San SuuKyi, and his party promised to give autonomy to the ethnic minorities in their territories. However, as fate would have, General Aung San and some key members of his associates were

assassinated few months after the Panglong agreement and a few months before independence. The successive Government of Burma never took this agreement seriously which led the Ethnic minorities retaliate by means of arms, with the Karen National Army as the first group to take up arms to fight against the Government. In the following years, many other ethnic groups followed. The situation between the Government and the armed rebel groups deteriorated when the military took over power to rule the country in 1962. The military Government instead of having peaceful dialogues with the groups, resorted to aggressive arms fighting thus, leading the country into one of the longest civil war of more than five decades in a row. The effects of the pro-democracy movement and the civil war are the two major causes of the country's displacement problem in its neighboring countries. These innocent civilians became the victims of the civil war which led them to seek for a secure and safe refuge. Burmese refugees account for about 458,381 out of which 110,000 are in Thailand alone and about 368,500 of IDPs within Burma.³⁹⁴

Another important theme discussed in this chapter is the consequences brought out by the causes of displacement. Once displaced, they do not find refuge in their host countries. Their life is loomed over with uncertainties and dangers. People flee from their places of origin to escape torture and persecution but on arrival in a new place, they are again caught in the same fear in a different form. According to a report by the US Commission for refugees and Immigrants released in 2008, many of the host countries for refugees function in poor protection list.³⁹⁵ There are many countries that resort to returning of refugees back to their countries. Thailand is one such country apart from many other countries practicing refoulement of refugees.³⁹⁶ Apart from this plight, these

³⁹⁴Tan Vivian, "UNHCR's new biometrics system helps verify 110,000 Myanmar refugees in Thailand," UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, News Stories, <http://www.unhcr.org/55926d646.html> (accessed on Jan. 20, 2015) and "2015 UNHCR Country Operations profile- Myanmar, Statistical Snapshot, as of June 2015," UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4877d6.html> (accessed on Jan. 20, 2015).

³⁹⁵Jacob AshikBonofer, eds., *Refugee Situation in India today* (Chennai: Centre for Asia Studies, 2011), 4.

³⁹⁶ Ibid

displaced populations from Burma in Thailand also are victims of many kinds of evils both within and outside the country. The displaced people within the country, are used as forced laborers, raped, lack education, lack health care, their land confiscated, persecuted for their religious beliefs, imprisoned, lack freedom of speech and practice of religion and culture and many others. Those taking refuge at the borders, are vulnerable to trafficking for slavery in Thai factories, sexual slavery for women and children, irregular wages, and exposed to doing the most dangerous and dirty jobs for survival.

This chapter gives a very broad picture of Burma, taking into account the historical perspectives and the root causes of displacement and the consequences it has brought about for the people of Burma. The causes of displacement for the people of Burma, therefore can chiefly be because of the Government's failure to build a strong nation, not allowing democracy to flourish and its inability to solve an issue with the minorities. The Government's selfishness to rule the country with military authority, its disdain attitude for democracy, disregard for the needs of the ethnic minorities and retaliation through arms means and not through a mutual and respectful manner of peaceful negotiations have allowed their own fall leading to unnecessary miseries for its population. It also explains the various efforts from both national and international actors in looking into the matters of human rights and democracy issues in the country and the measures and steps taken by responsible governments and organizations from across the world on the military government. The emergence of organizations formed by exiled individuals to condemn and stop the acts of the suppressive rule of the military government which gained massive international support had also been discussed in detail.

The fourth chapter entitled, "Activities of the Women's Group from Burma in Thailand and the Women League of Burma (WLB) in particular," gives an overview of the different groups based in exile, giving an important emphasis to the Women League of Burma, the organization that this present work focuses on. The work specifically concentrates on the women's organization based in and around Thailand. The difficulties of becoming exiles and refugees in a new place have been discussed. Women and

Children are two of the most affected groups due to displacement. In many cases, where displacement happens women have to often fend the families singlehandedly. As has been discussed earlier, women are often perceived to be powerless and helpless, but instances reveal how women who are displaced due to political, economic, religious, ethnic and social unrest in their country of origin are able to become powerful agents of change.³⁹⁷ There are many women organizations from Burma that mushroomed at the Thai- Burma border after being displaced by the pro-democracy and civil war in Burma. All organizations work for different causes, for example, WEAVE which was actually started as an organization to work for indigenous Thai women and children for their education, healthcare and economic self reliance program etc., extended its work for the displaced women from Burma (majority of whom are from ethnic communities) at the Thai- Burma Border where it continues to run its programs effectively.

Likewise, there are other organizations such as the Mae Tao Clinic which meets the healthcare needs of the poverty stricken displaced people from Burma. Today, it has become a well known health care clinic which also has a lot of international accolades to its credit for the dedicated service. There is another organization called Borderline that applies creativity to generate income to support the wellbeing of the refugees at the Thai- Burma border. It is an in-house café where organic essentials are sold, tea party and art exhibitions are hosted and the income generated from these activities enable them to reach out those who are in need. Most of the handicraft materials and art-crafts displayed and sold at their café are the handiwork of the different women's organization from Burma based at the Thai-Burma border. This way the organization helps both the women organizations and the refugees popularize their crafts as well as make them economically independent.

³⁹⁷Rita Manchanda, "Gender conflict and displacement: Contesting 'infantilisation' of forced migrant women." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2004): 4179-4186 and Anna Snyder, "Gender relations and conflict transformation among refugee women." *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (2008): 45.

Similarly, there are many more organizations that are catering to the needs of the displaced people from Burma at the Thai-Burma border. One such organization that cannot be missed is the Women League of Burma, which, the present study focuses on. The Women League of Burma, is an organization that contains 12 women organizations from Burma. This organization is unique because it functions with the twelve organizations' under one umbrella. It was not an easy task when it was first started in 1999. The hurdles faced by the founding members have been well explained in the chapter dedicated for WLB. Despite the difficulties faced in the initial days, the organization continues to remain under the same banner in the ensuing years till today. As explained in the chapter, the organization works mainly for advocacy of human rights, pro-democracy, peace and reconciliation and preventing violence against women. It has been observed from their interviews, activities and missions, that the organization leaders are clear of the principles they claim to fight for and they stand on head and tooth to fight for justice, promote democracy and involve in the negotiations of the peace-talks between the Government and the Ethnic Armed Rebels, as they believe that women's role can play a significant role in such negotiations. Apart from all these, they also advocate the plight of Burma people and emphasize the need to end all means of injustice committed by the military Government, at various international platforms. Political Empowerment of Women is another important activity of WLB. Political Empowerment trainings have been extended to many people in the refugee camps and also to those who are internally displaced. The organization also campaigns about violence against women and fights for it and thus has made a mark by attaining recognition and winning many accolades to its credit. Having set aside their diverse backgrounds they work for bringing about effective changes in the lives of women as well as men at the Thai-Burma border refugee camps.

Chapter five entitled "A Quantitative Analysis of Propaganda Materials of Women League of Burma" analyzes the propaganda materials published by WLB through a quantitative technique. It analyses whether WLB publishes more positive or negative reports, and whether, materials they publish adheres to what they actually say they do. It has been observed that about 101 articles had been published during the

period 2001-2014 and the researcher has identified, ten themes based on the relevance of the study on WLB. The themes have been divided into two categories as positive and negative and the period of study has been divided into two i.e. 2001-2010 and 2011-2014. The analysis reveals that during the period 2001-2010, positive themes had been mentioned 99 (275%) times, whereas negative themes had been mentioned 95 times (263%). As for the period 2011-2014, positive themes had been found 205 (315%) times whereas 151 (232%) times. The results show that WLB emphasized and propagated more positive than the negative themes.

Chapter six, entitled “Summary and Conclusion” is the last chapter of the thesis. As the concluding chapter, it summarizes all the chapters included in the present work. It also compares the hypothesis tested with the findings and brings out the results of the hypotheses. The chapter ends with recommendations to carry forward a more effective study.

Testing the Hypotheses

The researcher collected the necessary materials to study about the displaced women from Burma and the activities carried out by them to empower themselves and sustain in their state of difficulties. The main study has been carried out in the fourth and fifth chapters, where qualitative and quantitative analysis have been done. For the qualitative part, as explained in the fourth chapter, the study has analyzed the different activities of the organization, its contributions for the population displaced due to the ethnic war, the persecution they faced due to involvement in the pro-democratic activities, their ability to bring out their cause on the international platform and their efforts to empower themselves by working in unity despite the diversity. The quantitative analysis has been done mainly to view the contents of the propaganda materials published by the organization and to know whether, WLB actually works for what they are voicing for, based on their missions and objectives. For this, two broad categories have been

divided, i.e. positive and negative reports which have been categorized into two periods i.e 2001-2010 and 2011-2014. The details of the results have been discussed thoroughly.

The researcher has chronologically analyzed all the major points and issues on the causes of displacement in history, causes of displacement in Burma, the role of the women groups based in exile/as refugees and the propaganda materials published by them. Based on the analysis, the first hypotheses, “failure of managing diversity and implementing inclusive policies by the majority communities, and lack of poor governance cause sectarian violence and displacement in history’ is strongly accepted given the fact that, in mankind’s history, the cause of displacement was all due to the reasons of intolerance, lack of respect for culture, religion and language and the failure to accept diversity.

Burma rulers have been autocratic and ruthless. In any society, there is always a dominant group of people, who often tries to overpower the smaller groups. Burma is a country of Bamar majoritarians who are mostly Buddhists. The rulers of the country are the Barmars. The rulers’ lack of respect towards the ethnic minorities has converted Burma into a hub where mistrust towards the majority population has arisen and led to undergo one of the lengthiest civil wars in the world which has led to the displacement of its population. Hence the second hypothesis, ‘continuous military rule of the majoritarian Buddhist Burmese, democratic deficiency, violation of human rights against the ethnic minorities have converted Burma into one of the lengthiest ethnic conflict states with more and more displacement’ is strongly accepted.

Because of the unrest happening in Burma, millions of its citizens flee to the neighboring countries wherein, Thailand-Burma has the highest population of displaced people from Burma, and women and children are the most affected. Despite the hardships, some women have taken up the leadership and have been working for the men and women displaced by war and the suppression of political leaders. The displaced population consists of different ethnic groups from Burma. Bringing together the entire community was not an easy task due to the mistrust created by the military Government

in the country especially between the majority Barmans and the other ethnic minorities. However, WLB was able to break this barrier which helped them to overcome many other hurdles. The ability to break the mistrust by its founders has led the organization to its many successful activities till the present day. They have been actively advocating the rights due for each and every individual and giving training for young women by conducting various empowerment programs. Further, they create awareness about violence against women committed domestically or by the State's officials. This leads to accepting the third and fourth hypotheses i.e, 'WLB has been working positively for women empowerment, reconciliation, peace, democracy and human rights and building a pluralistic democratic Burma. WLB's leadership camp is creating more positive impacts among the alienated Burmese women and men belonging to different ethnic community.'

WLB has been publishing articles since 2001 and these materials have been analyzed based on relevant themes. The analysis reveals that the WLB published materials contain more positive themes than negative. The results of the analysis shows that WLB is focusing more on confidence building, women empowerment, promoting democracy and pluralism and problem solving than instigating violence and sectarianism. Thus, the fifth hypotheses that WLB as a group focused more on confidence building, empowerment, promoting democracy and problem solving in their propaganda published materials stands accepted.

The present study reveals that, the absence of pluralism, intolerance of culture, religion, language etc. are the basic causes of conflicts in the world. Often selfish and ambitious individuals try to manipulate and take over power which often leads the community, society or nation towards untold miseries. Such is the case of Burma, which was under the autocratic rule of successive military rulers where basic rights and freedom attached to every human being was suppressed. Those found practicing and enjoying their freedom were thrown into prisons, tortured and killed. When groups of people rebelled against their ruthless rulers, for denying what was due to them, instead of a peaceful negotiation which is supposed to happen in a civilized society, they were

retaliated with disdain leading to a long bitter war. The casualties and the most affected in this line were the innocent civilians. Fearing for their safety and their families, these groups of people and the innocent civilians had to bear the burden of being between the state and the rebels and fled or in many cases are forced to seek and take refuge in a place far away from home, often in a foreign land. With the little they had, they tried to start a new life forging ahead in spite of the many hardships they had underwent. It is these groups of brave hearts who waded through adversaries, empowered themselves and in turn empowered others. These are women, who have their own families to raise, deal with their domestic problems but have the attitude to reach out to the weak and empower them even in their state of difficulties. They are just ordinary women who have taken extraordinary steps to fight against the oppressors in different ways, one that is peaceful but aggressive. This study shows how women who are often labeled as weak especially in times when they are displaced by the unrest in their countries of origin become the agents of change. Such is the case of WLB, the 12 women organizations who stand and work hand in hand despite all the differences they have in their social, political, economic, cultural, linguistic and religious beliefs which have been the dividing forces in their country. They are an epitome of a real civilized group, who fight the oppressors aggressively, through peaceful means. They not only fight their oppressors but, bring about changes in their lives, and in turn, share it with their fellow citizens. They educate, empower and train their young women to carry on the activities. They wade through the rough waves and bring out their causes on an international platform, bringing the world's attention to the sufferings of their people caused by the atrocities of the military junta, to raise international support to end the Government's atrocities.

Suggestions and Recommendations for Further Research

Women League of Burma and their activities based in exile have been uplifting the suppressed communities in Burma that are displaced by the civil war and political upheavals. The organization has been doing tremendous work in areas of political empowerment, advocacy for human rights, promoting democracy, urging leaders of both

the Government and Ethnic Armed groups to go for peace and reconciliation negotiations, and promoting the importance of working together in unity in the midst of diversity. In its advocacy programs, the organization is immensely exposing the atrocities of the Burmese military Government towards its citizens especially the ethnic minorities, which otherwise are little known to the rest of the world. Apart from this, the organization has been able to mobilize and train young men and women by conducting programs on democracy, pluralism, critical thinking, women's rights and responsibilities, peace building, self-reliance, developing inner strength, capacity building and counseling. Nevertheless, though WLB as an organization has been contributing much, there are several suggestions that can improve its activities in a more effective way:

1. The organization can expand its presence to other parts of the world where there are refugees from Burma.
2. The organization can also add with their existing programs, economically sustainable activities and training which can help women folk to be economically independent.
3. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of the study reveals that WLB works for Unity in Diversity and the researcher suggests that they can also include and reach out to persecuted minorities such as the Rohingyas, who are considered as stateless and are known to be one of the most persecuted groups in the world today.
4. The inclusion of smaller minority groups can strengthen the work and mission of WLB.
5. It is viewed that WLB has been actively trying to get involved in the peace talk agreement between the Government and the Ethnic Minority Armies. However, due recognition has not yet been given to them despite their active advocacy and lobbying activities representing women. If given appropriate role, WLB as an organization can play a very important role in the peace making decision in the country's long lost peace.

This study on 'Women in Exile and Empowerment: a Case Study on the Women League of Burma, Thailand' is basically a study to analyze how women once displaced change or shift from being victims to becoming agents of empowerment. The study has taken the example of an organization from Burma, The Women League of Burma, based in Thailand, and has analysed its activities and propaganda materials. The most important part of the work is that, it attempts to evaluate the activities of the organization including its empowerment activities by analyzing the reports published by them and also by having interviews with some of the WLB's leaders in Thailand. Another important aspect of the research is the quantitative analysis which has been essentially done to identify and find out whether or not the organization adheres to what it says it is doing and what it actually does through its propaganda materials available in their website. A few researches have been done on WLB and its member organizations however, this research provides a new dimension taking into account all its activities and analyzing it qualitatively and quantitatively. Further, this research can be improved if more personal interviews are conducted with more member groups of the organization and women refugees who have benefitted by the activities of WLB.

This study has dived deep into the major facade of the role of the WLB and its activities. It has been proved that, women despite the often label of weaker section and victims, can actually become powerful agents of peaceful aggressive changes even at times when they are forcefully displaced and in a state of exile.