

PANEL

The Confined Lives of Displacement: Agency and Displacement Across the Myanmar–thailand Border

Convener

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Panel Description

Drawing on ongoing research on displaced people from Myanmar in Thailand, this panel explores the confined lives of displacement and seeks to understand the agency of the displaced in coping and thriving within the limited conditions. It reconceptualizes confinement as a relational condition that extends beyond physical sites of confinement like prisons, detention centers, or refugee camps. We understand confinement as encompassing legal precarity, security regimes, gendered control, discursive marginalization, and the affective pull of homeland aspirations. The panel examines how undocumented migrants, refugees, and political exiles navigate constrained social, legal, and political environments. We argue that confinement is not merely restrictive but also reshapes social relations, opening spaces for negotiation, solidarity, and political engagement.

The three papers trace interconnected trajectories of migration and displacement across borderlands, camps, and urban settings. The first paper examines patriarchal confinement through a study of gender-based violence among Myanmar women in Thailand. It analyzes how gendered norms and gender-based violence restrict women's mobility and their lives, while also highlighting the critical role of grassroots organizations and community-based networks along the border in creating spaces care, protection, and relative safety. The second paper focuses on undocumented migrants and refugees from Shan communities. Although cultural and linguistic proximity may facilitate everyday interactions with Thai society, protracted armed conflict in Myanmar and the absence of formal legal recognition leave many in prolonged uncertainty. Their condition illustrates how legal status operates as a powerful mechanism of confinement, and how the Shan navigate confined lives and become vital in the local economy. The third paper explores the lived experiences of young political activists in exile. Despite limited resources and precarious status, these activists mobilize translocal networks to sustain homeland-oriented political engagement, transforming spaces of displacement into platforms for continued resistance.

Taken together, the papers demonstrate that confinement operates across domestic, communal, legal, cultural and political domains. Yet displaced people are not passive subjects of restriction. Through everyday negotiations, collective organizing, and translocal network, they actively rework the conditions of constraint that shape their lives.