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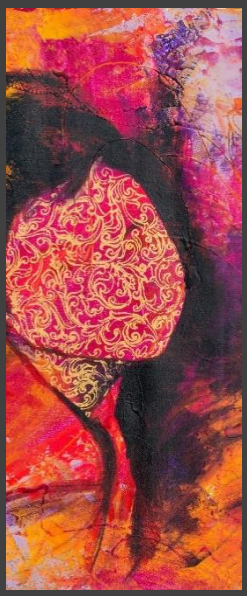

CONSTRUCTING FEMALE CITIZENSHIP IN TRANSITION

Women's activism and education in Myanmar

Elizabeth J. Tregoning Maber

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University of Amsterdam

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CONSTRUCTING FEMALE CITIZENSHIP IN TRANSITION

Women's activism and education in Myanmar

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To Angela,
in appreciation of your support
and your dedication to the practice of
socially just education.

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Abbreviations

ADB – Asian Development Bank
CBO – Community-based organisation
CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis
CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CESR – Comprehensive Education Sector Review
CSO – Civil society organisation
EfA – Education for All
GBV – Gender-based violence
GEN – Gender Equality Network
GPI – Gender Parity Index
INGO – International non-governmental organisation
KCSN – Karenni Civil Society Network
KED – Karen Education Department
KWO – Karen Women's Organisation
MDG – Millennium Development Goal
NGO – Non-governmental organisation
NLD – National League for Democracy
NNER – National Network for Education Reform
PoVAW – Prevention of Violence Against Women
SDG – Sustainable Development Goal
SWAN – Shan Women's Action Network
TBC – Thai Border Consortium
TNI – Transnational Institute
TRP – Technical resource person
UIL – UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
UN – United Nations
UNHCR – The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
UN Women - United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USDP – Union Solidarity and Development Party
VAW – Violence against women
WCDI – Women Can Do It
WLB – Women's League of Burma
WON – Women's Organisation Network

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Thesis Summary

CONSTRUCTING FEMALE CITIZENSHIP IN TRANSITION

Women's activism and education in Myanmar

I. Introduction

Education practices, as part of socially constructed institutions, can be highly gendered and as such present models of expected behaviour from young men and young women (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006; Dunne 2009). However, such practices also vary significantly across and within contexts and in varied forms of educational space, both formal and non-formal. This research explores the multiple ways in which education practices may construct notions and expectations of female citizenship within the transitioning context of Myanmar, including counter responses from within civil society movements.

There is a growing attention in international development and comparative education towards the role of education in transitional and conflict-affected contexts as potentially creating opportunities to promote greater social inclusion and address inequalities that can fuel grievances (Davies 2010; Leach & Dunne 2007; Novelli & Lopes Cardozo 2008; Lopes Cardozo & Shah 2016). Likewise, development priorities over the last two decades, as reflected in the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals as well as initiatives such as Education for All, have highlighted commitments both to expanding inclusive education and to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, reinforcing the associations between these spheres (Salvi 2017; Unterhalter 2015; UN 2016). However, there has been a tendency to oversimplify this relationship, and the historical lack of meaningful attention to the interconnections between such global goals, moving beyond limited notions of access to education, has been heavily critiqued (Kabeer 2005; 2015; Unterhalter 2012; Cornwall & Rivas 2015; Esquivel & Sweetman 2016). While the Sustainable Development Goals seek to promote improved linkages across these spheres (UN 2016), concerns continue to be expressed that the role of education in supporting *transformative* change may again be under-emphasised (Sterling 2014; 2016; Esquivel 2016).

Additionally, despite references to non-formal or 'life-long' learning included in international policy, the role of non-formal education and the contributions of non-state actors to education practices, particularly NGOs and civil society groups, has frequently been neglected in favour of a more narrow prioritisation of schooling (Casey & Asamoah 2016; Stromquist 2015a). Likewise, the role of women's organisations and activist movements in advancing equality objectives has similarly been highlighted as an area requiring greater consideration (Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Stromquist 2015a; 2015b) particularly by international institutions and actors seeking to promote gender equality.

This research therefore contributes to these debates through revealing specific social, cultural and political influences that operate within the context both of education practices and of gender equality/rights-oriented activism in Myanmar, drawing links between these two spheres in advancing notions of gender equality and empowerment. In so doing I also propose a conceptualisation of *activist-educators* as key mediators between international, national and community agendas, suggesting that greater consideration of the complexities of influences that these civil society activists and educators navigate can support more holistic approaches to development goals. A sustained case-study approach is therefore taken to highlight these evolving responses within Myanmar's activist women's movements, also drawing on my own experiences working with civil society and education practitioners within the context since early 2009.

As Myanmar is undergoing political transitions after half a century of authoritarian military rule, and tensions continue through armed conflicts and inter-communal violence (Lall 2016; Walton & Hayward 2014), the changing political dynamics of the last five years provide an opportunity to observe the emergent responses from varied education practitioners as well as civil society movements calling for increased social inclusion. These include demands for formal education reforms and an expansion of civil society capacity engaged in non-formal education, particularly led by women's activist organisations. The research therefore addresses the following two main research questions and their sub-questions:

1. *What roles do differing education practices play in constructing citizenship ideals in Myanmar, and in what ways are these gendered?*

   - *How have practices in education sustained and legitimised women's social subordination?*

- *In what ways are alternative sites of learning presenting alternative models?*

2. *How is women's activism in Myanmar and the Thai border creating alternative spaces for transformative learning during Myanmar's period of political transition?*

- *How are women's organisations responding to shifting constraints and opportunities within the period of transition and what are the consequences of these responses?*
- *What alternative presentations of female citizenship emerge from these learning sites?*

The research adopts a critical feminist approach building on post-structural conceptualisations of space and the possibilities of transformation (Braidotti 2011a; Butler 2004), with the aim of highlighting opportunities to learn from Myanmar women activists' experiences in constructing alternative sites of gendered learning. Specifically, the research draws on Deleuzian notions of space and nomadism (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988; Braidotti 2011a) to advance a conceptualisation of learning environments and the position of activist-educators which reveals the plurality of influences which may find their way into sites of learning. Research was conducted during multiple fieldwork visits between 2014 and 2016 following an ethnographic approach which combined semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, site visits and observations with ethnographic discourse analysis (Manor-Binyamini 2011). This took a case-study approach, engaging ten women's organisations leading community education courses that sought to address women's social inequality, and allowed not only for a study of their education practices, content and training texts, but also the perspectives of educators and participants in constructing and experiencing these learning environments. The thesis is subsequently structured into two main sections, Part II (Chapters 4-6) and Part III (Chapters 7-9) that address the dual priorities of the research as reflected in the research questions.

II. Education and Gendered Citizenship

The chapters in Part II explore the varying sites of learning and the gendered presentations that emerge from them, responding to the first research question centring on the role of differing education practices in constructing citizenship ideals.

Theorising Education Spaces: conceptualising spaces for learning and (gendered) citizenship constructions in Myanmar's transition

Chapter 4 develops the conceptualisation of educational spaces that underpins the subsequent chapters of the thesis. Varied education sites, particularly in situations of conflict and transition, can play multiple and changing roles, including validating reproductions of state-sanctioned citizenship along exclusive strata, or conversely adopting a more oppositional stance. This chapter explores the dynamics and contributions of differing education practices within the context of Myanmar, with a focus on the ways such practices and the emerging presentations are gendered. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notions of *striated* and *smooth* spaces (2013/1988), I highlight the differing dimensions of Myanmar's education environments which reveal alternate practices of learning and avenues for expanding inclusion. Myanmar state education practices have largely been found to restrict opportunities for inclusive learning through replicating entrenched social hierarchies characteristic of *striated* space. By initially highlighting the contrasting and seemingly oppositional ways in which varying educational sites have approached learning, moments then emerge in which overlaps become apparent, revealing opportunities for alternative and more inclusive learning practices to find entry points to erode hierarchical social structures which are replicated in institutional schooling. Drawing on examples of practices both in community education and by individual teachers already within formal education, *smooth* learning dynamics may therefore provide opportunities to undo the fixity of hierarchies.

Learning violence and shame: gendering violence and the body in Myanmar's formal education spaces

Chapter 5 explores gendered practices in formal schooling, as experienced and voiced by young Myanmar women of varied religions and ethnicities reflecting back on their recent education experiences. I draw a link between the subordination of female students which is inscribed in formal education practices and the legitimisation of violence against women within Myanmar society more broadly. In particular, three dimensions of gendered practices are revealed which contribute to the promotion of reticence and shame: the physicality of positionings in educational spaces; the materiality associated with women's bodies; and the silencing of young women's voices. These learning practices, themselves examples of structural and symbolic violence, are found to enable and sustain patterns of direct violence against women as

embedded in social inequalities and gender hierarchies. The chapter ends with an additional focus study which presents the desires for alternative school environments expressed by young women in a focus group discussion, revealing teaching methodology, relevance of curriculum and practical activities including participation in sports as key priorities for the young women.

Cross-border transitions: navigating conflict and political change through community education practices in Myanmar and the Thai border

Political oscillations in Myanmar and Thailand, between militarisation and democratic reform, have prompted a rapid renegotiation of the alignments, goals and priorities of non-state education providers, both international and community-based, along the two countries' border. Chapter 6 explores the responses to shifts in political environment, including the reorientation of donor funding and an increasing emphasis on repatriation, which have affected community education practices within Myanmar and amongst the refugee and migrant communities along the Thai border. Extending the theorisation of smooth and striated space to place emphasis on the nomadic experiences within cross-border movements (Braidotti 2011a), community learning sites on the Thai border are found to draw from multiple points of contact to create distinct learning environments, often constructed in opposition to Myanmar schooling. However these sites are also subject to diverse influences and are shifting prioritisation with the current processes of political change, resulting in increased emphasis on preparation for return to Myanmar.

III. Feminist Learning and Activism in Transition

The implications of the gendered nature of learning practices in maintaining women's social subordination are met with counterpoints and contestations in the learning environments constructed by women's activist organisations. The chapters in Part III therefore extend the analysis of the gendered nature of learning spaces to explore how women's organisations have mobilised community learning as a means of challenging gender inequalities within Myanmar, responding to the second research question of how women's activism is creating alternative spaces for transformative learning.

Conceptualising spaces for women's activism in conflict and transition

Chapter 7 extends the theoretic conceptualisations of space and nomadic subjectivity to the position of women activists and the activist learning

environments they are (re)constructing. Women's civil society organisations occupy a distinctive position in mediating between varied community, state and international priorities, which are accentuated through the changing dynamics of situations of conflict and transition. The experiences of displacement and disruption that emerge from situations of turbulence can increase the points of contact that activists encounter adding opportunities for alternative learning that can support activist agendas. However such situations can also increase the hostility and risk that activists are confronted with. Through a conceptualisation of the nomadic subjectivity of feminist activists in navigating these varied influences, the strategies and learning practices that activists employ also reveal the often hidden affective consequences of their positions.

Finding feminism, finding voice? Mobilising community education to build women's participation in Myanmar's political transition

Chapter 8 explores changing positions within women's activist movements, in particular an emerging engagement with 'feminism' as a concept and term, as articulated by Myanmar women activist-educators. I suggest that this emerging identification as feminists amongst activists is illustrative of a dissatisfaction with the depoliticisation and decontextualisation of women's equality goals evidenced through interactions with some international organisations, and also reflects the nomadism of activist-educators in constructing alternative enactments of feminist education. The chapter concludes with a second additional focus study of feminist leadership training, highlighting the potential disjuncture between the content of leadership training programmes and the expressed needs of female current and aspiring leaders.

(Re)Constructing Empowerment: challenges and alternatives in transporting women's empowerment training

Women's empowerment training is a common feature of initiatives across development contexts, delivered by international and local organisations alike and often following a training of trainers (ToT) approach intending to amplify reach. While the scope of individual courses does vary, much of the material being used is found to present homogenised and linear representations of men and women that are infrequently contextualised to local contexts, raising concerns over the potential replication of shallow representations of gender identities, roles and relationships. However, such representations do not remain uncontested with local women's organisations challenging the

constructions of international training practices to create alternative avenues for empowerment through learning. Chapter 9 highlights the challenges activist-educators have faced in trying to replicate empowerment training and presents two case studies of alternative empowerment courses designed in response by two women's organisations which highlight emphasis on sexuality and women's bodies, experiences of violence and highly localised content such as the implications of federalism for ethnic states and the environmental impact of extractive industries.

IV. Conclusions & Implications

Understanding the enactments of community education highlighted above as a form of activism that explicitly aims to counter the models of learning presented in formal state education systems, indicates the persisting gendered challenges that exist within education systems even when enrolment figures may suggest equality. Alternative learning environments led by women activists and community educators from civil society organisations are seeking to construct a different presentation of female citizenship, particularly focusing on notions of empowerment, political and community participation, and leadership. As these learning environments are unbounded by the necessities of prescribed subject learning, curriculum texts and assessment they present significant variety in their priorities and approaches, indicating opportunities to contextualise notions such as empowerment, which remain problematic in development discourse (Cornwall & Rivas 2015). These creative, activist learning environments are found to reflect the varied experiences of women activists and educators who draw on multiple points of contact, including with international training material, to adapt, repurpose and reformulate notions such as empowerment. Such reorientations are found to include the prioritisation of sexuality and women's bodies, experiences of violence, more relational understandings of (in)equality, identity and religion, political engagement and relationships with the State.

Attention to these alternative priorities therefore indicates opportunities not only to advance and contextualise understandings of gender equality and empowerment within development agendas, but also priorities within education reforms to promote more inclusive and transformative learning environments. These findings reinforce calls for more inclusive approaches to development that place emphasis on social, relational and ecological inclusiveness in order to make progress in achieving sustainable development for all (Gupta & Vegelin 2016; Pouw & Gupta 2017). It is

suggested that recognising the roles and expertise of activist-educators in contextualising concepts as well as building closer alliances with women's activist organisations who are designing and delivering their own education and training practices provides a starting point to support more targeted, inclusive and participatory efforts to support gender justice.