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Chapter 2

Context: Myanmar in Transition

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2.1 Introduction

In the last six years Myanmar has experienced significant political upheaval after over half a century of authoritarian military rule. In this context of transition and reform, there are new opportunities emerging for previously excluded groups to participate in tentative democratic processes, however the legacy of subordination and disadvantage leaves many ill-positioned to influence the established hierarchies which remain dominant in social and political institutions alike. As the processes of reform are happening rapidly there is a risk that previously marginalised voices are again being overpowered. Similarly, despite increased international attention and a rhetoric of consolidation there has been a lack of substantial progress in reaching lasting peace agreements with the multiple ethnic regions still engaged in conflict with the ruling majority. Conversely, ethnic tensions and sectarian violence have broken out on new fronts over the last five years, leading to the question of how committed the nascent civilian government is to ensuring an inclusive and sustainable Union. This chapter introduces the context of this transition in Myanmar drawing on recent literature as well as my own experiences witnessing these processes from Yangon and the Thai border regions, particularly focusing attention on the dynamics of conflict, women's roles and position in society, and the education system.

2.2 Conflict dynamics & political transitions

2.2.1 Legacies of colonialism and conflict

Under British colonial rule from the mid-19th century to formal independence in 1948, the legacies of colonialism continue to be evident in Myanmar's

education system, language policies, and penal codes, as well as in attitudes both within and outside the country to gender relations (Aung 2015; Crouch 2015). After an uneasy passage to independence, which saw the assassination of independence hero and transitional leader General Aung San (father of current State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) in 1947 along with six of his cabinet colleagues, conflict continued to mar the nascent independent government (TNI 2013). Although the military claimed absolute power in a coup in 1962, they had already held significant political influence during the years of the caretaker governments since independence (Metro 2013).

Successive military juntas in Myanmar from 1962 to 2011 reinforced an environment of authoritarianism and oppression during which democratic opposition and social activism were highly constrained and fraught with risk. Political militarisation was interwoven with multiple civil wars fought with ethnic armed groups over demands for auto-determination which have persisted since independence in 1948 and which provided a pretext for military domination and control (Metro 2013; TNI 2013). Despite intermittent ceasefire agreements, these multiple conflicts with ethnic armed groups, in some cases enduring for upwards of sixty years, remain largely unresolved, with renewed active fighting ongoing in the northern states of Kachin and Shan, while ceasefires are tenuously holding in eastern regions of the country (Jolliffe 2015). Sexual violence, particularly directed against ethnic-minority women, has been a pervasive feature of these conflicts, and ethnic women's organisations have made use of transnational connections and cross-border movements with Thailand to campaign against military impunity (WLB 2014). As a result of the conflicts in ethnic territories and crackdowns on political opposition parties, tens of thousands were displaced across Myanmar's borders, with refugees and exiled activists particularly establishing themselves over the eastern border with Thailand.

2.2.2 Political transition and reforms[4]

The recent, successive changes in Myanmar's political leadership have reflected a significant, though not altogether complete, shift away from the authoritarian military rule that dominated the country since the military takeover of 1962. 2010 marked a shift in the ruling military's position, with landmark elections held in November of that year. The elections, leading to the

[4] Chapter 6 provides further details of the context of transition and reforms, particularly in relation to education dynamics.

formation of a nominally civilian government in 2011, were the first since the contested elections of 1990 which saw Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) denied power and which prompted a large number of arrests and even greater restrictions placed on civil freedoms. At the time international observers expressed concerns over the military junta's claims that the elections would be contested fairly, and indeed the process was widely derided as undemocratic, with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon summarising the elections as "insufficiently inclusive, participatory and transparent" (UN, 2010). A major objection was the refusal to allow democratic opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to stand in the elections, leading to their boycott by her party, the largest of the opposition, the NLD. Unsurprisingly, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) secured victory, with President Thein Sein (himself a former military general) taking office in 2011 (UN 2010; Hlaing 2012) and many of the same military political figures reappearing in the newly reformed parliamentary bodies.

However, despite the contentious transferal of power, President Thein Sein began a process of widespread reforms, particularly seeking to expand economic opportunities with international partners (Hlaing 2012). While this economic expansion served the agenda of political and military elites who benefitted substantially from the process (Turnell 2015), the political and social reforms also created opportunities for civil society movements to expand, particularly aided by the relaxing of censorship laws, and exiled activists began to re-engage with government authorities in the hope of influencing reforms (Bächtold 2015). Constraints have nonetheless remained and new challenges emerged. Despite obvious progress, power has still largely resided in the hands of a minority of elite who have an inconsistent record of accepting change. In addition to the continuation of the unresolved ethnic conflicts, there has been a rise in intercommunal violence (highlighted below) inflamed by a rhetoric of ultra-conservative Buddhist nationalism, primarily targeting Muslim minority communities in the western region of Rakhine (Walton & Hayward 2014).

Subsequent elections were held in late 2015, this time under greater scrutiny, resulting in an overwhelming victory for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD. With the NLD taking office in April 2016 there has as yet been little opportunity to gauge the full impact of this transition from military dictatorship to democratic transition. However, the ongoing climate of conflict and increasing religious violence suggests although transition is underway, radical transformation may remain elusive.

2.2.3 Religion and religious tensions

The influence of religion has been prominent throughout Myanmar's political and cultural history and continues to shape the landscape of transition, with religious affiliation infused with constructions of national and ethnic identity. 88% of the 56 million population are estimated to be Buddhist (Department of Population 2016), leading to a frequent association between national identity and Buddhism, reinforced through media and public discourse as well as education practices (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012; Walton 2013; see also *4.3.1*). Christian communities account for an estimated 6.2% of the population of Myanmar, while Muslim communities constitute a further 4.3% of the population, with the remaining 1.6% of the population identifying as Hindu (0.5%), Animist (0.8%), with another religion (0.2%) or with no religion (0.1%) (Department of Population 2016).

Recent years have seen a rise in religious conservatism allied with Burmese nationalism which has resulted in violent inter-communal conflicts between Buddhist majority and Muslim minority communities, particularly in the western state of Rakhine where nearly 140,000 people in the state alone have been displaced (UNHCR, 2013a). Outbursts of violence have also occurred at locations across the country such as in Meiktila in 2013 where Muslim schools were the target of attack (Walton & Hayward 2014; GCPEA 2014), and remain volatile despite changes in political leadership. While religious violence has historical precedence, tensions have been inflamed by the recent emergence of controversial ultra-nationalist movements, known as the 969 and the MaBaTha, led by a small number of extremist Buddhist monks who claim to seek to defend the Buddhist majority from perceived threat.

Originally a fringe movement, the alarming support that the MaBaTha and 969 have received in recent years has resulted in their amassing startling political influence. The gender implications of this increased religious conservatism are particularly evident in the rapid approval of a package of legislation, originally introduced by these conservative groups, that restricts interfaith marriage, women's religious conversion and child-birth rights, instrumentalising women as vehicles for nationalistic control (Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015). The four laws, together known as the 'Protection of Race and Religion' bills, illustrate the potential for global women's rights discourses to be manipulated to serve alternative agendas. In particular, the bill 'Health Care on Controlling the Population Growth Law' includes provisions to limit birth numbers and mandate birth spacing in communities that are (perceived to be) rapidly expanding. Using a guise of international reproductive health recommendations that women be encouraged to space the birth of their

children for the sake of their physical wellbeing, the law perpetuates an unfounded fear that Muslim communities in Myanmar have higher birth rates than Buddhist communities and provides dangerous provisions to restrict the rights of Muslim women to have children.

The influence of religion on gender norms and expectations of behaviour is recurrent throughout the research, and further explored below and in Chapters 5 and 8. Additionally, extending from decades of militarisation, the projection of a dominant Buddhist and Burman ideology has been heavy-handedly enforced, particularly through education practices, and has further exacerbated marginalisation for minority groups (further highlighted in Chapter 4).

2.2.4 Notions of citizenship

Citizenship is a highly contentious notion in Myanmar (as reflected in Chapter 9), often being understood as associated with legal notions of citizen identity cards. The transportation of the terminology of global citizenship education in international programming can therefore run into contrast with local associations of the term (Arnot 2009; Andreotti 2011). The depth of emotion surrounding attachments to citizenship identities has been brought to the fore in the violent anti-Rohingya sentiments which have grown in prominence in recent years (see for example OHCHR 2017). While detailed discussion of the Rakhine conflicts and legal constructions of citizenship are beyond the scope of this research, nonetheless a brief introduction to the issue here highlights the contentious notion of citizenship in the Myanmar context.

Changes to citizenship laws in 1982 resulted in citizenship being denied to many who had previously been recognised as citizens including ethnic groups which were no longer legitimised, to those whose parents did not both hold citizenship and to those not born within Myanmar. As part of the military junta's attempts to push a unifying rhetoric, the new citizenship laws reverted to pre-colonial, highly subjective definitions of ethnic groups which predated 1823, and offered full citizenship only to those who could prove ethnic and territorial connections to these groups, setting up arbitrary notions of the 'indigenous' and 'authentic' inhabitants of geographical territories (TNI 2014, 5). The Muslim communities in Rakhine known as *Rohingya* were reframed as "Bengali illegal immigrants" (Fortify Rights 2014, 11; TNI 2014, 11), setting up hostilities with ethnically recognised Rakhine Buddhist communities. Without full citizenship status, those whose citizens' rights were revoked by the 1982 act are denied access to university enrolment, land ownership and inheritance.

While it is sometimes perceived that the use of the term *Rohingya* as an ethnic identifier is a recent phenomenon, communities self-identifying as Rohingya predate the 1963 founding of the Rohingya Independence Front after they were barred from political engagement by the military junta (Metro, 2013: 87). The choice to include or exclude the term in the 2014 census proved highly contentious and contributed to violent riots. As has been highlighted:

> A battle of historical narratives thus continues by all sides in the Rakhine-Rohingya clash, all rooted in claims about ethnic origins, presence (or absence) in British-delineated Burma before 1823 and ancestral pedigree. Even in this debate, however, all views converge in their perception of "lu-myo[5]" or "kinds of persons" as a verifiable, fixed and blood-borne lineage tied to ancestral territory. (TNI 2014, 11)

In recent discussions community leaders have recommended disusing the term *Rohingya* as a "conflict control measure" (BNI 2014, 69), which adds to the undermining of legitimacy for those Rakhine Muslim communities self-identifying as Rohingya. The marginalisation of the communities, however, is not new: the military junta began placing restrictions on the communities in 1993, which have remained in place, requiring permission to be granted before Rohingya couples can marry, and in 2005 imposing a 2 child policy for Rohingya in Northern Rakhine and prohibiting childbirth out of wedlock (Fortify Rights 2014, 10).

2.2.5 Refugee & migrant communities on the Thai Border[6]

Further factors influence the complicated mixture of hierarchies, agendas and motives that are vying for position in the shifting social and political landscape. These include the migrant and refugee communities in the Thai border region, which number in the several hundred thousand (UNHCR, 2013b), having fled violence, economic and social restrictions, and who are increasingly being pressured to return, while many former political exiles are voluntarily re-

[5] *Lu-myo* is the Burmese notion of ethnic or racial identity and "is a concept of differentiation rooted in the belief of objective, verifiable, fixed, and blood-borne lineage" (TNI, 2014: 3). *Taingyinthar*, meaning "offspring of the geographical division" (TNI, 2014: 5) is the concept of indigenous, or native to a particular territory. Hence only *taingyinthar lu-myo* are eligible for full Myanmar citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Act.

[6] See also Maber (2016b).

engaging with the government with the aim of influencing the direction of development.

On the Thai side of the Eastern border those who have fled the violence are sheltered in 9 official refugee camps and unofficially in migrant communities that span the length of the border. These number an estimated 128,480 living in the refugee camps (TBC, 2013a, 16) just over 50% of whom are officially registered with UNHCR. Additionally close to 850,000 legal Myanmar migrants in Thailand who have participated in the limited opportunity for nationality verification and documentation (TBC, 2013a, 19) and a further estimated 1.5 million undocumented migrants are working in Thailand (TBC, 2013, 19), particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

These migrant and refugee communities have provided a key base for women's activist movements and continue to influence civil society campaigning both within Myanmar and beyond. The long-standing presence of activist organisations in the Thai-border region, supported by considerable international assistance, not found at other sites of more temporary exodus from Myanmar such as the China-Kachin border, makes this a distinctive site for activist knowledge production. Many of these communities, particularly those in the refugee camps, are well established having been resident for up to 30 years and consequently women's organisations such as the Kayah Women's Union, the Karen Women's Organisation, the Pa-O Women's Union and the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand, have an established membership base engaged in sustained activism. Likewise, the disruption caused by conflict and displacement has, for some, created access to positions of community leadership that may not have previously been attainable (KWO 2010) and also supported independent education activities.

Ethnically aligned women's organisations[7], many originating in the 1990s, have frequently been associated with the ethnic armed struggles for auto-determination (Hedström 2016), navigating a precarious path between rejecting the frequently violent subjugation of women by the military state and simultaneously renegotiating gender roles within their ethnic traditions (Laungaramsri 2011). Combined with cross-border networks with exile groups in Thailand[8], these women's organisations balanced seemingly non-political endeavours (providing education and healthcare to women and children in conflict) with more overtly politicised campaigns such as reporting on the

[7] Examples of such organisations include the Shan Women's Action Network and the Karen Women's Organisation. See also Maber (2016a).

[8] Although the majority of its 13 member organisations are based within Myanmar, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) itself is based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

systematic rape and abuse of ethnic women by the military (WLB 2014). Through this position, accentuated by cross-border movements, women's organisations have become accustomed to negotiating transnational and competing local agendas.

Already the changing political landscapes in Myanmar and Thailand have caused shifts amongst the refugee communities, with some voluntarily choosing to return and discussions of wider scale repatriation currently underway (Maber 2016b). Chapter 6 provides a fuller discussion of the cross-border movements between Myanmar and Thailand and the resulting implications for educational practices.

2.3 Women in Myanmar

There has been something of a tendency in Northern-based scholarship to compare Myanmar to its South Asian neighbours with regard to patriarchal dominance and conclude that women in Myanmar are not subjected to significant disadvantage (see for example Steinberg 2013, 189). Such an attitude reflects the need for greater scholarly attention to women's equality movements in Myanmar and the need to expose latent inequalities as well as highlighting strategies to foster a greater understanding of the context. For example, even in James' detailed examination of governance and civil society in the country she concludes:

> Myanmar women do not face social, cultural, and legal barriers to participation in the benefits of development as in some other [Least Developed Countries]. Women in Myanmar enjoy high social status and equality of opportunity with men. (James 2005, 111).

However, such sweeping conclusions are strongly contested by women activists in Myanmar (Miedema, Shwe, & Kyaw 2016; Faxon, Furlong & Sabe Phyu 2015; GEN 2015b), and find little basis for support, betraying the tendency for the plural and multiple forms of women's inequality to be overlooked. Likewise, women are of course vastly different, and the intersections of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, age, (dis)ability, and political affiliation, amongst assorted others, all affect women's opportunities, priorities and constraints differently. Such intersections and the implications for women's activism are explored throughout the thesis, with the conceptualisation of the position of women activists expanded in Chapter 7

particularly intending to address this concern of 'which women' may be seen as advocating for others.

2.3.1 Women's rights

At first glance, women in Myanmar have been prominent participants of the labour force in a broad sense and claim an equal share of education opportunities, with female students being well represented in schooling and in tertiary education institutions (JICA 2013; Department of Population 2015). However, women are largely employed in the agricultural sector and in low-status, low-skilled positions, pointing to the hierarchical nature of gender relations (ADB) 2012) and a lack of opportunities for change during militarisation. With the change of government towards a civilian-led model, there are now emerging opportunities for women to take up roles that were previously closed to them, both within political leadership as highlighted below and in society more broadly, with the adoption of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2012–21) appearing to support institutional commitment to this goal.

However, although the 2013 joint UN delegation report praised the "growing number of civil society organizations working for women's empowerment" (UNICEF 2013, 10), they also expressed concern over the limited capacity of agencies to ensure commitments to gender equality are met across the different ministries, and the limited influence exercised by key UN offices particularly without a UN-Women presence in Myanmar, factors that remain unaddressed three years later. This underlines the marked tensions that are evident in Myanmar (as in many other countries) between the political rhetoric employed to fall in line with international standards, and institutional resistance to challenging entrenched gender roles. Additionally, cultural norms which dictate acceptable roles and behaviour for men and women, and privilege men and age give rise to further obstacles and opposition to women's positions of leadership (GEN 2013a; 2015b).

Similar dichotomies are apparent in the legal system. Although women's rights are nominally protected under the 2008 Constitution, in particular the rights to vote and run for public office, there are glaring inadequacies and the legal system offers little in the way of protection against discrimination, violence or inequality embedded in social practice. In particular, women's rights activists have drawn attention to the following points of contention within the penal code:

- there are no specific laws to protect women from domestic violence;

- abortion is illegal (except to save a woman's life);
- marital rape is not criminalised (unless the wife is under 14);
- there is a lack of standardisation of marriage laws (varying by the religion of spouses);
- divorce proceedings preference male partners (with greater restrictions applying to women seeking to initiate divorce);
- there are no harassment laws to protect women in the workplace;
- there is no provision for parental leave (GEN 2013a, 3–4).

The situation is compounded by weak judicial processes, the scarcity of legal training, and the widespread mistrust stemming from the historic manipulation of legal systems by the junta. The 2013 OECD Multi-dimensional Review of Myanmar found perceptions of corruption to be the worst compared to all regional South and South-East Asian neighbours, with women less than half as likely as men to "report having voiced an opinion to an official" (at only 3 per cent compared with 7 per cent for men – still alarmingly low), demonstrating very low levels of civic engagement and trust (OECD 2013, 48). The report also highlights that while legal systems appear to afford women equal rights with men on several fronts (including property ownership and inheritance), cultural practice does not substantiate this particularly across diverse ethnic groups and "if not taken into account, this gap between formal laws and customary practices could limit the effectiveness of policy interventions" (OECD 2013, 40).

2.3.2 Women's political organisation and leadership

As one might expect given women's exclusion from the ruling military regime, women were poorly represented in the Thein Sein government, despite gains in the by-elections held in 2012. Women accounted for 4.6 per cent of the elected parliamentary seats across the Union Assembly (comprising the Upper and Lower House) as well as the state and regional parliaments, and that figure falls to 3.4 per cent of the total appointees when taking into account the 398 seats (across the parliamentary bodies) reserved for military, and therefore exclusively male, appointees (GEN 2012, 1). The victory for the NLD in the 2015 elections has seen Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as iconic leader for the party, take up position as State Councillor[9], and an increase in female parliamentarians.

[9] Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is barred from holding the office of President in the 2008 Constitution, having been married to a foreign national and having children holding foreign (British) citizenship, in legislation that the military has refused to amend.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has without doubt done much to challenge the male dominated arena of Myanmar politics over the last 25 years, enduring imprisonment and house arrest, and has been an international figurehead for the democracy movement, while also now balancing challenging political shifts. Yet while she is an iconic female leader in the country, her pathway into politics – being the daughter of the military general and independence hero Gen. Aung San – is not easily replicated by those women who may be inspired to follow her lead. This follows a pattern commented on by Lesley Abdela (2000, 16) that trail blazing women are often associated with respected powerful men (such as Benazir Bhutto or Cori Aquino), and picks up Srilatha Batliwala's analysis that "heroines", identified as leading in a more individual style, may be less likely to lead transformatively than those who demonstrate a more shared, collective approach to leadership (Batliwala 2011, 27). Consequently, and as this research largely centres itself within the inter-election period prior to the 2016 inauguration of the new government, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does not feature strongly in this thesis in discussions of education and activist movements.

Women have historically been prominent members of the opposition and protest movements, and are increasingly mobilised and active in civil society, demonstrating a desire to advocate for women's rights (Hedström 2016). However, in the changing political environment they can find themselves lacking both the skills training to prepare them and the platform to effectively influence policy on a broader scale. Such dichotomies undermine the apparent gains in women's opportunities and perpetuate the dominance of masculine influence. While women have risen quickly to community leadership roles, particularly in situations of conflict or resistance and in informal arenas or those that do not challenge gender norms, it is much more difficult for women to access formal positions and those that attract greater prestige, influence, and/or financial reward. In other words, while there are proportionally high numbers of active female students in civil society groups, women volunteers in the armed militia groups and female teachers, health-care workers, and leaders of women's co-operative groups, there are proportionally very low numbers of women in government, leading civil service departments, or prominent in the (State) military, legal, or business sectors.

Hierarchical social structures which preference men and age make it difficult for women to challenge traditional authority figures, and narrowly defined concepts of acceptable roles for men and women, reinforced through education practices which restrict the pathways open to women, impede women's access to new opportunities. The women leaders interviewed by the

Gender Equality Network (GEN) for their 2013 study of leadership initiatives spoke of the resistance they encountered from others, male and female, to their positions of leadership: "'People don't want to listen to women'" (GEN 2013a, 10). In a society which also reserves great respect for elders, young women experience particular opposition making it difficult for them to gain experience in areas that challenge conventions. Similarly the impact of conflict, ethnic identity, political affiliation and family associations on women's opportunities, which have both helped and hindered women in their current positions, can lead younger women struggling to identify a course of action. While women are increasingly mobilised and active in civil society demonstrating a desire to advocate for women's rights, they can find themselves lacking both the skills training to prepare them and the platform to effectively influence policy on a broader scale.

Nonetheless, there are small but increasing numbers of women taking on more prominent leadership roles, not only at a community level but also at the national level (AGIPP 2015; GEN 2013a), and the growing links between women's organisations, fostered by networks such as the Women's Organisation Network (WON), the Women's League of Burma (WLB), and the Gender Equality Network (GEN), provide an amplified voice and a broader platform from which to support women's influence. These networks play a key role in knowledge and information sharing and provide natural partners for leadership training initiatives. Interestingly, a consequence of the greater operating freedom experienced since the 2010 elections has been that organisations that prior to 2011 took a more subversive, activist approach aligning themselves against the institutional hierarchies modelled by the military government, have since been seeking recognition and legitimacy from the civilian government and in so doing falling into line with the state rhetoric of approved practice. There is an evident risk then that approaches that fail to address the prevailing imbalances in power relations may be perpetuating inequalities, and transferring the onus onto those who are disadvantaged to bring about changes in social institutions where their influence is limited.

As the state has historically been hostile to activism or rights-based endeavours, trajectories into leadership within the women's movement have been plural: some women activists have taken up positions within international organisations, either prior to or as a result of community based work; others have been the recipients of international awards and scholarships to study abroad; others have fled conflict in their ethnic regions or been displaced by economic development schemes; others still have gained prominence through religious institutions. Many of the women activists interviewed in the context

of this research combine elements of these experiences and more, leading to a diversity of contributions which have influenced the research. Attention to these plural pathways into women's activism have therefore informed the basis of the theoretical conceptualisation outlined in *3.2* and subsequently in Chapter 7, by which women activists are understood to draw on multiple and varied points of contact and influence.

2.4 Overview of education dynamics

While further details of Myanmar's varied education dynamics are provided in Chapters 4 and 6, including in relation to education experiences for refugee and migrant communities on the Thai border, a brief overview is provided here to introduce the context of the research. Myanmar's education landscape is characterised by plurality with several different education providers delivering varying forms of formal and non-formal education. At primary level, formal education is provided by the state through government schools under the authority of the Ministry of Education (referred to in this thesis as 'state schooling'), as well as through monastic schools under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Lall 2011). Both of these systems use the state textbooks and curricula, with monastic schools providing additional religious instruction. Hostility to the nationalistic agenda prominent in the state curriculum as well as the limited number of government schools in remote and conflict-affected territories has led to the establishment of parallel systems of education by multiple ethnic groups, commonly referred to in Myanmar as 'ethnic schools' under their own authority, often associated with the ethnic armed groups in their controlled territories (Jollife 2014; Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012). These include, for example, the Karen Education Department (KED) and the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), and design their own textbooks and curricula largely delivered in their ethnic languages (Lall & South 2013). A major current concern for these ethnic schools, as well as migrant schools established on the Thai border (see *6.4*), is the lack of accreditation making it difficult for students to transfer between education systems, and contributing to the high drop-out rates highlighted further below (Higgins et al. 2016).

At a secondary level, there are fewer schooling choices, with ethnic and monastic schools typically not having the resources to extend beyond the primary level (Higgins et al. 2016; MoE 2014, 14). While many of the observations within this research also apply to primary education, the main focus has been on experiences in secondary education, and consequently

analysis focuses on state schools rather than monastic or ethnic schools as the foremost site of young women and men's secondary schooling experiences. A challenge in researching Myanmar's education practices has been the often inaccurate or absent data from official reporting statistics (Hardman et al 2014). Officially, Myanmar appears to demonstrate relative gender equality in terms of enrolment rates in state schools, with the gender parity index (GPI) for primary enrolment given as 0.98 (MoE 2014, 29). However, while census data indicates severe levels of drop out from education for both sexes in rural and urban locations, there is a lack of research to indicate either the gendered nature of experiences within schools across these different environments or the gendered motivations for drop out (Department of Population 2015). The relatively high numbers of girls migrating between states for education compared with boys (Department of Population 2015, 127-8) may indicate a lack of appropriate education opportunities for girls in certain areas, and also potentially a tendency for young women to continue education while young men pursue income generation. Likewise, data indicates significant differences in educational opportunities across the varied states of the Union: while the average literacy rate for the country (those over 10 years old) is reported as 89.5%, the range extends from 98% of men in Yangon Division being literate to 62% of women in Shan State (Department of Population 2015, 136-151).

Although not the major focus of this research, tertiary education has also been affected by political unrest, underinvestment and a lack of resources (Kamibeppu & Chao 2017). In urban areas the student protests of the 1980s and early 1990s led to frequent closures of the universities as they became associated with inciting opposition and civil unrest (Lall 2011). Many of the students, male and female, were subjected to brutal persecution and often imprisonment, and the ability of higher education facilities to function as learning institutions was profoundly undermined. This climate of civil protest initially led by student demonstrators and the wider democratic movement projected some women into positions of leadership – Daw Aung San Suu Kyi being the most prominent example of female leadership to emerge from the 1988 demonstrations – but it was a leadership that was constructed outside the authoritarian rule of the military junta and therefore drew severe repercussions (as evidenced by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 15 years in custody). Additionally, some women have found themselves disadvantaged at universities as the lack of standardisation across higher education institutions results in highly variable entrance criteria, which have at times involved the use of unfavourable quotas, meaning women can find themselves needing higher grades to secure a place compared to their male peers or can simply be

denied access to certain subjects. This has not deterred women from entering university, with current figures indicating higher enrolment rates amongst women than men (ADB 2012, 1; JICA 2013, ii), but it points to latent inequalities in prioritising male careers and casts doubt over the appropriateness of options available to female students. The undermining of higher education systems is also reflected in the prominence of civil society organisations in delivering post-secondary education initiatives, as is highlighted further in Chapter 8.

2.4.1 Education reforms and international involvement

During the restrictive years of the military regime, control over teacher training, curriculum design, standardised assessment and reporting allowed very little opportunity for outside influence to percolate into the state education system (Hardman et al 2014). Consequently, international education organisations[10], consultants and researchers largely worked with education providers beyond the state, including ethnic schools and monastic schools (which despite being under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs operated with greater independence) as well as non-formal community based initiatives.

International involvement, however, has been more prominent in ongoing attempts to reform education systems since 2011 (Higgins et al 2016; Hardman et al 2014). Revising education policy was a key component of the intended widespread sectoral reforms initiated by the Thein Sein administration, beginning with the Comprehensive Education Sectoral Review (CESR) from 2011-14, however has proved a highly contentious endeavour. Through 2014 and 2015 demonstrations in the streets of Myanmar's major cities were led by students who protested the new National Education Law[11], viewed as not supporting substantial change and maintaining exclusions within education systems (Zaw 2015; Zin 2015), in what they described as a "*rejection of a 'correct way of thinking' in education policy*" (group discussion with student protest leaders during fieldwork period, 2015). These acts of disruption and disturbance were powerful enactments of resistance that sought to undermine state hierarchies. However, highlighting the dominance of state forces in themselves resisting contestation, protesters were subjected to assault and arrest as police forces sought to re-impose control and enforce

[10] These included Save the Children, the British Council and World Education

[11] Several protests were witnessed during fieldwork and resulted in considerable anxiety for many of my research participants, as students known both to me and other educators were detained.

adherence to imposed hierarchies. Opportunities to openly contest dominant norms have remained severely limited, and the consequences of doing so have been evident in the arrest and imprisonment of student activists protesting the National Education Law, journalists, interfaith advocates, political leaders and ethnic opposition leaders alike. While there is hope that the new NLD led government inaugurated in 2016 might go some way to ease social tensions, in the early stages of their tenure there remain considerable obstacles.

The background to the dynamics of education, gender, conflict and political transition in Myanmar introduced in this chapter, while brief, nonetheless provide a contextualisation from which to consider the research study. While further details of these areas will be explored subsequently in more depth in the chapters comprising Parts II and III, the following Chapter 3 turns the focus to outlining the theoretical and methodological considerations that have shaped the research.