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Chapter 5

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

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This chapter has been adapted from Maber, E. J. T. (forthcoming) 'Learning violence and shame: gendering violence and the body in Myanmar's formal education spaces'. *Compare.*

5.1 Introduction

Formal learning environments are gendered in multiple ways, producing and reinforcing expectations of gendered behaviour, which can perpetuate gender inequalities. My aim in this chapter is to explore the dimensions of gendered learning practices in Myanmar, suggesting that the physical, material and vocal subordination of women within school environments contributes to the sustaining of violence against women in society more broadly. Understandings of gender violence are further complicated in areas affected by conflict, and highly politicised acts of violence such as the systematic abuse of women in conflict areas may obscure the structural inequalities that maintain implicit and direct gender violence throughout institutional, public and domestic settings.

As shall be explored further below, significant research has focused on explicit acts of gender violence that may be experienced within schools, between students, between students and teachers, or on the journey to school (Leach & Mitchell 2006; Parkes 2015). Likewise, research has highlighted the ways in which schooling may support cultures of violence through reproducing militarised, masculine ideals and a glorification of violence, particularly through curriculum texts in subjects such as history (Durrani 2008). However less attention has been given to exploring the processes by which shame and subordination may be learned by female students, and the implications of this learning for supporting gender violence both within and beyond school environments. This chapter therefore responds to the question of how experiences in education may contribute to the legitimisation of gender violence in society more broadly, with particular attention to the teaching of shame as a pervasive tool of subordination.

These processes are explored through the experiences of varied women in Myanmar, where conflict and legacies of authoritarian rule have contributed to entrenching exclusionary practices in education systems. Although Myanmar is undergoing political transition which is accompanied by sectoral reforms, including highly politicised reforms in education, these processes have not yet translated to substantial changes within classrooms. Schools therefore continue to be sites of replicating dominant citizenship ideals rather than sites of social transformation and the undoing of social inequalities.

5.2 Education, gender and violence

Understanding gender to be socially constructed within particular contexts (Butler 1990), it can be recognised that gender is 'learned' in multiple ways (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006; Leach & Humphreys 2007). While this learning occurs across family and community environments, being informed by observed behaviour and media projections amongst others, formal and non-formal education environments also contribute to reinforcing gender roles and expectations of behaviour for young men and young women (Connell 2011; Stromquist 2006; 2015). Reinforcing state productions of idealised citizenship, state schooling and formal education environments therefore play a central role in the transmission of norms and the construction of expected roles of citizens (Apple 2012; Bernstein 2000), with such constructions being inherently gendered. Schools are therefore formational sites where gender and sexual identities are produced (Porter 2015).

Teachers play an integral role in constructing learning environments which may perpetuate gender roles within the classroom or offer spaces to challenge inequalities (Connell 2011). However, without specific training in gender issues many teachers reproduce cultural and social expectations of male and female behaviour, both intentionally and otherwise (Stromquist 2006, 149). As formal education and teacher training systems are typically under-resourced, and even more so in contexts of conflict and political instability, teachers may have received little training and have limited material to draw on. However, even without material constraints in resources, social exclusions and associations of gender constructions with duties and expectations of behaviour can be desired from states seeking to enforce dominant cultural and religious notions of gendered citizenship (Durrani 2008). Across multiple country contexts, nationalist discourses and the stereotypical presentations of men and women in curriculum texts have come under scrutiny for perpetuating narrow and exclusive constructions of citizenship

ideals (Davies 2004; Durrani & Dunne 2010). Beyond textbooks and class material, language, timetabling, pedagogy, codes of discipline are also implicated in the replication of hierarchical social relations in school environments (Apple 2012). The capacity for schools to contribute to social transformation has therefore frequently been undermined (Novelli 2016).

Attention has been increasingly drawn to schools as sites of violence, particularly in situations of conflict (Davies 2004; Parkes 2015). This violence can be understood as direct, physical violence, which might be sanctioned within school systems such as in the case of corporal punishment, or which may occur within school communities amongst students, between students and teachers, and amongst school staff including bullying, sexual violence and exploitation, or which may be directed towards the school community from outside rendering schools as targets of attack (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006). Additionally, violence may be structural and symbolic, enacted through explicit and hidden curricula, pedagogy, classroom practice and language of instruction (amongst others) to reinforce social exclusions and inequalities (Heslop et al 2015; Parkes & Unterhalter 2015, 16). These multiple enactments of violence are inherently gendered (Leach & Humphreys 2007, 53; Parkes 2015, 5-6) and also intersect with other inequalities based on ethnicity, religion, age and (dis)ability, amongst others. The ways in which structural and symbolic gender violence within schools may support and sustain direct gender violence beyond schooling, is therefore a primary consideration.

Butler's (1990) notions of gender performativity are instructive for conceptualising the ways in which education practices encode gendered performances and define socially acceptable behaviour for young men and women, which are regulated through the use of violence, humiliation and exclusion (Butler 1990; 2014; Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006; Parkes & Unterhalter 2015, 21). As Butler asserts:

> Gender performativity does not just characterize what we do, but how discourse and institutional power affect us, constraining and moving us in relation to what we come to call our "own" action. (Butler 2014, 8)

Consequently, "violence may be a strategy to maintain the gender order" (Parkes & Unterhalter 2015, 19), which is enacted not only by some men in the wider community but also institutionally in education structures and enforced by teachers regardless of their gender. Additionally, shame has often been associated with experiences of sexual and gender violence, most commonly conceptualised as emotion resulting from assault or victimisation (see for

example Baker 2013; Cunniff Gilson 2016; Feldman 2010). However, as argued here, understanding feelings of shame as learned, "embodied and embedded" (Braidotti 2015, 3) in women's experiences across community and institutional settings and sustained in processes of subordination also enables violence to be committed and to be maintained (Schooler et al 2005). Shame is therefore approached here as an emotional condition produced through the gendered constructions of women's bodies as inferior, as has emerged from discussions with Myanmar women participating in this research. In this sense, the characterisation of shame outlined by Bartky as "a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy" (1990, 85) more closely approaches the learning of shame in educational settings, whereby "the classroom is also a site of its constitution" (Bartky 1990, 90). Such a conceptualisation places emphasis on the emotional experience of education sites whereby "knowledge is not merely something to be 'understood'; it is always felt and responded to emotionally and corporeally" (Zembylas 2007a, 20).

This chapter explores how violence against women in Myanmar becomes legitimised and sustained through and beyond schooling practices that reinforce young women's social subordination. In particular the construction of shame as embodied and embedded through three interlinked dimensions of practices in education is highlighted: the physicality of positionings in educational spaces; the materiality of women's bodies and objects associated with them; and the denial of voice or silencing, including the absence of discussion or with-holding knowledge. I argue that these dimensions of learning shame and subordination enable and maintain violence against women as gender violence becomes normalised in education experiences, and avenues to speak out about abuse or assault are suppressed.

5.3 Research methods

Material for this chapter is drawn from interviews conducted within Myanmar with both formal and non-formal education teachers, gender activists and community workers whose work focuses on reducing violence against women. As access to state schools is highly restricted, more complete interviews were conducted with non-formal educators or activists, many of whom had previously been state teachers and/or attended formal teacher training. Consequently quotes are often drawn from these sources, yet still reflect experiences within state school systems. Additionally, material is drawn from six focus group discussions (FGDs) that were conducted with 54 young adults aged between 16 and 24 focusing on their gendered education and learning

experiences. Four of these focus group discussions were conducted in community education sites with each group size between 9 and 14, three groups being exclusively young women and one being a mixed group of young men and women, of varied ethnicities and religions. One was conducted in Yangon (referenced as Yangon FGD1), one in Pathein (Pathein FGD1, the mixed gender group), and two were conducted in Chiang Mai (Chiang Mai FGD1 & 2) where young women from each of Myanmar's seven states and regions had travelled to participate in a residential school. A further two smaller group discussions were conducted with five young Christian women in Pathein (Pathein FGD2), and with three young Muslim women in Yangon (Yangon FGD2). All of the participants had spent several years in state schooling within Myanmar, and in the case of the Chiang Mai FGDs some had additional experience attending alternative ethnic schools and refugee camp schools. As participants in the research were all over the age of 16, the study focused on looking back over past experiences of education within state schools. However, for many participants, particularly in the focus group discussions, they had finished high school the previous year, and consequently the experiences of schooling discussed include present education practices. Following the methodology of the research (outlined in 3.3), holding all female discussion groups within community education environments where the young women were familiar with each other and with the researcher enabled sensitive discussions of issues of violence, sex and women's bodies to occur in a safe and supportive environment. Group discussions therefore meandered through varied expressions and included varied exercises such as writing, mapping and drawing as well as verbal discussions. The quotes presented here from the focus group discussions are therefore drawn from both verbal and written exercises. A change in speaker within the quote is indicated by the symbol //.

5.4 Situating women's bodies in Myanmar's public space

Myanmar has experienced significant turbulence and insecurity resulting from multiple ongoing ethnic conflicts, recent intercommunal violence and authoritarian rule by successive military juntas from 1962 to 2011. Landmark elections in late 2010 signalled the beginning of tentative and controlled transitions towards democracy which have accelerated with the subsequent 2015 elections in which the democratic opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), took power. The intervening years saw ambitious processes of economic, political and legal reform undertaken by the government, led by the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development

Party (USDP) (Bächtold 2015). However, despite a relaxing of authoritarianism, inter-religious and ethnic conflicts remain unresolved and processes of reform have in turn opened up new tensions as social exclusions are reproduced (Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015). Legacies of *Burmanisation* policies, which idealised national unity under the dominance of Buddhist religion and Bamar cultural identity[20], continue to exacerbate religious tensions and influence gender constructions, as further highlighted below.

5.4.1 Politicised constructions of women's bodies

The combination of the social subordination of women and the masculine-dominated militarisation of state leadership have left women excluded from political decision making. Consequently, women's bodies have been constructed on behalf of women in policy discourse and in popular media. Discussions of women's protection or of women's choices in marriage and child birth have therefore largely taken place beyond women's participation. State-run media outlets have for example encouraged women to marry young and have more children, as "early marriage [is] vital to economic development" (Aye 2016), while state-authorised billboards were observed in Mon State promoting women's protection by advising "women shouldn't wear sexy dresses" (billboard in Mawlamyine, observed February 2016). The transferal of responsibility to women to protect themselves and of blame for inciting violence against them is a common refrain, not only in popular media discourse but also enacted in police and ministerial policy decisions (DVB 2016; England 2016; GEN 2015b, 112-138). This was, for example, illustrated by ministerial complicity in police operations that outlawed the sale of contraception, including condoms and the contraceptive pill, during annual New Year (*Thingyan*) festivities under the guise of reducing sexual assaults against women (Saw Myint & Wai Aung 2015; Saw Myint 2015).

Women are contradictorily constructed as simultaneously responsible for the immorality of their bodies while also not deemed competent to make choices over them. Accentuated by the context of conflict and transition, "women's bodies have become battlegrounds both material and symbolic" (Phipps 2014, 2). As such, women have become emblematic of religious and nationalistic identity constructions and women's bodies have therefore been

[20] The majority (89%) of Myanmar are Buddhist, with Christian (4%) and Muslim (4%) minority communities. There are 135 officially recognised ethnic minorities in the country, with the dominant majority group being the Bamar, associated with the military and major political parties (Walton & Hayward 2014)

mobilised as a means of 'othering' religious and ethnic minority groups beyond the Buddhist Bamar ideal (Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015). Women are therefore reified as silent mothers for the idealised nation state, responsible for the propagation of future citizens, while being effaced from political dialogue. This has been most acutely enacted in the parliamentary approval of a package of legislation known as the 'Protection of Race and Religion' laws, proposed by ultra-conservative Buddhist nationalist factions known as the 969 Movement and the MaBaTha. The four bills cover the 'Myanmar Buddhist Women Special Marriage Law', the 'Monogamy Law', the 'Religious Conversion Law', and the 'Health Care on Controlling the Population Growth Law', and include restrictions on Buddhist women's right to marry across faith communities or to convert. The 'othering' of religious minorities, in particular Islam, is enacted through mobilising a sense of threat to dominant identity and of precarity represented through women's victimised bodies (Butler 2004; 2014; Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015, 41). Similarly, running in parallel to the media discourse encouraging (Buddhist) women to have more children, the 'Health Care on Controlling the Population Growth Law' enables mechanisms to limit birth numbers and mandate birth spacing in communities that are perceived to be rapidly increasing, playing into the harmful narrative of male Muslim sexualisation and the perpetuation of Buddhist threat from Muslim expansion. Such policy enactments reflect the intertwining of gender and religious identity constructions and reinforce notions of women's passivity, their inability to make decisions over their own lives and deny their agency and participation in public discourse.

5.4.2 Understanding violence against women in Myanmar

As women are denied agency over their bodies in political and popular media discourses, direct violence against women becomes an extension of women's structural and symbolic subordination. Reflecting the nature of bodies as "socially constituted" (Butler 2004, 20), Laungaramsri highlights Myanmar and ethnic minority women's instrumentalisation:

> Women's bodies in this particular context have been inscribed with relations of power and are made a powerful communicative device for articulating and representing difference. (Laungaramsri 2011, 108)

Systematic violence against ethnic women has been a pervasive feature of the conflicts (WLB 2014), in which women's bodies have become sites of violence

claimed and territorialised by the nation-state, as "a working out of boundaries on the woman's body" (Littlewood 1997, 11; Laungaramsri 2011, 106). Sexual violence enacted on ethnic women's bodies by military forces therefore has the multiple effects of claiming ownership of ethnic women, displaying state dominance, terrorising communities in ethnic territories and humiliating (male) ethnic armed groups. However, as Laungaramsri indicates:

> Women's bodies are not just objects of a violent nation but subjects of lived experience in which violence is felt and suffered. The suffering can be immensely deep as it is difficult for women to imagine how an individual self could possibly become a topography of state violence. (Laungaramsri 2011, 108)

While militarised violence against women has received politicised attention and contestation from transnational activist groups, international solidarity has not been so forthcoming for countering less politicised forms of violence against women such as intimate partner violence, harassment, or sexual coercion. Crafting a division between forms of sexual and gender violence deemed to be domestic and violence committed by military personnel belies their common origins in women's subordination in which gender violence can be understood as "linked in a 'continuum'" (Cockburn & Enloe 2012, 552; see also Meger 2016).

Recent research by women's organisations into the varied forms of direct gender violence experienced by women across Myanmar has highlighted its prevalence and also its interlinked nature (GEN 2015a; Miedema, Shwe & Kyaw 2016). Violence was found to be a common experience, both within domestic relationships and in public spaces, across religious, ethnic and socio-economic groups, constructing abuse as "a normal part of life" (GEN 2015a. 36). The lack of legal avenues to pursue justice for survivors of rape and abuse is amplified in the context of intimate partner violence, as there is no legislative criminalisation for marital rape (GEN 2013; Maber 2014, 144-5). Legal frameworks therefore codify women's unequal position. In contrast to the rapid and unencumbered adoption of the 'Protection of Race and Religion' bills, attempts by women's organisations to formulate a legislative bill on the 'Prevention of Violence Against Women' (PoVAW), have met with resistance and hostility on the part of lawmakers who have challenged the necessity of the legislation (Faxon, Furlong & Sabe Phyu 2015).

Women are therefore simultaneously made to feel acutely aware of and responsible for their bodies, while being able to exercise little control over what happens to them, as others have access to their bodies without their

consent and with impunity. As one women's right's activist highlighted: "*we have to convince young women that your body is yours*" (women's rights activist and educator, interview 2015). However, as will be explored below, formal education experiences are currently not supporting this transformation.

5.5 Constructing gendered citizenship in formal education

Education practices reproduce gender inequalities in multiple ways, including through stereotypical presentations in curriculum texts, classroom practices, roles and duties, pedagogy and teachers' attitudes, and practices of discipline (GEN 2015b, 86-97; Maber 2014). Teaching is commonly viewed as a culturally-appropriate profession for women, and consequently there are large numbers of female teachers in state schools. However, it does not follow that the feminisation of the profession automatically results in more gender-sensitive practices in schools (Stromquist 2006, 149). The sections below explore three dimensions of the ways practices within formal education are perpetuating women's unequal position within society which are less commonly highlighted and which provide the conditions for violence to be replicated and maintained.

5.5.1 Physicality and positioning young women in school space

> *My aunty, she said to me 'you are a woman you should not play with your big brother', and also if your brother complains you or shouts at you, you have to be silent, you have to be quiet because you are woman, you have to be polite. If you walk, you cannot walk dun-dun-dun [bangs table] like that. You have to walk very politely. And also when you speak, you have to speak quietly and if you are laughing you have to make your mouth like that, hee-hee-hee, like that [covers mouth with hand]. You can't laugh out loud like that.* (Young woman peer-educator, interview 2016)

Cultural traditions which shape expected behaviour for young men and women have physical implications in the ways that young women learn to position themselves as modest and unasserting, as the young woman now engaged in community education above highlighted. In familial and community settings such cultural expectations may find avenues for contestation, as in the case of the young woman above whose parents were less restricting than her aunt: "*My father and my mother they didn't put us through stereotypes. I was free to play together with my siblings*" (young woman peer-educator, interview 2016). However, these performances of gendered behaviour become reified in formal

education settings which codify expectations of behaviour through curriculum and timetabling (Stromquist 2006). Consequently, even if individual teachers may be inclined towards flexibility in their expectations of their students, the structure of school practice maintains the reproduction of gendered citizenship, as one female teacher highlighted:

> *This is a cultural construction of gender built into our education. While the boys play football the girls will learn handicrafts and sewing… We are always standardised to be a good mother, be a good housewife*. (Teacher, interview 2015)

In addition to gendered subject learning, classroom duties further inscribe expectations of gender roles, whereby boys are likely to be classroom monitors or prefects and girls are responsible for cleaning the rooms. One experienced teacher highlighted these widespread practices:

> *Girls' role is to clean the classroom before the lessons. And in many schools we still have wooden paintings, so lift up the wooden paintings, boys do it and girls clean the surface and the floor and then boys put them down, because we assume they have more physical power… We all accept that and assume that these are the jobs for boys, these are the jobs for girls*. (Teacher, interview 2015)

Such practices are "key symbols of gender identification and differentiation constantly practised within schools" (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006, 78) which reinforce the performance of gender through individual and collective acts (Butler 1990; Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006). During focus group discussions this inequality in the activities undertaken in schools, beyond the formal curriculum, was articulated as a grievance for young women who felt they had been denied opportunities to participate and learn skills that would support leadership roles:

> *In assembly at school only male students can lead, female students don't get the chance. // Even if the male and female students are scoring the same [mark], but if they have to choose a representative to go to another school for competition they choose only male students* (Yangon FGD1, 2016)

Further, more physical dimensions to learning were also held responsible for disadvantaging young women in participating in leadership roles. During one group discussion, young women from Karen State highlighted that learning to

"*be polite and respect elders because of traditional learning*" (Chiang Mai FGD1, 2014) meant that they were disciplined not to make eye contact but to look down when they were speaking to authority figures. They challenged this learned behaviour as being "*not good with foreigners or for presentation skills*" further articulating that "*we miss a lot if we are bowing our heads*" (Chiang Mai FGD1, 2014). In this way behaviour is learned that not only ascribes gendered characteristics to young women, preferencing timidity, but actively disadvantages them from participating in equal conversations or decision making.

During multiple focus group discussions, the division of timetabling was a particular source of frustration for young women, who wanted to participate in sports rather than having their role limited to "*cheerleading*" (Pathein FGD1, 2015) or having to attend parallel classes "*learning handicrafts*" (Chiang Mai FGD1, 2014), with participants in one group expressing:

> *We really want to play football but the teacher doesn't allow us. // Men and women should play together. If we play together, men and women, we have more confidence* (Yangon FGD1, 2016)

In addition to reinforcing the segregation of gendered activities for boys and girls, the refusal to allow girls to play sports in many schools is illustrative of a construction of the bodily physicality of women's subordination. Women's bodies are perceived not only as inferior to men's but potentially contaminating, and consequently if a woman is 'out of place' such as being positioned physically above a man or to his right side, then she is held responsible for reducing his power (*hpon*). *Hpon* is understood as a man's innate masculine superiority and is interwoven with Buddhist gender constructions (GEN 2015b, 34; Miedema, Shwe & Kyaw 2016, 675-6; Nwe 2009). Being a woman is associated with shame and penance and consequently an inherently inferior position, as one activist and educator explained: "*we are women because we did something wrong in our past life. How can we deal with that?*" (Women's rights activist and educator, interview 2016). Such beliefs contribute to the isolation of young women in schools as mixed play or sports activities such as football are seen as inappropriate, as one young woman now working as an informal teacher explained: "*Some thought that if women jump over their heads the men became unlucky*" (community educator, interview 2016). Concern over the protection of a man's *hpon* is also enacted in classrooms whereby the physical positioning of students reflects gender hierarchies, as the same young community educator highlighted:

> *But at school, we had to sit separately, and also most of the women we had to sit on the left side, the men sit at the right side. They believe that if women sit at the right side men became unlucky boys. So women always have to be on the left side. So in class we always had to sit on the left side.* (Community educator, interview 2016)

Classroom practices can therefore reinforce and replicate women's inequality by making visible their ascribed position as inferior. Shame is also ascribed to young women as embodying the potential to reduce *hpon*, and they are held responsible for positioning themselves 'correctly' in order to reduce the harm their bodies may involuntarily cause. Transgressing this tradition may therefore be disciplined in schooling environments, as one woman reflected speaking of her schooling experiences in Shan State: "*But if we stay to the right side the teachers shout at us, in public like shaming, so we feel shy. They didn't allow us to sit*" (young woman activist, interview 2016).

The emphasis on young men and women's positionings within schools reflects the *Burmanisation* of the state education system which has sought to consolidate Buddhist nationalist identity constructions. Consequently Muslim and Christian students were also exposed to the regulation of their bodies within school, whereas their home environment may not have instilled such concerns, which can also lead to punishments for transgression. Young Muslim women in the Yangon discussion group highlighted experiencing the same policing of their behaviour if they attempted to play with male classmates during break time:

> *sometimes we play together and teachers will scold us, saying girls should not play like this, girls should not do like this. Gender roles are really enforced in school*. (Yangon FGD2, 2015)

In such ways women are reprimanded for their embodiment of guilt and learn that being a body out of place is likely to incur punishment (Ahmed 2013).

5.5.2 Materiality and shaming

> *I always questioned, because our longyi*[21] *and our lower dress is never allowed to dry out in front of the balcony, but my uncle's*

[21] The longyi is the material traditionally worn by men and women in Myanmar, in place of trousers or a skirt, with men's and women's longyis being made of different fabrics

> *longyi was drying out in front of the balcony, so I asked the question why do our things always come to the kitchen or the very dark areas where we have to dry our panties or our longyis. So people explained to me that men never got periods, women get periods and that is a dirty thing, that's why. And I got angry! Why is a period very dirty, it's just blood?* (Women's community organisation leader and trainer, interview 2015)

In addition to physical positionings, women's bodies are also imbued with shame in more material ways within both school and community environments. The characterisation of women's bodies as sources of shame is interwoven with cultural understandings of menstruation as dirty, which education practices do little to counter and may actively perpetuate. As the quote above reflects, women's longyis and underwear are traditionally washed separately from men's, must not be placed higher on the washing line than men's clothing, nor in public view, nor in any place that a man may walk under them. Through such cultural practices, the shame that is imbued in women's bodies as dirty and inferior becomes materially transferred to the clothes that cover them, perpetuating the stigma associated with being a woman: "*It sends the message that women are lower. Daily these messages are given and passed on to kids"* (women's rights activist, interview 2015).

While these messages are pervasive beyond formal education sites, and are most commonly encountered in the home, school environments can reinforce the materiality of women's subordination through perpetuating the conceptualisation of women's clothing as inherently unclean and that items associated with and belonging to women are of less worth. Additionally, the transferal of power or shame through material objects may be employed by teachers as a way to deter interactions between classmates, with one young woman recalling being told by her teacher that "*if you sit on a chair after a boy has sat there you can get pregnant*" (Chiang Mai FGD2, 2015). Such strategies by some teachers to misinform and deny information on sexual practice position them foremost as responsible for maintaining cultural expectations of gender-appropriate behaviour, reflecting the fact that despite the majority of teachers being women, they may not perceive themselves as female allies in navigating the experience of puberty.

The lack of sex education or instruction on puberty in schools, means that there is no standardised content or guidelines for teaching about puberty

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and tied in different ways. Myanmar state school uniforms consist of a green longyi for boys and girls and a white shirt.

and consequently learning about body changes or sex largely comes indirectly from other sources. As one teacher working in the state sector highlighted: "*teachers are not trained. We didn't go through this ourselves so we don't know how to teach it*" (teacher, interview 2015). In the absence of direction, teachers frequently reproduce cultural perceptions of menstruation as unclean, with students reporting having been told they "*should not associate [with classmates] when having your period*" (Chiang Mai FGD2, 2015). One woman, now a women's rights activist, spoke of her own learning experiences and their effect:

> *I thought our menstrual blood was dirty. We will menstruate, don't sleep with boys, you are dirty. This is what we are taught. It makes us lose confidence.* (Women's rights activist, interview 2015)

Girls therefore learn that their bodies are associated with this inferiority identified with menstruation, but may not have access to further information to make sense of body changes or to understand sex, which can make experiencing puberty a particularly challenging time for girls, as one non-formal education teacher highlighted:

> *It's very frustrating. They don't know why their body is changing, they don't want to go to school when they have menstruation or cramps.* (Community educator, interview 2015)

Reflecting these experiences, the young women in focus groups often spoke of not going to school when they were menstruating, citing feeling "*embarrassed and afraid*" and that the "*school hygiene is very bad, toilets are not clean*" (Chiang Mai FGD2, 2015). For several young women, the experience of having stained their *longyi* during menstruation was a source of acute shame and embarrassment, causing them to not want to stand up in class when the teacher asked them, which in turn had provoked punishment and public shaming from the teacher, leaving young women feeling "*very shy to come back to school for a couple of weeks*" (young community educator, interview 2016). These practises contribute to further isolating female students and limiting avenues for support or guidance in understanding experiences related to their bodies.

5.5.3 Silencing and restricting knowledge

> *And also, even when we talk we can't talk freely and loudly. Men they can make noise and they can shout 'aarrh!' like that. But*

> *women no, the teacher didn't allow us in the class, we had to be quiet, 'you are women you have to be quiet' like that. There are lots of stereotypes in schools.* (Young community educator, interview 2016)

Myanmar state education practices, that have prioritised rote learning and authoritarian pedagogies (Redden 2007; Hardman et al 2014), have denied critical thinking skills to all students, male and female, rewarding replication and obedience and discouraging questioning or challenging authority and accepted traditions. However, these education practices that don't encourage speaking up and asking questions are compounded by cultural expectations of gendered behaviour which construct women as passive and submissive. Consequently it is considered a greater transgression for young women to ask questions of their teachers or to talk openly of shameful issues such as sex or puberty. Paralleling the quote cited above, one non-formal education teacher explained:

> *Girls are taught they should not speak out. It's shameful when girls or women speak openly. Mostly girls are worried when they speak openly that they are not being a polite girl.* (Women's community organisation leader and educator, interview 2015)

This silencing was felt as an injustice by some young women, who felt they had been excluded and unfairly treated by teachers in their formal education experiences:

> *We feel like only men are popular in the classroom, and only men have the chance. We want to be popular too. // Teachers discriminate against female students – even if the male student didn't finish his duties the teacher doesn't shout at them, but will shout at the female students.* (Yangon FGD1, 2016)

In areas affected by active conflict, the gendered responses from female teachers towards their students was perceived to be itself motivated by fear of violence, which compounded the differences in behaviour towards male and female students. Two young women from Shan and Kachin States respectively, spoke of experiences during high school:

> *The female teachers don't shout at the male students because they are afraid of them, because one male student had a gun in*

my class. // If the teachers shout at or shame the [male] students they wait till night and beat the teacher. (Yangon FGD1, 2016)

These young women identified the threat of violence towards female teachers on the part of some young men in high schools as further exacerbating the leniency of punishment towards boys while young women were felt to be disproportionately disciplined as they offered little threat or resistance. One of the same students continued: "*when the teacher shouts at the girls we are shy, we don't respond anything*" (Yangon FGD1, 2016). The gender dynamics of fear, violence and silencing, are therefore played out in multiple directions, in which young men are also disadvantaged through the negative assumptions of masculine violence in conflict areas. Likewise, as further explored in the section below, the intersections of gender, religion and ethnicity further compound such dynamics which can institutionalise marginalisation for both male and female students in different ways.

The cultural acceptance of corporal punishment in education, combined with large class sizes and an emphasis on respecting authority, result in discipline and punishment being common features of students' school experiences. Teachers are therefore identified not as potential trusted adults that students might be able to confide in but rather as the enforcers of idealised citizenship. Consequently, the young women in focus group discussions frequently expressed being afraid of their teachers and not wanting to draw attention to themselves in class:

If we did a mistake we were beaten. We are afraid of the teacher. // If I didn't understand the subject I didn't question, all students are afraid [of] the teacher. (Chiang Mai FGD2, 2015)

Young women therefore learn not to speak out or to challenge actions that are committed against them, and simultaneously have few possibilities to find answers to their questions. The lack of sex education combined with shame that young women are taught to feel about their bodies results in a lack of knowledge around sex for which young women have few sources of information. One young woman, herself now a community teacher, spoke of her experiences becoming aware of sex and pregnancy:

Me, I just know about sexual intercourse in grade 9, I was nearly 16. I just found out because I read in a health magazine, and I thought it was wrong. I had never heard about that. I thought that God puts a baby inside a woman. All my friends thought like that. So I brought this [magazine] to my friend and she had also read

> *this in a book and didn't understand. So one of our close male friends came to us and explained. Our male friends had knowledge of this before us. But we are very shy and we didn't have knowledge of this. But they know it.* (Young community educator, interview 2016)

The assumption that girls and young women will talk to each other about sex or body changes was not supported by young women who reported not having avenues for peer learning or sharing experiences, reflecting the pervasiveness of learning silence and shame. The experience was found to be common across religious groups. Despite the view shared by some Buddhists that members of the Christian community were more open to promoting women's rights, this articulation was not expressed by Christian young women:

> *Our community is conservative, you know, very, very conservative. Talking about sex is not good, it's not good to talk with friends, we don't talk either so much about that. Like sex before marriage is… it's very conservative in our community, the Christian community. We grew up in this community so…* (Pathein FGD2, 2015).

Consequently, young women have few resources to draw on to learn about safe sexual practice. This was contrasted with the experiences of young men who are perceived as having greater freedom to discuss more openly with friends, having access to more spaces to do so, and being able to buy and share sexually explicit material, as one non-formal educator highlighted:

> *The boys can access more easily, so they know more than the girls. They talk to each other and can share more easily. Whereas girls don't talk to each other about sex. When they do it's very secret, they don't want other people to know.* (Women's organisation leader and community educator, interview 2015)

The silencing of young women therefore has the dual effect of simultaneously making them less likely to speak out about abuse or non-consensual sexual experiences and also limiting their ability to inform themselves to make safe choices, as the same educator explained of the teenagers she worked with:

> *Sometimes, they know if the boys and girls live together, the girls can get pregnant easily. And they don't know about the disease. They know about HIV/AIDS, but they don't know it's from the sex.* (Women's organisation leader and community educator, interview 2015)

Having fragmented knowledge from varied sources, consequently creates an incomplete understanding of sexual practice amongst many young women, while they are nonetheless held responsible for the consequences. As another former teacher concluded of the social stigma attached to pregnancy amongst unmarried young women: "*they blame it on the sex not the lack of knowledge*" (former teacher, interview 2016).

5.6 Implications for enabling violence

Through positionings in education spaces, young women learn that their bodies are not of equal worth to their male counterparts, and conversely may cause harm in undermining masculine power, coupled with the characterisations of women's bodies as dirty and shameful. Likewise, these positionings are not only experienced by young women, but also observed and participated in by young men who equally learn expectations of gendered behaviour through such schooling practices. The physical and material dimensions of this characterisation enacted in education spaces, render women's shame visible and experienced both collectively through the separation of female students and individually through the humiliation of individual girls. Replicating these physical and material experiences in schools, if women are held to be transgressing expectations of their behaviour or place beyond education settings, they are liable to incur punishment. Consequently, violence against women becomes not just trivialised but vindicated. This final section further highlights the implications of such learned behaviour within society more broadly, connecting back to the subordination of women's bodies in political space, indicating that education practices are replicating a pattern of gender inequality which sustains gender and sexual violence.

While young men are able to access and share learning about sex, for young women the denial of sexual knowledge and body awareness makes it difficult to make informed choices about healthy and enjoyable sexual practice. Several teachers and activists spoke of the proliferation of sexual activity at universities, which was accompanied by frequent anecdotes of unwanted pregnancy, assault and rape, with one teacher lamenting: "*they should have been educated at school, through sex education. They have not been prepared*" (teacher, interview 2015). As highlighted above, young women have few opportunities to learn about their bodies in any positive way and are actively discouraged from doing so: the changes they are experiencing through puberty are encoded with shame and humiliation, they have restricted avenues for non-sexual body interactions (for example through not being allowed to play

sports), are not encouraged to talk to peers about sex or body issues, and have limited or no avenues to talk to trusted adults. As a result, young women are entering sexual activity from an inherent position of disadvantage. In addition, the silencing of women's voices renders it difficult for women to express their refusal, as one student reflected in describing sexual harassment:

> *Boys ask us 'why don't you do something when men do like this?' Because of our culture we don't want to speak out. We just accept*. (Yangon FGD2, 2015)

This silencing further isolates young women and multiplies feelings of shame. The same young woman continued, reflecting on the heightened isolation she felt as a Muslim minority: "*we don't have a chance to speak loud if something happens to us*" (Yangon FGD2, 2015). Having learned not to talk about their bodies or voice their discontent, young women therefore have few trusted avenues to turn to for support, as one community educator highlighted:

> *Some girls don't believe. They don't trust the facilitator much. They only speak out about the worst situations, otherwise they don't. They are shamed and afraid other people will blame them.* (Women's community organisation leader and educator, interview 2015)

Women activists and community educators stressed this challenge when working to secure justice for young survivors of abuse and rape: "*but you can't ask the girl what happened. She doesn't say anything*" (community educator, interview 2015).

Both when considered collectively, as in the case of attempting to enact the PoVAW bill, and individually, through attempting to prosecute individual cases of assault through criminal courts, sexual violence against women has failed to receive institutional attention. One civil society activist, who provides support and legal aid to women who have been sexually assaulted, spoke of the message being perpetuated, echoing the instruction provided in schooling:

> *Because you are a woman you have to be very careful, not to go out at night time, not wear clothes to attract men, behave yourself, don't laugh too loud.* (Women's rights organisation leader, interview 2015)

The same activist continued, underlining the implications of this message and highlighting the transferal of blame to women for acts of violence committed against them:

> *So if you are a woman, you are abused, you are raped, it's normal. No-one cares about it and the blame goes to the victims not to the perpetrators.* (Women's rights organisation leader, interview 2015)

In particular, intimate partner violence is not only seen as a private matter beyond legislative reach (GEN 2015a) but also becomes viewed as an accepted part of household and marital dynamics, as one community educator highlighted in speaking of legal services:

> *Talking about domestic violence at home… They don't see it as a violence… They will say there is no domestic violence because they don't see this as violence.* (Community educator, interview 2015)

The pervasive impact of learning social subordination therefore maintains the conditions for gender and sexual violence as such practices "may be (mis)recognised by their protagonists as normal or acceptable" (Heslop et al 2015, 137). Reflecting the intertwining of structural violence and coercion (Heslop et al 2015, 137), notions of masculine superiority, which are inscribed in the concept of *hpon* and made visible through the physicality of positionings within schools, facilitate the social acceptance of men's sexual entitlement (Faxon, Furlong & Sabe Phyu 2015, 467; Miedema, Shwe & Kyaw 2016). Likewise the absence of legal provisions to criminalise marital rape and the impunity of militarised sexual violence against ethnic women in conflict areas further perpetuate sexual entitlement as a condition of male superiority.

5.7 Conclusions

The combination of learning shame, silence and inferiority in multiple ways through interactions in familial, community and educational settings enables violence against women to become legitimised as a natural extension of maintaining women's social subordination, reinforcing cultural understandings of masculine dominance and disciplining transgression. As corporal punishment is seen as a legitimate form of discipline for overstepping the boundaries of culturally acceptable behaviour within classrooms, violence becomes a normalised dimension of school experience. The pervasive power of formal education settings as instruments of maintaining state order and

idealised citizenship constructions therefore has the effect of extending this influence over young women who may otherwise have supportive family environments and friendship networks from which to question gender inequalities. Such findings point to the significance of revealing the varied and contextualised gendered practices within education systems as a key step in seeking to transform gendered power relations more broadly, which move beyond an uncritical presentation of access to education as in itself likely to contribute to positive social transformations (Kabeer 2005; Novelli 2016).

Echoing research that brings attention to the multiple and subtle ways in which gender hierarchies are learned and replicated (Parkes & Unterhalter 2015; Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006), the findings presented here reflect the need to consider the varied forms of violence which are enacted and reproduced within schools beyond and in addition to physical acts of violence against female students. Additionally, young women's experiences of schooling in Myanmar indicate the need to reconsider shame and 'shyness' not simply as emotional responses to experiences of trauma but as a learned emotional condition acquired through the pervasive patterns of subordination which may be repeated in education sites. Feelings of inferiority and shame can therefore be understood as preconditioning and enabling violence, not only resulting from it. Additionally, the silencing of young women's voices in classrooms supports the perpetuation of sexual and gender violence both through teaching young women not to speak openly of sex, their bodies or their emotions, and also through denying avenues of support that teachers and other figures of authority could present. Violence against women is therefore an extension of women's subordination, their shame and their guilt at inhabiting bodies they have learned to be valued less.

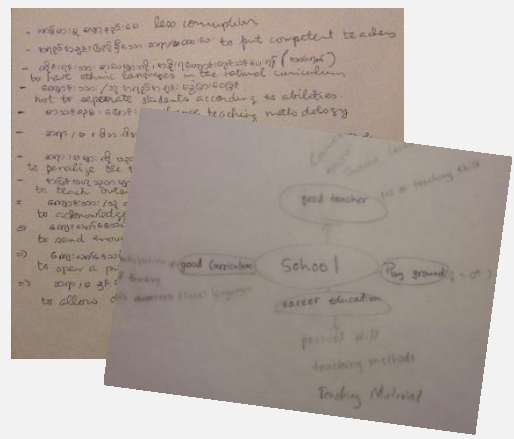
Part II Focus Study:

Desires for alternative school environments

While it is not the intention of the research to set out a uniquely negative view of female experiences in formal education, and the efforts of individual teachers to create more cohesive learning environments are highlighted as positive examples ways to foster greater inclusivity (see *4.4.2*), nonetheless the accumulation of young women's marginalisation within education is prominent. In the (all female) focus group discussions, when asked what they had learned about being a woman in their school experiences, the most common answers amongst young women were "*obedience*" and "*politeness*". Young women participating in the Yangon focus group discussion for example replied:

> *I learnt a true woman has to be polite, weak and a good follower.*
> *// As a girl, I was taught that I must be a good teacher, a good follower, be polite.*
> *// I learnt men have more power than women.*

Intended as an extension to the discussion raised above in Chapter 5, this focus study provides an opportunity to examine more closely through the data not only young women's often negative experiences in school, but also their articulations for the alternatives they would like to see. This section therefore presents the specific expressions of young women in one focus group discussion (Yangon FGD1) of their desires for improved experiences in state education. The group was comprised of 14 young women aged between 19 and 24 from six different ethnic states in Myanmar. The young women had gathered in Yangon to participate in a community education course aiming to empower young women and consequently, although the course was only at its beginning



Photos 3 & 4: Participants notes, focus group discussion, Yangon, 2016

stages, the participants were motivated to work towards improving gender equality in their communities. They were therefore knowledgeable and opinionated about gender inequality and were quick to relate this to their own experiences in education. While within the group some young women had attended multiple, varied forms of education, including ethnic schools, monastic schools and displacement/refugee camp schools, all had completed several years of schooling within the state sector. The fact that all the young women were ethnic minorities has relevance for their critical stance on practices within the state education system and the role of teachers.

Participants were asked to brainstorm the improvements they would like to see in state schools to create better learning environments. This exercise was conducted within a two hour focus group discussion during which several activities were undertaken which explored the young women's experiences in and attitudes towards their education. During this exercise, participants worked in groups of two to write down improvements they would ideally like to see in schooling, writing either in English or Burmese (later translated). The suggestions that the young women identified during this written exercise are indicated here, grouped by three themes that were common throughout the seven groups: teachers and teaching practice; curriculum and subject learning; and other dimensions of school experience. These have been visualised below, with the length of the bar roughly indicating the number of students identifying the issue, a longer bar signifying multiple groups including this issue in their brainstorm. This initial written exercise was then followed by a lengthy discussion during which participants compared their notes and expanded on why they had identified these issues and provided further details. While references to the broader discussions that took place in the focus group discussions are included throughout the Chapters of the thesis, the intention here is to indicate the changes that young women who are motivated to challenge gender inequality are prioritising for education environments, prior to lengthier discussion. All citations quoted here are drawn from the texts and mind-maps made by the participants, unless otherwise indicated.

Teaching

The most numerous improvements indicated related to teachers and teaching practice. While it is recognised that many individual teachers are trying to find ways to improve learning experiences for their students, the young women in this focus group discussion were frequently critical of teaching practices as a whole and highlighted the role of teachers as key to creating more equal and supportive learning environments. Following the frequently encountered view

amongst young adults of teachers as authoritarian (see Chapters 5 and 6), general improvements to teaching methodology stressed more student-centred approaches to teaching and "*allow[ing] discussions between teachers and students*" as well as a desire to "*acknowledge what students already know*". These positions and the perceived distance between students and teachers also connect to the desire to "*have ethnic languages in the national curriculum*" (indicated below), illustrating that resentment may be exacerbated by the lack of multi-lingual communication within classrooms. Likewise, a sense of resentment was illustrated towards poor quality teaching by groups suggesting "*to penalize teachers severely*" or "*to punish teachers and school staff in rural areas for not doing their job*". Additionally, experiences within the classroom were also directly linked by the young women to the need for improved teacher training, including that "*teachers should be trained about child rights*" as well as explicitly gender equality, determining "*if we give training there will be less discrimination"*.

Teaching
Improved teaching methodology (including learner centred approaches & encouraging critical thinking skills)
Teacher training for more competent teachers
Improves teacher-student ratio (more teachers)
Train teachers in child rights and gender equality
Treat male & female students equally (including leadership opportunities e.g. class monitor)
Punish teachers for 'not doing their job'

Table 6: Yangon FGD1 – desired improvements to teaching

Curriculum

Emerging from desired changes to curriculum material and subject learning was a strong notion that formal schooling is not meeting the preferences and interests of these young women, who highlighted the desire for classes to "*teach outside knowledge more*" and, at a high school level, to "*let students choose subjects they are interested in*". Likewise, participants stressed the need "*to put practical stuff in the syllabus*", including better resourcing such as laboratory equipment for science experiments. A more inclusive learning environment was prioritised particularly with relevance to curriculum texts: in addition to the desired use of ethnic languages indicated above, the young women also highlighted the need for "*more pictures, and better quality*

pictures – ethnic students don't understand so pictures help". Equally, greater gender sensitivity in the curriculum was frequently raised. This was expressed as a desire for male and female students to learn the same subjects, as well as changes to presentations within curriculum including representing more women leaders within history textbooks, models that go beyond suggesting young women "*must be a teacher or a nurse*", and explicit inclusion of women's rights or gender equality. While three groups identified the need for sex education within the written design of improved education environments, the topic sparked much agreement in the ensuing discussion, with participants lamenting that at present "*the teacher only teaches that students shouldn't have sex*" and that "*we know the basics but we don't know more.*"

Curriculum
Practical skills in class in addition to textbook learning
Gender balance in curriculum
Sex education, family planning & health awareness
More diverse subject choice (including human rights & gender equality subjects)
Use local languages
More material and resources
Career-relevance
Change exams (not rote)

Table 7: Yangon FGD1 – desired improvements to curriculum

School experience

Also reflecting a common theme in focus group discussions and connecting to a desire for more practical elements in the curriculum, five groups stressed the wish for more time for sports activities within school, for young women to be able to participate in sports along with male students, and for space for playgrounds (particularly for schools in urban environments). Other dimensions of school experience that emerged from the exercise revealed the academic pressure on students, from both teachers and parents, also including the propensity of after-school tuition. This also revealed the wish for schools to act as sites where help could be sought through the provision of counselling and support services. In one case teachers were identified as those who should be trained to provide counselling, also indicating the desire for closer relationships of trust with teachers.

School experience
More sports time and sports available to both male and female students
Less after-school tuition
Counselling & support services
Less pressure from teachers & parents
Less corruption

Table 8: Yangon FGD1 – desired improvements to other aspects of school experience

The exercise indicates not only the intersecting experiences of gender, ethnicity and rural/urban locations which played a role in students' negative experiences in formal education, but also the desire on the part of these young women to formulate more inclusive and varied learning environments. Moreover, these young women were clear on how they envisaged this being achieved, with the role of teachers playing the most significant part in redesigning learning experiences.