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Chapter 7

Development and activism: conceptualising spaces for women's activism in conflict and transition

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This chapter has been adapted from Maber, E.J.T. (*under review*) 'Conceptualising spaces for women's activism in conflict and transition'

7.1 Introduction

Women's activism takes multiple forms and is motivated by varied experiences and positions, creating a patchwork of women's responses to gender inequality across the globe (Wieringa 1995; Nazneen & Sultan 2014). Despite these variances, activist movements frequently draw on transnational connections and are influenced by global as well as local pressures, creating certain shared experiences of navigating these competing influences (Naples & Desai 2002). Additionally, situations of conflict can accentuate the variety, intensity and consequences of these competing pressures (Kaufman and Williams 2010). In Southern contexts, international development agencies are additionally implicated in influencing women's movements in multiple ways, including through relationships with national governments, the allocation of funding to civil society organisations, through programming and through delivering training designed to foster women's empowerment and leadership skills (Batliwala 2007; Connell 2014; Stroquist 2015).

This chapter presents a conceptualisation of the position of female activists and women's led organisations in translating and transforming development discourses within Myanmar drawing on Deleuzian notions of space (2013/1988) and Braidotti's articulation of a feminist nomadic subjectivity (2011a; 2011b) that emerges from experiences 'in-between'. In particular I highlight the role that non-formal education practices play in sustaining and advancing social movements as a site where these overlapping influences come to the fore in adapting and repurposing development discourses to create opportunities for transformative learning. I argue that furthering understanding of the roles that women activists and educators play, the strategies they mobilise and the challenges they encounter in engaging communities in dialogues about gender equality and social change offers a step

towards building more meaningful development partnerships that offer opportunities for contextualised knowledge and experiences to inform development practice.

I begin by positioning my discussion within current feminist scholarship on the relationships between women's movements and international development, followed by a brief outline of the context of women's activism in Myanmar. I then present a conceptualisation of the nomadic subjectivity of feminist activists navigating varied and competing influences. This is followed by an application of this conceptualisation by exploring two interconnected dimensions of women's civil society activism in Myanmar: firstly, relationships with the state and the implications of negotiating local, national and international influences; and finally the affective consequences of occupying this nomadic feminist position. While emerging from the broader pattern of research conducted throughout the research process, this chapter draws primarily on interviews with 16 women activists and leaders of women's CSOs in Myanmar and on the Thai border, which focused on their experiences establishing and leading their organisations, how these processes may have changed and the dynamics of working with different community, state and international partners.

7.2 Positioning activism in development

International rights mechanisms and global discourses of gender equality and women's empowerment, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can provide both momentum and leverage for civil society campaigning while also obfuscating the varied social and cultural dynamics of inequalities (Kabeer 2005; 2015; Harcourt 2010). However, while the practices of international organisations seeking to advance development goals have an effect on local women's movements, they are not the only avenue of influence that activists must navigate in seeking to advance women's rights and gender equality. Simultaneously, activists are balancing engagement with national state institutions, religious authorities, national and international legal frameworks with community and familial expectations and responsibilities. The combinations of these shifting and multi-dimensional influences, allies and adversaries necessitate varied responses from women's led organisations who are seeking to promote transformative change for women in their communities (Nazneen & Sultan 2014).

Women's organisations refract international, national and subnational agendas in multiple ways, through advocacy and campaigning to their governments, trying to change laws or enact new ones, as well as serving as sites of support, refuge or community mobilisation at a 'grassroots' level (Stromquist 2015a). These varied interactions and contextualised responses lead to a plurality in the positions and strategies of women's activist organisations (Nazneen & Sultan 2014, 5-6). Women activists leading civil society organisations are consequently positioned as intermediaries in diverse ways navigating between lateral influences, cultural and religious expectations and multiple scales of development. However, the formalisation of women's activism into NGOs and CSOs has also embedded them within bureaucratic processes, accentuated by global development platforms which can introduce tensions and constraints (Kuttab 2014; Naples 2002). Nonetheless, activist organisations are motivated by concerns that affect themselves and their communities even though the enactment of civil society mobilisation may have a distancing effect. In this sense, the space of NGO activism facilitates this intermediary position:

> the gendering of politics and the constructions of the public and private spheres give the NGO form a particular resonance with feminism. The fact that the NGO can move across the boundaries between insider and outsider, official and unofficial, or public and private explains both the proliferation of NGOs concerned with gender issues and liberal feminist investment in the form. (Bernal & Grewal 2014, 9)

As highlighted by Stromquist (2015a; 2015b) and Batliwala (2007) processes of learning and the flow of knowledge are central to these feminist activist spaces to draw allies to their transformative agenda and to challenge its opposition. Through constructing alternative learning environments women's organisations are able to share "knowledge that is pertinent to identifying the conditions of subordination that women experience and exploring how such conditions can be contested" (Stromquist 2015b, 313). In so doing, they not only "move across the boundaries" mentioned above (Bernal & Grewal 2014, 9), but also *between* constraints to expand spaces for contesting inequalities.

Women activists and their civil society movements are therefore important allies of development work for organisations attempting to

implement global objectives of women's empowerment and political participation. However, as underlined by Cornwall and Edwards (2014):

> the international development enterprise has been profoundly neglectful of the role that women's movements, small and large, have in making change happen to bring about greater gender justice and equality. (xi)

Part of the reason for this has been a tendency in development discourse to undermine the agency and plurality of diverse women in countries targeted for development assistance, instead presenting a homogenised view of Southern women's victimisation (Win 2004; Lind 2009; Sharoni et al 2015). This presentation serves the purpose of validating development interventions, legitimising the need for 'empowerment' to be conferred on subordinated subjects, and in so doing closes off avenues for reciprocal learning that might better inform practice and sustain relationships. Consequently, contextualised knowledge generated by community practice or through civil society activities and activism has little opportunity to set priorities for interventions, inform the design of programming or the orientation of development objectives codified in global frameworks (Connell 2014).

This neglect not only overlooks the contributions of women's organisations in facilitating social change but also denies the burden that is placed on women activists and educators in mediating development discourses for their communities. By failing to recognise the existing experience and expertise of women leading CSOs, the coloniality of gender constructions implicit in pre-formed notions of women in the global South risks being reproduced (Connell 2014; 2015). Within the practices of development assistance supplied by international donors, the burden of responsibility falls on local women to contextualise and translate concepts and interventions that have been formulated beyond their consultation (Khurshid 2016). However often this work goes under-recognised and under-rewarded, particularly in training interventions whereby participants are expected to cascade learning to their communities. Equally, the lack of opportunities for reciprocal flows of knowledge means that the hostility and opposition that women encounter from multiple sources when contesting strongly held social norms of gendered behaviour, is frequently unacknowledged.

7.3 Women's collective activism in Myanmar

Women's activism is well established in Myanmar and the border regions, with many women's organisations originating in the 1990s being ethnically aligned and often associated with the ethnic armed struggles for auto-determination[27] (Hedström 2016). As highlighted further below, by focusing on the needs of ethnic women and children in conflict, and attending primarily to culturally acceptable female domains such as education and healthcare, the women's organisations in ethnic regions were able to gradually establish a position for themselves that was less contested while they were viewed as operating in non-political spheres (Laungaramsri 2011). This then provided a platform from which to engage in more overtly politicised campaigns such as reporting on the systematic rape and abuse of ethnic women by the military (WLB 2014) or advocating for women's inclusion in the peace negotiations (Lahtaw & Raw 2012). Women in these movements were therefore navigating a distinct path between rejecting the frequently violent subjugation of women by the military state and simultaneously renegotiating gender roles within their ethnic traditions (Laungaramsri 2011). Cross-border networks of such women's organisations, and transnational connections to women in exile from the civil wars and military oppression facilitated the sense of a shared engagement in this renegotiation and provided a wider base for collective action. Community education was frequently mobilised as a way of sharing information within such networks, often involving cross-border movements, reinforcing the position of community education as occupying an alternative space for the recognition and renegotiation of identities.

With the expansion of both political and activist space, momentum also increased for women's organisations to mobilise for the inclusion of women's concerns within reforms, and to ensure participation in the processes of transition. There is therefore a sense of timeliness which accompanies the conceptualisation of women's activist space to ensure inclusion in emerging transitions that have previously not been accessible and has involved negotiating changing relationships across community, state and international dynamics. This chapter therefore primarily situates its discussion between the election cycles when women were navigating this emerging landscape of political change, during which period data gathering was undertaken.

[27] Examples include the Shan Women's Action Network or the Karen Women's Organisation.

7.4 Conceptualising spaces for activism and positions of nomadic subjectivity

7.4.1 Striations and smooth spaces

In Chapters 4 and 6 I highlighted the relevance of Deleuzian notions of space for education, particularly in the context of cross-border migration, both forced and voluntary. In extending this conceptualisation my intention is also to highlight the relationship between non-formal education environments and activism as complimentary sites for contesting social norms, particularly those that sustain gender inequalities. In this sense, an exploration of smooth space corresponds with feminist intentions to resist and undo the social hierarchies that maintain gender norms and perpetuate women's subordination.

Women's activism, particularly in the context of political transition, conflict and turbulence, is understood as creating opportunities for a *smooth* space which contests and intercedes with the *striated* hierarchies of structured state institutions. Striations are visible as more static and formal iterations of bureaucracy and while they may proliferate are nonetheless reluctant to change, which contrasts with the movement and flexibility that constitute smooth spaces. While smooth and striated space are understood differently they share a dialectic relationship whereby striations may encroach on the smooth, such as through legislative practices that encourage conformity to dominant frames, or smooth spaces may crystallise to reform delineated striations. Equally, smoothing can undermine the fixity of striated hierarchy provoking turbulence which can disrupt boundaries and expand smooth space. In this sense smoothness is associated with undoings, in which the firmly held assumptions of the striated nation state may be challenged, contested and reclaimed.

Of particular interest for exploring spaces of activism is the ways in which smooth and striated spaces may be in dialogue with each other, given that they "do not communicate with each other in the same way" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988, 562). They are mutually co-existing spaces, reacting both against each other and in consort following "the principles of the mixture, which are not at all symmetrical, sometimes causing a passage from the smooth to the striated, sometimes from the striated to the smooth, according to entirely different movements" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988, 562). The ways in which feminist movements therefore may resist and respond to subnational, national or international agendas through varying and at time simultaneous forms of engagement and opposition with state and development institutions reflect these dialectic asymmetries.

7.4.2 Nomadic subjectivity

The implications of these co-constructed spaces are advanced through Rosi Braidotti's understanding of nomadic subjectivity (2011a; 2011b). Deleuze and Guattari situate the concept of nomadism as itinerant figuration within the fluidity of smooth space:

> The primary determination of nomads is to occupy and hold a smooth space: it is this aspect that determines them as nomad (essence). (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 478)

Braidotti extends this figuration to conceptualise a feminist reading of nomadism as the plural experiences of a "collectively assembled, externally related and multi-layered subject" (2011b, 210) in which "women's condition as other is turned around to be a powerful position of resistance and agency" (Käll 2006, 198). This nomadic subjectivity is informed by multiple points of contact with varied others, including through physical movements across cultural contexts, experiences of displacement, exposure to humanitarian aid, international NGOs or missionaries, diverse educational trajectories and through speaking varied languages. Nomadic subjectivity is therefore both a product of turbulence and a response to stasis which offers opportunities to disrupt dominant social norms that maintain gender subordination:

> Politically, nomadic subjectivity addresses the need to destabilize and activate the center. Mainstream subject positions have to be challenged in relations to and interaction with the marginal subjects. (Braidotti 2011a, 5)

Nomadism is reflected in the position of varied women activists in mediating and translating concepts across boundaries, between global discourses of rights and empowerment, state legislation and the realities of local communities. In contrast to a linear understanding of translation and localisation from one source to another, this conceptualisation of nomadism within activism emphasises the multiple sources, borrowings and contradictions that influence the creating of "a creative alternative space of becoming" (Braidotti 2011a, 7). Activists may therefore be perceived as 'mobile' in the sense that they navigate between these multiple scales of interaction and also between striations of state authority, opening up spaces for contestation and alternative constructions.

While women activists may share a commitment to enacting social change, they are diversely influenced by their varying religious and ethnic

identities, physical abilities, as well as their age and family situation. The diverse implications of a shared position of gender subordination open up avenues for women's experiences to inform their activism in multiple simultaneous directions:

> Both politically and epistemically, nomadic subjectivity provokes and sustains a critique of dominant visions of the subject, identity, and knowledge, from within one of the many 'centers' that structure the contemporary globalized world. (Braidotti 2011a, 7-8)

Creating new, alternative forms of (feminist) knowledge is therefore a central component of contesting gender norms institutionalised by the state and also of resisting globalising discourses which homogenise women's experiences. I contend that recognising the position of these activists and educators, their "ecosophical sense of community" (Braidotti 2011b, 210), and the multitude of influences that they mediate as well as the affective consequences they endure would allow for more effective and more horizontal collaborations.

7.5 Negotiating national and international influence

There is a tension between the imperative of international organisations to work to support women's equality claims and the oppositional position this often requires in terms of state practices, heightened in Myanmar during the years of the Thein Sein administration. Over the last five years, international organisations, and UN institutions, have sought to align themselves closer with state institutions and influence processes of reform, however in doing so they have jeopardised relationships with non-state actors who maintain oppositional stances to the government. This tension is also felt in reverse, by which activists in women's organisations as well as broader civil society groups simultaneously desire to connect with global frameworks that will add weight to their movements while also being mistrustful of the potential appropriation and depoliticisation of their goals. Activists commonly articulated this dual position, oscillating between resentment that international agendas obscured local priorities and a desire for greater support and connections, highlighted here by the director of a women's rights CSO:

> *We know that international pressure to our government is very important. But at the same time the CSOs feel that because they fully support the government they follow the government way,*

> *that's how the CSOs feel about that*. (Gender CSO director, interview 2014)

This mistrust has implications for the ways in which women's CSOs work with both international organisations and with the national government. The transfer of political power from military to elected civilian parties has been accompanied by a shift in funding dynamics as donors cultivate new relationships with state partners and eschew contentious activism in border regions. The consequences of this changing funding landscape for civil society have been felt by women's organisations on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border, particularly those working on gender based violence, and has directed and constrained their activities, as one women's organisation leader highlighted:

> *We wanted to set up a shelter [for women fleeing abuse] but international donors don't want to fund a shelter so we just raise awareness … Before many CSOs could access international funding, but not now.* (Women's CSO director and trainer, interview 2015)

The same activist explained, "*before we could access them [international funds] without registering, but now we have to be registered to work with UN Women and others*" (women's CSO director and trainer, interview 2015). This shift in international involvement in Myanmar saw funding redirected from an oppositional stance towards the state prior to 2011, which supported many organisations allied with ethnic armed groups including ethnic women's organisations, now to organisations working in partnership with the state. As a consequence new and existing funders, including UN partnerships and the EU, have been reluctant to jeopardise burgeoning relationships with the government by supporting movements perceived as contentious, and have preferred to direct funding only to organisations that have been through a state registration process newly set up in 2014[28]. However, the requirement that civil society organisations be legitimised by the government severely constrains opportunities for activism, as summarised by the director of an ethnic women's organisation who had attempted to navigate the registration process:

[28] The Associations Registration Law was enacted in 2014, to immediate concerns that civil society space was being restricted and monitored (HRW 2013; Morgan 2015)

> *So for my organisation it's very difficult to register for government departments because we have the two sensitive words [in the organisation name] – ['the ethnic group'] and 'women'. And then my colleagues at other NGOs said when they apply for registration if you include 'women' the government will never give the registration. So, like for activists it's very sensitive.* (Women's CSO director, interview 2015)

In this way striations of state regulation have reinserted themselves into activist networks, reflecting the constant interplay and undoing of smooth and striated spaces as sites of turbulence are settled and recolonised. International agencies and donors are then seen as complicit in this process and further reinforce striations by adding to the bureaucratisation of movements that align with development goals. The comment also reflects women's categorisation as 'other', setting up the work to promote women's rights and empowerment as oppositional to state hierarchy. In this way, despite its seeming legitimation through global development discourses, women's rights work remains threatening to the social orders embedded through the striations of the nation state. Rather than promoting activism that might provoke a radical challenge to these orders or framing gender equality as central to reforms, much development work funded through international donor organisations instead reinforces the side-lining of women's activism as periphery. While it is hoped that activism might nonetheless provoke a reforming of alternative orders, the process may lead to compromises that undermine transformative intentions, reflecting Pittman and Naciri's observation that "being able to channel feminist voice effectively – allowing it to be legitimated and recognised by the state and in political society – does not necessarily lead to immediate change" (2014, 119).

In short, many groups attempting to resist authoritarian state regimes are boundaried into practices of engagement that risk legitimising the dominance they seek to contest and restricting women's activism to within predefined arenas which remain subordinate in social hierarchies. A case in point has been the petition to enact a Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Law by Myanmar women's civil society organisations. In developing the proposed draft law, women's organisations undertook unprecedented public consultation and hosted community learning events at multiple locations across the country, in order to ensure the violence many women experience is understood and taken seriously both within communities and across legislative structures. However, after the extensive consultation

process, the draft PoVAW law has been successively restricted and depoliticised at each encounter with ministerial committees to a point that activists no longer feel the bill represents their intentions nor challenges the prevailing rhetoric of women's subordination. One activist involved in the formulation of the bill and it's lobbying concluded: "*We are so disappointed with that. We try to push back as much as we can*" (activist and CSO leader, interview 2016).

This process has been in stark contrast to other legal reforms restricting women's freedom to interfaith marriage that were pushed through parliament without debate amid a rise in religious conservatism. The legislative parcel for the 'Protection of Race and Religion', commonly known as the 'four bills', were rapidly passed through Parliament and approved in 2015 after support from ultra-conservative Buddhist factions, and codify state authority over women's choices including marriage between faiths, conversion and birth spacing (Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015). Despite advocating against the bills, activists have been unable to influence their approval, highlighting the different pathways accessible to those at different points in the hierarchy:

> *It's driven by a group of people playing with power…It's not related to their knowledge, it's political. The people that understand, they are not in the position to do these things*. (Activist and CSO leader, interview 2015)

The contrast between authoritarian and consultative legislation preparation reflects the institutional legitimation of violence against women which activists seek to contest through engaging lateral support. Sharing knowledge and learning is therefore an important part of this engagement, which will be further expanded below.

7.5.1 Repositionings

This tension is also a product of the intermediary position of many women leading civil society organisations in working both against and within state institutional practices, and is accentuated within a context of turbulence and political transition. Local civil society and community based organisations are concerned with ensuring the state performs more effectively to support women's rights, including access to justice mechanisms and political representation, and consequently in the period of political transition there is added motivation to cultivate emerging opportunities and seek influence

within formalised arenas. One activist explained her motivation to take up the position of joint-general secretary of the ethnic political party in her state:

> *Also I've got ideas. If I continue working for women's organisations, even if I work for women's organisation, I advocated to ethnic armed groups and political activists from ethnic political parties, like that, to increase women's participation, to adopt policy for women's participation in their party, I advocate. But it's not really successful, so I just changed my strategy, ok I will not advocate them from outside, I participate inside the party and also I am going to adopt the policy for the women. So my women's organisation they support me and they allow me to participate in the political party. Now I just became… the general secretary (3) at the ---- National Party*. (Women's rights activist, interview 2016)

In this way a smooth space may find openings for influence within formalised arenas through the movement of nomadic activists as new avenues open up through the political transition. Movement between institutions, including political parties, legislative bodies, media, or social sectors, increases points of contact and potentially supports the expansion of spaces for women activists to exercise influence and to learn from experiences that can inform strategies for action. Additionally, such movements occur in multiple directions, whereby activists who have gained experience in civil society organisations may seek to stand for office in political parties, as in the case above, or conversely having been party to institutionalised processes may abandon these practices in favour of greater independence and community mobilisation. Civil society groups can therefore not be conceived of as freestanding entities, nor activists as occupying singular positions, but rather as simultaneously resisting and remaking multiple discourses and practices which can result in varied responses. Positions are therefore constantly changing as activists shift strategies, as allies cease to offer support, or as new challenges and new opportunities are encountered reflecting the imperative for those occupying smooth spaces to "confront new obstacles, invent new paces, switch adversaries" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988, 581).

Although seeking to work within state apparatus and political parties may offer opportunities to effect change from within, pushing the boundaries of striations, this is not perceived to be the case for international development, and development institutions have proved a greater challenge in this regard. Activists were commonly encountered who had previously worked for

international organisations particularly as gender or women's empowerment trainers, and these experiences informed their work and training as they adapted and redesigned training in their own community organisations, adding to a dimension of nomadism. However learning was not perceived to flow in the reverse direction, with development agendas characterised as unresponsive to the changing dynamics of local concerns:

> *As you know international NGOs always have their own agendas. I wish if they focus on the real communities, the real people's movements, mobilisation, [then] the development is not very slow. This is my wish. Because they [women in the community] are very active, they have motivation, but they don't have skills, they need technical support. Because there are a lot of issues in our country, a thousand issues, so the internationals can't focus on one issue.* (Women's community organisation leader and trainer, interview 2015)

Confronted with the inflexible position of development institutions, women's organisation leaders have instead sought ways to protect the smooth dynamics of their environments and resist the co-opting of their movements to serve alternative agendas, by defining their own working practices. Several organisations chose not to apply for funding, with one activist joking "*we're very bad at the funding things!*" (Women's CSO leader and trainer, interview 2014), preferring instead to define their own priorities for community work. The director of another women's organisation revealed:

> *We're laying out a way of doing it before we ask the donors for support. If we don't have [our own frameworks] then we have to use theirs.* (Civil society leader and trainer, interview 2015)

By rejecting the administrative infiltration of her organisation, the activist emphasised the importance of women's groups enacting their own pathways in the transitional landscape. In such ways there are opportunities for knowledge to flow back and inform development practices in international organisations should they be receptive to receiving it. However, frequently these opportunities for mutual learning remain unpursued and development practices continue to be unidirectional. Additionally, the rejection of donor funding by some organisations in order to protect independence, results in community activism being undertaken in addition to paid work, often in translation or teaching, which further stretches workloads. There are therefore tensions, in seeking greater independence from state and international

influence and balancing a desire for recognition and acknowledgement of women's rights work.

7.5.2 Solidarity in feminist mobilisation

For some women activists and their organisations, this ambiguous relationship with development institutions has contributed to the appeal of a transnational feminism that is viewed as more overtly political and therefore more resonant with the current priorities for women's mobilisation. As I go on to highlight in Chapter 8, discussions of feminist movements in the US and UK in particular were found in the women's political empowerment training courses being provided by local women's organisations around Myanmar's urban centres. Again reflecting the nomadism of their position, activists and educators made use of books and class material from the US that had been accessed during periods of study abroad, adding an additional layer of discourse to the bricolage of constructing alternative learning environments. These experiences are therefore informing the practices of women's led organisations in mobilising community education as a way to engage women and men in alternative learning environments which seek to promote social change.

Beyond these training contexts, activists have increasingly begun to identify themselves as feminists in the claiming of a transnational activist space that opens up opportunities for connections to broader movements, such as participation in global feminist forums. This space of feminist becomings has provided a context and connections with which to make sense of personal experiences and rejections of gendered oppression. Likewise, for these activists, engaging with feminism provides a sense of solidarity across borders which, as highlighted further below, may provide support for activists who feel isolated as a result of their positions: "*I think those feminism movements really drive us to move forward and to have our own movement*" (women's CSO leader and trainer, interview 2014).

During discussions and interviews with activists and feminist educators, women often recounted similar defining moments as children and young women questioning cultural practices of subordination. Cultural traditions dictate that a woman's *longyi*[29] should not be washed with a man's nor should women's clothes be placed on the washing line above those of men or placed in public view, but should be washed and dried separately in a private

[29]The longyi is the cloth traditionally worn by men and women in Myanmar in place of a skirt or trousers. Longyis for men and for women are made of different material and tied in different ways.

area of the house. In this way shame that is imbued in women's bodies as dirty and inferior becomes materially transferred to the clothes that cover them. However, several women recalled questioning this practice and in some cases challenging it:

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

By taking a stand against such traditional practices, activists are marking out an alternative subject position that resists the gendered orders of culturally constructed citizenship ideals. The same activist, the co-leader of a feminist community organisation, highlighted the process of coming to identify as feminist as an explanation for this position:

> *I found myself feminist very young, even though I didn't know the name feminist, you know … So when I found out about feminism I evaluated myself and I found out I am feminist!* (Women's community organisation leader and trainer, interview 2015)

When asked how she found out about feminism she replied that she had been gifted an introductory book on feminism (in English) by a friend a few years ago. The anecdote reflects the relationships and exposure to alternative sources of learning that women's activist environments support. In this case social class dynamics play a role, in linguistic ability and friendship networks that present opportunities for nomadism in providing contact with new fields of experience. However, while experiences working with international NGOs, education abroad and linguistic diversity may set these activists apart from others in their communities, this is not necessarily to say that they occupy an elite financial position. Indeed many Myanmar women activists live in precarity and, like their male counterparts, have endured hardship, both informing and resulting from their activism, including displacement, imprisonment, verbal and physical attack, and lack of access to funds. Exposure to multiple influences and points of contact consequently sometimes comes through these very experiences of marginalisation that have resulted in exile and alternative

education experiences (as highlighted in Chapter 5). Nomadic learning may therefore take place through diverse experiences of mobility, and accessing this expansive activist space necessitates negotiating the varying local contexts for feminist actions.

7.5.3 Intersections of identity: complexities of class and nomadism

Drawing attention to the collective action of women's movements also calls into question the ways in which the intersections of social disadvantage may be (un/)acknowledged and reflected within such movements, reflecting Yuval-Davis concern that "we cannot homogenize the ways any political project or claimings affect people who are differentially located within the same boundaries of belonging" (2011, 4). The ways in which categories of social difference are "mutually constitutive" (Yuval-Davis 2011, 4) is already apparent in educational settings (Chapters 4 and 6), where gendered experiences of education are also interwoven with issues of ethnicity, religion, language of instruction and (dis)ability. Such considerations also have implications for women's activism, and for the conceptualisation of nomadic subjects advanced here.

Notions of class and privilege can be complex within social positionings in Myanmar. The decades of oppressive military rule have contributed to widespread material disadvantage and many who were university students during the political uprisings of 1988 have endured arrest, torture and imprisonment as a consequence of their participation in democracy movements. There is therefore a clear distancing amongst activists from those elite aligned with the military regime. As one women's rights trainer highlighted during extended discussions, 'elite' women were typically identified as the wives of senior military and political figures:

> Patriarchy doesn't mean only the dominance of men. It also means the dominance of a privileged class. In any society, not only men, but also women with high status - socially, economically, and politically - can take dominant roles. As they are from a privileged group, they won't consider the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. It is also a form of patriarchal practice. Therefore, even if there is a quota system for women to participate in parliament, if those women are from privileged groups – such as the wives of authority figures and the daughters of crony men - it cannot solve the problems of all women, or the issues for women who are marginalized and have been silent for a long time. It is

> still encouraging the power of patriarchy. (Women's rights trainer, 2015)

Feminist activists therefore identify a clear rejection of elite co-optation of their movements under the guise of women's participation in prominent roles. However, a concern for feminist leadership is that the number of women associated with the pro-democracy and women's rights movements, who are seen as more likely contributors to voicing women's varied and plural concerns, remains very low:

> Women from advantaged groups – who are wives of authorities, daughters of privileged groups and elite – are more likely to become candidate in 2015 election. Who will represent women from ethnic areas, conflict affected areas, women with poor economic status? Who will raise a voice for their suffering? A lot of women in armed conflict areas are being exploited as sexual objects and raped by the armed forces. Which candidate will consider them? (Women's rights trainer, 2015)

This doubt over representation reflects broader notions of authority and difference within women's collective activism. While there may be an understandable rejection of identification with elite social groups, nonetheless the extent to which many women activists might be understood as representative of their communities is subject to limitations. Here, conceptualisations of nomadism help reveal women activists varied positions that illustrate unease with social categories of class.

As the state has been hostile to 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 combine elements of these experiences and more. Reflecting the polyglot formation of the nomadic subject, they speak their ethnic languages, Burmese, Thai, Chinese or English, and multiple combinations of these[30]. Consequently, they are used to borrowings and overlappings of linguistic signifiers. Indicative in this is the interaction and

[30] See also Maber (2016a).

synergies that come from relationship building within varied contexts, with varied subjects and across varied languages – "the effect of the constant flows of in-between interconnections" (Braidotti 2011a, 17-18). While these women activists may reject an identification as elite, therefore, their experiences of nomadism allows them to span social settings and experiences.

Nonetheless, these same experiences which may engender nomadism, even through hardship and deprivation, create a potentially distancing effect with individuals and communities whose trajectories have not been so varied. Consequently, as further highlighted below, activists and educators returning from the Thai border, although having fled conflict as refugees, have found returning to their ethnic states to engage in community activism revealing of these divisions.

7.6 Affective consequences of nomadic subjectivity

In attempting to undermine the hierarchisation which maintains women's subordination activists face substantial opposition, not only from state authorities but from those across communities and religious institutions who resist challenges to accepted gender orders. Many female activists have consequently been subjected to harassment and intimidation, increasing as internet and mobile phone access has expanded (GEN 2015a). The examples of quite public abuse that these women have been subjected to therefore undermines attempts to reduce the fear and insecurity that is articulated as a reason for not engaging in politics or voicing support for rights campaigns at a more local level. There are therefore affective consequences of occupying this nomadic subject position.

Widespread violence against women and girls takes multiple forms, including intimate partner violence, rape by state military in conflict areas, trafficking, assault of young women during festival periods and rising cases of child abuse. Knowledge of the intricate forms of violence that women experience and the testimonies of abuse is embedded within the women's networks and community based organisations who have long documented cases and published research reports on the prevalence of violence (see for example GEN 2015b; KWO 2015; SWAN 2002; WLB 2014). For these organisations, learning environments within the community focus on counselling skills and providing information and support to access justice mechanisms within a judicial system hostile to women's claims. Nonetheless, even with this more expansive approach to countering violence against women, several women trainers spoke of feeling overwhelmed and helpless

when faced with the nature of abuse, as one trainer expressed: "*sometimes counsellors need counselling, you know?*" (CSO director and community educator, interview 2015). Greater attention is warranted to the emotional burden placed on community educators and gender trainers as mediators of contentious and sensitive concepts, which can be neglected and exacerbated by international organisations seeking to promote training activities. The institutionalisation of violence against women is maintained through striated state reinforcement of subordination, and its enactment becomes part of maintaining orders and hierarchies. Disrupting these ingrained practices therefore requires a radical transformation of gender orders, which is subject to substantial resistance, and the constraints placed on women's activism may limit the potential for such a significant shift.

Likewise, in addition to the hostility and opposition that activists encounter in their advocacy work with the state, activist-educators similarly encounter community resistance to contesting gender norms. One activist who had been trained in the border areas highlighted her experiences delivering training in Myanmar in 2012:

> *I went to the village and I gave training for the women's rights protection laws, you know you have the rights, this law protects your rights, if your husband abuses you you can report to the police or to the lawyer or to the women's organisations, I explained that, but … women complained to me. 'Why do we have to report to the police? It's culture! We have to serve for our husbands. If we don't want to serve our husbands like a servant so you shouldn't get married*!' (Women's rights activist and trainer, interview 2016)

Turbulence is by its very nature upsetting and challenging social, cultural and religious conventions can be provoke emotional responses, reflecting Deleuze and Guattari characterisation of smooth space as "a space of affects, more than one of properties" (2013, 567). In creating learning environments that disrupt conventions, activist-educators have to navigate these affective consequences, which may vary on different sides of the border and necessitate alternative strategies to garner acceptance. The same activist continued:

> *The first time we met that challenge, that even women don't accept our message, so we tried to say in another message indirectly, now they became more understanding and they started to accept this opinion.* (Women's rights activist and trainer, interview 2016)

Cultural expectations of women's roles extend not only to leading activists involved in formal politics but also to female trainers who are similarly required to balance their position within their family and communities, reflected by one young trainer who revealed:

> *Even me, some of my uncles tell me, why are you so interested in politics? You are a woman, if you want to be a teacher, be a teacher, don't be participating in politics like that, they tell me like that.* (Women's political empowerment trainer, interview 2014)

Occupying this blurring that goes beyond what is expected, from a woman and from a teacher, therefore positions women activist-educators as transgressing accepted codes of behaviour which leaves them liable to reprimand and sometimes overt threats. Additionally, the vulnerability of unpaid female community teachers residing in insecure accommodation in militarised areas was underscored in early 2015 when two Kachin volunteer teachers were raped and murdered while working in Northern Shan State. The incident struck a chord with many female trainers, with one expressing: "*for us as a volunteer teacher, we become very fearful to go to the conflict areas*" (women's empowerment trainer, interview 2015). Cross-border movements have likewise been fraught with risk, leaving those pursuing alternative education opportunities equally exposed to risk:

> *I came back to Burma and I brought some young students, women, to start the young women's leadership programme, from Burma to Thailand. On the way the government and the ethnic armed groups are fighting so there were many challenges for me at that time.* (Women's rights activist and trainer, interview 2016)

The turbulence accentuated by situations of conflict, displacement and political transition which may create openings for unravelling exclusion in certain areas therefore also simultaneously exposes women to increased risk of violence, hostility and harassment underlining the diversity of encounters in transitional space.

7.7 Drawing conclusions

Global frameworks such as CEDAW tend to be based on individualised notions of citizenship rights, whereas for many women in the global South relational and familial dimensions of gender equality are primary concerns (Pittman & Naciri 2014, 119; Nazneen & Sultan 2014). Women's CSOs rely on garnering

support and allies in order to be able to apply pressure to facilitate changes, particularly at a state level. While international organisations and donors can be powerful allies in providing this support, it is local communities who sustain women's organisations as the motivation for their activism. However, priorities for women in Myanmar's varied communities, such as land rights, the impact of mining projects or contesting military violence against ethnic women in conflict areas, may be both shared and diverse, and are often oppositional to state and donor agendas. Women activists are therefore negotiating between international rights frameworks and development goals, which present a more homogenous and individualistic notion of women's inequality, and diverse experiences of subordination while mindful of the relational implications within communities. Additionally, navigating shifting relationships with the state, at times oppositional and at times complimentary, requires varied strategies and innovation.

These shifting positionings can be viewed as the conversations between smooth and striated spaces. The smooth space for activism is a fluid and dynamic space which reacts to changing influences and actions from multiple, sometimes opposing, directions. In navigating this space, activists are subjected to multiple influences from international, state, religious and community sources which both invites and creates a nomadic subject formation. A feminist nomadism therefore emerges both as a response to the subordination which women experience through hierarchical state striations and through the multiple points of contact that activists encounter in navigating these striations. Activists of the women's movements therefore make use of a smooth space constructed simultaneously in opposition to and in between the striated endeavours of nation-building, and in so doing maintain nomadic subjectivity (Deleuze & Guattari 2013; Braidotti 2011b; Laungaramsri 2011).

The turbulence caused by situations of conflict and displacement can provide openings for activism in disrupting the reach of state striations. The border regions have provided areas for women's activism to take hold, with a proliferation of CSOs working for women's rights and offering community education environments. Such border areas further accentuate nomadism through linguistic diversity, exposure to new people and new learning environments and an unsettling of conventions. However, such spaces are also vulnerable to violence in the reassertion of hierarchies. Beyond the border regions, activists are also subject to violence and harassment through their work in community education, legal advocacy and political engagement as they threaten accepted social orders. Feminist activism in transitional contexts

therefore involves a constant process of renegotiations through which activists are encountering new allies and oppositions. Recognising this distinctive position that activists and women's CSOs occupy and the challenges they face allows opportunities for international development organisations to learn from their contextualised experiences and potentially forge more effective partnerships in advancing gender equality goals.