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Chapter 8

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

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8.1 Introduction

> *Where is equality? Where is justice? Where is fairness? Where is the voice of the poor, marginalized, and uneducated people?* (Female activist-educator, 2015)

The quote above reflects the views of one woman educator and activist teaching political empowerment, gender equality and women's rights to civil society members in conflict affected regions of Myanmar. This desire to amplify the concerns of her community and ensure voices are heard illustrates the feminist undertakings of many women activists in an environment of nascent transitions. The same activist continued "*I approach [training] from a feminist point of view, not from my race or my religion*." While many international gender training practices present a homogenised and de-politicised construction of womanhood (Cornwall & Edwards 2014:19), this chapter highlights the practices of a small number of Myanmar women's groups that identify as feminist and that offer alternative formats to encourage women's participation in the current reform process. I therefore seek to explore the role of community education within the women's rights movement in Myanmar as a site to support activism and the extent to which the recent increased engagement with the rhetoric of feminism is illustrative of reactions within women's civil society groups. In so doing, I base my discussion on three main premises. Firstly, that in this context adult community education offers an alternative site of learning which has been mobilised by civil society and women's organisations as intended to be both subversive to authoritarian state practices and transformative in its agenda. Secondly, that the women activist-educators who lead community education and training initiatives

occupy a distinctive position through which they are translating, adapting and localising ideas, course content and training texts. These women simultaneously combine experiences from multiple sources and contacts while also mediating international influences. Finally, that in Myanmar these sites have become increasingly politicised and 'feminist' in their position and in the content of education initiatives. From this starting point, I explore the problematic role of international training and the significance of a new local language of feminism that is being employed by women activists. The intention is to highlight the local responses to transnational movements and global agendas, specifically through the adaptation of feminist concepts and terms for Myanmar's current transition period. This chapter emphasises the role of women activists and educators in mediating this process and considers their position as nomadic subjects in constructing their own identifications of feminist approaches to learning and to social change.

8.1.1 Positioning the research in context

Authoritarian rule and active civil wars have rendered Myanmar a turbulent site for social transformations. Despite the constraints and the brutal consequences of opposing authoritarianism, democratic opposition to military rule has supported civil society activism that has propelled activists, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, into positions of leadership. Like their male civil society counterparts, the majority of women activists who are now leading women's organisations and networks have invariably endured the repercussions of their position, from exile to imprisonment, for pro-democracy activism, for ethnic alliances and in some cases for family associations. This adds both to an atmosphere of mistrust in the current rhetoric of change and a sense of caution and fear amongst leaders and younger activists alike. However, political transition has nonetheless opened up spaces for negotiation. Since the process of democratic reform was formally instigated in 2011, after half a century of military rule, Myanmar has witnessed rapid albeit somewhat superficial transformations. Underlying the visual markers of 'progress' (such as the proliferation of mobile phones, newly imported cars, and Yangon's rising skyline) are complex social renegotiations through which historically marginalised groups are seeking to gain a space for inclusion to effect meaningful change amidst the rhetoric of political and economic reform. For the women's rights movement in this context, the multiple networks of local women's organisations are claiming a new space for political engagement through peer education and community mobilisation while navigating evolving

agendas including the increased international attention and available (albeit conditional) funds which have accompanied the transition.

However, there is an increasing disillusionment emerging with the processes of reform and concerns are growing that institutionalised hierarchies are merely being replicated. This context for women's equality movements reflects the timeliness of activism, highlighting the urgency of mobilisation for women in this first cycle of civilian government in the lead up to the elections of late 2015. Although women's organisations in Myanmar and the border regions have been active in seeking to raise the profile of women's concerns for the last twenty years at least, it is only in recent years that widening transnational links have connected women to a global movement and the discourses of international feminisms have found their way into training practices for empowerment and feminist leadership. Movements which have long been political are now being understood overtly as such, and momentum has gained finding a new authoritative space to promote women's political activism, coupled with the desire to 'create something different'. The extent to which community education has been mobilised as a vehicle to generate support for the women's movement is explored here as a key resource available to women activists and educators.

This chapter extends the discussion introduced in Chapter 7, outlining the distinctive position of non-formal community education as a means of knowledge sharing, bringing together a critical feminist perspective to education and development interventions, particularly as they relate to empowerment (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Stromquist 2015), with a conceptualisation of the nomadic position experienced by the women who are leading women's rights focused civil society organisations and who are responsible for the transmission and transformation of material. In so doing, I draw particular attention to the discourse of empowerment as a desired development goal (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Stromquist 2015).

For adult learners, community education offers spaces for learning where access to education has been interrupted or restricted and has been mobilised as a site to exchange learning on areas forbidden or unavailable in the highly censored state curricula (including at universities) or media. So post-secondary education and training initiatives frequently adopt a wilfully subversive position to state authoritarianism through the teaching of human rights, women's empowerment and social justice (Maber 2014). Women's led organisations, which have been prominent in leading community education practices in areas of conflict and displacement, have used these sites as means

to promote an understanding of women's inequalities in society and awareness of their rights, amongst female and male community members. Such practices have then been used as a platform to campaign for social change and to advocate for, amongst others, increased participation in the processes of political transition, for legislative reform that recognises women's rights and for women's protection from violence (particularly military violence in conflict areas). These education sites contrast with workshops and training courses delivered by international development and education organisations[31] which are often short term and delivered in English following an abridged 'training of trainers' model that introduces generic rhetoric of gender and women's rights mechanisms. However, many educators in the women's movements have attended these courses and may make use of the concepts introduced while assessing their relevance for their community contexts. Consequently, I suggest that the women leading these activist and educational endeavours which are oriented to women's equality occupy a distinctive nomadic position in mediating internationally informed perspectives on women's rights and increasingly introduce a more overt discussion of feminism. Along the way language and terminology are adopted, circumnavigated and/or repurposed as "site[s] of symbolic exchange" (Braidotti 2011a, 40). However as highlighted in Chapter 7, margins and centres never remain in stasis but "shift and destabilize each other in parallel, albeit dissymmetrical, movements" (Braidotti 2011a, 9). Women activists are therefore encountering new challenges and threats which undermine their efforts to enact social change.

For the purpose of this chapter data is largely drawn from a small selection of interviews conducted in 2014 and early 2015 with 14 women leaders of community-based and civil society organisations which use education as a means of promoting social activism. These women come from

[31] These organisations have in Myanmar included the gamete of international agencies including UN institutions such as UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP, development organisations such as World Vision, Care and Oxfam, nationally aligned education institutions such as the British Council and the American Centre and smaller charitable and religiously associated groups. Women's empowerment training courses have been funded by donor governments including Canada, Norway, UK, Australia, USA and the EU and by funders such as the Open Society Foundation and the World Bank. The purpose of this research is not to expose weaknesses in individuals or specific organisations, so programmes are not identified here, also with the intention of protecting the anonymity of research participants. However, it is acknowledged that not all of these organisations or the interventions they provide are the same and while there are limitations to the international model of women's empowerment individual initiatives do vary and are not automatically assumed to be without benefit.

varying ethnic and religious backgrounds and have experienced varying trajectories to their current positions of leadership. To reflect the dual role that these women occupy, I employ the term activist-educators to represent their position. Additionally, data is drawn from the mapping exercise conducted in mid-2014 with 28 women-led organisations which gathered data on the organisations and the content of courses covered.

8.2 Seeking a feminist education

In the recent years of transition, the space for civil society has considerably expanded leading to an increased number of organisations that attend both to women's rights and to gender equality more broadly (including LGBT and disabled women's groups) beyond an identification with ethnic alliances[32]. However, old and new organisations alike have mobilised community education and training, increasingly as a way to educate others beyond their member base and to highlight the need for gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches to cross-sectoral issues. The sections below explores the ways in which the international community has influenced these civil society movements, beginning with a brief look at the discourse of women's empowerment that is often propagated through INGO training initiatives. It goes on to explore how women activist-educators have responded to exposure to this training and in some cases reacted against it.

8.2.1 From empowerment to feminism

As Cornwall and Edwards (2014, 9) point out, *empowerment* has moved a long way from its feminist underpinnings of the 1990s to now being a ubiquitous term in the context of development interventions and no more so than in the environment of adult education and training courses[33] (see also Batliwala 2007; MacKenzie 2009; Kabeer 1994). The result risks perpetuating a homogenising and depoliticised construction, insufficiently contextualised to

[32] This is in part due to the response to Cyclone Nargis which struck in 2008, with many civil society groups forming to fill the void of inaction on the part of the military government, and then following the relaxing of restrictions by the civilian-led government in 2011.As part of this research project a mapping survey of local organisations delivering women's empowerment training was conducted in 2014. Of the 28 local organisations included, 14 had been established since 2008.

[33] Many such courses are set up along the 'training of trainers' model to 'cascade' replications of a desired goal of emancipated womanhood and suggested steps for her achievement.

the needs and concerns of the women targeted[34], and one which diverts attention from the plurality and the priorities of the women's movements (Ghose 2010; Dunne 2009; Khoja-Moolji 2014). Many of these priorities are more contentious and more oppositional to state authority than is palatable to international donors concurrently engaged in manoeuvring for bi-lateral partnerships and trade agreements in the same countries that are the object of empowerment programmes.

Simultaneously intersecting and paralleling these practices however, are alternative movements within local women's organisations and networks that are mobilizing community education as a platform to challenge both social norms that reinforce women's subordination *and* the oppressive state institutions that give these structure (including military, legal and political bodies) (Ghose 2010). To some extent then, the international language of empowerment has provoked a local language of feminism in response. My aim here is therefore to highlight the work undertaken by women activists and educators in retrieving the feminist origins of empowerment while also exploring an uneasy navigation with feminist discourse itself.

8.2.2 Voices muted, muffled and masked

While international connections are seen as valuable, there is a strong sense that the local space, and by extension local feminism, is distinct, and frequently misunderstood by outsiders, with one activist-educator highlighting: "our women have their own leadership skills but they don't notice that" (female educational civil society leader and activist-educator, 2014). One of the frequent criticisms encountered from Myanmar women trainers is that they get invited to participate in international training events that are perpetually introductory, with no progression to further learning, and they feel insulted by the lack of acknowledgement of their expertise. Several women leading civil society organisations expressed this frustration, suggesting that training initiatives may be misidentifying participants for their workshops and also over attributing the relevance of their content. One leading community educator who develops local language training material and tailors courses on sex and sexuality education for marginalised women, a topic entirely absent from

[34] The image of women as targets of empowerment is deliberate, suggesting the misrecognition of empowerment in development discourse as something that can be *done to* women, rather than a multiple and varied process that women might undertake on their own or with others as suggested by Cornwall and Edwards (2014), Batliwala (2007), Kabeer (1994). The question also naturally arises of which women are being identified as such targets.

standard gender training workshops, expressed exasperation that "*these gender specialists should listen to me and use this sexuality [training material] in their training*" (female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015). Such comments betray the irritation of highly experienced activists and educators leading civil society organisations, and in several cases standing for parliamentary office, with the labels of 'expert' and 'specialist' that are attached to temporary appointments in their countries. Likewise, educators were very conscious of the privileging of these perspectives, not only on the part of the international community but also by national governments and course teachers alike:

> *What [international agencies] do wrong is they introduce a package that we should use here. And what people here do wrong is they need to think and adapt more. They always think international ideas are better than ours so they don't think about our context and how they can adapt.* (Female civil society director and activist, 2015)

The short term and introductory nature of many empowerment, leadership and capacity building courses at an international level is also not responding to the need for more considered, varied and subjective learning environments for adults at a local level. Likewise, another activist-educator emphasised the homogenising nature of standardised empowerment training that does not reflect the diverse constituents of women:

> *All women are affected by women's inequality, however women are different and international training courses aren't reflecting this. Professional women, but not [those] in politics – teachers, health workers, management et cetera are also affected by casual violence and harassment.* (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

Rather than a deliberate insult, such scenarios highlight the poor model of both gender learning and gender-sensitive practice being projected in international development spheres. Additionally they risk providing a replicated model which traps gender discussions within such neatly packaged boxes under the descriptors of women's empowerment, leadership or capacity building which do not serve the demand for inclusive discussions of gender roles and a shared alliance for social transformation.

A clear doubt was expressed by some of those interviewed who had participated in 'training of trainers' women's empowerment courses offered by international organisations and were now conducting community based training of their own. Speaking of the workshop style of short training initiatives one educator reflected:

> *And also these months, I've been thinking about 'are these trainings really effective?' I've had that question in my mind. Because there has been like a lot of trainings but I don't know, I don't feel like there's a change at all*. (Female activist-educator, 2015)

Such doubts may be common to trainers and educators, where change is rarely immediately visible and where it does occur is longer term and therefore unlikely to be tangibly connected to training input. However, it is noticeable that trainers conducting this model of workshop highlighted this concern rather than community educators who worked more systematically with community members. Speaking of her role as a workshop trainer, one educator who had previously worked for an international agency and was now running her own community education programme highlighted further unintended consequences of failing to provide responsible and context-sensitive training:

> *I conducted lots of gender training [when I worked for the international organisation]. Women like it, men don't like it. So when we leave, they fight.* (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

Such comments highlight the potentially damaging effects of the lack of continuity in training courses, further articulated by another empowerment course trainer:

> *I think the problem is the follow-up. Because most of the programmes are running with the funding, and then when the funding finishes they finish, just stop. So we can't really follow-up. They might want to do something, right, after the training when they've got all this training, and now what? But we cannot support them and they cannot find other support, financially. We are very limited, you know?* (Female activist-educator, 2015)

Another tension lies in the fluctuating allegiances of donors. In opening up possibilities for political engagement, the move from military rule to

(quasi)civilian-led government has dramatically shifted international involvement in Myanmar, particularly in the support offered to civil society movements. The congregation of political attention and international actors in the urban centres of Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw (and to a lesser extent Mandalay), is leaving organisations in the periphery – the rural, ethnic and border regions that have been erstwhile homelands of movements for democracy, civil rights and peace – simultaneously underfunded and overlooked, as one teacher of women's political empowerment courses highlighted:

> *Because all the things are happening in Yangon and in Nay Pyi Taw, so we don't really see the women coming out from the very rural areas… For example, when I travelled to Kachin State I saw many young women really active in their fellowship programmes and from their church and things like this. But they don't really seem to come out from that atmosphere and that environment you know? I mean nobody hears their voices.* (Female activist-educator, 2015)

Likewise, for some, the push to promote women's political participation and educate voters, while valuable, is obscuring other priorities in the women's movement, the most commonly articulated being livelihoods, land use and gender-based violence. A sense of resignation, if not resentment, is fuelled by the current donor preference for funding election-oriented projects, which amplifies the lack of control that women leading community-based and/or civil society organisations feel in being able to respond to needs identified by the communities rather than by international funders. Even an emphasis on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which might logically be understood to connect both legal mechanisms and political structures, seems too oppositional to the current international trend of support for the state, leading to a lack of funding for planned projects such as a CEDAW shadow report to document incidents and contexts of violence. This project reflects the commonly expressed desire to reveal "what is really happening here"(female civil society leader, Yangon, 2014) against a feeling that a discourse of positive change is emerging over the top of people's lived realities, again highlighting the frustration that women's experiences and grievances are being subsumed by the totalising rhetoric of 'reform'. International observers, investors and researchers with limited experience of the context, who have multiplied over the last two years, are viewed as complicit in such a reproduction:

> *Like yesterday, one of the [foreign] business persons was at the reception and was asked to say something. He mentioned that he'd been here in 2010 and now he's here and the first thing he notices is a lot of traffic. But he thought that this is because of some change in the economic system. All the Burmese people were smiling because we know that it's not because of economic changes and growth but because of undiscipline… But for him it's a sign of the changing political way and economic growth. It's not.* (Female civil society leader and activist-educator, 2015)

A counterpoint lies in the pathways women activists are forging for themselves. However, these international interventions are not without significance, and after a consideration of the retrieval of feminist discourses, the desired roles for mutual collaboration are further explored below from the point of view of women activist-educators.

8.2.3 Feminism as a concept and term

As in many contexts, feminism is a tricky word to use in Myanmar (Hedström 2016; Wieringa 1995, 2-3). Particularly where English language terms are employed for a variety of strategic reasons including both to emphasise and to obfuscate agendas, the buzzwords of development speak such as gender, empowerment and capacity building have a history of being redeployed. The leader of one women's civil society organisation reflected on this adaptation of terms, noting:

> *'Gender' is quite common usage. Instead of 'women' or 'feminism' people use 'gender', and then when more people use it it's like jargon, it's not [relevant]… Actually the word feminism is very sensitive. Like the government doesn't even like 'women' … and I heard some government officials openly say they don't like activists, they don't like feminism.* (Female civil society leader, 2015)

Within this repurposing of terminology, the concept of feminism and its politicised activist associations therefore occupies a different position to the highly sanitised terms of the development industry. Consequently, it's not uncommon for educators to want to distance themselves from the associations of the term, as was illustrated by one teacher of a women's political empowerment course stating "I'm not feminist, I'm just teaching women's rights" (women's political empowerment course trainer, 2015). In employing

the term, activists are simultaneously connecting to a transnational discourse, while differentiating themselves from the international funding environment which is largely now failing to serve their transformative goals. Accompanying its employment is the suggestion of a transnational activism that connects a much more politicised stance with the nomadic subjectivity that informs a collective commitment to women's participation:

> *Three or four years back, people don't want to say we are feminist, they prefer to say we are activists…because they think [feminism] is a negative for women. So now I heard they are saying that we are feminist, I'm happy for that.* (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

From an original position of opposition to the authoritarian practices of the military regime, many women's organisations (and CSOs broadly) are navigating a new orientation towards working in partnerships and/or from within the state in an attempt to translate transition into transformation. Clearly, what is important is not whether or not women choose to use a certain borrowed term in relation to their positions and activities, but the evolvement of women's collective action particularly with regard to their orientation with the state that may be reflected in this shift in identification. The question remains of whether this more explicit adoption of the terminology of feminism is reflective of a more prominent interaction with the concept itself. It is suggested here, therefore, that the emerging identification with feminism parallels a desire to re-politicise women's movements generally, and empowerment specifically.

Another clear constraint is the lack of arenas for men and women alike to pursue feminist study. There are no gender studies departments at universities in Myanmar and consequently training courses and workshops provide the only organised means of pursuing gender learning[35]. Women activists are therefore using these spaces to formulate their own articulation of and approaches to feminist action. To a certain extent then, local women's organisations are re-politicising empowerment adding a renewed attention to dynamics of power and patriarchy. Although the terminology of feminism clearly has its origins in an international discourse, it has largely not found its way into the women's movement through the empowerment training material being provided by INGOs, which offer a much less politicised and less

[35] Connell observes this constraint in many Southern contexts whereby NGOs are now the major source of knowledge production around gender (Connell 2014, 535).

contentious vision of women's enactment of social change. Teachers, however, (community-based or otherwise) are responsible for the linguistic and cultural translation of texts in their classrooms (Apple 2012) and consequently we find emerging "complicated stories in the undershadows – stories of local interpretation, enactment, recontextualisation and resistance to global policy solutions" (Exley, Braun and Ball 2011, 216). Trainers teaching women's empowerment or gender equality (including to mixed gender groups) mentioned that despite there being no specific content in their training material on feminism in the majority of their courses, the topic would come up informally amongst participants. Such practices are a reflection of the widening association of women's rights as a movement with political positions and social implications. For others however, feminism has been explicitly incorporated into the training programme:

> *In the training we have to explain what is feminism, what is the patriarchal system… we have to explain clearly what we want to talk about. Justice and fairness and gender equality, we have to go through all these issues*. (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

The paradox is clear, then, that while the women's movements are seeking a greater link with the international discourse of feminism, the international community is distancing itself from politicised forms of activism in favour of consolidating support for a newly-legitimised object of development. The recent adoption of feminist terminology then is reflective of this changing environment for women's activism which has necessitated a renegotiation of relationships and positions and illustrates a closer alignment with more overtly politicised and transnational stances.

8.2.4 Constructing a feminist education

In the mapping exercise conducted in mid-2014, only one of the 28 women's organisations providing community education surveyed included a discussion of feminism listed in their course outline. However, in the following 12 months groups were found to be increasingly including the topic in their courses. Speaking of why they had chosen to add discussion of the meanings of feminism into political training courses, one activist-educator stated "these are issues that affect all women across the world" (female activist-educator, 2014). Despite objections to international training course practices, international discourses and course content are very much present in the teaching of

community education. These initiatives use the language of empowerment to reach out to women and men across various positions in society, from rural and ethnic grassroots community members, IDP or refugee populations, to students engaged in tertiary education or civil servants. Such training initiatives often promote the dual agenda of fostering a willingness for political engagement while seeking broader cultural shifts and they often make use of translated training material from multiple sources. Reflecting the fluidity of this informal space, concepts have filtered through informal and accidental means that are a product of women's nomadic experience. These points of contact include participation in 'training of trainers' programmes and working for international organisations, being frustrated at the role they play but simultaneously learning from the environment. However, beyond this, women activist-educators are also drawing on their experiences from studying abroad; reading and sharing with online communities, aided by relaxed censorship laws; cross border movements and experiences in the borderlands with their overlapping and competing mix of influences; and also chance encounters facilitated through their familiarity with multiple languages. So one activist described how an unexpected meeting with an Israeli sex therapist sparked her commitment to bring sexuality education to her community.

Educators are therefore seeing an opportunity to draw links between global movements for women's equality and the current struggles of Myanmar women activists. One of the very few community education organisations to explicitly identify as feminist and teach feminist history explained their rationale for including course content on the suffragette movements:

> *our Burmese women think they can [participate in politics] because they are Westerners, because they are foreign women, so I would like to show them how hard in history English women sacrificed their lives for the vote, for the right to vote… So we would like to show how the foreign women tried to get women's rights.* (Female activist-educator, 2015)

The same educator continued to explain the parallels in the Myanmar historical context as well as the challenges in trying to retrieve this form of historical analysis:

> *we tell them about the Burmese women's movement in the colonial time. We don't have a [historical] feminist movement but we have a women's movement, but it's based on the patriarchal sense, on the political freedoms. And we have Burmese women*

> *who also fight for their freedom, freedom fighters, in the Japan times and the British colonial times. So we give them Burmese examples as well. But the problem is we don't have Burmese women's history. There are no documents, just a few, very, very few documents, on Burmese women who fight for their freedom. Because they are marginalised from history*. (Female activist-educator, 2015)

In identifying themselves as feminist and teaching feminist history, these women activist-educators draw a sense of solidarity from what they perceive as a shared commitment to struggle. It is particularly this horizontal approach to learning, and a shared respect and commitment that is desired from international collaborations. Feminist education is of course not merely characterised by course content, but also in approaches to learning. Speaking of the pedagogical practices of both international training workshops and some local initiatives one educator expressed her desire for what she identified as a more feminist approach to teaching:

> *Even though they are asking for women's rights they are not practicing a feminist approach … It's also true in training. Sometimes women's rights activists they take teachers' role, which is higher than the participants. So it's also an approach to training I think. People don't often consider feminism in this power distance. They see it as a different issue*. (Female activist-educator, 2015)

The same educator continued to explain her vision of more equal learning practices:

> *some trainers transfer their knowledge to their participants and the participants have to listen and accept their knowledge in their notebook. To me it's not real learning.* (Female activist-educator, 2015)

The non-formal nature of adult community education is seen as potentially offering a more shared learning environment that practices "*not teaching but rather sharing*" (female civil society leader and activist-educator, 2015).

Many women leading civil society organisations expressed a continuing desire for sharing knowledge and learning with the international community, acknowledging the limitations of their own state education experiences: "*we want to get to know what other people are doing. We have degrees but what*

do we really know? We don't have the capacity to look beyond" (female educator, 2015). In so doing, women are articulating their distinctive view of feminist learning which includes how they want to learn:

> *When we go and learn short courses or masters' it's like teaching not learning. We get very good marks but we don't have the experience of putting the theory into practice … there's a lack of creativity in putting theory into practice*. (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

Reflecting the desire for greater follow-up to education initiatives previously articulated above, experiences of participating in international training courses can be illuminating but equally easily dissipate, as the same activist-educator expressed: "*we lose the connections. We think 'it's so good, what are we going to do?' But the next day we lose it*" (female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015). Another educator likewise highlighted her disappointment after returning to community activism after tertiary study abroad, reflecting the disconnection between non-contextual learning and the realities facing women in their communities: "*I still can't do anything. I feel very suppressed. I feel very confused*" (female activist-educator, 2015). Again emphasising the different position occupied by community education as opposed to other sites of more formal learning, women educators therefore also articulated the need for community-based training that was tailored to the learning needs of participants:

> *Our education system never teaches us to think. International people need to understand we need to analyse and think and question and they should help local people to think and analyse*. (Female civil society director and activist, 2015)

The women civil society leaders interviewed in the context of this research were therefore clear in the role they saw for international organisations, indicating a desire for support rather than direction:

> *International staff should bring examples from other contexts and instead of duplicating them here they should let civil society think about how they can apply here … Instead of them putting ideas, let the local [people] understand and use it with their own context*. (Female civil society director and activist, 2015)

The identification of obstacles to transformative learning aided activist-educators in formulating a more feminist approach to teaching, which supports Stromquist's observation that "education for gender transformation needs much greater awareness of the relevant content and process of knowledge development and acquisition that can be fostered" (2013, 30).

8.3 Drawing conclusions: nomadic positions within a feminist movement

As has been illustrated above, in Myanmar's transition there is a common dual articulation, on the one hand recognising gains made in the political and, to a limited extent, economic opportunities available to women while also reinforcing the need for social change that is not forthcoming. Such perspectives reflect the need to encourage women's mobilization more broadly, adding support to the call for a "more holistic approach to women's political empowerment that can go beyond the narrow cycle of support to women politicians and instead support women's organizing at all levels" (Cornwall & Edwards 2014, 16). Such approaches are being pursued by women's and civil society organisations, frequently beyond the sphere of international funding, with activists highlighting the need to address the fear of the political that is still overwhelming at a grassroots level. Women leaders' campaigning for support therefore runs hand in hand with community education initiatives, which seek to break down the barrier of the fear of engagement or subversion, not just of political participation but also of challenging gender roles accentuated and reinforced by the authoritarian rule of the military junta. The shifting landscape for women's activism, accelerated through Myanmar's so-called democratization, has reinforced the nomadism of their position, requiring varied responses and, for some, providing multiple points of contact with others.

A more political feminism is newly evident amongst the women's movement, but one that is being redefined and made relevant for the current Myanmar context. This change in discourse reflects a shift in positioning for women activists, but has not found its origins in the generic language of formulaic training courses. Rather, feminist concepts and terminology are being shared amongst women's networks by activists who have encountered them through more varied transnational movements. This filtration and borrowing of ideas is ad hoc and informal, and is reflective of the nomadic subject position occupied by leading women activists. A central implication of identifying this nomadic subjectivity is the analysis it affords the social position

of these women leaders. They cannot be understood as elite, given their marginalised ethnic and religious identities, their persecution by the ruling government and often the lack of financial resources available to them. However, they have clearly experienced different trajectories from many women in the constituencies they serve and are linguistically and academically well positioned both to take advantage of opportunities available through international contact and to challenge its assumptions. They are the activist-elite, and in the case of several of the women participating in this research, have won international awards for their roles.

Experiences of exile, displacement and relocation, and/or of studying abroad and working with/for international organisations, have positioned leading women activists to mediate and translate concepts such as feminism for their contexts. Indicative in these experiences are the interactions and 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). Reflecting the polyglot formation of the nomadic subject, these women speak their ethnic languages, Burmese, Thai, Chinese or English, and multiple combinations of these. Consequently, they are used to borrowings and overlappings of linguistic signifiers, and are able to draw on multiple (although sometimes incomplete) sources as they revise the orientation and discourse of the women's movements. Such women activist-educators are therefore adept in bridging influences while responding to shifting community needs, demonstrating what Braidotti identified as "a double commitment, on the one hand, to processes of change and, on the other, to a strong ethics of the ecosophical sense of community – of "our" being in this together" (Braidotti 2011b, 210). The result is a newly refined feminist approach to sharing learning for social change.

Part III Focus Study:

Feminist Leadership Training[36]

Leadership training is a common feature of initiatives seeking to promote women's increased participation targeting community level leadership and well as political leadership at the national level. In 2013, the Gender Equality Network (GEN) conducted a review of leadership training activities and a survey of the expressed needs of women leaders, published in the report *Taking the Lead: An Assessment of Women's Leadership Training Needs and Training Initiatives in Myanmar*[37]. GEN is a growing network of over 100 civil society organisations, national and international NGOs and technical resource persons (TRPs, of which I am one) in Myanmar, established following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 in response to the evident need for coordination in women's protection and emergency response. The network has now extended its focus more broadly to promote gender equality and women's empowerment throughout Myanmar and has conducted several recent studies on women's political participation (2013b), women's experiences of violence (2015a) and cultural norms and social practice (2015b).

One of the specific objectives of the study was to 'identify the leadership skills and leadership capacity development needs of women leaders targeted for training by GEN members' (GEN 2013a, 6). This involved interviews with 43 women leaders across three areas of leadership: members of political parties; local and international NGOs; and local-level community-based organisations (CBOs). The women had varying experiences of training, with some having attended numerous training courses ranging in duration and content, while a few had no previous experience of training (GEN 2013a, 9). GEN developed a women's leadership framework for the study which divided 23 leadership competencies across three categories: Leading Self, Leading Others, and Leading an Organisation, Institution or Community. The 43 participating women were asked to rank the competencies in three areas: those most important in their current leadership role, their own competencies, and those they would like more training in.

[36] This focus study has been adapted from a section in Maber, E. (2014) (In)Equality & Action: the role of women's training initiatives in promoting women's leadership opportunities in Myanmar. *Gender & Development*. 22(1), 141-156.

[37] As a TRP for the network I assisted in the preparation of the report.

Interestingly, in the category of Leading Self, there was a strong correlation found between those competencies identified as most important in their current roles and the women's own current competencies, suggesting that the training these women have received may have had a particular emphasis on confidence building and this prepared them well for their current positions. This fits with the content of most training courses, which emphasise self-esteem building as well as skills such as public speaking or presenting which boost confidence amongst participants. In this category, the top leadership competency identified that where women would like more training was 'coping with negative comments towards me because I am a woman' (GEN 2013a, 31). The women also identified the need for supportive environments – from their organisations, families, and the wider community, signalling the current hostile atmosphere in which women leaders often find themselves operating.

In the categories of Leading Others and Leading Organisations, there was a less clear correlation between the competencies important now and those labelled as personal strengths. This suggests that women need more support in these areas and training courses may need to include greater attention to equipping women to shape organisations and effect institutional change. While communication skills were listed as prominent current competencies, reflecting their inclusion in the majority of training courses, managing conflict and decision making were highlighted as areas with a need for greater training. Interestingly, the skills relating to influencing and affecting change featured less prominently both as competencies and identified needs: this would seem to indicate a practice of leadership that may not be genuinely transformational, as women's current capacity to influence broader institutional change is still limited.

The findings compliment my review of leadership and empowerment training text. At a skills level, 'leadership skills' are actualised as communication and presentation skills and public speaking, in some cases combined with negotiation skills. 'Empowerment' is largely characterised as confidence building and networking with likeminded activists, with activities promoting group work and shared learning. Trainers and participants expressed particular enjoyment of these pedagogical styles that gave them the opportunity to work together in a participatory manner, highlighting the most positive contribution of such training workshops may be not the content they deliver but the environment they create. However, in terms of developing the skills women require to lead effectively in their organisations and communities, trainings are frequently falling short. Additionally, in the material surveyed negotiation skills

exercises tended to assume a male adversary in a business context, which is unlikely to address the experiences of women leaders when confronted with mistrustful community members. As will be explored further in Chapter 9, training is therefore not preparing women for the hostility and resistance that many have faced in reproducing activities and attempting to challenge social norms.

This fits in with concerns expressed by Srilatha Batliwala writing of the need to articulate feminist leadership as "working to transform the relationships of power in society, and to create alternate models of power within their own structures" (2011: 33). Highlighting four areas of focus for leadership training – Power, Politics, Practices and Principles – she sees evidence of a prominent focus on practice amongst leadership training programmes, but fears that considerations of power dynamics and their role in reproducing unequal structures are often lacking from feminist leadership programmes (Batliwala, 2011). Batliwala's research, conducted on behalf of CREA, provides a valuable framework within which to conceptualise feminist leadership training practices and also influenced the design of the GEN study. GEN similarly concluded that attention to power relations and transformative approaches to leadership practice were necessary considerations of course design (GEN 2013a, 21) and also emphasised the importance of networks and supportive environments in facilitating women's participation:

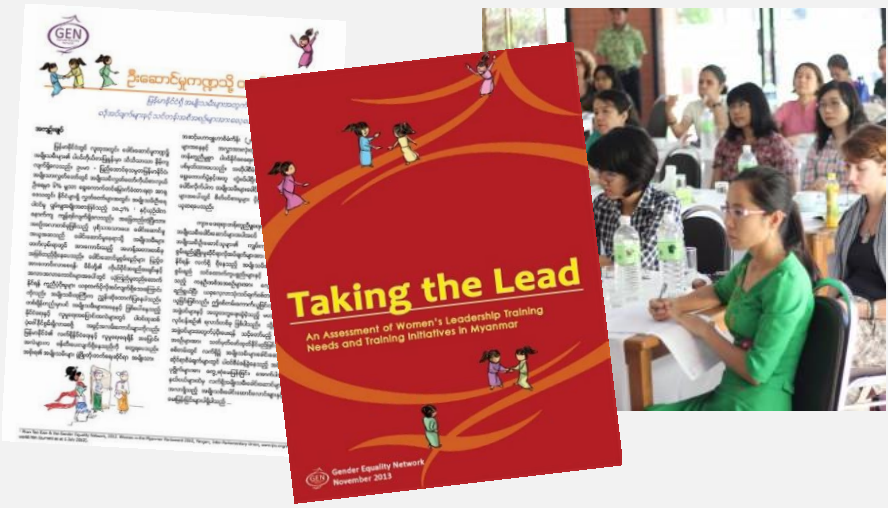
> It depends on people and colleagues. We need mutual understanding and goals. The organization needs to give space, more time to build social relationships and give a clear December 2014 vision, strategy and approach. Training can help. (Female leader interviewed for *Taking the Lead*, (GEN, 2013a: 12))

The survey also highlighted the varying needs of women in different roles, with women leaders in community based organisations expressing different needs from those in NGOs and women in political parties, while training practices frequently do not tailor their workshops to address these differing positions. In particular, the female members of political parties interviewed found their experiences of training too short and not sufficiently detailed, largely covering broad introductory themes (GEN 2013a, 13). This reinforces a need for training initiatives to conduct careful needs assessments and to adapt courses according to the participants involved. In many cases this may require a significant shift in organisation, as frequently courses are developed, funded, and material is sourced before the participants have been identified.

The findings indicate that women leaders see training as an important source of support to supplement and inform their own efforts to impact positive change, and that these initiatives would benefit from expansion to meet these demands. GEN provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for the improvement of training programmes in Myanmar, with the aim of better supporting women from diverse backgrounds and with varying experiences in accessing leadership positions and in leading according to transformative models rather than simply reproducing power relationships. Based on these GEN recommendations and my own observations in my professional work and research, I would highlight the following key considerations:

- those organisations conducting leadership training must conduct thorough needs assessments, tailor course content appropriately, and engage suitable trainers to model participatory approaches;
- women's leadership training should follow a feminist, transformational approach that analyses power imbalances and supports women to lead differently, rather than reproducing unequal structures;
- women leaders need greater support in leading organisations and affecting institutional change: GEN members called for very practical skills training, including strategic planning, organisation set-up, and gender-sensitive policymaking, as well as communication, decision-making, and analytical skills (GEN 2013a, 20);
- training programmes should develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation strategies to be able to adapt more effectively to the changing needs of women leaders;
- for young women seeking to access leadership roles, internships and mentoring opportunities should be considered to facilitate pathways;
- women are demonstrating a desire for continued learning; training should therefore be offered at different levels to avoid repetition of basic concepts and so that women can continue to develop their leadership skills in timeframes that suit them (GEN 2013a, 22).

The final point is of particular relevance to the issues raised in this Section. While there may be a natural reaction to doubt the relevance and utility of many of the training initiatives currently offered, women across varied positions and backgrounds express a desire and motivation for continued opportunities for learning, leading to an attempt in this research to identify more effective strategies for developing relevant learning environments.



Photos 5, 6 & 7 (L-R): Burmese briefing paper, Taking the Lead; English report cover page, Taking the Lead; a GEN meeting. Images from GEN's website: www.genmyanmar.org