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Chapter 9

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

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This chapter has been adapted from Maber, E.J.T. '(Re)Constructing Empowerment: Challenges and alternatives in transporting women's empowerment training' (draft)

9.1 Introduction

This chapter extends the discussions of the limitations found in leadership training practices, to focus on the experiences of Myanmar educators in redeploying empowerment training and in the process constructing alternative perspectives on empowerment. The chapter first reflects on the content of international training material which was found in use in Myanmar through the mapping exercise and through the ethnographic discourse analysis. Secondly, the experiences of Myanmar trainers in redeploying this material is explored, revealing tensions in the process of attempting to replicate empowerment training and workshops. Finally, the practices of women's organisations in constructing alternative courses which seek to promote women's empowerment are highlighted.

Particular attention is given to two dimensions prominent in empowerment training, with contrasting approaches evident from within Myanmar's women's movements. These are: the dual notions of sex and gender, commonly portrayed as biological differences in sex compared with social constructions of gender which are approached quite differently within different courses; and the contrasting characterisation of the relationship between knowledge and empowerment. Two courses, of contrasting lengths and adopting different priorities and approaches, are highlighted as case studies to offer alternative perspectives on the notion of women's empowerment training.

Although gender is understood to be relational, necessitating the inclusion of diverse gender identities (Butler 1990; Davies 2000; Connell 2012; Yuval-Davis 1997), training courses have largely tended to target women,

particularly for empowerment and leadership initiatives but also in the content and focus of workshops delivered under the guise of gender training. Consequently, while I recognise the limitations of reducing gender equality movements solely to women's contributions, this chapter takes as its main focus women's empowerment training as a primary means currently employed to promote gender equality, and alternative responses from local women's led civil society and community based organisations within the context of Myanmar.

The immediate paradox presents itself of whether it is possible to 'teach' empowerment, in what ways it might be 'learned' and whether training courses could provide a means of doing so. This chapter starts from the position that given how common such courses are and the propensity of women's led organisations to continue to adapt and deliver training, research into the broad implications of these practices makes a contribution beyond simply dismissing them altogether. This research therefore does not seek to evaluate the impact of individual courses, but rather to explore practises and experiences as expressed by women activists and educators who have at once participated in training and are subsequently delivering their own.

9.2 Learning empowerment

Global development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, and now the Sustainable Development Goals, have increased international attention to gender inequality and have codified women's empowerment into a universalised and seemingly quantifiable objective (Kabeer 2015; Cornwall & Rivas 2015). Simultaneously, education systems have also been identified within these same frameworks as an assumed avenue for facilitating empowerment (Kabeer 2005; Stromquist 2006). However, the failure of many national education systems to promote transformative social change (Novelli 2016) has been equally evident in persisting gender hierarchies reinforced through formal education practices, coupled with continuing limited access to quality education for many girls and young women (Parkes 2015; Connell 2011). The shortfall of formal education has therefore set the stage for the proliferation of training courses identifying the need for adult women to 'learn' empowerment and leadership skills perceived as missing from previous (sometimes limited) learning experiences. International organisations in particular have taken up this objective, largely bypassing state engagement to deliver their own courses promoting an image of empowered womanhood as a desired development goal. However, there is an immediate concern in

international development actors attempting to construct idealised female citizenry and models of empowerment beyond local experiences (Dunne 2009).

In circumventing state institutions that are complicit in the reproduction of gender hierarchies, onus is placed on women activists to contest gender inequalities. While many activists and educators take up this task with admirable vigour and dedication, the affective burden placed on individual women to enact social transformation exposes them to risk, particularly in spheres where their influence may be limited, as they encounter new forms of opposition. Indicative in this are the nature of relations between multiple actors - donors, development agencies, national governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups and activists – and consequently exploring processes of knowledge translation therefore highlights the implications of where power lies and what avenues are available for contestation or resistance (Bonal & Rambla 2003; Chilisa & Ntseane 2010). The argument is made that by listening to the experiences of women activists and educators in translating training experiences for their communities and contexts, development organisations might better understand the role they play in advancing equality objectives and how these undertakings might be better supported.

Within the context of facilitating learning as a means of empowerment, issues arise in the failure of some international training to recognise this specific position and to design training appropriate to the skills and existing knowledge of women activists and educators with opportunities for mutual learning. Instead, training has a tendency to anticipate a standardised model of participant in need of empowerment and to assume that learning will flow in a single direction. Training that is perpetually introductory and insufficiently contextualised is therefore not responding to the situation of local women activists, community educators and civil society leaders who are already familiar with gender injustices nor is it preparing them to be able to extend activities within their local communities. The ill-fitting design of courses therefore exposes the disconnection between generic global discourses and the highly contextual and multiple, simultaneous priorities of local women's movements, which leads to frustration on the part of women activists.

9.3 Context for training and research methods

Although highly constrained, prior to Myanmar's recent political transition, empowerment training courses did occur, delivered both by international and

local organisations, however they have expanded in number since 2011. Despite ongoing constraints for civil society nonetheless a less restrictive operating environment for contentious rights based programming has emerged, and networks of women's organisations have increased in membership numbers and in profile, allowing for greater cooperation between organisations that were often previously working in isolation. Although women are increasingly mobilised and openly active in civil society demonstrating a desire to advocate for women's rights, they can find themselves lacking the platform to effectively influence policy on a broader scale. Such dichotomies undermine the apparent gains in women's opportunities and perpetuate the dominance of masculine influence, highlighting the danger that women's inclusion is being overlooked in the rapid pace of reform. There is an evident risk then that generic approaches that fail to address the prevailing imbalances in power relations may be perpetuating inequalities, and transferring the onus onto those who are disadvantaged to bring about changes in social institutions where their influence is limited.

Data for this chapter draws particularly from the process of ethnographic discourse analysis conducted closely with five women's organisations in Myanmar and Thailand and with an additional five organisations according to a more light study (as highlighted in Chapter 3). Citations of individuals and training texts therefore largely come from these ten organisations, and the 19 activist-educators and 30 course participants who were consulted in the study. The discussion below begins with a brief overview of the content of international training material from ToT courses found to recur in subsequent training, followed by the responses and perspectives of Myanmar trainers in attempting to replicate and adapt training themselves. Finally, examples are considered from the ways in which local women's organisations are redesigning training content, focusing on dimensions that trainers identified as empowering themselves.

9.4 International empowerment training material

From single workshops to 10-week training packages, courses promoting women's empowerment, leadership, and capacity building abound across development contexts, being provided by international organisations, facilitated by international consultants (myself having been one of them) and/or funded by international donors. Many workshops and courses being

delivered by international organisations[38] are set up along the 'training of trainers' (ToT) model to 'cascade' replications of a desired goal of emancipated womanhood and suggested steps for her achievement. All of the women leading civil society organisations engaged in the course of this research had participated in such courses, and material borrowed from ToTs was found in use in several of the courses studied. Recognising the individuality and autonomy of trainers and educators (Apple 2012; Connell 2011), these training practices and the texts used within them are of course not passively received, but interrogated and at times challenged and contested by local trainers who are ultimately responsible for the adaptation and repurposing of concepts and material, and these counter movements are explored further below.

As introduced in Chapter 8, despite the original feminist underpinnings of empowerment, much attention has been brought to the co-optation of the concept by development organisations resulting in the instrumentalisation and depoliticisation of women's equality claims (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Kabeer 1994). Consequently in training courses as in development discourses, a homogenised presentation of 'woman' (and indeed 'man') has been critiqued as lacking in localisation both to contextual landscape and to the varying needs of diverse women (Dunne 2009; MacKenzie 2009; Khoja-Moolji 2014).

A closer examination of some of the training material being used under the heading of women's empowerment indicates the limitations of and concerns over generic training material replicated across contexts. Amongst the variety of international training material being used, texts from six international sources including UNFPA, YWCA, Oxfam, Amnesty International, World Vision and Women Can Do It (WCDI) were found to recur, in addition to the textbooks produced by international staff at a Myanmar and Thai based organisation (in English with some Burmese translations available). Of the myriad ToT workshops and training courses that local trainers recounted having participated in most had taken place in Yangon and in Thailand, particularly around Chiang Mai, with some having travelled further afield for such training including to Australia, the Netherlands, Norway and the USA. Training courses had typically lasted between one and five days, and were

[38] Amongst the international organisations delivering forms of empowerment training these include UN institutions such as UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP, INGOs such as World Vision and Oxfam, and nationally-affiliated organisations such as the British Council, American Centers or programmes such as the Norwegian government affiliated 'Women Can Do It'.

delivered by international consultants sometimes in partnership with a local facilitator.

9.4.1 'Empowerment' constructed in ToT material

A survey of the training material provided by the ten groups consulted showed that material borrowed from international training was found to cover two main areas: presenting information on gender inequality and soft skills building. As attention was drawn to training practices for skills building in Focus Study 4, the discussion here focuses mainly on the content, topics and exercises aiming to reveal inequality. Although trainers may contextualise the material, the texts themselves did not provide details specific to the Myanmar context. A challenge remains that in seeking to contextualise generic training material, the agenda has largely already been predetermined of what constitutes inequality and what areas are prioritised as significant for women's empowerment.

Training material typically begins with exercises to explain the difference between sex and gender. This was the case in all the international training material surveyed, as well as a good deal of locally designed material used in courses, outlining the difference between 'sex' as denoting biological differences between men and women and 'gender' being socially constructed norms and expectations of roles and behaviour. Doubts have been raised over the relevance of this trope and its utility in advancing a comprehensive view of gender relations (Davies 2000, 54), particularly when there are no equivalent translations for these concepts in the first languages of course participants (as is the case in Burmese and other Myanmar ethnic languages). In reinforcing male-female binaries there are risks that new exclusions are introduced. Exercises that attempted to reinforce the differences between 'sex' and 'gender' characteristics were found to emphasise the biological functions of women as giving birth and breastfeeding, simultaneously isolating women who may not be able to or wish to perform these functions and reinforcing heteronormative expectations of gender performances. Additionally, three international training texts were found to explicitly state that 'sex cannot be changed', immediately setting up dangerous constructions of transgender and transsexual identities as errant (see for example *fig.8*).

> Sex is biologically founded and constant across time and cultures. The fact that we have different physical features makes up the sex dimension, and a person's sex is not subject to change. The sex dimension is dichotomised into male – female.
>
> Gender is a socially-constructed notion of what is feminine and masculine, thus also the understanding of what it is to be a man or a woman. Gender varies across time and between cultures. Gender is defined by the terms: feminine and masculine
>
> The qualities and characteristics of a person are not dependent on their sex, but different conducts and mindsets are connected to and defined by gender. It is important to be aware of this. Sex cannot be changed but gender roles are constructed, and thus can be changed.

Figure 8: Text from a Norwegian training manual for women's empowerment, WCDI, p.2-3.

This introduction is typically followed by statistics revealing women's global oppression, accompanied by evidence of women's unequal participation in the labour market and in politics. Women's rights, and in particular CEDAW, are also presented, with the emphasis on what they are rather than how these rights may be accessed or mechanisms to report violations[39]. Rounding off the conscientisation process, gender based violence (GBV) is also commonly included as a topic within training material, again focusing on what it is - for example, what constitutes rape - and its prevalence.

Participatory exercises, such as 'work diaries', which involves comparing the listing of men and women's daily paid and unpaid tasks within and beyond the household, offer some avenue for contextualisation to reveal gender inequalities experienced by course participants. However, exercises such as these presuppose women's subordination at a household level and deny diverse household composition. As befitting the construction of Southern women in development discourse (Lind 2009; Win 2004), it is assumed that women are mothers in male-headed households. While this may be the case for many women, equally many households represent much more plural compositions, particularly in areas affected by conflict, displacement and

[39] Although CEDAW is commonly taught in ToT empowerment courses the focus is on conveying understanding of what it is rather than how it might be invoked. As I have highlighted in Chapter 8, projects that actually try to enact CEDAW, such as producing a shadow report on right abuses, struggled to secure funding being viewed as too contentious and oppositional to state interests for many international donors courting the transitional government.

legacies of political persecution. When a 'work diaries' exercise was observed conducted with a young women's political empowerment course, for example, participants responded with a vast range of variation revealing daughters financially supporting parents and extended families, women having moved from rural to urban areas living in hostels, alone or in apartments with friends, women with caring duties and those with none, women living in abusive homes, and those with supportive partners. While there may be emphasis on identifying practices of subordination incorporated within training course material, there is a risk that decontextualized training practices anticipate these areas of subordination within predefined global trends and therefore may overlook more nuanced, interconnected or alternative manifestations of inequality.

Further assumptions about the nature of womanhood abound within textual material, presenting a universalised image of women as heterosexual, working wives and mothers, leaving many young women in particular struggling to find themselves represented within training texts devoid of diversity in socio-economic status, age, religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability. Likewise, the singular construction of men as (heterosexual) oppressive aggressors does little to advance a nuanced understanding of gender identity and relationships, and equally misrepresents many Myanmar men's commitments to social change during transitional struggles as well as women's relational experiences. By generalising gender norms and presenting a universalised vision of gender inequality, courses and material have therefore potentially overlooked the localised interconnections which inform and maintain traditional gender roles. Likewise, the image is presented either of women as confident leaders or of women as victims of subordination and abuse, but not of how one might occupy both positions simultaneously, nor of how one might navigate between these and the multiple other positions that women may occupy on the spectrum of their experiences.

9.5 Experiences of redeploying training

Of the women and men interviewed in the context of this research, many were pleased to have opportunities for international contact and, particularly amongst younger women, were positive about participating in international led training. However, invariably they expressed tensions within this participation and although they may have enjoyed the environment of the course itself, encountered challenges in acting upon what they had learned and sharing learning with the wider community, raising doubts over the

appropriacy of some training models. As highlighted in Chapter 8, a frequent lack of follow-up means that organisations are often not aware of the difficulties that participants encounter in attempting to cascade learning, and therefore these experiences are not feeding back to inform the redesign of future courses. Once one-off funding allocations have been used there may be neither the financial resources nor the motivation for follow-up after final reports to donors have been submitted, leading one women's equality activist to lament:

> *Good projects are implemented, but there's no feedback at all. Once the money is gone no-one is interested in what has happened.* (Civil society director, Yangon and Kachin, 2015)

Rather, the coloniality of development relations transfers responsibility for advancing narrow equality objectives to women activists and trainers while relinquishing international organisations' participation in the continued process of learning. While international training courses largely expect that participants will continue to share learning within their communities, there is rarely financial compensation for doing so. ToT models are therefore further contributing to women's unpaid workloads, in addition to familial duties, while simultaneously exposing them to risks and hostility. The sections below explore specific challenges that community educators faced in navigating this process of adapting material for the specific contexts of their education and training programmes, with emphasis on the challenges of translating terminology and concepts and of encountering resistance.

9.5.1 Challenges of translation

As international training and material is largely provided in English, issues of language pose significant obstacles and undermine the relevance of content for participants at the community level. The women attending ToT initiatives have typically been identified to participate due to their ability to speak multiple languages and their existing familiarity with development organisations. Although in this sense they are well placed to translate international concepts for local audiences, nonetheless finding the right words to do so is a challenge where there are frequently no Burmese language equivalents for development terminology and consequently terms are typically deployed in English. However this can alienate participants within communities who are unfamiliar with these terms, reflecting the potentially distancing effect of nomadic subjectivity explored in Focus Study 3. Reviewing the evaluation

feedback she had received from participants in her women's empowerment training course, one local educator highlighted:

> *They said [in the evaluations] some resource persons use many English [words] so they can't understand and they can't catch up*. (Women's empowerment trainer, Yangon, 2015)

The difficulty in finding the right translation points to an underlying challenge in localising concepts, where the meaning of development terminology often remains equally elusive in English[40]. Likewise, where training texts have been translated from English into Burmese, this does not always make them any more comprehensible or useable in a classroom, particularly when the translator may not have been familiar with education needs. One trainer teaching classes to young women from mixed ethnic groups highlighted this challenge where learners may speak a variety of ethnic languages:

> *I also have the textbook in Burmese, but the problem is the language they use for translating is very difficult to understand, so the English is easier to understand. If people want to translate the books from English to Myanmar they should use very simple words instead of using the very high words, because Myanmar is very easy to complicate when you translate it. That's why I use English books.* (Young women's empowerment trainer, Chiang Mai, 2014)

Likewise, beyond only linguistic translation, the difficulty in transposing advocacy strategies across contexts was also highlighted by a trainer adapting women's political empowerment material originating from America:

> *Because America is a developed country, for the advocacy we don't have those kinds of tools or materials in our country, so we have to modify in our context. Like sometimes they suggest us to use texts [sms] in our campaign, but in our country not everybody can use the mobile phone, so it's not useful in our country, so we skip that kind of part and we have to find another way.* (Women's political empowerment trainer, Yangon, 2015)

[40] 'Empowerment' is similarly a much contested term in this regard. See for example MacKenzie (2009) or Cornwall and Anyidoho (2010).

At a local level then, courses require greater time to cover unfamiliar concepts and negotiated linguistic hurdles, and choices may need to be made as to which concepts are considered essential for the objective of training.

9.5.2 Relevance & resistance

The adoption/adaptation of material designed for different contexts can also be problematic, beyond the burden of translation work involved, and can result in the subtle, unintended reinforcement of entrenched prejudice. In three instances[41], training material was encountered that involved case-studies of Muslim women's marginalisation in the Middle East or South Asia. However, rather than fostering a sense of solidarity, there is a risk that transnational examples of Muslim women's oppression can add fuel to the rhetoric of male Muslim threat in Myanmar which is reinforced through public discourse stoked by certain nationalist, ultra-conservative Buddhist groups and legal changes to restrict interfaith marriage.

Likewise, the sensitivity of contesting gender roles, particularly where they are closely allied with understandings of religious duties, is frequently unacknowledged in workshops leaving trainers facing hostility and exposing tensions in approaches. One woman leading a local training programme[42] spoke of a guest trainer who had conducted gender training for one day:

> *They have a very strong religious belief on men's and women's things. So when [the trainer] speaks about men and women are the same status they complain. They think [the trainer] is very outspoken. They ask the question, 'are you a Christian or a Buddhist?' Some participants think she dared to speak out because she is a Christian*. (Women's empowerment trainer, Yangon, 2015)

The perceived irrelevance of concepts, exacerbated by linguistic divides, can fuel this hostility, highlighting the need to adapt content to the priorities of women in different circumstances. For example, while many leading women's rights activists are engaged with CEDAW monitoring and campaigning to hold government bodies to account for inequalities and rights violations, and report positive engagements with CEDAW in training, other trainers have been

[41] It should also be noted that this material was not found being used in the Muslim women's group that was included in the research.

[42] This five day training programme was delivered at multiple locations in predominantly Buddhist communities.

surprised by the rejection of international mechanisms they encounter at a community level. One young woman spoke of her experience cascading training to older women in her community after she had participated in a ToT workshop, which had emphasised the importance of CEDAW:

> *One woman said, 'we can't be leaders because we are women' and another woman said 'we can't be leaders because we are women and we are afraid of the dark. If the violence or something happens, conflicts happen, in the dark we women can't go there. That's why leaders must be men'. Actually CEDAW is nonsense for them I think.* (Women's empowerment trainer, Ayewaddy, 2015)

Despite its standard appearance in training courses, the relevance of CEDAW to the lives of women at a community level is doubted by some local trainers. Particularly in conflict areas, where the rule of law has a tenuous hold, militarised sexual violence against women is common place, and trafficking networks flourish with impunity, international rights frameworks may be viewed as empty at best, as one male trainer working in partnership with an international agency similarly expressed: "*There's not very much that learning about CEDAW can do – how does it help?*" (Gender trainer, Kachin and Rhakine, 2014). The same trainer also highlighted the disconnection between a rhetoric of international rights mechanisms and the precarious situation of groups who are denied citizenship status, which can anger local communities. Speaking of training conducted within displacement camps for Muslim communities in western Rakhine state, the trainer continued: "*In Rakhine State when people learn about their rights they say 'ok, where's my ID card?'*" (Gender trainer, Kachin and Rhakine, 2014). The tension highlights the position of community educators as mediators of knowledge who are then held responsible for the redress of inequalities and power imbalances that are beyond their influence, potentially exacerbating tensions between dominant and marginalised groups.

However a counterpoint can be found in the practices of women's organisations and trainers that have emerged through this process of adapting training content. The section below highlights some of the responses encountered amongst women's organisations, with a focus on what activists and educators have identified as empowering within these learning spaces through their experiences of participating in and delivering training.

9.6 Counter responses from women's movements

While the courses designed and delivered by local educators make use of international training material borrowed from these courses, they are also adapting and supplementing to create learning environments that more directly address the needs of local women and men in confronting unequal social structures that maintain hierarchies and subordination. This section highlights departures from this approach by focusing in particular on two areas prioritised within the training practices of the women's organisations studied: notions of sex and sexuality; and the conceptualisation of knowledge as a means to empowerment. These are supported by two case studies drawn from the process of ethnographic discourse analysis, observations, group discussions and interviews conducted with women's organisations targeting different priorities. The section ends with further reflection on this diversification of what is perceived to be empowering and the relational approaches adopted towards gender equality efforts.

9.6.1 Violence, Sex and the Body

Attention to women's sexuality was incorporated into five of the courses researched, with varying degrees of emphasis and directed towards different age groups, including emphasis on body changes and familiarisation with women's bodies. As also highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5, the need for sex education and knowledge of body changes during puberty, being absent in formal education curricula, was commonly articulated amongst young women (and to a less prominent extent young men) in focus group discussions and interviews, as one young woman highlighted:

> *For most of us, our first menstruation is quite a shock for us. We are shy, we even think it's shameful. I think for men it's ok but for women it's quite difficult to accept puberty*. (Young women's community educator, Yangon, 2015)

Body awareness and countering the shame that women have learned to feel towards their bodies is therefore prioritised in reconceptualising notions of women's empowerment.

While international women's empowerment material typically emphasises the distinction between sex as biological and gender as socially constructed, there is a general absence of discussions of sexual practice, sexual pleasure and sexuality. Additionally, by emphasising the biological function of reproduction in discussions of sex, material constructs an assumption of

heterosexuality which is often sustained through discussions of gender characteristics. By contrast, sexual and reproductive health training is often delivered in isolation from empowerment training, more commonly by health NGOs placing an emphasis on HIV/Aids prevention and contraceptive use. This removal of issues relating to sexual practice from broader discussions of empowerment or gender inequality fails to recognise the interlinked nature of issues of consent and coercion with gender roles and power dynamics. Likewise, in isolating discussions of sexual health within freestanding workshops, the resistance to engaging with sensitive topics from community members described above is also accentuated. One young woman trainer spoke of delivering reproductive health training within her community in Ayewaddy Division after attending a ToT training workshop in Yangon:

> *Given the kind of education they have, it's a bit awkward for them, when we get the feedback, when we have to talk to Mums, they said why are we talking about this, it's kind of embarrassing. And also when I delivered the training here the students were also kind of, they feel kind of awkward hearing about things like that. It's awkward for them. And they think it's not like the education that we had to learn [at school], especially when we give the training with boys and girls mixed, and they are teenagers so they feel a bit embarrassed. And that's our first time. And some, they don't like that kind of education at all.* (Karen community trainer, Ayewaddy, 2015)

As explored in the case study below, certain women's organisations however have taken a more holistic approach, focusing less on the potential negative health consequences of sex and instead emphasising an understanding of a woman's own body to help alleviate the shame that women have learned. This then provides a foundation from which to engage in discussions of consent and coercion, notions of choice and experiences of violence.

Case Study 1: Sex and sexuality education

Two organisations approach sexuality education from a notably different perspective and were sharing the material and lesson plans they were developing amongst other women's education groups. Reflecting the nomadism of activist-educators in drawing from transnational points of contact, one of the women leading this area of training previously worked as a health trainer for an international organisation, and is forming alternatives to

practices she saw as not responsive to cultural norms and not serving the needs of women in her community:

> *Reproductive health is also a need, but what empowers them is the sexuality awareness, it's empowerment dialogue through sexuality education.* (Civil society leader and trainer, Yangon, 2015)

Rather than being sites in isolation, the Myanmar educator-activists developing this training have drawn on working partnerships with international educators, development practitioners and feminist activists, experiences translating training texts from English into Myanmar, and experiences delivering training designed by others. As one trainer recounted of this process: "*When we do the activities [in other training material] we find out what they really need*" (Young women's trainer, Yangon, 2015).

As highlighted in Chapter 5, the lack of sex education in schools in Myanmar is simultaneously a result of the cultural environment which sees any discussion of sex as taboo and also contributes to a lack of awareness of bodily processes such as puberty and menstruation. One trainer developing the material spoke of her own experiences as motivation:

> *The first time I didn't know what it [menstruation] was, I didn't want to tell anyone. I was afraid. Finally I told my Mum and she said this is normal! She said that women are not good because of this.* (Empowerment & sexuality trainer, Yangon, 2016)

Learning about these experiences is therefore seen as an empowering means of countering the association of women's bodies with inferiority, uncleanliness and shame.

> *Sexuality is the backbone, then we talk about gender and power. So we start with menstruation, we are not dirty. Why have we been told this?* (Civil society leader and trainer, Yangon, 2015)

The courses varied in length according to the group, typically lasting two or three days or being spread out over four weekly morning sessions for adult women, or over multiple weekly two hour sessions for adolescents. In addition to running women's empowerment workshops, one of the two collaborating organisations also offered joint workshops to engage men in sexuality dialogue. Describing this process in one class the trainer highlighted:

> *The first day [the men in the class] didn't want to accept we are women talking about sexuality. The first day some men fight – some. Then the second day they were more quiet and then they apologised to us… So women's empowerment and men's engagement are different approaches.* (Empowerment & sexuality trainer, Yangon, 2016)

By tailoring training more sensitively to these experiences, learning from what participants respond to and building up activities through lengthier engagement the trainers had developed a programme of material that could then be shared with others. However, in sharing material a challenge is also encountered to ensure that facilitators are prepared in how to use it, as one trainer working at multiple sites across the country expressed:

> *When we do the puberty topic, the trainers have not seen these pictures, they don't know the vagina, the clitoris, the uterus. And they don't want to look. I harass them! I really push them, they should see*. (Young women's trainer, Yangon, 2015)

For women attending the courses then, and new facilitators alike, attempting to overcome entrenched cultural taboos is a sensitive position to navigate. The process of finding appropriate strategies to build up relationships even within a short time period is supported by the trainers' positions within the community and contrasts with experiences of a foreign trainer delivering a guest session:

> *We based on our culture and practices so they accept it. But from the [foreign trainer], they were shocked. After 2 years we have learned the process*. (Empowerment & sexuality trainer, Yangon, 2016)

By first refocusing greater attention on to women's bodies within training, courses then also sought to address issues of sexual and gender violence and consent. While gender based violence is a common topic included in international training, it largely features through definitions and case-studies from unfamiliar contexts which hold little relevance and reinforce a characterisation of women as passive victims of abuse. However, there is a vast distance between this decontextualisation and the physical, emotional and structural violence that trainers and participants alike of community education classes have experienced, particularly in contexts of conflict and turbulent

political transition. As the organisation leader expressed of the facilitators she was training:

> *Trainers know what is inequality and violence across all the community. You know it's typical Burmese, it's very difficult to talk about gender or sex or women's rights. But they are facing abuse and violence in their home environments. They know.* (Young women's empowerment trainer, Yangon, 2015)

Moving away from a discourse of rights in favour of creating collaborative space for discussion of experiences, feelings and creativity was therefore identified by trainers as supporting empowerment[43]:

> *I don't use 'rights' but treat them like a person. Then they will be able to think and be creative, then no military government will control them*. (Civil society leader and trainer, Yangon, 2015)

A final difference in approach of these courses is also noticeable when reviewing other material attempting to address the pervasive lack of discussion of issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. One textbook in particular, *Gender: Issues and Perspectives*, which was designed specifically for use in the Myanmar context, albeit largely by international consultants (including myself[44]), was found to be used in several empowerment courses. Although the book does not include broader discussion of sex or body changes, it does include a chapter on sexuality which focuses on gender identity and sexual orientation. The inclusion of this chapter is refreshing given the heteronormativity of much international training material, and provides discussion of LGBT identities and homophobia in the context of Myanmar, India and globally. However, in discussions talking through how trainers used this training material in their own classes, educators admitted skipping this chapter and some trainers had strong opinions against the use of terminology in the text, perceiving it to be too controversial and likely to invite opposition from course participants. The result then in many classes was that as the material was perceived to be too confrontational, the issue of sexual orientation was

[43] This also indicates a difference in strategy in training courses developing within Myanmar and on the Thai side of the border, where a discourse of women's rights has been more prominent.

[44] As highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, I was involved as an editor in the development of this textbook.

simply not discussed, reverting back to a default assumption of heteronormativity.

In contrast, the two courses under discussion here approach sexuality from the starting point of getting to know your body and pleasure, rather than direct discussion of sexual orientation. As the director described: "*Sexual orientation is not a major focus, but a focus on different people like different things"* (civil society leader and trainer, Yangon, 2015). This extended not only to same sex relationships, but also to varied sexual practices: *"In law, anal sex is not normal. So I talk about the muscles and pleasure, and if you like it you like it. But you can say no"* (*Ibid*).

9.6.2 Diversifying perceptions of empowerment and knowledge

A distinction between international material and local practices can therefore be summarised in the contrasting approaches to knowledge. While training material from international sources and the ToT workshops that trainers recounted having participated in largely focused on revealing inequalities, through statistics, definitions, frameworks and reporting mechanisms, women's organisations saw knowledge as a shared process emerging from experiences. For the women attending short training workshops, once they are aware of gender inequalities, as the women trainers occupying this intermediary position are, then there is arguably little to be gained from endlessly repeating examples of inequality. Merely presenting evidence of inequality or discrimination is therefore not sufficient to transform social perceptions of gender roles without being accompanied by explorations of the social barriers to women's participation and strategies to counteract them.

A key feature of training led by local women's organisations is the diversity of focus areas that are prioritised under the heading of 'empowerment', with emphasis being placed on the empowering process of learning. Courses were found to target the details that activists felt will help empower the different women in their communities in ways that are relevant to them, which included attention to disability, sexuality, responses to child abuse or militarised and domestic violence against women as well as political mechanisms or language learning. Identifying these priorities in participation with community members is therefore a key feature of planning training which educators are learning from experience, as one trainer reflected:

> *Sometimes we make the training but it's not very useful for the participants, that's why [now] we make the meetings*

[beforehand] so we can adapt it. (Women's political empowerment trainer, Yangon, 2014)

The following case study highlights how this process of building up knowledge that was considered empowering was achieved in a young women's political empowerment course.

Case Study 2: Young women's political empowerment

This six-month residential training programme in Thailand delivered by Myanmar women educators, targeted political empowerment amongst young women from varied ethnic states in Myanmar as well as those displaced on the Thai border. The ten young women aged between 16 and 22 had travelled from their home states or refugee camps to spend the six months of the course living together in the same house, along with their primary teacher, who had also travelled from Myanmar. Classes were held each day for a couple of hours in the morning, followed by lunch that was cooked and eaten together, with a further couple of hours teaching in the afternoon usually provided by an alternative teacher or guest facilitator. Towards the beginning of the course, I spent a week living in the residential house, sometimes observing, sometimes participating in classes, conducting group discussions, interviews, and participatory exercises, and accompanying the young women on study visits. Later, I returned to conduct follow up discussions, interviews and observations after the course had progressed.

The aim of the course was to empower the young women to be more politically active within their communities and to be better informed to contribute to the work of ethnic women's organisations within their home states. Although the course was nominally taught in English, with predominantly English texts, some international guest facilitators, and additional English language learning components, the informality of the environment meant that

Photo 8: Participants in a women's political empowerment class, 2014

classroom language frequently changed languages across English, Burmese, Karen and Tai (spoken in Shan State).

When asked to brainstorm what they understood empowerment to be the young women provided varied responses largely revolving around soft skills building, reflecting the abstract nature of the concept:

What is Empowerment?	
- Get ideas - Conscience - Consciousness / awareness - Critical thinking - Improves women's leadership - Improving self-confidence - Speaking skills – speaking in detail, importance of word choice	- Promoting ability - Participation skills - Feeling free to criticize - Capacity - Active listening - Decision making skills - Intelligence

Table 9: What is empowerment?

Within the course, however, while soft skills and confidence building were acknowledged as valuable, the main area that was perceived to give these young women confidence was specific knowledge that can inform action, something that is largely missing from the decontextualized training courses at an international level. So, during initial exercises to co-construct the design of the course over the coming months, these young women immediately identified the topics that preoccupied them which included an understanding of federalism and its implications for gender relations and conflict grievances in ethnic states, the environmental damage done by mining, dams and deep sea ports, and practical steps to involve more women in the peace processes as their priorities for learning. Underlining the association of targeted learning with forms of empowerment, one course participant revealed her motivation for participating in the course:

> *Men that have petrol money have power; I want to be a very educated talented woman so that those men will listen to me.* (Young women's empowerment course participant, Chiang Mai, 2014).

Course trainers responded by developing lesson plans targeting these knowledge gaps and inviting other activists to share their expertise in these

specific areas. Describing their approach, the primary trainer highlighted: "*It's like empowering women with knowledge, the focus is on the knowledge*" (young women's empowerment trainer, Chiang Mai, 2014). As also reflected in the case study above, knowledge is associated with empowerment not so much in revealing inequalities of determining what is and isn't categorised as violence under international legislation, but rather in sharing experiences, identifying knowledge gaps and formulating collaborative strategies to address prioritised issues.

Additionally, the environment of bringing course participants together for a prolonged period of study allowed for deeper relationships to form which created a safe environment for the discussion of sensitive and personal issues. As the primary trainer further explained in a later discussion:

> *It's one of the advantages of the environment that they can talk openly about sexuality… Domestic violence is [also] a major issue for the students, many had experienced it and wanted to talk and share about it together*. (Young women's empowerment trainer, Chiang Mai, 2015)

Paralleling the desire expressed by other young women for avenues of support and spaces to voice concerns, pressures or negative experiences as well as questions about sex and sexuality, responding to these personal experiences through building relationships of trust.

9.6.3 Relational approaches to equality and empowerment

Finally, this multi-dimensional conceptualisation of empowerment likewise prioritises a relational understanding of gender inequalities. While many women's led organisations continue to deliver training primarily to women in their community, there has been an acknowledgement of the need to engage with male community members and authorities, as highlighted by one educator working with Karen communities:

> *Men's participation is involved although we want to empower women. You cannot exclude men in this context*. (Community educator, Yangon, 2015)

The construction of independent womanhood that emerges from much generic empowerment material, particularly with regards to women's leadership, does not reflect Myanmar women activists own experiences of leadership which involves negotiating the consequences of not meeting

expectations of duty and challenging inequality. Stressing the importance of a relational approach, the same educator continued:

> *We are talking about gender, we are talking about equality. To be able to be treated equally we need men's support. But when [international organisations] talk about gender we are only talking about women.* (Community educator, Yangon, 2015)

The perspective also highlights the desire to approach gender training as a dialogue in which roles and expectations can be negotiated and contested and this process of negotiation is itself empowering. Seeking small changes in interactions, particularly within the family was therefore viewed as a starting point from which to gain greater space for women's equality claims. As one educator described:

> *When we talk about gender it's really easy. On the desk, it's really easy. But when you practice it it's really difficult for us. It's not only big activities but every moment, small things. When we change who sits where, who talks when, gender matters. If we can make small changes these barriers in the family collapse*. (Civil society leader and trainer, Yangon, 2015)

Creating their own spaces of empowerment is ultimately the preoccupation of the women's led organisations in navigating social transformations. In so doing, they are opening a pathway for learning to potentially flow back and inform the relationship between donor institutions, development agencies and community organisations.

9.7 Implications & Conclusions

Community education and training is a key avenue through which organisations are mobilising to affect social change. Training courses on women's varied forms of empowerment consequently reflect these varying priorities and underline the disconnection between international and local approaches. Focusing greater attention on the ways in which women's organisations are articulating and responding to the multiple priorities they identify also reveals the ways in which these priorities differ from global discourses. While the adaptation of empowerment training is only one dimension of the varied work undertaken by women's organisations, nonetheless the process highlights the position of these activists and educators in mediating influences from multiple sources to define their own actions.

While international training tends to focus on understanding discrimination and revealing inequalities, which ultimately can contribute to a homogenised and reductive portrayal of women as victims of male dominance, local women's led organisations prioritise strategies of negotiation and transformation as well as resistance.

This is not to say that international organisations and ToT practices have no contribution to make in supporting empowerment through learning, but rather that a more reciprocal process would support the design of programmes that could better meet the needs and challenges of trainers. As also emphasised by Connell (2014) and Stromquist (2015), there is a whole body of knowledge and learning that sits behind women's movements from which to learn alternative strategies for women's empowerment and transformation of social norms. However, current practices are maintaining the singular direction of knowledge flows, as one Kachin gender trainer expressed: "*translation is going the wrong way*" (gender trainer, Kachin and Rhakine, 2014).