UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Constructing female citizenship in transition

Women's activism and education in Myanmar

Maber, E.J.T.

Publication date
2017
Document Version
Other version
License
Other

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Maber, E. J. T. (2017). *Constructing female citizenship in transition: Women's activism and education in Myanmar*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:08 Nov 2026

Chapter 10

Conclusions & implications

10.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter brings together the strands of the research to reflect on the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in the research and the resulting implications that emerge. Following these initial reflections, responses to the research questions are considered, a discussion of what can be learned from women's activist education practices and priorities and the implications of this research for development studies.

10.2 Theoretical & methodological reflections

Returning to the image of the zig-zag (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988; Deleuze & Parnet 2002/1987) introduced in *3.2*, the research has aimed to bring together multiple dimensions in connecting explorations of educational and activist practice and in bridging theoretical positionings and tracing lines of flight between them. This has also extended to traversing disciplinary boundaries: while Deleuze is a familiar theorist within the context of educational research, in development studies such theoretical positioning may be less commonly encountered. Likewise, (Northern) feminist conceptualisations of nomadic subjectivity, while interwoven with notions of globalisation and the shifting roles of nation states, are likely unfamiliar to Southern movements for women's emancipation. Bringing together these perspectives, I have sought to shed light on the nature of resistance and the interactions of diversely positioned actors.

In particular, raising questions of the (potentially) changing nature of female citizenship within a context of political transition draws attention to where such presentations of citizenry emerge and where (and by whom) they may be contested. In this, my research recognises that educational spaces, particularly formal state schools, being the most common site of education experience for young people in Myanmar (UNESCO 2015; Jolliffe 2014), compose a key site through which projections of national citizenship ideals are encountered (Apple 2012; Bernstein 2000; Freire 1993/1970; Bartky 1990, 80-

90). So, analysis in this thesis, particularly in Part II, has focused on *how* expectations of gendered behaviour are enacted within these formal education sites, drawing on Judith Butler (1990; 2004) and Bronwyn Davies' (2000; 2011) notions of performative enactments. Such performances lead not only to reproduction but also to reformulation and contestation (intentionally as well as inadvertently) (Butler 2004). This recognition has sought me to look beyond formal education settings to more explicit sites of contestation. Here, Deleuzian conceptualisations of *smooth* and *striated* space have contributed to revealing the different characteristics of educational spaces that support differing educational objectives and differing relationships with the state, not only through oppositional constructions (for example of formal compared with non-formal education practices) but also by illustrating how smooth and striated dynamics intermingle and react to each other within certain spaces (Youdell & Armstrong 2011). Through highlighting the practices that result in the reinforcement of social hierarchies within formal education within Myanmar, and theorising the opportunities for hierarchies to be undone through moments of smoothing (*4.4*), the research points to opportunities for more socially inclusive education dynamics to take hold within diverse spaces.

Drawing attention not only to the nature of gendered hierarchies, but also to the endeavours of those who seek to transform them places a clear emphasis on the dual role of women's movements in challenging gender inequality broadly, and in making use of learning sites specifically, as has been the focus of Part III. Recalling Gramscian notions of the role of teachers as public intellectuals (Gramsci 1971; Mayo 2014), these activist-educators are attempting to refocus attention on the role of learning in undermining exclusionary hierarchies. Here, Braidotti's conceptualisation of a feminist nomadic subjectivity (2011a) additionally leads towards an understanding of this position of activist-educators in being exposed to and drawing from multiple experiences and points of contact across international, national and community arenas, which subverts the logic of a linear pathway of translation and reproduction across scales of development. This advances notions of women's movements and activists as key mediators in processes of adapting equality goals (Stromquist 2015a), and in so doing reveals fractures and disconnections between the priorities of diversely positioned actors in development practice.

Acknowledging that "women's mobilisation matters to advance gender equality agendas" (Esquivel 2016, 18), these movements are also significant sites for revealing alternative considerations of notions of equality and empowerment. Radical education sites, drawing from traditions of critical

pedagogies, have long been recognised as being highly political and associated with efforts for social transformation (Gramsci 1971; Freire 1993/1970; Apple 2013). Additionally, activist movements are acknowledged as themselves being sites of learning and of transformation (Mohanty 2003; Choudry 2015), and this learning should be considered not only as a process for those within such movements but also as a process of generating knowledge for those beyond as well (Ackerly 2001). This research has therefore explicitly sought to bring together these two considerations to explore *how* women's organisations in Myanmar and the Thai border are making use of community education to simultaneously challenge certain practices within formal sites of learning and to reformulate notions of the expectations and roles of women in the current period of political transition and beyond.

In returning to the themes of the research as they originally emerged from the theoretical and methodological discussions (*3.5*), these overlaps become all the more apparent and extensions can be made to further articulate the complexities of navigating the transitional landscape for Myanmar's young women and activist-educators alike.

10.2.1 Space, movement and the possibility of disruption

In concretised forms, physical positionings emerged as an important spatial consideration, particularly in education environments and strongly connected to Myanmar understandings of *hpon*, through which the positionings of women's bodies and the material objects associated with them are imbued with performative significance and potential to undermine masculine superiority or import bad luck (as highlighted in *6.5.1*). These findings echo those of Dunne and Leach (2007) that gendered space holds particular symbolic significance in schooling contexts and are intricately associated with enactments of gender violence, albeit in contextualised ways (187-8).

Further, as reflected above, Deleuzian conceptualisations of space have supported the exploration of both educational and activist environments bringing attention to the role of the state in maintaining social hierarchies as well as opportunities for undoing the fixity of unequal constructions and reformulating alternative enactments. This attention to smooth space as a site of disruption brings to the fore the multiple and competing influences and agendas in processes of transition, as well as reflecting the further disruption accompanying conflict and cross-border movements. As highlighted by Gorodetsky and Barak:

> Multiplicities are generated and reside in deterritorialized, nomadic, and smooth spaces of experience that have not been reduced into a priori static understandings by the application of accessible representations. In contrast to striated spaces that are grooved, i.e. wandering within them is confined to a priori limited and pre-identified paths, smooth spaces are open ended. Such spaces maintain concurrently the manyness of options for experimentation by avoiding the reduction in the many into discrete components, to a one identity. Nomadic space generates a multiplicity of elements, i.e. it is a complicating process that does not impact the heterogeneity nor hinders the potential of the multiplicities toward future becomings. (2016, 87)

The implications of formulating space in this way is that social hierarchies can be seen as easily reproduced, intentionally or otherwise, through education practices which can lead to the narrow presentation of male and female hegemonic ideals. In this way, "[s]ubjectivity is postulated on the basis of sameness, i.e. as coinciding with the dominant image of thought and representation of the subject" (Braidotti 2010, 410) and consequently difference is equated with inferiority (Davies, B. 2011).

While there is an appeal in working with the alternative and looking for disruptions, there is also a risk of falling into dichotomies that oversimplify the complexities and interlacings of these spaces. Here, critiques of nomadism have also drawn attention to the potential idealisation of marginalised subject positions (Sutherland 2014). I have approached the conceptualisations of space and nomadism as tools to help reveal underlying tensions in practice, and in so doing I have sought an affirmative position to support the identification of pathways forward. In this the intention is not to idealise experiences of displacement or marginalisation, but rather to look for what may be learned through these movements and nomadic subjectivity:

> The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction. (Braidotti 2011a, 6)

10.2.2 Time, temporal transitions and moments of change

The importance of time and timing is underscored by a sense of urgency which was apparent in women's activist movements during the first inter-election

period (see *8.2.2*), and has continued through a sense of expectation in transition as the new NLD government has taken office. This effect of elasticity and expectation recalls fluid notions of time reflected in *Kairos*, or the "time of opportunity" (Honkanen 2007, 4), as placing significance on certain moments as creating opportunities for change. As Voela and Guaraldo highlight in the introduction to the special issue, *If not now, when?* in which Chapter 8 of this thesis originally appeared: "*Kairos* is the unexpected and unpredictable time of change, the 'right time' when something extraordinary happens" (2016, 319).

In this sense the victory of the NLD in the November 2015 elections may be seen as an 'extraordinary' event, and one that has been desired and anticipated since the annulled elections of 1990. Nonetheless, there has remained a sense of constraint and mistrust as periods of transition also by their nature suggest temporality, and consequently experiences in the present are interwoven with legacies of past associations (see for example *7.5* and *8.2*). Despite evident advancements in Myanmar's democratic landscape, changes are necessarily understood within the historical legacies of experienced oppression by Myanmar activists and educators, male and female. It is therefore important for development actors to be able to recognise the experiences of civil society activists and educators in a time continuum where experiences are informed by previous iterations of rhetoric and shallow policy revisions. While it is often implied of Myanmar that there has been little or no reform in the last fifty years, particularly in the education sector, in fact the frequency with which policy has been reformulated during this time reflects the superficiality of these policy changes which have had limited impact in improving education conditions. Such experiences inform the deep mistrust that non-state education providers and civil society activists share in the current processes of reform and can exacerbate frustration with new international involvement seen as naively positive towards the rhetoric of change.

The strong spatio-temporal interconnections evident in conceptualising nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 2011a, 247) additionally make sense of my positioning in the research. Having been fortunate to have been living and working in Yangon at a time of significant political upheaval and disruption, my continued professional and personal relationships in the country over the course of eight years has allowed for opportunities within the research process that have been greatly beneficial and allowed for a more participatory approach.

10.2.3 Violence, sexuality and the body

Preoccupations with issues of the body, being also closely interwoven with notions of movement and space, have reflected priorities emerging from the research context as well as the broader theoretical underpinnings of the research in which:

> A nomadic body is a threshold of transformations. It is the complex interplay of the highly constructed social and symbolic forces. The body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others. (Braidotti 2011a, 25)

However, notions of the body are also found to be interwoven with relational and religious understandings of gender, by which women's bodies are associated with inherent (perceived) guilt and subordination in relation to the masculine ideal, leading to the insinuation of feelings of shame (*6.5.2*). Reflecting divergent constructions of gender and sexuality, similarly emphasised by Nnaemeka (2004) in the context of Nigeria (see also Fennell & Arnot 2008, 530-1, and Oyéwùmi 2005), sexuality is conceptualised less in relation to sexual acts and more in relation to understanding and accepting one's own body. The presentation of empowerment through 'sexuality dialogue' (*9.6.1*) by certain women's organisations in Myanmar therefore constitutes a substantial departure from notions of gender and sexuality presented within international development frameworks (explored further below in *10.6*).

Violence has likewise emerged as a key feature of young women's learning experiences within and beyond formal education settings as well as, in response, a central preoccupation of the women's movements. Gender violence is understood to be both direct and indirect (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach 2006; Parkes 2015) and was found to have been enacted, sustained and legitimised through young women's experiences in state schooling. Notions of performativity (Butler 1990) have supported the analysis of *how* such practices become enacted in education spaces and also point to the opportunities for alternative performances and enactments to emerge, both intentionally and inadvertently.

10.2.4 On voicing and hearing

Emotional dimensions of young women's experiences within schools and more broadly within society bridge thematic focus on the body and issues of voice, and conceptualise learning environments as strongly emotional, or affective,

spaces (Zembylas 2009; Ahmed 2004). The fear, shame and shyness that at once emerge from positionings and performances of the body, are also introspective emotions that limit opportunities simultaneously to learn and also to confide in others about negative, confusing or unfamiliar experiences. Consequently, young women and older activists alike recalled not understanding processes of puberty, menstruation or sex, and not knowing who to turn to for support or guidance (see *6.5.2, 6.5.3* and *9.6.1*). This dimension of the voice and of voicing also leads to the parallel question of who might be listening. The absence of counselling or support services within schools or in the wider community leads to reduced avenues for communication and accentuates isolation that may lead to greater introspection, affecting students (see *6.5.*3) and also activists, whereby the emotional consequences of activist work take their toll on the women's movement (see *7.6*).

The emphasis emerging from activist work on resisting silencing also reflects the prioritised position of discourse within post-structural understandings of agency, whereby women's empowerment and agency is understood as linked to "having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and to be heard" (Davies 2000, 66; see also Keddie 2011). Acts of 'speaking out', and in this way being a voice out of place, were seen as acts of resistance and of contestation, at once liable to punishment and to attention (see *6.6*). Collectivity, enacted through multiple, simultaneous acts of speaking out, is therefore seen to support women's activist work, adding weight to plural voices, rather than homogenising their varied concerns (Harvey and Halverson 2000; Mouffe 1993). In this is reflected Braidotti's formulation:

> one *speaks as* a woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contractictory sets of experiences, determined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference. (Braidotti 2011a, 25)

Notions of voice, and who is speaking, have also been apparent within the varied education environments included within the research, including within the state sector and the constraints imposed on teachers through nationalistic curricula and the infiltration of international discourses such as empowerment or feminism in training texts in community education environments. Amongst these competing education texts and agendas, women activist-educators are navigating a pathway in articulating their own priorities. Here, the question of

whether those dominant national or international actors are listening is also of relevance.

In this, being mindful of enacting the feminist and decolonising methodologies that also inform my theoretical approach (Smith 2012; Chilisa 2012) my research practice has sought to prioritise the act of listening to further create space for the articulations and priorities from within women's movements to be heard. Through ethnographic discourse analysis, hearing the perspectives and experiences of educators in using training texts, rather than simply textual analysis, as well as participatory exercises in focus group discussions, informal and multiple interviews and discussions with key research participants over the duration of the research, the act of listening has been an essential dimension of this research. It is my hope that in so doing, and in bringing together the varied voices that have contributed to the research, that I have done justice to their concerns.

The following two sections turn attention to bringing together the findings of the research in order to respond directly to the research questions posed. As the research sought to address two main research questions paralleling the dual themes of the research, they are addressed here independently in the first instance.

10.3 Education and gendered citizenship

1. *What roles do differing education practices play in constructing citizenship ideals in Myanmar, and in what ways are these gendered?*

As the chapters of Part II have laid out, differing forms of education, from formal schooling provided by the state, religious institutions, in particular monasteries, and parallel ethnic education departments, to non-formal community schools and (I)NGO training classes and workshops, are motivated by differing agendas which result in varied presentations of citizenship both intentionally and otherwise. Additionally, a wealth of factors further influence these learning environments, including the geographical location of schools, the availability and source of resources (human, material and financial), the training available to teachers, language use, and international involvement. Attention in this thesis has largely been brought to the divergence between learning experiences within state schools and non-formal community-based education delivered by women's organisations as a way to highlight the dialogue between these two learning sites.

10.3.1 Education and the reinforcement of hierarchies

The inherently gendered nature of notions of citizenship (Crossouard & Dunne 2015; Yuval-Davis 1997) becomes particularly revealed within state school practices as simultaneously reflecting ideologies of national identity (such as through standardised curriculum texts) and broader societal norms (such as through teacher practices) (Apple 2012). In seeking to explore *how practices in education sustained and legitimised women's social subordination* (*1.3.1*), it is evident that numerous forms of marginalisation intersect within education practices to create multiple and varied forms of disadvantage (as highlighted in Chapters 4 and 6). Experiences also vary significantly across rural and urban settings in the resourcing available to schools, as well as in the practices of individual teachers, school administrators and township education officers leading to variations in school experiences. Acknowledging these variations in experience, and drawing together analysis from Chapters 4 and 6, the follow specific dimensions have been revealed in the course of the research as contributing to women's feelings of inequality in relation to their male counterparts:

<u>Curriculum</u>

Representations within curriculum texts contribute to creating models of expected roles and duties of men and women, as also highlighted by GEN's 2015 study *Raising the Curtain* (see *Photo 9*). The reinforcement of associations between men and positions of leadership and financially more lucrative employment, contributes to the replication of expected pathways for young men, while young women find representations of their futures limited to more domestic spheres, or less financially rewarding professions such as teaching and nursing (GEN 2015a). Additionally, the glorification of (Bamar) military violence evident particularly in history narratives, presents a normalisation of violence against those outside the idealised male, Buddhist, Bamar construction, which subordinates not only women, but all those perceived not to live up to this ideal including ethnic and religious minority, LGBT and disabled students (see *4.3.1*). However, beyond the images emerging from curriculum texts, which have received attention from curriculum theorists and activists alike, multiple other forms of practice also overlap to create patterns of inclusion or exclusion within learning environments, including the ways in which teachers have been trained to teach the curriculum (Aikman & Unterhalter 2005). Additionally, key absences in curricula, the most prominent of which being the lack of sex education, also contribute to the assumption of heterosexuality and the expectation and responsibility of young women to

avoid sex by removing opportunity to discuss issues of puberty, sexuality or sexual experiences altogether (see *6.5.3*).

Pedagogy and assessment

The ways in which teachers teach the curriculum, with a common emphasis on discipline and authoritarian styles and the prominence of rote learning within schools emerged as a primary grievance amongst young women and activist-educators alike, reflected in the lament "*our education system never teaches us to think*" (female civil society director and activist, 2015; see *8.2.4*). While the lack of discussion and critical engagement within schools affects all students, subordination is exacerbated for those students excluded from the hegemonic ideal by being denied opportunities to contest and question these assumptions (see *6.5.3*). Similarly, ethnic minority students who are learning in their second or third language or visually/hearing impaired students who may require assistance are similarly disadvantaged in the lack of opportunities for discussion, and therefore explanation, in classes. While individual teachers may be motivated to find ways to adapt their teaching and provide more inclusive learning environments, the constraints of timetabling and the necessity to teach to standardised assessments, particularly significant for the final matriculation exam, limits the possibilities for alternative approaches (see *4.3*).

Finally, assessment practices also codify women's subordination albeit in a seemingly counter-intuitive way. The requirement by many universities that women need to obtain higher grades in their matriculation exams than men in order to access the same university courses in subjects including medicine and engineering may initially be seen as expectations of women's higher achievement. However, the practice was largely understood as requiring women to prove they are capable of undertaking professions culturally deemed to be more appropriate for men and ensuring that men continued to be prominently represented in these fields.

Participation and gendered roles

In addition to gendered roles being reinforced in curriculum texts, the division of subjects within schools can also reproduce assumptions of 'suitable' behaviour and careers for young men and women (see *4.3.2* and *6.5.1*). Consequently, "*handicrafts*" which generally involves sewing and cooking is a common subject taught only to female students which reinforces expectation of domesticity, while young men typically engage in sports, rewarding competition and physical prowess. The refusal of many schools to allow female students to play sports was a particular grievance amongst young women

participating in the research, seen as denying them opportunities for healthy relaxation as well as competition and leadership, and also reinforces the isolation of young women's bodies constructing them as weak, shameful and inferior (see *6.5.1;* also in connection with religious notions highlighted below). Likewise, the gendered division of labour amongst students in schools also reinforced these dichotomies, whereby girls are expected to clean the classroom before lessons and boys to lift heavy items of classroom furniture. Additionally, tasks commonly ascribed to students, such as being class monitor or representing the school at a competition, which are perceived to offer leadership opportunities were frequently felt to be only offered to male students leaving female students again feeling that they had been denied opportunities to engage in more public or 'political' roles.

Adherence to cultural and religious traditions

Allied with those roles mentioned above, while presentations of expected duties for men and women in curriculum texts are strongly associated with Myanmar Buddhist notions of the roles of men and women, these cultural and religious affiliations are also enacted in performative ways within the classroom (see *4.3* and *6.5.1*). Physical positionings whereby young women are not expected to sit on the right hand side of men, or to stand above them, for fear of diminishing their innate masculine power (*hpon*) reinforce a pervasive and visible subjugation of women which is extended to non-Buddhist students (see also Nwe 2009). The dual effect is therefore created of simultaneously projecting an image of Myanmar citizenship as uniquely Buddhist, while also reinforcing the gendered performances that are inscribed within this.

Language and voice

Language of instruction has been a major issue affecting the poor learning outcomes of many ethnic students in state schools (Higgins et al 2016; Lo Bianco 2013), with pass rates for the matriculation exam being reported as low as 8% by Chin teachers engaged in the research. However, the language of instruction used by teachers and in curriculum texts is exacerbated as a barrier to understanding by pedagogical styles that limit opportunities for discussion to clarify meaning. As highlighted in *4.4.2*, some teachers are engaging innovative ways to try to mitigate this barrier and create more inclusive spaces, identified as moments of smoothing, within their classrooms. However, nonetheless, the prevalence of negative experiences remained for ethnic students. Young women identified feeling particularly held back in this regard, as cultural expectations presume women's timidity, and were subject to discipline for seeming to transgress hierarchies of authority (see *6.5* and *6.6*).

Additionally, the general silencing of young women in education environments, as in society more broadly, commonly identified by young women as not being able to "*speak out*", not only leaves them not able to ask questions or check comprehension, but also unable to talk about body changes or negative (especially sexual) experiences (see *6.6* and *9.6.1*).

Emotional consequences of gendered learning

These experiences reinforced emotional dimensions to women's learning experiences, in particular the pervasive sense of shame that was attached to women's bodies, "*shyness*" in not wanting to speak out or draw attention to oneself and the isolation in not having avenues to reach out to trusted adults or in many cases even peers to talk about negative experiences (see *6.5.2* and *6.5.3*). Pressure was particularly articulated by those young women who were motivated to try to overcome the obstacles that were placed in their way, such as the necessity to achieve a higher mark in the matriculation exam to enter the same university course as their male peers, with demands of after-school tuition as well as limited avenues for relaxation and diversion (exacerbated by lack of engagement in sports). The silencing of young women, especially around taboos of sexual practice, also transfers increased emotional stress on women who have experience sexual harassment, abuse and trauma, leading to calls for greater support services to be made available, both within and beyond education structures (see *6.6* and *9.6.1*).

Direct/indirect violence in schools

Many of the above issues may be seen as examples of structural violence in which women are socially constructed as subordinate to their male peers, and excluded from participation in wider roles and opportunities. This indirect violence however, provides the conditions to justify direct violence against women, and other marginalised groups, through the reinforcement of social hierarchies in which more powerful groups are awarded authority and privilege over others. Additionally, as corporal punishment is also widely practiced as a form of discipline within schools, the model of violence as an act of control and as punishment for transgressing accepted patterns of behaviour is already established and violence becomes normalised as part of the (gendered) school experience. Beyond school environments, sustaining patterns of direct violence therefore becomes legitimised, compounded by lack of political and legal support to address violence more broadly.

10.3.2 Seeking alternative sites of learning

In looking for the *ways that alternative sites of learning are presenting alternative models*, attention has focused on non-formal education initiatives as operating with greater independence and therefore with the freedom to construct learning environments targeted to specific objectives. The intention has been to highlight learning practices which represent an alternative approach to those outlined above to serve as a point of comparison and an illustration of alternative approaches. This has reflected the desire to uncover opportunities for *smoothing* in which an undoing of the *striated* social hierarchies might emerge. It is acknowledged however that within non-formal education practices a breadth of practices may be encountered that also replicate unequal and exclusionary constructions, not only relating to issues of gender and sexuality, but also religion, ethnicity, social class, and (dis)ability amongst others. In this regard, *striation* is not to be understood as uncritically negative, as the oversight afforded by regulation and frameworks can provide valuable monitoring tools, which can also support protection for those within learning environments. Rather, the issues arise in the formulation of striations whereby the privileging of some groups over others becomes maintained within the dominant structure.

Nonetheless, amongst the diverse community education providers encountered whose learning environments were aiming to support social transformation certain common features can be identified, not only amongst women's organisations but across the variety of community education sites encountered on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border (see Chapter 5). While many teachers in community education settings have not received formal teacher training, which may raise alternative complications, the community educators encountered largely shared a characterisation of their learning environments as sharing knowledge rather than traditional teaching, undoing notions of the authoritarian teacher (Freire 1993/1970). This was also supported by students participating in community learning environments both in Myanmar and in Thailand, who highlighted the opportunities to engage teachers in conversation on a more equal level as a key difference appreciated in these classrooms (see *5.5.1*). It should be acknowledged, however, that setting the model of egalitarian relationships within the classroom is significantly easier with smaller class sizes of motivated students, typically comprising between 10 and 20 students. Such class sizes allow for a certain level of informality and the building of relationships between students as well as with the teacher and also ensure space for greater peer discussion and feedback. However, within the state sector teachers are frequently instructing

classes of well over 60 students, or multiple classes may take place in halls without room dividers. Authoritarian teaching practices are recognised therefore not simply as stemming from teachers own sense of authority but also from a sense of needing control in environments that are undoubtedly difficult to manage.

Allied with this reformulation of the role of teachers towards facilitation rather than instruction, community classrooms typically prioritised discussion and debate (see *5.5* and Part II Focus Study), indicating a significant shift from experiences of rote learning. In so doing, opportunities are created for differing viewpoints to emerge which, if respectfully managed, can create more inclusive learning environments. Metro's *Histories of Burma* (2013) textbook provides an illustration of the way introducing the plurality of positions associated with sensitive topics including historical marginalisation/aggression and conflict can be supported through curriculum material (see *4.4.2*). Being beyond the necessity of standardised assessment, community education sites are able to transfer emphasis onto the experience of learning, rather than the outcome as measured through examination. In this sense classes were found to incorporate more varied activities, emphasising group work, practical projects and presentations rather than the reproduction of texts. While this approach supports the development of varied skills and was particularly appreciated by students during feedback, there is a caveat that such learning styles compliment more formal modes of learning rather than replacing them. A notable distinction was encountered amongst students whose learning experiences on the Thai border had primarily involved non-formal education whereby their ability to speak multiple languages and engage in creative and critical discussions was strong, however skills in maths and science were often less well developed. The tendency, noted also by teachers within Myanmar's eastern states of returning migrants, additionally reflects the susceptibility of education environments of the border to the skills of voluntary teachers, both local and international (see *5.6*).

This introduces a paradox within these alternative learning sites. While subjects such as maths and science receive less attention, social sciences and concepts allied with development discourse such as human rights, empowerment or community development are common staples, indicating the avenues through which development rhetoric can influence communities. However, such sources were not found to be singular. Rather, a further common feature of these classrooms was the diversity of sources of material, including textbooks in English and in Burmese, training texts or toolkits from NGO workshops, worksheets downloaded from the internet, news stories, and

videos, reflecting the nomadic subjectivity of educators in accessing and blending varied learning material. This diversification allows for more varied viewpoints to enter the classroom, which if engaged with critically can support analytical skills amongst course participants. However, there are also risks that new stratifications and dominant discourses enter the classroom which may replicate the unequal power structures that were originally under contestation. Likewise, the flexibility of these learning spaces can mean that they can respond rapidly to shifts in the political landscape, as witnessed in women's organisations mobilising community education as a means to engage women in voting (see *8.2*). However, this flexibility also derives from their tenuous position as dependent on securing funds either through donors, through community fundraising or through income-generation activities. Consequently, while they may be able to respond to new opportunities, they are also susceptible to losing funding when political climates alter, as has been the case for many education groups on the Thai border. As a result, education activities can also be influenced by the priorities and agendas of donors which may result in competing influences affecting the orientation of courses.

The experiences of formal education in state schools have also largely provided a foil which women's organisations are reacting to in constructing their own alternative learning environments, particularly those directed to young women at the post-secondary level. The priorities in such community education classes, while varied, highlighted particular concerns with the lack of critical thinking development and preparation to engage with differing points of view or '*speaking out*', the singular source of learning (i.e. from government textbooks), lack of sex education in schools, and exclusion from leadership roles. However, these alternative sites are also subject to influence from varied sources including the state, international involvement or religious institutions, and although their presentation may initially seem idealised, as is further highlighted in the section below, navigating these competing influences provokes challenges.

10.4 Feminist learning and activism in transition

2. *How is women's activism in Myanmar and the Thai border creating alternative spaces for transformative learning during Myanmar's period of political transition?*

Women's movements in Myanmar have drawn attention to the many diverse ways in which women may experience inequality, with activist responses including emphasis on promoting political participation and leadership,

providing psycho-social support and legal services to those who have experienced violence, public campaigns to end harassment in public spaces and challenging religious and cultural traditions, amongst many others. Even within this great diversity of activist and community-based responses, education activities occupy a central position, with the largest share of the 109 women's community groups and organisations surveyed by WON and GEN (2015) being found to focus on education and training activities in some form. While not all of these pursue the emphasis on social transformation and contesting social inequality that have formed the focus of organisations included in this research, nonetheless the close relationship between activism and alternative education is prominent. Likewise, when we compare the gendered practices in state schools, as highlighted above, the expressions of young women describing their schooling experiences and their desires for different learning environments (*Part II Focus Study*), a strong relationship is evident between these prior learning experiences and women's activism, with activist learning environments constructed to address the deficiencies of women's construction in the formal school system.

International development organisations have, however, been neglectful of the actions of women's organisations in supporting women's equality goals (Cornwall & Edwards 2014), and even more so in their practices of delivering alternative forms of education. Consequently, attention here has focused on the contrasting approaches evident between international led training directed towards women in Myanmar and the learning environments that Myanmar women activist-educators themselves construct, with the intention of revealing opportunities to learn from these responses. In doing so, attention is also brought to the distinctive nomadic position of activist-educators in mediating multiple influences and drawing from varied sources to reformulate notions of women's empowerment.

10.4.1 Navigating shifting dynamics

The ways in which women's organisations are responding to shifting constraints and opportunities within the period of transition and the consequences of these responses, are further revealed through this consideration of nomadic subjectivity in which women are navigating the changing dynamics of their environments. While this nomadism has involved physical movements for some, particularly activist networks on the Thai-border, it has also emerged from the increasing diversity of national and international actors and organisations which are adopting varying positions within the process of political transition. The difference in positioning of

women's organisations therefore leads to different strategies in response to shifts. Consequently, the more overt political stances of groups on the Thai side of the border, brought international attention to rights violations by the junta and raised the profile of women's campaigning, challenging "the authoritative power of nationalism [that] continues to suppress and silence the transnational subjectivity of women" (Salman & De Theije 2011, 12; see also 5.7 and 7.5). However, the new climate of political reform within Myanmar, since 2011, despite continued military influence and conflict, has seen opportunities to work in partnership with the new government to (seemingly) shape the agenda of reforms and the peace processes attracting many political exiles back to Myanmar from the Thai border and further afield. While these movements may have been more hesitant amongst women's organisations, the overtly oppositional stance of many organisations have no longer aligned with trends towards partnerships leaving organisations negotiating choices in how and to what extent to engage with state partners.

Concurrently, international donor governments and organisations, who had substantially funded community based organisations on the Thai border, as well as new institutions who had not previously worked in Myanmar, shifted attention after 2012 to forging new partnerships and, in the case of many donor government agencies, bilateral-trade agreements with the newly appointed Thein Sein administration. As a result funding for contentious activities and organisations based on the border largely evaporated, with financing instead being diverted to activities within Myanmar, particularly those focused on economic interventions and less antagonistic forms of political mobilisation such as voter education. This has resulted in a dramatic change in the funding landscape for women's organisations, further exacerbated by the implementation of requirements by incoming agencies such as UN Women and the EU that any civil society organisations receiving grants be registered (according to a new government process).

The responses to this shifting funding landscape varied amongst women's organisations. Several organisations on the Thai-border have chosen to relocate to Myanmar; some within Myanmar have reoriented their activities to be able to access donor funds; others have opted to work through small grant funding for certain projects that appeal to funders, such as political empowerment training, while continuing other parallel activities unfunded; and several organisations involved in the research simply bypassed applications for funding, instead preferring to continue their own community education practices without financial assistance, or supported through income generation activities. However, in all these varied strategies adopted the

insecurity of financial assistance has added both to the stress on activists and their unpaid workloads.

Additionally, the increasing popularisation of conservative and nationalistic notions of Buddhism, exemplified in the emergence of movements such as 969 and MaBaTha, has brought with it an additional and unanticipated form of hostility directed towards women activists challenging unequal gender constructions. While many monks had been prominent instigators and allies in the democracy movements opposing the military regime, and iconic figures of the 2007 Saffron Revolution protests, the rise in political prominence of a number of alternative conservative monks has isolated many women's organisations and activists who have been reframed as undermining Buddhist culture and authority. This repositioning of women's equality work as threatening to religious and cultural identities, rather than as oppositional to military authoritarianism, coupled with the expansion of communication platforms, has resulted in an increase in abuse and harassment directed towards prominent activists, and underscores the different and distinctive position that women activists occupy in relation to other forms of civil society activism as well as the emotional consequences of acting with intent (Davies 2000; Ahmed 2004). Women's activism is increasingly being positioned as opposing religious traditions understood to be aligned with nationalism, and therefore are being constructed as threatening to national unity, leaving female activists once again in a tenuous relationship with the state. In addition to these aggressive and sometimes directly violent reactions to their work, activists and educators consulted in the research often encountered hostility and suspicion from other community members, particularly those working in geographical areas new to them.

While engaging in religious dialogue has generally not been a priority of women's activist classrooms, there is growing recognition of the need for interfaith dialogue to feature more prominently, as activists have been confronted with the necessity of mediating conservative religious positions. Likewise, a public construction of women's supposed 'ignorance' (maintained in part through exclusion and subordination in education systems) has been deployed as justification for the laws and the need to protect Buddhism from perceived threat, setting up paternalistic control over women. This was underscored by comments made by the Chairperson of the Theravada Dharma Network that: "Our Buddhist women are not intelligent enough to protect themselves" (U Aung Myaing, quoted in Walton, McKay & Mar Mar Kyi 2015). In this way women are being positioned within public discourse as passive representations of the nation state, denied active agency and individuality in

determining their own futures. In resisting this discourse, and in using community education as a means to engage others in this resistance, women activist-educators are seeking to gain greater space for gender transformative work to remain possible within transitions.

10.4.2 Alternative constructions of female citizenship

Despite the challenges of navigating the constraints highlighted above and in seeking to take advantage of opportunities to engage with the processes of transition, community education provides a means for women activists and educators to expand the reach of their activities, to continue to challenge dominant discourses and to gain support for women's increased political and social participation. The final question of the research therefore remains of *what alternative presentations of female citizenship emerge from these learning sites.* In this the practices of women's organisations in constructing alternative learning environments represent a departure both from the formal schooling environments highlighted above and also from the practices of international organisations in delivering empowerment, capacity building or leadership training which are common features of development contexts. While the characteristics of the non-formal learning environments have already been expanded above, certain additional dimensions can be summarised in constructing an alternative presentation of female citizenship. These are then discussed in more detail in relation to broader implications in section *10.5* below.

While each course may be different in its learning approaches and texts, and undoubtedly education activities may reproduce unequal representations of male and female citizenship, the intention has been to explore what alternative models might present examples of different approaches. Differences in the framings and terminology attached to women's activism and activist education can also be linked to the shifting dynamics and positionings highlighted above. Women's organisations and networks on the Thai side of the border have largely framed their activities as campaigns for *women's rights* (see also Hedström 2016), tapping into the rhetoric of development discourses and reflecting influences from international funders and the available training resources. Material used in training courses equally reflected this prioritisation of women's rights, CEDAW and international frameworks and monitoring mechanisms. While such material and discourses are also present amongst women's organisations within Myanmar, an emerging engagement with the discourse of *feminism* is also taking hold, as highlighted in Chapter 8, with community education courses increasingly found

to include material explicitly discussing feminism and its historical origins often accessed during periods of study abroad. While in the initial mapping exercise conducted in 2014 only one community education programme was found to overtly position themselves as feminist, during the two years of the research increasingly classes were found to include discussions of feminism and activists were increasingly using the term to identify themselves. The shift may indicate a desire by activists within Myanmar (and those who have relocated from the border) to repoliticise women's activism and notions of empowerment and to take ownership of contesting women's subordination, rather than appealing to development institutions or donor governments whose alliances have proved uncertain. Instead, emphasis on feminism inserts a notion of transnational solidarity into women's alternative learning environments. However in doing so new divisions may open up which highlight the distance between those who occupy this nomadic subject position and those who do not have access to such influences. Consequently, while identification as feminist may be increasingly popular in more cosmopolitan urban areas, within rural communities, as one activist and educator highlighted "*feminism is not their word*" (interview 2015).

In seeking to provide a counterpoint to the training courses of international development organisations, particular emphasis has been given to the notion of empowerment. While much international training course material targeting women's empowerment has been found to reproduce a homogenising and heteronormative construction of women as either victims of male oppression or individualised and financially independent leaders in business or politics (see *9.4*), women's organisations were found to prioritise alternative notions of empowerment (see *9.6.2*). Emphasising abstract notions of confidence building, which may prove effective within the bounds of the classroom, was found to dissipate once participants returned to their familiar surroundings. Rather, emphasis was given within women's organisations to providing access to tangible and targeted knowledge to address specific areas of concern which included political and legal practice, but also the environmental and gendered impacts of economic development sites, mine clearance or reducing traffic accidents. Additionally, relational approaches to empowerment and equality were prominent across the activities of multiple organisations, so that even though the majority of classes were directed towards women, organisations also sought to engage men in other areas of their work. Likewise, empowerment was often characterised as being able to negotiate for small changes in familial settings as well as in collectively challenging women's cultural subordination, and is therefore perceived in its enactment, rather than as a static entity (see *9.6*).

Finally, also connected to notions of female empowerment, as explored in more detail below, women's activist learning environments drew attention to sexuality and women's bodies in seeking to overcome engrained associations of shame and inferiority. A presentation of female citizenship therefore emerges of women having control and authority over their own bodies, which is in stark contrast to public discourse which places authority in male guardianship and reinforces women's passivity and ignorance. While this moves a step closer to challenging the heteronormativity that is assumed in many educational contexts, it still stops shy of explicit engagement with issues of sexual orientation and presenting a broader understanding of gender beyond male and female binaries.

10.5 Learning from the priorities of women's movements

The practices considered above indicate opportunities to learn from the priorities and activities of women's movements and from activist-educators in particular, especially with regard to the contextualisation and alternative responses they afford to international development goals such as educational equality and women's empowerment. This prompts a return to the idea that, as referenced in *4.4.1*, "[c]reative feminist work in the South often involves a critical appropriation of Northern ideas, in combination with ideas that come from radically different experiences" (Connell 2014, 527). The ways in which women civil society leaders and educators are reformulating and adapting material and discourses drawn from international exposure as well identifying alternative priorities emerging from their community experiences indicates areas that can inform future work with greater contextualisation, not only specific work within Myanmar but also broader approaches to advancing gender just scholarship and practice.

Connell (2015) highlights several key areas of importance for expanding the agenda of theorising feminist knowledge on a global scale that reflects the participation of movements and scholarship in the South in constructing theory. In addition to the need to consider indigenous knowledge formulation (see also Fennell & Arnot 2008; Chilisa 2012), she highlights: notions of power and authority with regard to the State; varied perspectives of identity, with collective identity commonly being prioritised over individualised; alternative methodologies; and issues around land (Connell 2015, 56-8). The priorities emerging from women's movements in Myanmar support these areas of alternative theorising, while also adding supplementary perspectives, as explored below.

10.5.1 Interactions with the state and notions of the political

Questions of how feminist work engages with the state are evident in the contrasting strategies amongst women's organisations in approaching the transitional government as well as persisting mistrust. The period of transition throws the urgency of political engagement to the fore, as the desire to be part of the new political landscape and to affect social change through setting agendas within ministerial or civil service departments is evident amongst many women's organisations. However the climate of fear that has existed around engaging with the state during military dictatorship continues to overshadow expectations. Even in choosing not to work from within or in partnership with state institutions however, the state remains central to these activist movements as an oppositional authority, framing state actions as central to addressing feminist priorities and gender equality. Additionally, addressing the 'fear of the political' as a legacy of authoritarian control has been a major priority for women's activist education environments at a community level. Within these community education practices, challenging women's cultural and domestic roles are revealed as highly political endeavours.

10.5.2 Relational notions of (in)equality, identity and religion

More collective understandings of community roles and the tenacious resistance to challenging strongly held identity constructions especially when allied to notions of religious duty operate in conjunction to place emphasis on relational notions of equality (Connell 2014; 2015). The concept of empowerment therefore becomes more closely aligned with strategies of negotiation and mediating hostility than with individualised formulations of confidence-building. This pattern is brought into relief through nomadic movements which juxtapose strategies of approaching inequality. Consequently, the discourse of rights which struck a chord with activists on the border, within a more plural and transnational context, has not resonated so clearly with communities in conservative, and often rural, areas of Myanmar. Educators attempting to replicate training and community learning initiatives in rural areas of the country have met with strong resistance, and as a response have developed more gentle strategies to build links and adapt their approaches.

As further highlighted below, attachments to religious notions of gender duties are aligned to this resistance, underlining the interconnections between social gender constructions that require holistic responses. Attention

is brought not only to the broad role of faith in the lives of individuals and communities, but also to the specific ways that performative enactments of religious notions can influence gender construction. In the Myanmar context this specifically relates to notions of *hpon*, including how this cultural construction of men's spiritual superiority pervades material practice.

10.5.3 Sex and the materiality of subordination

Preoccupations of women's activist learning environments draw attention to the materiality of women's inequality, through which notions of women's uncleanliness and inferiority, associated particularly with menstruation, are transferred to objects associated with them especially clothing such as panties and *longyi*. Practices of washing women's *longyi* separately, not allowing them to dry in public or be placed higher than a man's *longyi* on the washing line, and warning against men touching them for fear of bad luck (Nwe 2009), imbue women's bodies and items associated with them with not only a sense of shame but also a sense of threat to male power and authority. Women's organisations have therefore prioritised focus on women's bodies as a way to learn to overcome this shame and contest such notions of innate inferiority. Reflecting the holistic nature and interconnections of gender inequality, such practices underscore attitudes towards violence against women, as further highlighted below.

Reflecting this desire to address taboos associated with the female body, an additional area prioritised amongst some women's activism in Myanmar, is the desire to see greater access to sex education, not along a biological model or focusing on the negative consequences of sexual practice, most common in 'life skills' material, but focusing on understanding and accepting body changes and overcoming the shame that has been learned through educational and social practice.

10.5.4 Addressing violence

As violence has been a pervasive feature of Myanmar women's lives, including structural and direct violence from both private and public sources, addressing violence is a major priority of the women's movements. The varied approaches to tackling issues of violence include research into intimate partner abuse, as illustrated by GEN's 2015 report *Breaking the Silence*, campaigns such as 'Whistles on Buses' (Kearl 2015) to draw attention to harassment on public transport, the formulation of and attempts to enact the Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) law, as well as challenging impunity for militarised

violence against women in conflict areas (WLB 2014). Such combined efforts within women's movements draw attention to the common source of varied practices of violence against women as stemming from unequal social constructions particularly reinforced by the framing of women's bodies as inferior and of less worth. In this way, understandings of the nature of violence are advanced and indicate implications for broader theorising, both of the need to conceive of military violence against women in conflict and intimate partner violence or harassment as originating from the same root of women's social inequality (Meger 2016; Cockburn & Enloe 2012), as well as the role of education environments in contributing to such social constructions.

10.5.5 Sites of learning and knowledge production

While also a priority across multiple sites of feminist scholarship, raising questions of knowledge formulation draws attention to practices within education systems and the goals of state-sponsored learning. While this research has intentionally focused on education practices, drawing the link between experiences in formal education and gender constructions which are both reflective and constitutive of social practices, women activists and civil society leaders also commonly stressed this priority. In particular the affective dimensions of learning experiences, particularly of learned fear, shame and shyness formed the bases of women's counter-responses through reformulating empowerment in community education sites.

There is of course a need to avoid over idealisation of local women's organisations, recognising that there are multiple different civil society groups with varied agendas. However, opportunities to learn from the strategies and priorities of women's movements indicate ways to advance both broader theoretical understandings of gender and learning as well as specific improvements to training approaches. Such opportunities do exist, as highlighted by the civil society director designing sexuality curriculum material in Burmese:

> *We started in English until 2013 and then [mixed with] Burmese. So now it's partial English and partial Burmese. [Once we finish writing the material] We will translate back to English so it's available to international NGOs.* (Civil society leader and trainer, 2015)

As highlighted further below, a challenge therefore lies in opening up pathways through which such practices and the knowledge gained by members of the

women's activist movement through longitudinal experience can also inform responses from international development institutions.

10.6 Implications for international development

While Deleuzian notions of difference and becoming, whereby acts are never fully complete but also in constant progress of transformation (Davies, B. 2011) creates dissonance with development studies agendas, "it is important to resist the uncritical reproduction of sameness on a planetary scale" (Braidotti 2011a, 6). The global nature of international development institutions and frameworks for development agendas, exemplified in the Millennium Development Goals and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals, can exacerbate decontextualisation which renders progress towards equality shallow at best. As highlighted by Dunne:

> Even if this imperative to action arises from a broad commitment to an equity goal, when based on macrolevel generalities it is an effective denial of the relevance of context. Such decontextualisation objectifies people and simplifies the complexities and contingencies of social life and universalises gender (and other) processes. (2009, 11)

Understanding the interconnections and intersections of social difference that influence gender identities leads towards the prioritisation of more holistic approaches to seeking gender equality (Yuval-Davis 2011a; Unterhalter 2012). While it is acknowledged as essential that development interventions be gender sensitive in considering the impact of work on differing men and women, to have deeper benefits in challenging the underlying conditions that support gender inequality a transformational approach is needed. Transforming gender inequalities into more equitable relationships therefore has to include analyses of power, and unpacking the contextualised power relationships and imbalances between different groups of men and women. Such considerations have relevance not only for development goals oriented towards gender equality but also for targets for universal quality education provision, and highlight the overlaps between these priorities[45].

[45] See for example MDG 3 to *promote gender equality and empower women*, of which the single target was to eliminate gender disparity in education (UN 2015), and SDG 4 to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*, which also prioritises reducing gender disparities as well as mainstreaming gender equality within educational content (UN 2016a).

A key implication for development practice therefore lies in acknowledging the interconnections and mutually constitutive nature of forms of social inequality (Yuval-Davis 2011b, 4). However, frameworks, particularly those relying on narrow measurement indicators (Smith & Vaux 2003, 16-18), can truncate responses to specific dimensions of inequality with the effect that the transversal connections across such boundaries are frequently lost. Understanding the enactments of community education, as highlighted above, as a form of activism that explicitly aims to counter the models of learning presented in formal state education systems, indicates the persisting gendered challenges that exist within education systems even when enrolment figures may suggest equality. These patterns therefore add further evidence to appeals that universal access to education does not equate to universal experiences within education (Leach 2000; Aikman & Unterhalter 2005; Unterhalter 2012; Parkes 2015; Dunne 2009; Kabeer 2005) and that the complex and overlapping intersections of gender identities and other dimensions of social difference result in radically different experiences (Yuval Davis 2011a). This emphasis on the experiential dimensions of education environments also points to implications for international measurements and the tendency to attempt to codify progress towards highly variable and context-dependent notions such as empowerment into universalised indicators.

In highlighting the priorities that emerge from women's activist and educational environments, implications are similarly apparent for the ways that international development agencies and actors engage in equality work in the global South. As highlighted by Fennell and Arnot (2008):

> Where international agendas uncritically import liberal individualising models for education into developing countries, they could undermine women's position and future and perhaps could even aggravate existing gender divisions. (526)

This critique has been particularly directed towards the MDGs, and in particular the reduction of women's empowerment to access to education and national positions of political leadership (Kabeer 2005; 2015; Unterhalter 2012). Guided by these ill-fitting standardised models of equality/inequality and empowerment, international development actors in the field risk replicating a superficial understanding of the nature of gender inequality, the role of education is contributing to equality/inequality, and validating responses that remain insufficient to address underlying structural conditions of power (Cornwall & Rivas 2015; Fennell & Arnot 2008). This tendency is exacerbated

by the short-term engagement of many staff members of international organisations within the country of operation, underscoring the need to build genuine partnerships with local organisations and actors working in the context. This necessitates taking the priorities of activist movements seriously and creating channels of dialogue to learn from their experiences in formulating responses. For example, as has been highlighted in Chapter 9, recognising the experiences of women activist-educators in contextualising notions of empowerment and the burden that is placed on them, particularly through training of training initiatives, to adapt material for their contexts may lead to more reciprocal interactions between international development organisations and those they seek to 'empower'.

While the recent SDGs have explicitly sought to provide a more holistic platform for development intervention, and their formulation included much wider consultation processes than their predecessors, there is nonetheless still concern that inconsistencies within the SDGs may be replicating this reductive tendency (Esquivel 2016). SDG 4, *ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*, includes considerably greater emphasis on the quality of content and processes within varied learning environments than previous manifestations, and indicates a role for education for sustainable development as well as "promoting a culture of peace and non-violence" (UN 2016a) (see also Bonal & Fontdevila 2017). However, targets for Goal 5, *achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls* (UN 2016b), as well as the phrasing of the goal itself, continue emphasis on *giving* empowerment to women rather than stressing the experiential processes by which this may be enacted or by drawing attention to the relational considerations of gender inequality and the ways in which multiple gender identities and expressions may contribute to varying experiences of inequality or marginalisation (see also Esquivel 2016). A further risk in attempting to universalise notions of empowerment emerges from the mis-alignment of indicators and contextualised experiences of gender inequality, over-anticipating women's subordination in some fields while neglecting social variations in others (as illustrated in *9.4*).

However, it is recognised that development frameworks and international agreements provide important leverage for women's civil society organisations in seeking to influence state practices (Ackerly 2001). Consequently, rather than seeking to abandon links between activism and development, strengthening the relationships and dialogues across these positions is likely to contribute to more effective alliances in advancing meaningful enactments of equality goals. Such perspectives reinforce calls for

more inclusive approaches to development that place emphasis on social, relational and ecological inclusiveness in order to make progress in achieving sustainable development for all (Gupta & Vegelin 2016; Pouw & Gupta 2017). As Gupta and Vegelin (2016) highlight, there has been "little emphasis on including the knowledge of all, or engaging all, or promoting effective capacity building to enable better participation" (441). It is therefore suggested through this thesis that recognising the roles and expertise of activist-educators in contextualising concepts as well as building closer alliances with women's activist organisations who are designing and delivering their own education and training practices provides a starting point to support more targeted, inclusive and participatory efforts to simultaneously support gender justice and development objectives.

10.7 Concluding reflections and future research

This research project has aimed to explore the landscape of gendered learning in Myanmar with particular attention to the ways in which women activists are attempting to undo hierarchical notions of gender through community education practices. In this the research can be seen as a starting point from which to continue to further examine the role that civil society and activist organisations in advancing notions of equality and social justice, as well as deepening understandings of the actual and potential interactions between formal and non-formal learning environments. In particular, three areas emerge as fruitful avenues to move the research forward.

Firstly, as initially highlighted in *1.4*, a significant part of this research project has focused on the transmission process and reformulation of notions of empowerment, women's equality and gender training through the practices of women activist-educators. An evident extension to the research project would be a refocusing on the process of the reception of training and community learning environments amongst participants. While attempting to quantify the achievement of empowerment is seen as contradictory to its performative, evolving and multiple nature, further exploring the responses, perceptions and experiences of participants in training courses would extend the research to build deeper understanding of the contributions of these community learning spaces. Additionally, while this research has largely focused on the practices of ten women's organisations in formulating training on political and social dimensions to women's equality, empowerment and leadership (as outlined in Appendix 4), there is scope to expand the focus of interventions to include other dimensions such as economic or ecological

prioritisations within training, and to further research the differences between practices in varied regions of the country.

Secondly, the limited number of sustained research studies within Myanmar, particularly relating to gender and to education practices, points to a continued need for further research attention. As Myanmar's political transition advances and processes of reform continue there is hopefully increased opportunity to conduct further research, especially in remote areas and within formal state education institutions that have previously been largely beyond access. The continued efforts of individual women and activist organisations in campaigning for women's political participation and inclusion within the peace processes also indicates opportunities for aligning research and practical agendas in advancing notions of social justice and inclusion in moments of transition and peacebuilding. In particular, research that is attentive to and incorporates the existing knowledge and expertise within the country, such as the experience and perspectives of women activist-educators, is recommended to support the recognition of Southern theoretical perspectives and to continue to advance contextually-informed, intersectional feminist analysis. In my own research, I am continuing to work towards this aim through co-authoring forthcoming work with several of the women who have provided feedback on my work in Myanmar with the intention of maintaining research collaborations.

Finally, the conceptualisation of women activist-educators as nomadic subjects would be greatly supported by exploring such dynamics in alternative contexts beyond that of Myanmar. While the moment of political turbulence and transition in Myanmar makes this a particularly fruitful site to examine the role of women's movements in supporting social transformations, exploring the dynamics of both education and activism, and their interconnections, in relation to (re)constructing notions of female citizenship in other countries would enable the conceptualisation to be tested and refined.