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Published in:
Gender and Education

DOI:
10.1080/09540253.2016.1167175

Citation for published version (APA):

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To cite this article: Elizabeth Jane Tregoning Maber (2016) Finding feminism, finding voice? Mobilising community education to build women's participation in Myanmar's political transition, Gender and Education, 28:3, 416-430, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1167175

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1167175

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Published online: 06 Apr 2016.

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

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role played by women activists and educators in mobilising community education to support new opportunities for women’s activism in the context of Myanmar’s political transition. Recent political reorientations in Myanmar which have resulted in a civilian-led democracy emerging from a repressive military regime, have facilitated increased international contact. Myanmar women activist-educators are rejecting hierarchical relationships and the sterile reproductions of idealised female citizenship evident in some training practices and are promoting a conceptualisation of feminist education. I reflect on the dynamics of this feminist activism, including the adaptation of feminist concepts and terminology, as articulated by activists, and I explore responses to the new avenues for women’s engagement which are opening up in the first inter-election cycle.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 May 2015
Accepted 14 March 2016

KEYWORDS

Social activism; feminisms; Myanmar; political transition; women’s rights movements

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Introduction

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

This quote reflects the views of one female educator and activist teaching political empowerment, gender equality and women’s rights to civil society members in conflict affected regions of Myanmar. Her desire to amplify the concerns of her community and ensure voices are heard illustrates the feminist undertakings of many women activists in an environment of nascent transitions. The same activist continued: ‘I approach [training] from a feminist point of view, not from my race or my religion.’ While many international gender training practices present a homogenised and de-politicised construction of womanhood (Cornwall and Edwards 2014, 19), this paper highlights the practices of a small number of Myanmar women’s groups that identify as feminist and that offer alternative formats to encourage women’s engagement in the current reform process. I therefore seek to explore the role of community education within the women’s rights movement in...
Myanmar as a site to support activism and to explore the extent to which recent increased engagement with the rhetoric of feminism is illustrative of reactions within Myanmar women’s civil society groups. I base my discussion on three main premises. Firstly, that in this context adult community education offers an alternative site of learning which has been mobilised by civil society and women’s organisations as intended to be both subversive to authoritarian state practices and transformative in its agenda. Secondly, that the women activist-educators who lead community education and training initiatives occupy a distinctive position through which they are translating, adapting and localising ideas, course content and training texts. These women simultaneously combine experiences from multiple sources and contacts while also mediating international influences. Finally, that in Myanmar these sites have become increasingly politicised and ‘feminist’ in their position and in the content of education initiatives. From this starting point, I explore the problematic role of international training and the significance of a new local language of feminism that is being employed by women activists. The intention is to highlight the local responses to transnational movements and global agendas, specifically through the adaptation of feminist concepts and terms for Myanmar’s current transition period. This article emphasises the role of women activists and educators in mediating this process and considers their position as nomadic subjects in constructing their own identifications of feminist approaches to learning and to social change.

Context of conflict and political change

Authoritarian rule and active civil wars have rendered Myanmar a turbulent site for social transformations. Sixty years of military dominance in politics and a ruling military junta from 1962 to 2011 saw the state enact increasingly oppressive policies of control and domination over its population. Long running civil wars between the state and ethnic forces provided the premise for the military to consolidate power. These civil wars occur on simultaneous and multiple fronts and are still largely unresolved despite a number of ceasefire agreements and renewed attempts to secure a nationwide ceasefire agreement (Keenan 2015). Elections held in late 2010 were a significant marker in Myanmar’s transition from authoritarianism to a more democratic model of government, however the military retained control of emerging democratic processes through the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) which was steered to electoral victory and 25% of parliamentary seats were reserved for military appointees (Maber 2014). Despite these constraints and the brutal consequences of opposing authoritarianism, democratic opposition to military rule has supported civil society activism that has propelled activists, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, into positions of leadership. Like their male civil society counterparts, the majority of women activists who are now leading women’s organisations and networks in Myanmar have invariably faced negative repercussions ranging from exile to imprisonment, for their pro-democracy activism, for ethnic alliances and in some cases for family associations. This has resulted in the current rhetoric of change taking place within context of mistrust. A sense of caution and fear is experienced by senior figures and grass roots activists alike. However, political transition has nonetheless opened up spaces for negotiation. Since the process of democratic reform was formally instigated in 2011, after half a century of military rule, Myanmar has witnessed rapid albeit somewhat superficial transformations. Underlying the visual markers of ‘progress’ (such as the proliferation of
mobile phones, newly-imported cars, and Yangon’s rising skyline) are complex social renegotiations through which historically marginalised groups are seeking to gain a space for inclusion to effect meaningful change amidst the rhetoric of political and economic reform. For the women’s rights movement in this context, the multiple networks of local women’s organisations are claiming a new space for political engagement through peer education and community mobilisation while navigating evolving agendas which include those of the international development agencies and the available (albeit conditional) funds which have accompanied Myanmar’s political transition.

Disillusionment with the processes of reform is increasing and concerns are growing that institutionalised hierarchies are being replicated. This context for women’s equality movements reflects the timeliness of the refrain if not now, when? by highlighting the urgency of mobilising women in this first cycle of civilian government as Myanmar prepares for elections planned for late 2015. Although women’s organisations in Myanmar and the border regions have been active in seeking to raise the profile of women’s concerns for at least the last twenty years, it is only in recent years that widening transnational links have connected women to a global movement and the discourses of international feminisms have found their way into training which aims to empower women in Myanmar. Movements which have long been covertly political are now positioning themselves overtly as such, and the gathering momentum to ‘create something different’ has resulted in a space opening up for the promotion of women’s political activism. The extent to which community education has been mobilised as a vehicle to generate support for the women’s movement is explored in this paper as a key resource for women activists and educators.

**Theoretical framework and methodology**

My research examines the changing landscape for community education and women’s activism and builds on professional work undertaken in Myanmar since 2009. I employ a theoretical framework which brings together a critical feminist perspective to education and development interventions, particularly focusing on the discourse of empowerment as a desired development goal (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall and Edwards 2014; Stromquist 2015), with a conceptualisation of the nomadic position (defined below) experienced by the women who are leading women’s rights-focused civil society organisations and who are responsible for the transmission and transformation of material.

This paper builds on research which outlines the distinctive position of non-formal community education as a means of knowledge sharing, particularly in areas affected by conflict and political instability where state education practices are frequently associated with authoritarianism and control (Maber 2014). In the case of Myanmar’s state education system, schools have promoted a Buddhist, Bamar,¹ and militaristic ideal (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012) reinforced through rote learning, corporal punishment and the suppression of critical thinking skills. Non-formal education practices have acted in opposition to this to a certain extent, providing alternative educational environments.

For adult learners, community education offers opportunities for learning which are often taken up when access to education has been interrupted or been restricted. These spaces have been mobilised as sites to exchange learning on subject matter forbidden or unavailable in the highly censored state curricula (including at universities) or media.
Post-secondary education and training initiatives frequently adopt a determinedly subversive position contrary to state authoritarianism through the teaching of human rights, women’s empowerment and social justice (Maber 2014). Women-led organisations, which have been prominent in leading community education in areas of conflict and displacement in Myanmar, have used these educational sites as means to promote an understanding of women’s inequalities in society and awareness of their rights, amongst female and male community members. Such practices have then been used as a platform to campaign for social change and to advocate for, amongst others, increased participation in the processes of political transition, for legislative reform that recognises women’s rights and for women’s protection from violence (particularly military violence in conflict areas). These education sites contrast with workshops and training courses delivered by international development and education organisations which are often short term and delivered in English following an abridged ‘training of trainers’ model that introduces generic rhetoric around gender and women’s rights mechanisms. However, many Myanmar activist-educators have attended these courses and make judicious use of the training materials by adapting them for their community learners. Consequently, I suggest that the women leading these activist and educational endeavours which are oriented to women’s equality occupy a distinctive position in mediating internationally informed perspectives on women’s rights and increasingly introduce a more overt discussion of feminism.

This paper draws on Braidotti’s conceptualisation of nomadic subjects, to highlight the plurality of interconnections and influences spanning grass roots community activism, transnational movements and national political manoeuvrings, reflecting a ‘collectively assembled, externally related and multi-layered subject’ (Braidotti 2011b, 210). This nomadism is theorised as a process taking place in material sites of turbulence and disruption, where nomadic subject formation comes into being not simply due to the subject’s altered location but due to the subject experiencing shifts in environment and points of contact. Along the way language and terminology are adopted, circumnavigated and/or repurposed as ‘site[s] of symbolic exchange’ (Braidotti 2011a, 40). As Braidotti emphasises, margins and centres never remain in stasis but ‘shift and destabilize each other in parallel, albeit dissymmetrical, movements’ (Braidotti 2011a, 9). Women activists are therefore encountering new challenges and threats which undermine their efforts to enact social change. This article therefore ultimately aims to highlight the distinctive position that these women civil society leaders occupy in Myanmar’s transition.

Data for this study was collected throughout 2014 and 2015 using ethnographic methods and collaborative qualitative research practices. Both female and male leaders of community education organisations were interviewed as well as members of the Myanmar women’s and feminist movements more broadly. In total the research project has involved interviews, focus group discussions, site visits and observations with 99 individuals from 45 organisations consulted in both urban and rural Myanmar and Thailand in addition to 20 site visits and seven focus group discussions with course participants. However, for the purpose of this article data is largely drawn from a small selection of interviews conducted with 14 women leaders of community-based and civil society organisations which use education as a means of promoting social activism. These women come from varying ethnic and religious backgrounds and have experienced varying trajectories to their current positions of leadership. To reflect the dual role that these women occupy, I employ the term activist-educators to represent their position. Additionally,
data is drawn from a mapping exercise conducted in mid-2014 with 28 women-led organisations which gathered data on the organisations and the content of courses covered. Although the project has also involved textual analysis of the course texts, this material is not discussed here and will be further explored in subsequent work.

The evolving women’s movement

Ethnically aligned women’s organisations in present day Myanmar, many of which were established in the 1990s, are generally associated with the ethnic armed struggles for auto-determination (Hedström 2015). As such, they have frequently navigated a precarious path between rejecting the violent subjugation of women by the military state and simultaneously renegotiating gender roles within their ethnic traditions (Laungaramsri 2011). Combined with cross-border networks with exile groups in Thailand, these women’s organisations balance the delivery of state-sanctioned political endeavours (such as the provision of education and healthcare to women and children in conflict zones) with more overtly subversive political campaigns such as reporting on the systematic rape and abuse of ethnic women by the military (WLB 2014). Myanmar women’s organisations are therefore experienced in negotiating both competing local and transnational agendas and by extension, complex political terrain in the theoretical sense.

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

Seeking feminist education

From empowerment to feminism

As Cornwall and Edwards (2014, 9) point out, empowerment has shifted in meaning and usage since the 1990s. Then rooted in feminist activism, it is now a ubiquitous term in the context of development interventions and no more so than in the environment of adult education and training courses (see also Kabeer 1994; Batliwala 2007; MacKenzie 2009). The result risks perpetuating a homogenising and depoliticised construction, insufficiently contextualised to the needs and concerns of the target women, and one which diverts attention from the plurality and the priorities of women’s movements (Dunne 2009; Ghose 2010; Khoja-Moolji 2014). Many of these priorities are more contentious and more oppositional to state authority than is palatable to international donors concurrently engaged in manoeuvring for bi-lateral partnerships and trade agreements in the same countries that are the object of the empowerment programmes.
Local women’s organisations and networks simultaneously intersect and parallel international development programmes, resulting in community education which challenges both the dominant social norms that act as mechanisms to subordinate women and the state bodies that institutionalise women’s oppression (including military, legal and political bodies) (Ghose 2010). To some extent then, the international language of empowerment has provoked a local language of feminism in response. My aim here is therefore to highlight the work undertaken by women activists and educators in Myanmar in retrieving the feminist origins of empowerment which involves activists navigating complex feminist discourses.

_Voices muted, muffled and masked_

While Myanmar’s international connections are generally regarded by activists as valuable, some activists believe that Myanmar’s cultural specificity, and by extension its localised feminism, is frequently misunderstood by outsiders, with one activist-educator explaining that: ‘our women have their own leadership skills but they (the international development staff) don’t notice that’ (female educational civil society leader and activist-educator, 2014). One of the frequent criticisms encountered from Myanmar women trainers is that they get invited to participate in international training events that are perpetually introductory, with no progression to intermediate or advanced training opportunities, and they feel insulted by the lack of acknowledgement of their own local expertise. Several activists working for women-led civil society organisations expressed similar frustration, suggesting that training initiatives may be misidentifying participants for their workshops and also over-estimating the relevance of the workshops’ content. One leading community educator who develops local language training material and tailors courses on sex and sexuality education for marginalised women (a topic entirely absent from standard gender training workshops in Myanmar), expressed exasperation that ‘these gender specialists should listen to me and use this sexuality [training material] in their training’ (female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015). Such comments betray the irritation highly experienced activists and educators, who in several cases are seeking parliamentary office, feel regarding the status of ‘expert’ or ‘specialist’ which are awarded to non-Myanmar development staff employed on a temporary basis. Likewise, some activist-educators were very conscious of the privileging of these non-Myanmar perspectives, not only by the international community but also by government and some educators in Myanmar:

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

The short term and introductory nature of many empowerment, leadership and capacity building courses devised for international audiences is not regarded by some activist-educators as adequately responding to a need to provide well-thought-out, culturally-specific learning for adults at a local level. One activist-educator emphasised the homogenising nature of standardised empowerment training that does not reflect diverse constituencies of women:
all women are affected by women’s inequality, however women are different and international training courses aren’t reflecting this. Professional women, but not [those] in politics – teachers, health workers, management et cetera are also affected by casual violence and harassment. (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

Such scenarios highlight instances of poor models of gender-equality training and gender-sensitive teaching practice in circulation within international development spheres, models which serve up discussions of gender equality within neatly packaged boxes under the descriptors of women’s empowerment, women’s leadership or capacity building. Such models do not adequately address the grass roots demand for inclusive, wide-ranging discussion of gender roles and the pressing need for social transformation.

A clear sense of doubt was expressed by activist-educators who had participated in ‘training of trainers’ women’s empowerment courses offered by international development organisations and who are now conducting community-based training. Speaking of the workshop style of short training initiatives one interviewee reflected:

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

Such doubts may be common to trainers and educators, where change is rarely immediately visible and when it does occur is seen in the longer term and is unlikely to be tangibly connected to training input. However, it is noticeable that trainers conducting this model of workshop highlighted this concern rather than community educators who worked more systematically with community members. Speaking of her role as a workshop trainer, one educator who had previously worked for an international agency and was now running her own community education programme highlighted further unintended consequences of failing to provide responsible and context-sensitive training: ‘I conducted lots of gender training [when I worked for the international organisation]. Women like it, men don’t like it. So when we leave, they fight’ (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015). Such comments highlight the potentially damaging effects of the lack of continuity in training courses, further articulated by another empowerment course trainer:

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

Another tension lies in the fluctuating allegiances of donors. In opening up possibilities for political engagement, the move from military rule to (quasi-)civilian-led government has dramatically shifted international involvement in Myanmar, particularly in the support offered to civil society movements. The congregation of political attention and international actors in the urban centres of Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw (and to a lesser extent Mandalay), is leaving organisations in the periphery – the rural, ethnic and border regions that have been erstwhile homelands of movements for democracy, civil rights and peace – simultaneously underfunded and overlooked, as one teacher of women’s political empowerment courses highlighted:
Because all the things are happening in Yangon and in Nay Pyi Taw, so we don’t really see the women coming out from the very rural areas … For example, when I travelled to Kachin State I saw many young women really active in their fellowship programmes and from their church and things like this. But they don’t really seem to come out from that atmosphere and that environment you know? I mean nobody hears their voices (Female activist-educator, 2015).

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

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

A counterpoint lies in the pathways women activists are forging for themselves and their retrieval of feminist discourses and the intergration of those discourses into localised, culturally-specific gender-equality training, as is discussed below. The desirability of future mutually-rewarding collaborations with the international agencies is then explored from the point of view of women activist-educators.

**Feminism as a concept and term**

As in many contexts, feminism can be a problematic word to use in Myanmar where English language terms are employed for a variety of strategic reasons including both to emphasise and to obfuscate agendas. Consequently the buzzwords of ‘development speak’ such as gender, empowerment and capacity building have a history of being redeployed by actors on both sides of the political divide:

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

This repurposing of terminology results in the concept of feminism and its politicised, feminist activist associations standing in contrast to the sanitised terms of the development industry. Consequently, it is not uncommon for some teachers to want to distance themselves from the contentious associations of the word feminism. As one teacher of a women’s political empowerment course (but not an activist) illustrated, saying ‘I’m not feminist, I’m just teaching women’s rights’ (Women’s political empowerment course trainer, 2015). In employing the term, activists are simultaneously connecting to a transnational discourse, while differentiating themselves from the international funding environment which is largely now failing to serve their transformative goals. Accompanying its employment is the suggestion of a transnational activism that connects a much more politicised stance with the nomadic subjectivity that informs a collective commitment to women’s participation:

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

From an original position of opposition to the authoritarian practices of the military regime, many women’s organisations (and CSOs broadly) are navigating a new orientation towards working in partnership with and/or from within the state in an attempt to navigate a pathway from political transition to political transformation. This evolution of Myanmar women’s collective activism is accompanied by an increasingly explicit adoption of the terminology of feminism. This paper suggests that the growing tendency of Myanmar activist-educators to explicitly identify with feminism parallels a desire to re-politicise the women’s movements in the country more generally, in the ongoing struggle for equality.

One obvious barrier to re-politicising gender equality in Myanmar is the lack of opportunities for women and men alike to pursue feminist study. There are no gender studies university courses taught in Myanmar and consequently community-based training courses and workshops provide the only organised access to these subjects. Women activists use these spaces to articulate their approaches to feminist activism. To a certain extent therefore, local women’s organisations are re-politicising empowerment adding a renewed attention to dynamics of power and patriarchy. Although the terminology of feminism clearly has its origins in an international discourse, it has largely not found its way into the women’s movement through the empowerment training material being provided by INGOs, which offer a much less politicised and less contentious vision of women’s enactment of social change. Teachers (community-based or otherwise) are responsible for the linguistic and cultural translation of texts in their classrooms (Apple 2012) and consequently we find emerging ‘complicated stories in the undershadows – stories of local interpretation, enactment, recontextualisation and resistance to global policy solutions’ (Exley, Braun, and Ball 2011, 216). Interviewed activists who teach women’s empowerment or gender equality (including to mixed gender groups) in Myanmar mentioned that despite there being no specific content in their INGO training materials on feminism in the majority of their courses, the topic was raised by participants. Such instances reflect
the growing association of women’s rights by course participants with explicitly feminist political positions and concurrent social implications. For others, feminism has been explicitly incorporated into their training programmes:

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

The paradox is clear, then, that while the women’s movements in Myanmar are claiming stronger links with the international discourse of feminism, the international community is distancing itself from feminist politicised forms of activism in favour of consolidating national government support for development projects. In contrast, the adoption of feminist terminology by activist-educators is reflective of changing expressions of women’s activism in Myanmar, associated with a growing identification with overtly politicised, transnational feminist discourse.

**Constructing a feminist education**

In a mapping exercise conducted in mid-2014, only one of the 28 women’s organisations providing community education surveyed included a discussion of feminism in their course outline. Over a 12 month period groups were found to increasingly engage in discussion of feminism in their courses. Asked why they had chosen to add discussion of the meanings of feminism into political training courses, one activist-educator stated ‘these are issues that affect all women across the world’ (female activist-educator, 2014). Despite objections to international training course practices, international discourses and course content are very much present in the teaching of community education. These initiatives use the language of empowerment to reach out to both women and men across various socio-economic classes in society, from rural and ethnic grass roots community members, IDP or refugee populations, to students engaged in tertiary education or civil servants. Such training initiatives often promote the dual agenda of fostering a willingness for political engagement while seeking broader cultural shifts and they often make use of translated training material from multiple sources. Reflecting the fluidity of this informal space, concepts have filtered through informal and accidental means that are a product of women’s nomadic experience. These points of contact include participation in ‘training of trainers’ programmes and working for international organisations, being frustrated at the role they play but simultaneously learning from the environment. However, beyond this, women activist-educators are also drawing on their experiences from studying abroad; reading and sharing with online communities, aided by the relaxed censorship laws; cross-border movements and experiences in the borderlands with their overlapping and competing mix of influences; and also chance encounters facilitated through their familiarity with multiple languages. So one activist described how an unexpected meeting with an Israeli sex therapist sparked her commitment to bring sexuality education to her Myanmar community.

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

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

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

we tell them about the Burmese women’s movement in the colonial time. We don’t have a [historical] feminist movement but we have a women’s movement, but it’s based on the patriarchal sense, on the political freedoms. And we have Burmese women who also fight for their freedom, freedom fighters, in the Japan times and the British colonial times. So we give them Burmese examples as well. But the problem is we don’t have Burmese women’s history. There are no documents, just a few, very,very few documents, on Burmese women who fight for their freedom. Because they are marginalised from history. (Female activist-educator, 2015)

In identifying themselves as feminist and teaching feminist history, these women activist-educators draw a sense of solidarity from what they perceive as a shared commitment to struggle. It is particularly this horizontal approach to learning, and a shared respect and commitment that is desired from Myanmar’s international collaboration partners. Feminist education involves pedagogy as well as course content. Speaking of the pedagogical practices of both international training workshops and some local initiatives one educator expressed her desire for what she identified as a more feminist approach to teaching:

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

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

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

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

Many women leading civil society organisations expressed a continuing desire for sharing knowledge and learning with the international community, acknowledging the limitations of the learning opportunities afforded by their own state education experiences: ‘we want to get to know what other people are doing. We have degrees but what do we really know? We don’t have the capacity to look beyond’ (female educator, 2015). In so doing, women are articulating their distinctive, Myanmar-specific view of feminist learning which includes how they want to learn:

When we go and study short courses or masters’ degrees it’s very academic. We get very good marks but we don’t have the experience of putting the theory into practice … there’s a lack of
creativity in putting theory into practice. (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015)

Myanmar activist-educators’ report experiences of participating in international training courses as illuminating but describe the benefits as dissipating, as the activist-educator quoted above explains: ‘we lose the connections. We think “it’s so good, what are we going to do?” But the next day we lose it’ (Female civil society director and activist-educator, 2015). Another educator likewise highlighted her disappointment after returning to community activism after tertiary study abroad, reflecting the disconnection between non-contextual learning and the realities facing women in their communities: ‘I still can’t do anything. I feel very suppressed. I feel very confused’ (Female activist-educator, 2015). Again emphasising the different position occupied by community education as opposed to other sites of more formal learning, women educators therefore also articulated the need for community-based training that was tailored to the learning needs of participants:

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

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

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

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

Drawing conclusions

Seeking opportunities in political transition

Myanmar’s transition has involved a simultaneous recognition of political (and to a lesser extent economic) gains coupled with the desire for greater social change that has not been forthcoming. This dual perspective articulates the need to encourage women’s mobilization in broader terms, adding support to the call for a

more holistic approach to women’s political empowerment that can go beyond the narrow cycle of support to women politicians and instead support women’s organizing at all levels (Cornwall and Edwards 2014, 16).

Such approaches are being pursued by women’s and civil society organisations, frequently beyond the sphere of international funding, with activists highlighting the need to address the fear of the political that is still overwhelming at a grass roots level. Women leaders
campaigning for support runs hand in hand with community education initiatives which seek to break down the barrier to political participation created by fear of the subversive cultural connotations of political participation and of challenging gender roles accentuated and reinforced by the authoritarian rule of the military junta. The shifting landscape for women’s activism, accelerated through Myanmar’s so-called democratization, has reinforced the nomadism of their position, requiring varied responses and, for some, providing multiple points of contact with others.

**Nomadic positions within a feminist movement**

A more political feminism is newly evident amongst the women’s movement, but one that is being redefined and made relevant for the current Myanmar context. This change in discourse reflects a shift in positioning for women activists, but has not found its origins in the generic language of formulaic training courses. Rather, feminist concepts and terminology are being shared amongst women’s networks by activists who have encountered them through more varied transnational movements. This filtration and borrowing of ideas is ad hoc and informal, and is reflective of the nomadic subject position occupied by leading women activists. A central implication of identifying this nomadic subjectivity is the analysis it affords the social position of these women leaders. They cannot be understood as elite, given their marginalised ethnic and religious identities, their persecution by the ruling government and often the lack of financial resources available to them. However, they have clearly experienced different trajectories from many women in the constituencies they serve and are linguistically and academically well positioned both to take advantage of opportunities available through international contact and to challenge its assumptions. They are the activist-elite, and in the case of several of the women participating in this research, have won international awards for their roles.

Experiences of exile, displacement and relocation, and/or of studying abroad and working with/for international organisations, have positioned leading women activists to mediate and translate concepts such as feminism for their contexts. Indicative in these experiences are the interactions and synergies that come from relationship building within varied contexts, with varied subjects and across varied languages – ‘the effect of the constant flows of in-between interconnection’ (Braidotti 2011a, 17–18). Reflecting the polyglot formation of the nomadic subject, these women speak their ethnic languages, Burmese, Thai, Chinese or English, and multiple combinations of these. Consequently, they are used to borrowings and overlappings of linguistic signifiers, and are able to draw on multiple (although sometimes incomplete) sources as they revise the orientation and discourses of feminism. Such activist-educators are adept in bridging influences while responding to shifting community needs, demonstrating what Braidotti identifies as ‘a double commitment, on the one hand, to processes of change and, on the other, to a strong ethics of the ecosophical sense of community – of “our” being in this together’ (Braidotti 2011b, 210). The result is a newly-refined, feminist approach to sharing learning for social change.

**Notes**

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

3. Examples of such organisations include the Shan Women’s Action Network and the Karen Women’s Organisation.

4. Although the majority of its 13 member organisations are based within Myanmar, the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) itself is based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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

6. Many such courses are set up along the ‘training of trainers’ model to ‘cascade’ replications of a desired goal of emancipated womanhood and suggested steps for her achievement.

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

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

9. Of which there are over 135 in Myanmar.

References


WLB (Women’s League of Burma). 2014. If They had Hope They Would Speak. Chiang Mai: WL.