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(In)Equality and action: the role of women's training initiatives in promoting women's leadership opportunities in Myanmar

Elizabeth Maber
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As Myanmar has moved to a civilian government following decades of military rule, new opportunities for women's political participation have emerged. However, persistent social and institutional inequalities – including lack of high-quality formal education – have left many women ill-positioned to contribute to political debate. While recent reforms are indicating increased attention to supporting education systems in the country, the years of oppressive practices in the state sector have disadvantaged those women now in a position to contribute to the social changes accompanying the transitioning government. This article will explore some of the factors that have led to this disadvantage and examine the role of women's leadership training in preparing women to overcome barriers to political participation, including lack of formal education, and gain access to positions of influence. The article concludes with recommendations for providing more comprehensive support. The observations here are based in large part on my work as a teacher and consultant in Myanmar over the last five years, and draw on recent work conducted by the Gender Equality Network (GEN).

Maintenant que le Myanmar est passé à un gouvernement civil après des décennies de régime militaire, de nouvelles occasions de participation politique pour les femmes ont fait leur apparition. Cependant, les inégalités sociales et institutionnelles persistantes – y compris le manque d'opportunités d'éducation formelle de qualité – ont laissé les femmes en mauvaise position pour contribuer au débat politique. Si les réformes récentes indiquent que l'on accorde une attention accrue au soutien apporté aux systèmes d'éducation dans le pays, les années de pratiques oppressives dans le secteur public ont défavorisé les femmes qui sont maintenant en position de contribuer aux changements sociaux qui accompagnent le gouvernement en transition. Cet article traitera de certains des facteurs qui ont abouti à ce désavantage et examinera le rôle de la formation en leadership des femmes pour préparer ces dernières à surmonter les barrières à la participation politique, y compris le manque d'opportunités d'éducation formelle, et à accéder à des positions d'influence. L'article se conclut par des recommandations afin de fournir un soutien plus complet. Les observations faites ici se fondent pour la plupart sur mon travail en tant qu'enseignante et consultante au

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Myanmar au cours des cinq dernières années, et elles s'inspirent des récents travaux effectués par le Gender Equality Network (GEN – Réseau d'égalité hommes-femmes).

A medida que Myanmar transita hacia gobiernos civiles tras décadas de gobiernos militares, se abren nuevas oportunidades para la participación política de las mujeres. A pesar de ello, persisten varias desigualdades sociales e institucionales —entre las que se incluye la falta de educación formal de alta calidad— que marginan a muchas mujeres, por lo que éstas no pueden contribuir efectivamente al debate político. Si bien las recientes reformas han mostrado la disposición a otorgar mayor apoyo a los sistemas educativos del país, los años de prácticas represivas en el sector estatal, propician que las mujeres, que actualmente podrían contribuir a los cambios sociales impulsados por el gobierno de transición, se encuentren en desventaja. El presente artículo analiza algunos de los factores que han contribuido a construir esta desventaja, examinando el rol que juega la capacitación en liderazgo para las mujeres, en tanto las prepara para superar los obstáculos que restringen su participación política, incluyendo la falta de educación formal y de acceso a posiciones de influencia. Las conclusiones abordan varias recomendaciones en el sentido de otorgar apoyos más integrales. En gran parte, las observaciones consignadas en el artículo son el resultado del trabajo como maestra y consultora realizado por la autora durante los últimos cinco años en Myanmar, y se apoyan en el trabajo emprendido recientemente por la Gender Equality Network *(Red de Igualdad de Género).*

Introduction

November 2010 saw the first elections in Myanmar[1] for 20 years, marking an end to 60 years of military rule, and a transition towards democratic reform. At the time, the international community expressed concerns over the military junta's claims that the elections would be contested fairly, with United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon describing the process as 'insufficiently inclusive, participatory and transparent' (UN 2010), and indeed unsurprisingly many of the same military political figures reappeared in the newly reformed parliamentary bodies. Nonetheless, the elections signalled a radical shift in Myanmar's political trajectory and paved the way for increased international dialogue and the potential for more systematic democratic reforms. These reforms are now under way, opening up new opportunities for participation in government practice from many parties previously excluded – political opposition, ethnic minorities, and women being amongst them. However, the decades of internal conflict, still largely unresolved in many states, and oppression of civil rights have left many both cautious and in a position of disadvantage when engaging with

the established hierarchy of leadership. As the processes of reform are happening rapidly there is a risk that previously marginalised voices are again being overpowered.[2]

While disadvantage affects many in Myanmar, this article looks expressly at the needs of women leaders and considers efforts to better support women in influencing policy dialogue through training initiatives. The decades of military dominance over all public spheres has kept women out of public office and restricted the status of women in Myanmar (OECD 2013, 38). I shall highlight some of the key implications of this legacy, paying particular attention to the impact of low levels and poor quality of education, which are relevant when planning training initiatives aiming to promote the participation of women in public office and positions of influence.

I shall also highlight work conducted by the Gender Equality Network (GEN) in their recent study of women's leadership training, *Taking the Lead: An Assessment of Women's Leadership Training Needs and Training Initiatives in Myanmar* (GEN 2013b), drawing on their recommendations for improvements. GEN is a growing inter-agency network of UN agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), and civil society organisations, as well as technical resource persons in Myanmar, established following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 in response to the evident need for women's protection. The network has now extended its focus more broadly to promote gender equality and women's empowerment throughout Myanmar and has conducted several recent studies on women's participation in government, the economy, and legal frameworks.

First, a note on terminology. There are a number of different terms used to refer to the aims and content of training programmes that aim to increase women's abilities to achieve greater equality in social structures, the most popular being *capacity building*, *empowerment*, and *leadership training*. In the context of the limited number of training courses offered in Myanmar, and stemming from a justified historic caution surrounding stating potentially subversive intentions too explicitly in course titles, these terms have at times appeared interchangeable. In order to avoid confusion, for the purposes of this article, I shall follow the lead of GEN and refer to all relevant initiatives as *leadership training*, as the programmes discussed here share the primary goal of promoting women to positions of leadership in order to influence change in an environment of transition from a singularly rigid state to one of greater plurality. I also follow feminists including Srilatha Batliwala (2011) in advocating for a *feminist leadership* model as representing one that seeks to transform power structures, with an emphasis on social justice, inclusion, and the realisation of rights, rather than to reproduce structures that reinforce subordination.

This article starts by briefly setting out the context for women in the current climate of political transition, and explores some of the disadvantages experienced by women in Myanmar, using the challenges expressed by the women leaders interviewed by GEN as an entry point. I then present the findings of the GEN report in more detail, with regards to the implications for women's leadership training initiatives. Having

spent several years working as a teacher, curriculum writer, and educational consultant in Myanmar and the Thai border, this article is informed by my practical experiences. I aim to share lessons, and support critical reflection on the role and nature of leadership training initiatives for women in emerging democracies.

The context: Myanmar

Women's rights and gender relations

Women in Myanmar have been prominent participants of the labour force in a broad sense and claim an equal share of education opportunities, with women being well represented in tertiary education institutions (UNDP 2013). However, women are largely employed in the agricultural sector and in low-status, low-skilled positions, pointing to the hierarchical nature of gender relations which has gone uncontested under militarisation (Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2012).

With the change of government towards a civilian-led model, there are now opportunities for women to take up roles in government that were previously closed to them. However, three years after the general elections, with by-elections held in 2012, the number of women represented in the Union Assembly (the Upper and Lower Houses) and the state and regional parliaments is strikingly small: only 4.6 per cent of the elected parliamentary seats are held by women and that figure falls to 3.4 per cent of the total appointees when taking into account the 398 seats (across the parliamentary bodies) reserved for military, and therefore exclusively male, appointees (GEN 2012, 1).

There is apparent (although as yet unrealised) commitment to increasing the numbers of women participating in government and decision-making roles, as seen in the forthcoming National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2012–21).[3] However, although the 2013 joint UN delegation report praised the 'growing number of civil society organizations working for women's empowerment' (UNICEF 2013, 10), they also expressed concern over the limited capacity of agencies to ensure commitments to gender equality are met across the different ministries, and the limited influence exercised by key UN offices particularly without a UN-Women presence in Myanmar.

This underlines the marked tensions that are evident in Myanmar (as in many other countries) between the political rhetoric employed to fall in line with international standards, and institutional resistance to challenging entrenched gender roles. Similar dichotomies are apparent in the legal system. Although women's rights are nominally protected under the 2008 Constitution,[4] in particular the rights to vote and run for public office, there are glaring inadequacies and the legal system offers little in the way of protection against discrimination:

- there are no specific laws to protect women from domestic violence;
- abortion is illegal (except to save a woman's life);

- marital rape is not criminalised (unless the wife is under 14);
- there is a lack of standardisation of marriage laws (varying by the religion of spouses);
- divorce proceedings preference men (with greater restrictions applying to women seeking to initiate divorce);
- there are no harassment laws to protect women in the workplace;
- there is no provision for parental leave (GEN 2013a, 3–4).

The situation is compounded by weak judicial processes, the scarcity of legal training, and the widespread mistrust on the part of victims stemming from the historic manipulation of legal systems by the junta. The 2013 OECD *Multi-dimensional Review of Myanmar* found perceptions of corruption to be the worst compared to all regional South and South-East Asian neighbours, with women less than half as likely as men to 'report having voiced an opinion to an official' (at only 3 per cent compared with 7 per cent for men – still alarmingly low), demonstrating very low levels of civic engagement (OECD 2013, 48). The report also highlights that while legal systems appear to afford women equal rights with men on several fronts (including property ownership and inheritance), cultural practice does not substantiate this particularly across diverse ethnic groups and 'if not taken into account, this gap between formal laws and customary practices could limit the effectiveness of policy interventions' (OECD 2013, 40).

In addition, the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war by the state military in the ethnic conflicts (Info Birmanie and Swedish Burma Committee 2012, 1) again underlines the systematic subordination of women, particularly those from ethnic states, and their current vulnerability under systems that fail to offer protection.

Finally, the controversial and ultra-nationalist 969 movement, which seeks to defend the overwhelming Buddhist majority from perceived threats and which has garnered worrying popularity recently against a backdrop of increased religious tensions in the country, recently floated a proposal that would restrict inter-faith marriage and deny women's right to choose their partners by requiring fathers to give consent. Originally a fringe movement, the alarming support that the proposal has received by central government figures demonstrates how tentative the recent gains in women's inclusion remain. It also highlights the need for feminist leadership approaches to power relations that would see greater consideration of human rights and a rejection of oppressive systems in all its applications.

Women's political organisation and leadership

Myanmar's women have historically been prominent members of the opposition and protest movements, and are increasingly mobilised and active in civil society, demonstrating a desire to advocate for women's rights, however, in the changing

political environment they can find themselves lacking both the skills training to prepare them and the platform to effectively influence policy on a broader scale. Such dichotomies undermine the apparent gains in women's opportunities and perpetuate the dominance of masculine influence.

While women have risen quickly to community leadership roles, particularly in situations of conflict or resistance and in informal arenas or those that do not challenge gender norms, it is much more difficult for women to access formal positions and those that attract greater prestige, influence, and/or financial reward. In other words, while there are proportionally high numbers of active female students in civil society groups, women volunteers in the armed militia groups and female teachers, health-care workers, and leaders of women's co-operative groups, there are proportionally very low numbers of women in government, leading civil service departments, or prominent in the (State) military, legal, or business sectors.

Nonetheless, there are small but increasing numbers of women taking on more prominent leadership roles, not only at a community level but also at the national level, and the growing links between women's organisations, fostered by networks such as the Women's Organisation Network, the Women's League of Burma, and the GEN, provide an amplified voice and a broader platform from which to support women's influence. These networks play a key role in knowledge and information sharing and provide natural partners for leadership training initiatives.

Gender and education in Myanmar

The formal education system in Myanmar (as elsewhere) of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s experienced by today's adult women reinforced state-sanctioned values, and sought to form citizens favourable to the country's leadership. For Myanmar at this time, this meant a pliable population that would not challenge the authority of the self-serving military. In the classroom, mirroring the practices of the State, acceptance and obedience were rewarded while individual expression and alternative approaches attracted punishment (often corporal punishment). In such an environment, students are not taught to question authority, accepted tradition, or cultural norms, but rather to reproduce faithfully the models that have been presented to them (Smith 2007). Under the military junta, these models unequivocally demonstrate male leadership. Such teaching practices, which suppress analytical and critical thinking skills, deny students the opportunities to challenge, to question, and to debate, which affect all adversely; however, female students are particularly disadvantaged as they are not equipped with skills to engage with the inequalities to which they are subjected (Brock-Utne 1989).

An additional problem facing formal education in parts of the country is the ongoing ethnic conflicts in many of Myanmar's states and regions, which have taken their toll in slowing down progress towards universal education, and interrupting the education provision that has been achieved. Although the country as a whole has been

making steady progress in improving access to education, the mean years of schooling is still under four, rising from just 1.7 years in 1980 (UNDP 2013, 2), while in Karen, Karenni, and Shan States, where conflict has been long-standing, just 10 per cent of children were found to be attending school in 2002 (Metro 2006, 4). The disruption to communities resulting from the conflicts, which have seen many displaced either over the porous borders or internally, has maimed the education infrastructure, leaving schools struggling to secure staff and students in already resource-constrained environments. For those children in school, education has often been of sub-standard quality due to the difficulty teachers have accessing resources, the standardisation of the state curriculum in the Burmese language (where many speak their ethnic language), and also due to political manipulation.

Tertiary education has also been affected by political unrest. In urban areas the student protests of the 1980s and early 1990s led to frequent closures of the universities as they became associated with inciting opposition and civil unrest. Many of the students, male and female, were subjected to brutal persecution and often imprisonment, and the ability of higher education facilities to function as learning institutions was profoundly undermined. This climate of civil protest initially led by student demonstrators and the wider democratic movement projected some women into positions of leadership – Daw Aung San Suu Kyi being the most prominent example of female leadership to emerge from the 1988 demonstrations – but it was a leadership that was constructed outside the authoritarian rule of the military junta and therefore drew severe repercussions (as evidenced by Suu Kyi's 15 years in custody).

Additionally, some women have found themselves disadvantaged at universities as the lack of standardisation across higher education institutions results in highly variable entrance criteria, which have at times involved the use of unfavourable quotas, meaning women can find themselves needing higher grades to secure a place compared to their male peers or can simply be denied access to certain subjects. This has not deterred women from entering university, with current figures indicating higher enrolment rates amongst women than men (ADB 2012, 1), but it points to latent inequalities in prioritising male careers and casts doubt over the appropriateness of options available to female students. The ADB has drawn attention to the disparity between the high levels of female enrolment at the post-secondary level and the comparatively low levels of women's participation in the labour force outside the agricultural sector, concluding:

> This indicates a mismatch between the skills attained in school and labor market needs, as well as gender discrimination in the types of study based on cultural stereotypes regarding the skills and/or occupations suitable for women. (ADB 2012, 10)

Education systems therefore have not prepared women to lead.

While recent reforms[5] are indicating increased attention in supporting education systems in the country, worryingly there are already indications that women's equality and women's needs are being poorly addressed in the process of education reform. The report *Empowering Higher Education: A Vision for Myanmar's Universities* (British Council (BC) 2013) on the policy dialogue conducted between the parliamentary committees, the BC, the ADB, AusAID, and UNESCO – one of several significant steps in furthering the systematic redevelopment of tertiary education – gives only cursory attention to gender considerations. The brief reference to a gender imbalance in favour of women connects the high numbers of female staff with low salaries but admits 'the [Comprehensive Education Sector Review] notes correctly that the reasons for this situation have not been systematically researched' (BC 2013, 20). Likewise, despite their apparent surprise that 'sometimes almost the entire cohort of senior staff appears to be female, even in technological universities' (BC 2013, 20), nine of the ten Myanmar parliamentary committee leaders, ministry and university representatives participating in the dialogue were male,[6] raising concerns that Myanmar women are being denied influencing positions even in those labour sectors where they have a majority share of the market.

In the next section, I shift the focus to the needs of existing and potential women leaders in Myanmar and the role of leadership training in supporting them.

Taking the lead: the GEN's survey

In 2013, the GEN undertook an extensive survey of the needs of women leaders and also reviewed the current leadership training initiatives being offered by their member organisations with the aim of better understanding the capacity-building needs of participants and facilitators alike. One of their specific objectives was to 'identify the leadership skills and leadership capacity development needs of women leaders targeted for training by GEN members' (GEN 2013b, 6). This involved interviews with 43 women leaders across three areas of leadership: members of political parties; local and international NGOs; and local-level community-based organisations (CBOs). The women had varying experiences of training, with some having attended numerous training courses ranging in duration and content, while a few had no previous experience of training (GEN 2013b, 9). While the women interviewed were asked several questions regarding their perceptions of leadership qualities, visions of a strong leader, and previous experience, I shall focus here on the descriptions of attitudes faced as a female leader as illustrative of the cultural context for women aiming to influence decision-making.

People don't want to listen to women. (GEN 2013b, 10)

The women leaders interviewed by GEN spoke of the resistance they encountered from others, male and female, to their positions of leadership. Hierarchical social structures which preference men and age make it difficult for women to challenge traditional authority figures, and narrowly defined concepts of acceptable roles for men and women, reinforced through education practices, impede women's access to new opportunities.

> *Being men and women are a little bit different. Women cannot influence people much and her ability is often challenged. People don't want to listen to women.* (GEN 2013b, 10)

In a society which also reserves great respect for elders, young women experience particular opposition, making it difficult for them to gain experience in areas that challenge conventions:

> *For elder men, it is very difficult because of culture. They think they know best and that women are not as good as they are. To overcome this, I need to be careful and first build a relationship to manage them to listen to me. They then become accepting. Age is very important.* (GEN 2013b, 11)

As leadership is firmly identified as a masculine role, women were criticised for behaving in an 'unfeminine' way: 'One Member of Parliament (MP) said she had faced double criticism, both for engaging in politics and for being a woman' (GEN 2013b, 10). It also seems that the sustained repressive regime of the junta has left a legacy of political disenfranchisement. Politics has been portrayed as the preserve of the male elite, and therefore something of a luxury in times of more pressing needs:

> *Myanmar people's political awareness is very low. People told me I am doing nonsense and that doing politics cannot feed my family. (ibid.)*

However there are also indications that these attitudes are changing now that political spheres have become somewhat more inclusive. The same woman continued: 'Now the country has changed. People see me differently now' (GEN 2013b, 11). The interviews also reveal the tenacity demonstrated by those women currently in positions of leadership:

> *When I become a leader, I faced negative attitudes, perspectives. But I don't give much attention to that. People will have good and bad things to say about others. Given I have reached this position, I already expected such attitudes.*

And:

> *At the beginning, men don't want to give me opportunities. I had to prove my ability through my job performance. When you face a challenge, you cannot just sit and be quiet, you have to speak out if you think you are saying the right thing.* (GEN 2013b, 11)

Women have therefore been doubly disadvantaged in accessing leadership roles due to the historic exclusion resulting from militarisation and as a result of traditional attitudes to gender practices which prioritise male authority. Despite the accelerated pace of transition and reform, women are already identifying a shift in the way they are perceived. This underlines the importance of collectivity in supporting women's ability to challenge resistant attitudes that is already becoming visible as civil society is given greater freedom to operate.

Finally, echoing the personal effort they have made in enduring and overcoming negative perceptions, the women interviewed likewise spoke of the broader support they felt they needed across multiple areas of their lives:

We need community support, support from male colleagues, government support and space to speak out.

And:

It depends on people and colleagues. We need mutual understanding and goals. The organization needs to give space, more time to build social relationships and give a clear vision, strategy and approach. Training can help. (GEN 2013b, 12)

Transformative leadership training: the current situation

The political and social context for women leaders in Myanmar, including the educational context, obviously has a serious impact on their role in leadership. This draws attention to the important function of leadership training initiatives, and informs considerations of course content and practice.

The considerable need for citizenship awareness, human rights understandings, and civil society development across all sectors may have led to the prioritisation of broad initiatives and resulted in women's specific needs receiving less focused attention from training programmes, meaning that in many cases gender equality may appear as a small module in a larger course rather than as a field in its own right. Nonetheless, a number of local CBOs, teaching institutes, and NGOS, including a few of the large international NGOs, implement initiatives that fall under the remit of women's leadership training.[7] These initiatives vary greatly in duration, from just a few days to over six months, as well as varying in the language of instruction. In their 2013 review of initiatives, GEN identified 13 current programmes, the majority of which were administered by network members (GEN 2013b, 16) and predominantly targeted younger women identified as potential leaders. The topics of training programmes were broadly found to cover three areas: women's rights and gender equality, including international mechanisms such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; leadership competencies, including communication

skills and confidence building; and technical areas such as peace building or environmental issues (GEN 2013b, 18).

While most courses were found to contain content drawn from each of these three areas, GEN noted a lack of training on organisational management, and only longer courses included attention to critical-thinking skills, change management and decision making (GEN 2013b, 19). The implications of these omissions shall be explored further below.

The historic sensitivity attached to any rights-based work which posed security issues to trainers and course participants resulted in courses being conducted in relative secrecy without the possibility of advertising openly and, consequently, also reducing collaboration between organisations; while this sensitivity is less prominent now, there seems still to be some sense of caution attached to seeking publicity for rights-focused training initiatives. Likewise, the sensitivity of work, ongoing conflict, and difficulty in accessing remote areas have resulted in an unbalanced distribution of programmes, with the majority of courses being run in Yangon, with some focus in Nay Pyi Daw. Thus, although efforts have been made to promote inclusivity (such as sponsored residential courses), women from ethnic states have seen restricted opportunities for participation (GEN 2013b, 8).

Additionally, the insecurity of funding budgets can result in short-term planning producing isolated, one-off training events rather than coherent, successive pro-grammes.[8] Given the diversity of women's backgrounds and the variations of women's prior experiences (both of learning and of disadvantage), there is a wide breadth of needs that risks being insufficiently met by individualised approaches.

The reality for women's leadership training programmes is that many of the participants have not previously been exposed to participatory teaching and learning techniques, and consequently attention needs to be given to collaborative methods, and analytical and critical-thinking skills. Additionally, such courses are also taking on responsibility for supporting women across a range of educational needs, and therefore courses need to be of an appropriate duration to allow time for learning development. The input then, particularly in terms of follow-up support, needs to be comparable to the significant requirements in learning that are being demanded of participants to propel them into positions of leadership, whether at a community, organisational, or government level.

Meeting expressed needs: considering future leadership training

In addition to the open interviews conducted with women leaders for their recent study, GEN developed a women's leadership framework which divided 23 leadership competencies across three categories: Leading Self, Leading Others, and Leading an Organisation, Institution or Community. The 43 participating women were asked to rank the competencies in three areas: those most important in their current leadership role, their own competencies, and those they would like more training in (GEN 2013b).

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

This quotation reflects the impact of cultural influences that undermine women's leadership and indicates that attitudes are not easily confronted even for those women leaders who have received multiple training. These women also identified the need for supportive environments – from their organisations, families, and the wider community, signalling the current hostile atmosphere in which women leaders often find themselves operating.

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

This fits in with concerns expressed by Srilatha Batliwala (2011, 33) writing of the need to articulate feminist leadership as 'working to transform the relationships of power in society, and to create alternate models of power within their own structures'. Highlighting four areas of focus for leadership training – Power, Politics, Practices, and Principles – she sees evidence of a prominent focus on practice amongst leadership training programmes, but fears that considerations of power dynamics and their role in reproducing unequal structures are often lacking from feminist leadership programmes (Batliwala 2011).

The GEN survey also highlighted the varying needs of women in different roles, with women leaders in CBOs expressing different needs from those in NGOs and women in political parties. In particular, the female members of political parties interviewed found their experiences of training too short and not sufficiently detailed, largely covering broad introductory themes (GEN 2013a, 13). This reinforces a need for training initiatives to conduct careful needs assessments and to tailor courses according to the participants involved. In many cases this may require a significant shift in

organisation, as frequently courses are developed, funded, and material is sourced before the participants have been identified.

Recommendations from the findings

The findings indicate that women leaders see training as an important source of support to supplement and inform their own efforts to impact positive change, and that these initiatives would benefit from expansion to meet these demands. GEN provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for the improvement of training programmes in Myanmar, with the aim of better supporting women from diverse backgrounds and with varying experiences to lead.

Based on these GEN recommendations and my own observations in my work here, I would highlight the following key considerations:

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

Finally, the women interviewed by GEN clearly expressed their appreciation of collaborative settings, and their desire for more supportive environments outside training courses: fostering networks and peer-support groups, then, can help women feel better supported, beyond the aims of training.

Conclusions

It is clear that this is a key time for women in Myanmar to be involved in decision making and to ensure that the rhetoric of gender equality that is accompanying the rapid reforms translates to meaningful progress, not only in positioning women in leadership roles but also equipping those women to lead effectively and transformatively, giving them the power to influence the leadership structures around them.

There is a key role to be played by education in preparing individuals for leadership roles, however, in the current Myanmar context many men and women have been ill-supported by their previous experiences of formal education. In the long term, education-sector reform should result in a population more equally prepared to access labour markets, participate in decision making, and engage in political processes, with currently marginalised groups being better supported in exercising self-determination. However, this does not address the needs of adults who have already passed through a sub-standard education system and there is doubt that this scenario of comprehensive and affirmative education-sector reform can materialise as long as these same marginalised groups are not an integral part of directing their own needs through the process. For women's equality this means accelerating women leaders into positions of influence, equipped with an appropriate skill-set to exercise change and a network of allies to draw on in applying pressure to cumbersome patriarchal institutions. In these areas, the training courses available to women leaders can provide valuable support.

Elizabeth Maber is currently completing a PhD with the Centre for International Education at the University of Sussex, UK. She has spent several years as a trainer and consultant with international and local organisations in Myanmar and Thailand. Postal address: Centre for International Education, School of Education & Social Work, University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, UK. Email: E.Maber@sussex.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 A note on the politics of names: this article uses the official names of Myanmar and Yangon to refer to the country and its major city. Although Burma and Rangoon, respectively, were officially replaced in 1989, they are still used in common parlance, particularly amongst the communities on the Thai border, and were preferred by the democracy movement who rejected the legitimacy of the military government. However, with the 2010 elections marking an end to official military rule, Myanmar is now widely accepted amongst all movements as the country's legitimate name.

2   An illustration of this might be found in the choice of a man with 20 years' service to the military government, Dr Mya Oo, as the head of the Women and Children's Affairs Committee advising on education-sector reform.

3   Due to the sensitivity surrounding rights-based programmes I shall not name these organisations here. However, more details of the programmes reviewed are provided in the GEN 2013(b) report.

4   The 2008 Constitution replaced the previous socialist constitution of 1974 and paved the way for democratic reform in what was termed *Myanmar's transition to democracy.*

5   Reforms include the Comprehensive Education Sector Review, the stablishment of several committees to mediate on planned reforms, and partnerships between the Ministry of Education and international education organisations, including UNESCO, AusAid, and the British Council, which represents a significant change in attitude in promoting collaboration, although their attention to gender considerations is as yet not encouraging.

6   The lone exception coming from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as chair of the Higher Education Law and Yangon University Revitalisation Committees.

7   This formed the second part of GEN's (2013b) study, Taking the Lead, in order to compare the training needs expressed by current women leaders with those courses currently being offered to younger, emerging leaders.

8   For a discussion of the implications of international funding constraints on longer-term education development programmes, see Knutsson and Lindberg (2012).

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