

WILL GAD EFFORTS WORK WITHOUT A STABLE DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR?

Thant, Sanda;

Kusakabe, Kyoko;Doneys, Philippe;Chatterjee, Joyee;

© 2021, AUTHOR



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original work is properly credited.

Cette œuvre est mise à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>), qui permet l'utilisation, la distribution et la reproduction sans restriction, pourvu que le mérite de la création originale soit adéquatement reconnu.

IDRC Grant/ Subvention du CRDI: 108622-001-Building policy research capacity in Myanmar

WILL GAD EFFORTS WORK WITHOUT A STABLE DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR?



- Sanda Thant, SEGRI, Myanmar
- in collaboration with:
- Prof. Kyoko Kusakabe, Gender and Development Studies, Department of Development and Sustainability, Asian Institute of Technology
 - Dr Philippe Doney, Gender and Development Studies, Department of Development and Sustainability, Asian Institute of Technology
 - Dr Joyee Chatterjee, Gender and Development Studies, Department of Development and Sustainability, Asian Institute of Technology

Gender in Myanmar

Gender inclusion concerns have been widespread among organizations working for Myanmar's humanitarian and social development after cyclone Nargis hit the country in 2008. The number of women's organizations is growing, and there is increasing momentum within the organizations to promote gender equality in programming and advocacy for women's rights. In 2013, in collaboration with the United Nations Gender Theme Group and Gender Equality Network, the government committed to promote and protect women's rights by formulating the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW). A gender situation analysis was conducted in 2016 as a baseline for the NSPAW.

With growing focus on gender issues, development organizations and the ministries concerned have launched several gender-related development initiatives, including gender awareness training, projects on Gender Based Violence (GBV), gender mainstreaming, gender in project cycle management, gender budgeting, gender analysis. The dissemination of the contents of the UN's Convention on Eliminations of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has also been implemented. Two local organizations, the Gender Academy and Myanmar Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS), offer customized gender certificate courses mainly focused on WPS and project cycle management. Academic institutes such as the Department of Economics from Yangon University of Economics and the Myanmar Institute of Theology offer gender courses. Development partners and organizations including the UN have emphasized more advocacy works on gender, ranging from community-level to government entities and Parliament.

Despite this progress, challenges exist, as gender inequality has not been historically recognized as an issue for development in Myanmar. Being under the military regime for decades (1962-2010), research in Myanmar is underdeveloped, and there is limited or no data/information available across sectors. The education system under the military regime did not encourage, and in fact even hindered analytical thinking; thus, research capacity and analytical skill have been critically neglected. Deep-rooted social norms and gendered cultures/traditions call for better understanding and in-depth analysis of gender, but there are not enough studies to provide sufficient basis for policy discussion. While there is growing focus on and increasing efforts toward gender equality and women's empowerment, the existing resources (both gender experts and material support) are insufficient, and the analysis tend to be superficial and lack depth. It often follows existing discourses without contextualizing the analysis, hence invites the wrong criticism that gender equality is a foreign concept. Perceiving gender as merely a women's issue, just adding women into project interventions, without engaging in meaningful gender integration or in-depth analysis of power relations, lead to tackling gender in a superficial way. It is, therefore, crucial to have a wider and in-depth understanding of gender and development at all levels: individual, family, organizations, community, and the state.

Gender research capacity building project at YUE

Based on the realization that the lack of in-depth gender analysis stems from the lack of academic training on gender analysis, the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and The Yangon University of Economics (YUE) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to cooperate on a series of activities to build gender analysis ca-



capacity among the faculty members/ research staff and students of Yangon University of Economics (YUE) in Myanmar. The Socio-Economic & Gender Resource Institute (SEGRI) of Myanmar has played a catalyst role to follow up on AIT's inputs to YUE, and monitored and mentored the YUE researchers on daily basis. The key areas of cooperation are: 1) Capacity building of YUE faculty members/ research staff on gender analysis (building gender research capacity, conducting micro research, studying gender-related master's and certificate courses at AIT); and 2) Joint supervision of YUE master's students in 2018 and 2019. In 2020, due to the global Covid-19 out-

break, progress was slow, however, the twin goals of finalizing micro research and joint supervision were carried out virtually.

The initial plan was to develop a gender and development curriculum at YUE to equip students with theoretical knowledge on gender, and development and analytical skills from feminist perspectives. However, it is difficult to change the curriculum (especially to add a new concept such as gender), as universities, including YUE, are not autonomous in Myanmar, and the curriculum is controlled by the Ministry of Education.



Hence, the YUE and AIT took a different approach. With the financial support of IDRC and in collaboration with SEGRI, they laid down an environment supportive of building gender capacity at YUE. They conducted two workshops in YUE, and subsequently developed a new Gender and Development course as discussed below.

The first workshop “Integrating Gender into the Existing Curriculum and Building Research Capacity” was organized at YUE in February 2018. Its aim was to gain familiarity with gender concepts and the relevant discussions around these concepts, to offer gender modules on social protection and social policy, and to discuss training needs for research capacity building. The workshop covered both concepts and practical issues with regard to gender and development,

gender and social policy, gender and social protection, and the challenges that women and men face in ensuring social protection in Myanmar. The workshop was attended by YUE lecturers and some graduate students. These lecturers were expected to incorporate gender issues in their course content with technical assistance from AIT faculty members.

The second workshop “Capacity Building for Qualitative Methods in Gender Research” in June 2018, gave YUE faculty members and teaching staff a better understanding of gender issue and exposed them to qualitative research methods. These faculty members formed small groups to conduct gender research on the topic of their choice, with technical support and guidance from AIT, YUE and SEGRI.

Gender and Development course in the YUE's master's programme

It was around this time that the YUE professor in charge of this project got a promotion as head of department for the Department of Economics that has been offering a professional post-graduate programme “Executive Master’s in Development Studies (EMDevS)”. This professor, through the project activities, realized the importance of gender integration for sustainable development. Her commitment moved the Rector of YUE as well, and together, they were able to create a space for a Gender and Development (GAD) course in the YUE’s Executive Master’s in Development Studies (EMDevS) programme in September 2018. Considering the fact that YUE is a public university, creating a new course is a sheer demonstration of their political will and determination to establish a gender and development course at YUE. SEGRI developed the course content and grading system, with technical support from AIT faculty members.

The EMDevS programme targets working professionals in the field of development, and development practitioners from public institutions, the private sector, and management levels from development fields (e.g., United Nations, International Non-Government Organizations, Civil Society Organizations). The curriculum focuses on economic and development-related topics such as economic principles, different development segments, development economics, political economy, rural development, international trade, human resource development, SME development, gender and development, public policy and administration, environmental and natural resource economics, public finance, international finance and aid, and strategic management.

The EMDevS programme’s gender and development (GAD) course is based on academic and

theoretical discussions, together with academic papers review, supported by guidance and close coordination by AIT faculty members. The GAD course mainly used the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)’s book “Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development”, and six academic papers for individual reviews and group exercises.

To understand the GAD course better, it is useful to look at the IDRC book and how it was utilised in the course, in greater detail. The first three chapters of the book discuss the importance of theory in influencing conventional thought, and helps students look at issues from a feminist perspective. It questions traditional assumptions and challenges mainstream theorizing. Looking at gender issues in different eras, and their policy implications, help to better understand sustainable development as a model for societal transformation. The historical context explains how development and feminist frameworks intersected to become the competing frameworks Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). In addition, the chapters desensitize the concept of ‘feminism’ as it is wrongly interpreted in Myanmar. The next two chapters deliver key gender concepts using examples in a Myanmar context, which make for better understanding and inspire students to carry out further gender research. Questions about “why women” in development projects/programmes and public policies, are answered using the WID policies of international development institutions, ‘engendering’ as a concept of human development, and key features of WID and GAD.

The students were given six academic papers for review and discussion covering (1) Globalization, (2) the Equality Debate, (3) Sustainable Development, (4) Gender Poverty and Inequality, (5) Unpaid Work and the Economy, and (6) Gender Issues in Urban Areas. The course and the dis-

ussions were not only useful for the students by creating a space for sharing views but also provided an effective way to influence policy makers and practitioners on the importance of gender equality. Most of the students are either middle management officials from different government departments, or mid- to senior-level development practitioners from international and civil society organizations. They have rich experience in supporting policy formulation, project and programme implementation and management, and a high-level awareness of economic development in the globalization era. Therefore, the course (which was a required course for the professional master's students) provided an excellent opportunity to sensitize these students.

Perception on gender and feminism

At the same time, the teaching experience of the SEGRI faculty revealed that gender and development concepts and discussions are perceived differently by different students. Many students from government departments have a limited understanding of gender and some have negative views on the issue. The students from the private sector mostly perceive gender as not an issue. Those from international organizations and civil society organizations have high acceptance of gender equality, but weaker practical and contextual understanding. In order to capture the concept of gender and gender equality, it is important not to label the idea before debating on it or thinking through the concept. It is often the case that students label 'feminism' as 'extremism that focuses exclusively on women's issues', shunning any further discussion. However, those who are more open and willing to debate appreciated the concept, since it gave them alternative ways of thinking. Historical alternative approaches to women and development, and theoretical

concepts help the development practitioners and policy makers better understand the gender issues and provide a link between theory and practice through country-specific policy/programme examples from different fields of development.

It is important to note that without such debate and open-mindedness and critical thinking and analytical attitudes, it is difficult to be engaged in gender analysis. It was not only the lack of outside information that stifled gender analysis during the former military regime, but also the lack of encouragement of critical thinking that prohibited gender analysis to grow.

Military coup and the future of gender and development education

Hence concerns ran high when the military coup occurred in February 2021. The military coup has not only set back the country's progress but also worsened the country's economy, already suffering from the pandemic in 2020. Nationwide protests in Myanmar, known locally as the 'Spring Revolution', have started since the coup, using non-violent forms of demonstration. One of these is a powerful strike called the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), whose adherents are refusing to return to work and demanding the military return power to the elected government; a broad range of professions, led by medical and healthcare workers, teachers, railway workers, truck drivers, engineers, bankers, lawyers, and civil servants from government departments have joined the strike. Although there is no data available on how many staffers from government entities have joined CDM, almost all public services and offices have been rendered unable to operate. International organizations including United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are also protesting the coup by practicing non-en-



gagement with the government ministries and departments currently under military control. Universities were closed, and the capacity building project with AIT/YUE was halted as well as the GAD course at YUE.

The military re-opened universities in May 2021 for doctoral courses, master's studies, and final-year undergraduate students, partly to show the world that the country is functioning normally. However, only a few students in some universities attended, many universities saw no student

attendance. There is no information available on whether master's studies at YUE is continuing, and whether we can revive the GAD course at all. Even if the GAD course is revived, will the university encourage critical thinking that promotes diversity and equality? Can we still teach GAD that promotes women's rights and empowerment under the military regime? The achievements have owed much to various people's commitments and contributions. All these might go to waste if the country's democracy is not restored.