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Nuancing Human Rights Discourse and Practice: Perspectives from Myanmar

Amy Marie Argenal

University of San Francisco, amyargenal@hotmail.com

The University of San Francisco

NUANCING HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE:
PERSPECTIVES FROM MYANMAR

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Amy Argenal
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Dissertation Abstract

Nuancing Human Rights Discourse and Practice: Perspectives from Myanmar

Through a participatory action research project with human rights activists in

Myanmar, this study builds on discourse around inherent power imbalances in

international human rights work by highlighting voices often left out of the human rights

discourse. Using postcolonial and third world feminist frameworks, this research offers

analysis of ten research participants' narratives on their relationship with human rights

discourse and a discussion of their practice. By looking at questions of how community

activists from Myanmar engaged in a human rights discourse, the study offers nuanced

understandings and critical analysis of how and why certain activists will embrace or

reject the use of human rights standards and practice. Based on these findings, the study

offers suggestions for how foreign born human rights activists can engage in solidarity

with local community agents in ways that do not reinforce narratives of victimization and

salvation. It offers the reader thoughts on how to build solidarity across borders by

highlighting specific recommendations from local activists in Myanmar that offer insights

on how one can engage in human rights work across borders in a way that focuses on

building local relationships based on trust and collaboration that make room for a

constant examination on power dynamics.

Amy Argenal, Author   Shabnam Koirala-Azad
                                             Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Amy Argenal   May 12, 2016
Candidate   Date

Dissertation Committee

Shabnam Koirala-Azad   May 12, 2016
Chairperson   Date

Monisha Bajaj   May 12, 2016
                                               Date

Chris Thomas   May 12, 2016
                                               Date

DEDICATION

To all of those who risk their lives every day to bring human rights, peace and justice to their local communities. I dedicate this work to you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

feel honored that they shared their work with me, and pray every day that I do their work

justice.

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CHAPTER 1: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In June of 2008, I moved to a small town outside of Bangkok to study a Masters degree in human rights in an international program at a Thai University. In this program, it was made up of students from all over the world with the large majority being from South and South East Asia. While there, I was able to meet local, on the ground activists from Southern and Northern Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, India and Indonesia. I was invited to visit many of their organizations and participate in programs around their work.

At the same time, I was taking four classes a semester on a number of different topics. We studied international human rights standards and mechanisms; researched the history and philosophical discussions around human rights, and examined human rights issues in Asia. One thing I began to notice was the large disconnect from the work being done on the ground and the issues studied in the course curriculum. There is this large body of research on the international human rights framework, all the codified international treaties, alongside all the governmental and non-governmental organizations working to bring human rights to the global community. However, I did not see the work of my fellow colleagues reflected at all. As Vinjamuir and Ron (2013) highlight, those from Europe and North America tend to dominate the writing and leadership positions in development and human rights work and I was witnessing this in my program.

I began to question more what "human rights" means, and more specifically, what does it mean to do "human rights work"? I wanted to see and hear my classmates' work and narratives represented more into the discourse and began to question why it wasn't there. Scholars have written about the colonial legacies that exist in human rights work.

For example, Weissman (2004) writes that "the disparity in power between the colonizer and the colonized continues to affect the ongoing development of human rights norms " and that "the human rights project must be guided by an awareness of the power relationships that shape proposed remedies" (p. 262). She is not alone in her work calling on critical understandings of human rights work (Bob, 2005; Rieff, 2002; Spivak, 2002; Vinjamuir & Ron, 2013; Kennedy, 2001). These scholars highlight the notion of power in the human rights project and it's colonial legacies. However, much of the work is still focused with the human rights project as a structure. The research is missing the importance of how this structure can affect the relationships of those most involved. What takes place between the foreign born activist living in another country and the citizens of that specific country? What do these relationships look like? How can foreign-born activists prepare themselves to live abroad and engage in human rights activism while not reinforcing and maintaining oppressive systems of power?

If we are to engage in authentic relationships that focus on reciprocity and solidarity rather than on the notion of "saving the other" as Spivak (1988) has written, one must be willing to examine these relationships. Solidarity is an important aspect of the global human rights regime, but it cannot exist without highlighting the role power and colonialism have played in the international human rights project. This research project aims to explore the notion of building solidarity across borders by examining relationships within the field of human rights activism inside of Myanmar. It is an exploration of those questions listed above. By interviewing ten local community activists in Myanmar, alongside two co-researchers, we are sharing the work they have been conducting within their communities and uncovering their relationship to human

rights discourse and practice. We are connecting their narratives back to the question of what, if any, influence the international human rights project has on their work, and what they hope their work could offer the human rights project.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following main questions:

1. How do community workers in Myanmar engage in discourse and practice around Human Rights?
2. What do interactions between local and foreign-born activists look like?
3. How can human rights activists from abroad engage in human rights work that builds solidarity across borders from the perspective of local activists in Myanmar?

Statement of the Problem

A few years ago, a video went viral entitled *Radi-Aid: Africa for Norway* (www.africafornorway.org), in which a group of young people gathered radiators from the African continent to send to Norway to help with the cold weather. The video was meant to expose the stereotypes that exist around the African continent in the media and also in the world of fundraising. The stereotypes are of the "poor" African continent, which is all the same that has a constant need for aid from Europe, North American and Australia (the West)(Adekoya, 2013; Moyo, 2009). These same stereotypes also exist in the field of human rights. While studying Human Rights in Thailand, I had a first hand account witnessing the way these stereotypes affected those coming from countries with poor human rights records. Often times, human rights activists coming from countries with poor human rights records, were themselves labeled victims in the same place they came to build upon the work they were doing. There are two problems with this; one it is essentializing an entire group of people as all "victims" because of their country, and the second is that because everyone is a victim, it must take someone from outside to save

them. For example, referring to the *Radi-Aid* video mentioned above, if everyone from the African continent lives in poverty, then who can possibly provide aid from within that place. The assumptions are that all people within a nation are the same; they come from country that suffers human rights abuses and therefore are all victims of human rights abuses. This narrative reinforces an idea that to "help", an outsider must come into to provide human rights.

Mohanty's (2003) work on how Western feminists write about Third World women is the perfect example of this. She critiques the "coherent group of women" and writes, "the major problem with such definition of power is that it locks all revolutionary struggles into binary structures- possessing power versus being powerless. Women are powerless, unified groups" (p. 39). Abu-Lughod (2002) and Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) have also addressed this specifically in their studies on the role of Western Feminism and the "Muslim woman".   As Abu-Lughod (2002) writes "we need to be vigilant about the rhetoric of saving people because of what it implies about our attitudes" (p. 787). This same rhetoric occurs so much in the literature on human rights work. Narratives are largely focused on human rights violations.   An example of this is the Voice of Witness series, where human rights violations are documented through oral histories[1]. Where are the stories of activism taking place and why do these not dominate the literature? How are groups working together to build solidarity and strength in communities around the world? This part of the human rights project is often left out and overlooked and when this happens, those of us looking for models and examples of activism miss out. It falls back on the old notions of salvation and rescuing the victims.

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[1] More information can be found at http://voiceofwitness.org/about/.

When this happens, the human rights project becomes dangerously close to replicating those same oppressive systems it hopes to stand against.

These narratives are especially true for the case of Myanmar. Up until recently, Myanmar has been isolated from the global stage. Having been cut off by economic sanctions from the European Union (EU) and the United States, and having been closed off to international media, people knew very little about the human rights situation inside of the country (Johansen, 2012). What people did know seemed to reinforce the same narrative of victimization. Christina Fink's (2009) work is a perfect example of this. Fink looks at a culture of silence that undermines the notion of activism by the Burmese people. Clapp's (2007) chapter is yet another example of all the human rights violations coming out of Myanmar during this isolated period, while at the same time assuming a unified and monolithic group of "Burmese citizens" who experience these violations.

After the 2010 elections, the country saw a sudden transition to democracy after years of authoritarian rule (Kundu, 2012). Since then, more aide and human rights organizations have been flocking into the country, including more foreign-born activists and development workers (Rieffel & Fox, 2013). It is important to begin to discuss the way human rights work is done and how those relationships are built doing this work. It is especially important to do this now in Myanmar, as the last few years have seen the largest influx of foreign aid, development organizations and human rights organizations entering into the country. As this continues, it is important to introduce this dialogue so that the old legacies are not reinforced in a country transitioning to democracy.

Background and Need for the Study

When Burma emerged from colonial rule in 1948, it was the wealthiest, best educated, and most progressive country in Southeast Asia. In fact, it was Asia's original democracy. Today it is one of the most economically backward, politically stagnant, and repressive countries in the region and indeed, the world (Clapp, 2007, p. 135).

Myanmar, also known as Burma, the name it was changed from in 1989 by the government looking for a name that more "unified" the country (BBC, 2007), is a large South East Asian country bordering Thailand, India, Bangladesh and China. It was a British colony, and as stated above, was one of the richest countries in Asia at the time of its independence. That situation greatly deteriorated due to the series of military regimes that led the country from 1962-2011. While the regimes names changed, and there were elections, prior to 2011, there was little change in Myanmar with regards to steps towards democracy. The regimes names have changed over the years, from the BSPP government of Ne Win from 1962-1987, which ended with the massacre of hundreds of protesters in August of 1988, to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) from 1988 until 2004, "when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)… systematically dismantled, outlawed, or militarized the remaining institutions of government and civil society that survived the Ne Win years" (Clapp, 2007, p. 139).

Clapp (2007) offers characteristics of the military regime since then. The military had a deep fear of external influence, often blaming the democracy movement on foreign influence, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy leader, who was educated abroad. The generals feared free speech, open debate and political

complexity and tolerated no debate even within the military. There had been constant purges within the military under Than Shwe, former chairman of the SPDC (p. 140).

Unexpectedly, after the election of 2011, Myanmar began to dismantle much of the authoritarian rule of the last fifty years. National League for Democracy (NLD) leader, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and the NLD was legalized. The government began to encourage exiles to return home by removing their names off blacklists and the release of other political prisoners began. There were also a series of legal reforms tackling the right to assemble, labor organizing and voting rights. Bills for foreign investment were drafted and the currency was adjusted to the international rate (International Crisis Group, 2012). As the former president of Myanmar, Thein Sein's (2012) state of the union addressed,

> Our vigorous constitutional democratic transition has now systematically reached a peaceful path. The international media has named our democracy transition 'Burma spring' or 'Myanmar spring'. As our stable and correct transition is gaining more and more international recognition, we need continuous efforts to win further trust. Our country is in the transition to a system of democracy with the constitution as the core. In fact, it is the uniqueness of our country and our people.

Last year, in November of 2015, the transition to democracy took another huge turn when the National League for Democracy won over two-thirds of the seats in Parliament (BBC, 2015). Myanmar has a new president, and the once arrested leader of the party, Aung San Suu Kyi now serves as State Counselor, a new position created just for her (McKirdy, 2016).

It is here that led the United States and the European Union to remove sanctions after many years of isolation. This removal has led for a rush of international non-governmental organizations (INGOS) and development agencies into Myanmar. Also as stated above, Myanmar is known for its long record of human rights violations. This makes it an appealing country to human rights INGOS who have been waiting for years to access Myanmar. While this recent transition on the part of the government is definitely a positive step for the people of Myanmar, the sudden influx of foreign investors, development agencies and human rights workers from abroad can leave many of those who have been working inside the country overlooked. There are scholars, like Escobar (1995) and Moyo (2009), critiquing the role development has played in reinforcing global power structures and their work is extremely important now, however, there is also a need for work looking at the individual relationships taking place or not taking place between those working on the ground and the new international community moving in. It is important to address and highlight both the narratives of those who have been doing this work, and also challenge these new visitors to a different, critical way to build relationships.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is highlight local narratives from community activists in order to understand their relationship to human rights discourse. These narratives also highlight messages to foreign-born activists around ways to re-engage in human rights work abroad in a way that focuses more on solidarity rather than the notion of saving the other. This research attempts to be the "vigilant" that Abu-Lughod (2002) calls for. It is offering a critical look at human rights work inside of Myanmar by highlighting

narratives of local Burmese and ethnic minority activists and searching for ways to build

solidarity while taking into account the imbalance of the global power structure. This

was done by engaging in a Participatory Action Research project where two co-

researchers and I gathered the narratives of ten community activists in Myanmar to better

understand their work and their perceptions of foreign-born workers and activists.

Through the conduction of this project, the co-researchers and myself did not only gather

narratives but also had the opportunity to reflect on our own process of working together.

This allowed us a space to self-reflect on the process of researching together as a group as

well as gathering data on what others say about the human rights work within the

country.

Theoretical Framework

Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept

from us-entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not

allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from

it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital

that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely

to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we

transform the theorizing space (Anzaldua, 1990, p.xxv).

I start with this quotation above because of the underlying belief that this research

must become part of the transformation needed within theorizing spaces around the

human rights project. This research is based on the assumption that voices have been

left out of the discourse on human rights and that it is my goal as a researcher not only to

include as many of those voices as possible and transform that space but also transform

the lives of those of us involved in this research. Creswell (2009) describes this type of approach as an advocacy /participatory worldview in that " the research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and contains an agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants" (p. 9).

The theoretical frameworks that will help structure this type of worldview are post-colonial and third world feminist critiques. Both of these frameworks will be used alongside a critical human rights discourse to analyze the data. These frameworks offer a discourse around challenging narratives and traditional ways of understanding the production of knowledge. They highlight the legacies of colonialism and power dynamics in the way we understand history, culture, anthropology, politics and social systems. Post-colonial studies and third world feminism critiques how people are theorized about, and are used in this study to challenge the narrative of the 'silenced' human rights victim.

Postcolonial theory

For the purpose of this dissertation, Postcolonialism is viewed as a "dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty- but also the realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination" (Young 2001, p. 57). Young (2001) also writes

> Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that
> operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and
> neocolonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain.

Interest in oppression of the past will always be guided by the relation of that history to the present (p. 11).

There is not a unified understanding of the use of postcolonial but for the purpose of the dissertation, the goal is to use a framework to understand and analyze a particular regime. A postcolonial study offers this. I do not intend to simplify the debate around the term, and recognize the various complexities. The main use of postcolonial for the purpose of this research is to put " the emphasis on the economic, material, and cultural conditions that determine the global system in which the postcolonial nation is required to operate- one heavily weighted towards the interests of international capital and the G7 powers" (Young, 2001, p.57). Edward Said (1993) offers three topics that emerge in what he terms "decolonizing cultural resistance" that are also extremely relevant to this discussion. The first is the "insistence on the right to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally". The second is the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history. Finally, the third is a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation (p. 97). These themes that stem from Said's work on postcolonial theory will add much to the discussion of the literature.

Third World Feminism

Third world feminism provides an excellent framework around the question of who is represented in discourse and how are they represented. Mohanty (1991) offers a critique of what she labels "the production of the 'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) feminists texts" (p. 51). She highlights how

this writing of "third world women" by Western feminist actually reinforces the "latent economic and cultural colonization of the 'non-Western' world" (p. 74).

Spivak (1988) and Abu-Lughod (2002) both offer what happens when we view the 'third world' woman this way. They both critique the problems of 'saving the third world woman'. Spivak (1988) states that what the colonial project comes down to is white men saving brown women from brown men. Abu-Lughod offers what damage this narrative provides, "projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (p. 78). Through a critique of how narratives are used to reinforce a colonial project, third world feminism is an important framework to use in analyzing human rights work, as so many of the narratives are coming from Western human rights scholars writing about violations in the third world.

Postcolonial theory and third world feminism are challenging and deconstructing how history has been told with relations to colonialism and power dynamics. These frameworks will be used to critique and highlight what is missing from the critical human rights discourse and the human rights discourse at large. It is important to carry this tradition over to how we view human rights work, while attempting not to speak for the subaltern, but theorize ways in which the subaltern can use human rights framework to find the space for their own voice. It is not only about deconstructing the work that is being done but also re-defining it.

Significance of the Study

As our world continues to be more and more connected, it is important to understand how people engage with each other across borders. In the context of

Myanmar specifically, the country was isolated from the rest of the world for over 50 years. As previously discussed, most of what news existed of the country was extremely negative, including being labeled one of the worst of the worst when it came to governance (Clapp, 2007). With the country's recent transition to democracy and removal of sanctions by both the United States and the European Union, development and human rights agencies are flooding in. Tourism and business investment is also on the rise (Rogers, 2013).   There is a need to think critically about the way these newly emerging organizations engage with Myanmar. Also, one must challenge the narratives of the "other" that have been told about Myanmar, especially at a time when the country is now in the limelight of the international community. This research speaks specifically to those hoping to engage in human rights work in Myanmar, with the intention of sharing local practices in advocacy and activism of those from there.

This study is also important to the fields of development studies, human rights and human rights education (HRE). HRE is such a significant part of the training of the human rights activist, both from the third world and in the West. This research aims to offer an analysis of why and why not human rights discourse is being used, connecting that back to larger power structures. The research also shares suggestions at how schools of human rights and human rights education can approach the work that takes place across borders with a critical eye.

This is critical not only in the field of human rights and development but also for the field of international education. As more and more students and young people move to study and live abroad, there has to be a challenge to the notion of the "colonial student" (Ogden, 2008). Understanding positive examples to engage in solidarity and

discuss human rights in other countries is key.   This is also important when we think of the skills needed for a 21ˢᵗ century education. Much of the discourse around the notion of a 21ˢᵗ century education looks at how young people will interact in a global world.

> An education for globalization should therefore nurture the higher-order cognitive
> and interpersonal skills required for problem finding, problem solving,
> articulating arguments, and deploying verifiable facts or artifacts to substantiate
> claims. These skills should be required of children and youth who will as adults,
> fully engage the larger world… transforming it for the betterment of humanity-
> regardless of national origin or cultural upbringing (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-
> Hilliard, 2004, p. 6).

As we attempt to educate the next generation on "transforming" our world for "the betterment of humanity", we must be critical of how we are doing that. If we continue to reinforce the current power structures without critically deconstructing and decolonizing our work, then we leave much to want. This research offers both a discussion on how local activists are/ are not using human rights discourses, and suggestions on ways to engage across borders that are critical of the power structures and legacies of those structures.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this paper, the human rights project is defined by the international governing body of the United Nations, the regional governing bodies such as the Organization of American States, and large INGO and NGOs working in human rights work. This also includes both the legal standards and the mechanisms with which human rights work is based. The use of the human rights project for the purpose of this

work will extend beyond the traditional definition of the human rights regime. Donnelly's (1986) early work introducing the term really just focused on the "principles, norms, rules and decision making procedures" (p. 599) and then very centered on the UN-centered principles (p. 605). For this work, I am including, not only the principles, norms, rules and decision making procedures that work around the United Nations treaty system but also including the actors, both as large INGOs and NGOS, and individual human rights activists. For the purpose of this research, the recognition of individual actors using the norm systems are quite important, because it is the individuals use of the treaties that will influence the relationships that are built.

In regards to speaking about the research participants, the phrase community activist is used instead of human rights activist. This is because many of the participants did not label themselves human rights activists and while there will be arguments made that they are human rights activists or defenders, the term community activists is an inclusive term decided by the research team. The research refers to the community activists as one involved in advocating for social change with their local or national community.

This paper will also have to refer to geographic regions that are often times referred to as the West or the First World and the Global South or the Third World. The term the West and Westerner will refer to Europe, Australia and North America and people coming from those three regions. Third World or Global South will refer to the rest of the world. Foreign born is also a term that is used while discussing interactions between those not born in Myanmar and those who are from the country of Myanmar.

This will be different then Westerner, as there can be foreign-born activists in Myanmar from other parts of Asia, and the world.

I also must clarify the use of the term Myanmar versus that of Burma. For the purpose of this research, the researcher will use the term Myanmar as the name of the country. This is not a rejection of the term Burma, and I do recognize the resistance of many activists to use Myanmar as a rejection of the current government. However, upon discussion with the co-researchers, and their own use of Myanmar, the decision was made to recognize the most recent use of Myanmar to describe the country. Many of the participants will continue to use Burma and when they are directly quoted, Burma or Burmese will be used.

Finally, the term Gurkha is used to describe an ethnic minority group in Myanmar, referring to people whose ancestry came from Nepal. There is a debate around whether or not this is an officially recognized ethnic minority, and even within the community, there is debate on whether they label themselves Gurkha or Nepali, however, for the purpose of this paper, we use this term, to speak about a community with the same linguistic and cultural practices.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

One major limitation in the study was the inability to record the research participants. Due to the history of a military dictatorship and the harsh repression many have experienced under the former government, the co-researchers felt asking to record participants would put an undue burden on them. There was still distrust around sharing the work they were doing in order to protect that work. This limitation required the research participants to take very detailed notes at all of the interviews and even during

the research team meetings. While this attempt was made, it is still possible that nuances in the dialogues and the interviews were overlooked.

Delimitations

One key restriction of this study was the time spent in Myanmar. The main bulk of the research was conducted over five weeks in the summer of 2014. This was not my first time in the country, and many of the necessary preliminary relationships were already established, however it still limited the time we had as a research team. While the team has continued to follow up through email and Internet chatting, this did leave one of the co-researchers with the bulk of the follow up work.

One other delimitation in the research that was impacted by the amount of time spent in Myanmar was the decision to not interview foreign-born activists. This was an intentional decision made by the research team to strictly focus on narratives of local community activists, however, it does narrow the discussion around cross-border relationships and activism to solely the perspectives of the local activist.

Summary

Understanding the fact that the personal relationships that are built across borders are ever more important and at the same time, ever more complex, is an extremely important aspect of "global education". Our world pushes us more and more to recognize global problems and work for solutions; however, we must do so in solidarity and not as "saviors". This research hopes to stress the importance of building relationships across borders as human rights activists while at the same time remaining critical of global power structures that continue to separate us.

What we can learn about building community and maintaining reciprocal relationships while engaging in human rights work abroad is extremely important. What should we be aware of in our own actions when we build these relationships? Are we supporting communities in their own struggles or are we maintaining certain power structures in our work? What is needed to build and maintain positive and trusting relationships? Conducting this research through a project -based approach attempts to shed some light to these questions.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The discourse around human rights work has increasing become more interdisciplinary and therefore must pull from a multitude of disciplines. Human rights theory focuses on the interaction with international norms and laws, always in relation to the national government or the international governing body of the United Nations. Rarely are power relationships between governments and their subjects or even the international power relationships that exist incorporated into the discourse. Human rights are seen as values and as a source of empowerment (Bajaj, 2011; Ely-Yamin, 1993; Reardon, 1997; Tibbits, 2005; UNESCO, 1998), yet usually without acknowledging the existence of a colonial history as the source of these values. As the international human rights regime has its historical groundings in the West, there are legacies of colonialism that still exist (Weissman, 2004). How can we challenge this? How can voices of community workers be brought to the table? Michelle Fine's (2008) epilogue quotes scholar Ignacio Martin-Baro claiming "that a central task for critical social researchers is to uncover the collective lies that have been told about a people's history and to excavate untold stories so that people could critique the past and reimagine the future" (p. 216). This is ever so important to address within human right discourse.

Human Rights have been termed many things, an international value system (Reardon, 1997), a global movement (Henry, 1990; Martin, 1987; Mihr & Schmitz, 2007; Tibbits & Rehman, 2003), a universal standard, etc.,(Said & Lerche, 2006) however they are deeply based in the international legal system (Donnelly, 2006). Just as Critical Race scholars saw the lack of acknowledgement of race in the U.S. legal system, human rights scholars, such as myself, see the lack of acknowledgement of the role of colonialism and

imperialism in the international legal system, which includes human rights standards and mechanisms (Weissman, 2004).

The main goal around this chapter is to understand and offer a critical look at human rights discourse through the lens of postcolonial and third world feminist frameworks. This section will start off by looking at three themes that come out of these theories that are relevant when looking at human rights discourse. Those three themes are 1) understanding human rights as steeped in legacies of Western-centric histories; 2) recognizing the universalizing notions of culture in human rights work; and 3) recognizing the role of "saving" as a tool for the colonial project. The literature review will be structured by first looking at these three themes from a theoretical perspective. Then it will offer empirical studies that speak to each of these themes. The research presented is interdisciplinary ranging from literature to anthropology to the field of public health to education. Finally, this section will end with a discussion of alternatives to challenge the three themes discussed.

One important thing to note is that a critique and an analysis through this framework is not attacking the standards and values of human rights. It is important to keep that in mind because many times one may assume that this is offering an attack on the work that one is doing where in reality, it is just pushing to be aware of all perspectives and continue to work to in include the voice of all willing to participate in the discourse. Johan Galtung (1994), a peace scholar, acknowledges this clearly in his critique of human rights. He writes

For a peace researcher to be interested in human rights comes rather naturally.

The overlap in value-orientation is obvious: human dignity, the use of normative

power rather than sticks and carrots, the effort to reduce direct violence. My

enthusiasm for that tradition, the glimmer of light even for the most tortured and

utterly lonely prisoner, can be found all over in this book, even though, as a true

friend, I try to focus constructively on the possible deficits (Preface).

 I enjoy his celebration and discussion as a "true friend". I will use this same reference

here to explain the work that I am attempting to do. He is not attacking human rights, but

attempting to bring out what might not be working within the frameworks so that they

can move forward. I will follow his footsteps in attempting to highlight how the role of

colonialism and imperialism has been overlooked in the discourse of human rights.

Complicating International Notions of North-South Engagement

Looking at traditional human rights discourse, there is a legacy of writing that

stems from the West (Vinjamuri & Ron, 2013). Much of the history itself around human

rights starts with Western legal documents and political movements. This section will

provide an overview of how the history of human rights is framed in traditional discourse

using critical human rights scholars and post-colonial and third world feminist critiques

to highlight critical gaps in the theory.

A large portion of the discourse in postcolonial theory deconstructs historical

narratives told by the West. Postcolonialism highlights the role these historical narratives

played in the subjugation of colonized peoples. When taking this framework to apply to

human rights studies, the history of colonialism and imperialism must also be addressed.

One must acknowledge the telling of the history of human rights as a tradition of rights

steeped in Euro-centric narratives. One must also recognize the role of European history

in the colonization of many parts of the world. In deepening this, one must also begin to

understand the history of the United Nations, and those states, which maintained power in this system, because of the fact that the UN is the norm sender for international human rights law.

Both Ishay's (2004) and Freeman's (2002) work on the history of human rights offers this analysis of a history steeped in Western influences. Ishay clearly states that she takes the position that this history is European in origin. She writes, "the second controversy concerns the claim, which I endorse, that our conception of rights, wherever in the world it may be voiced, is predominantly European in origin" (p. 5). While she does offer a historical look at human rights and even, acknowledges the European origins, she does not offer a critique of this or discuses the implications of this for peoples and nations not within Europe. Freeman's (2002) work also offers an overview of the origins of human rights. He tends to lay out arguments of others more so than making a claim of his own. He does however address the origin of human rights as a concept that began with the creation of the United Nations and dismisses it with his own statement that the history is much longer, even if it is controversial. He basically shares the two debates around a history of human rights, one that starts with the founding of the United Nations as the beginning of human rights, and the other, a version of a much longer history. He claims that the latter is a "better" view, however, also claims that it is filled with controversy (p. 14). He goes on to look at the universality of the history of human rights while laying out both arguments, that "the concept of human rights has a universal history in the various religions and philosophies of the world, while others maintain that it originated in the West and was universalized only recently" (p. 14).

Again Freeman is merely offering various arguments without critical analysis or implications for human rights from these historical standpoints.

Jack Donnelly has a wealth of published works on the topic of human rights and he does make the claim that human rights are historically steeped in Western histories. In his chapter entitled Markets, States and "The West" (2003) he connects rights to politics and to the rise of modernity, "I will argue that human rights are centrally linked to 'modernity' and have been (and remain) specially connected to the political rise and practices of 'the West'" (p. 57). He connects markets to modern states and then makes the claim that the rise of political claims of equality and tolerance are connected to the rise of the markets and nation states. He then goes on to state that "ever more powerful (capitalist) markets and (sovereign, bureaucratic) states gradually penetrated first Europe and then to globe" (p. 58). What he does not offer is the historical context with how these markets penetrated the globe. Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) work on property rights would further enhance Donnelly's discussion on the history of modern market states. An incorporation of the role of European colonialism and its continued implications today is needed in this discussion. Donnelly has avoided the discussion around how the West brought these "values and norms". This discussion and recognition is key to understanding how different cultures will interact with the human rights regime. This is where critical human rights scholars are pushing the discourse forward. Weissman's (2004) piece highlights this exact point as one of the four aspects of colonial legacies in her article critiquing the human rights project. She highlights four aspects of colonialism's legacy, those being the resistance to western dominated norms, which really contests the notions of the universality of human rights values; resulting ineffective

legal norms and strategies to address human rights abuses; distortion of knowledge about humanitarian needs and; the formation of contradictory human rights policy (p. 291). She writes that "the reintroduction of humanitarian values recalls circumstances of subjugation and revives memories of a time when those who now espouse the virtues of human rights were willing to inflict unspeakable violence in the name of civilization and moral improvements (p. 291).

In addition to understanding the history of how human rights were "brought" to the world, it is also important to understand how people interact with the law. As international law is steeped in legacies of the European legal system, it is important to keep in mind that not all cultures interact with the legal systems the same way, nor do they always view the legal systems as "neutral" or unbiased.

Galtung (1994) uses this exact same argument when discussing human rights and the legal tradition. His work looks at the various perspectives different cultures bring in when trying to understand the international legal structure.   He states that the legal tradition favors the perpetrator perspective or as he labels the actor-orientated perspective. He begins to incorporate into his discussion the role of imperialism here. Galtung writes

> Thus an imperialistic structure can have disastrous consequences and yet there is not necessarily any evil intention anywhere. Obviously there are actors around, otherwise the structure would not operate. But only a segment of an actor is any one particular structure and only a small part of a structure shows up in any one particular actor (pp. 30-31).

He brings up a very key point in that it is easier to prosecute an action versus an entire system. This is one of his critiques of the human rights system. Its reliance on this legal tradition may not allow for much structural change to combat the systems that have caused the injustices. This is another important area that the work of post-colonial and third world feminist critiques offer: an alternative vantage point to understand how non-Western bodies interact with the international government system.

Prashad's (2007) work offers a multitude of examples of how this played out in his discussion of the Third World Project. For example, much of the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa banned together to create different sub-groups in the United Nations to protect themself from the Western dominated Security Council. However, as Prashad's work highlighted, many of the coalitions were unsuccessful, as many nations would fall under the pressure of foreign loans or internal coups. By looking at how much of the third world or the global south dealt with their anti-colonial or nationalist movements and what failed to bring them out of a neo-colonial situation, Prashad's piece is an excellent summary of the success and failures of the "Third World Project". Prashad's work is key because it shows the implications of the colonial legacies on the international system. It looked at how a global power structure did, in fact, impact the movement of the recently independent nations, at a time when the NAM countries were looking at many basic human rights of their citizenry. Prashad challenges the readers to continue to search for a large global movement against Western dominated oppressive systems.   He calls for a new movement and while the work of the human rights regime is incorporated, the role of relationships and the power dynamics of past structures must be addressed.

The limitations of IMF-driven globalization and revanchist traditionalism provoke

mass movements across the planet. The battles for land rights and water rights,

for cultural dignity and economic parity, for women's rights and indigenous

rights, for the construction of democratic institutions and responsive states- these

are the legion in every country, on every continent. It is from these many creative

initiatives that a genuine agenda for the future will arise. When it does, the Third

World will have found its successor (p. 281).

Escobar (1995), Farmer (2005), and Moyo (2009) all highlight more recent

examples of how the global power structure still impacts both the economic and political

situations in the global south, and also the lived daily experiences of those on the ground.

For example, Farmer's work on health and human rights is another example of how the

global power structure plays out in the implementation of social and economic rights.

His work uses case studies from Haiti, Chiapas and Russia to look at how the human

rights framework has failed marginalized communities in these three regions. He also

makes larger connections to global power structures, especially the United States in

relation to Haiti, the Mexican government in relation to Chiapas and the international

health advocates in relation to the Russian prison inmates.

Escobar (1995) and Moyo's (2009) work speaks directly to Prashad's (2007)

discussion of the creation of poverty in the third world and how debt and the giving of aid

impacts that. Moyo writes "the net result of aid-dependency is that instead of having a

functioning Africa, managed by Africans, for Africans, what is left is one where outsiders

attempt to map its destiny and call the shots." (p. 66).

Another important work which looks more at the individual impact of legal policies is Boddy's (2007) work in Sudan which highlighted how dominated people's can be affected by legal policies, which were more about control then protection. She provided examples of this in her discussion around infibulation in Northern Sudan and the British policies that were adopted around the cultural practice.

The notion that laws and standards are neutral and that all human beings are treated the same under law is a large oversimplification. This happens in human rights work as one often tends to stress the universalization of human rights standards. To assume that people have the same relationship with their governments, that protection will be the same and that the laws and standards themselves even fit with all communities is a large oversight on the part of the human rights regime. As Weissman (2004) writes

> The proposition that the rule of law is connected to the human rights project must thus be viewed within its historical context. That it is viewed in some quarters as the cornerstone of civilization and marker of modernity, as well as a means for delivering human rights protections, does not preclude it from being viewed in other quarters as the rationale for oppression and domination. The hegemonic nature of the Western legal system continues to play an important part in the formation of postcolonial relationships (p. 287).

The argument here is the that human rights have a history that stems from European history, that human rights discourse has been dominated by Westerns and Europeans and that the legal traditions that dominate human rights mechanisms are also stemming from legal notions from the West. Spivak (2003) however, challenges that "it is still disingenuous to call human rights Eurocentric" (p. 171). In her chapter, looking at

the role education needs to take in the global south to implement human rights, she

challenges the notion that human rights is completely Eurocentric but speaks about the

legacies of colonialism on the educated middle class or rather as she labels "descendants

of the colonial middle class, who become human rights advocates in the countries of the

South" (p. 169). She speaks of the disconnect the domestic elite have on the children of

the rural poor. She clearly is looking at a class difference in her argument, however also

acknowledges that class differences stems from colonial legacies.

This discussion guides a critical lens in how to understand human rights work in

Myanmar, playing close attention to the relationship activists have with the international

human rights regime.

The Creation of the 'Victim'

Human rights discourse often uses narratives and the lived experiences of those

who have suffered human rights violations. Often times these stories are told through

Western organizations meant for Western readers. This section will walk the reader

through an explanation of how human rights narratives can often create a monolithic

version of the "victim" from the third world. It will then offer how post-colonial and

third world feminist frameworks critique this discourse.

Human rights narratives tend to focus on the violations groups of people. This is

because much of the human rights work historically has been around naming and

shaming governments (Meernik, Aloisi, Sowell, & Nichols, 2012). Human rights

narratives are often told portraying the victims of human rights violations and calling for

the international community to take action. While this can be empowering for the

international community, rarely are empowering stories conveyed about the community

itself. Weissman's (2004) states that there is a "misuse" of the human rights discourse and that this misuse of the discourse leads to a "tendency of colonial powers to discredit value systems of other cultures as a means of justifying colonial intervention" (p. 264).

Take the case of Myanmar for example. Much of the literature on human rights in Myanmar speak of horrific human rights violations and yet few spoke of what people in Myanmar are doing to resist. What was stressed in at least three different works on Myanmar was the need for international and U.S. involvement (Clapp, 2007; Fink, 2009; Lemere & West, 2011). One would be led to feel that nothing was taking place, however with further in-depth research, there are movements of resistance inside the country.

Christina Fink's (2009) work is an example of the Burmese voice offered through a language of victimization. Her book offers an overview of the harsh reality of the lives of Burmese people. She shows how

> successive regimes in Burma have manipulated Burmese history and exploited cultural norms and popular beliefs both to legitimize military rule and to marginalize detractors. The book will also show how successive regimes have used violence and a climate of insecurity to instill fear and political passivity in the people they have ruled (p. 4).

Her book argues that there exists a "culture of silence" inside Myanmar in which the people have adapted under the harsh rule of the military government. While I am not contesting her argument, I assert that there may be more that the writer is not completely aware of, or may be oversimplifying in her work. Also, there is a tone of victimization around the use of the word "silence". It takes away the agency of the Burmese people.

Clapp's (2007) work is another piece on modern Burma. Clapp describes Burma as a backward country. She stresses the fall from being one of the wealthiest countries to "one of the most economically backward, politically stagnant, and repressive countries in the region and, indeed in the world" (p. 135). Even the U.S. House of Representatives (2006) takes a similar tone in speaking about Myanmar, leading the reader to believe that the "brutal military dictatorships… has ruined a beautiful and naturally rich land" (p. 1). These excerpts have completely removed the Burmese people from the story as if they were not there. They are speaking about the country as a land, a space with a military regime without really digging into the lived experiences of the people. One final example of human rights scholarship, which does come directly from the voice of Burmese people, is Lemere & West's (2011) work on the Voices of Witness series on Burma. This work takes a number of oral histories from Burmese exiles. Even here the voices and the stories are of suffering and abuse, and while the narratives come from Burmese people, the book is edited by a U.S. company and meant for a U.S. audience.

The way that we understand the "other" is a very important point in understanding how this victimization occurs. The creation of the "other" is the creation of the "human rights victim". It is someone who lives far away, in a land that is filled with violence and evil governments. Postcolonial and third world feminist theories offer a critique to the creation of the "other" that is needed in human rights discourse. It is important because when there are transnational interactions we must understand not only the historical context of how we engage with each other, but also the implications of those previous interactions today.

How have groups been written about throughout history? Not only do we have to examine our own relation to the people we are writing about, we also must understand the implications and purpose for much of that data. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes, "research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized" (p. 7). There are two themes that stem from this. The first is creating an understanding of a colonial subject as one of a victim that must be saved from their culture and society. It is the use of a justification for colonial/imperial intervention. Second is the notion that everyone is the same in that one place. "All third world women" need saving (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This language further justifies the first point in that because "all" of this type of person is the same, therefore, the only saving can come from someone outside.

Edward Said's (1977) founding work *Orientalism* really began to challenge the way the West theorized the "other". Said wrote how both formal scholarly writing and imaginative constructions interconnected to create the essential image (p. 3). The essential image of the "other" was "the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the yellow peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominoes, ect.) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)" (Said, 1993, p. 105). Said goes on to show that Orientalism served a very specific purpose in justifying colonialism through the image of the "other". Said states "the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, or the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior," and that "the Orient is eternal, uniform, incapable of defining itself" (p. 104).   All of these dogmas speak directly to the

creation of an imagined "other" that is brought into the formal academic discourse in Area Studies.

Said (1993) also describes the role that narratives can play as a part of the imperial project. He stresses this focus about how others are portrayed in the writings of the powerful,

> narrative is crucial to my argument here, my basic point being that stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans it future-these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative (pp. xii-xiii).

The notion of the narrative also helps to reinforce colonial and Western control by the notion of "saving or civilizing the savage". As Said writes how important the narrative is, the narrative is used to portray the "other" as savage or brutal.

Spivak's (1988) chapter "Can the subaltern speak?" is a key work in the way the subaltern has been theorized and written about. Her work asking the question of "can the subaltern speak" is a critique of European scholars work in trying to write the subaltern. As she writes, "it is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" (p. 24). In this critique, I understand most through the posing of questions, like who is speaking for the subaltern? What is the purpose of writing the subaltern? Who is

classified as subaltern? What is classified as representing the subaltern? The question not of can the subaltern speak, but does the West and Western scholars have the authority to speak on behalf of the subaltern, seems to be a more appropriate question.

Spivak addresses the subaltern voice through what she terms the subject-effect. "A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on" (p. 13). This is extremely difficult to group under one label, the subaltern. What will we group all together in order to label? This can be a limitation of locating the consciousness of the subaltern. Spivak writes that "subject-effect' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge" (p.24). She goes on to write that this "pretends it has no geo-political determinations" (p. 24). This is really looking at the question of who is speaking for the subaltern and for what purpose. The notion that Western scholars are not aware of the colonial legacies they are writing from is very important. Said (1978) also speaks to this in that he states Orientalism that was information as "morally neutral and objectively valid" (p. 111).

The notion of "saving the savage" and justifying colonialism leads into the question of who is the subaltern. As Spivak writes, the subaltern is the difference, what sets a group apart from the elite. The identity of the subaltern itself, "is it's difference" (p. 27). Much of the role of Western work on the colonized or the "other" has been to demonstrate that difference.

Representing the subaltern also brings the problem of essentialist thoughts on "the other". Mohanty (1991), Said (1993) and Spivak (1988) all speak to this. Mohanty writes

that the production of the 'Third World Woman' "as a singular, monolithic subject in some (Western) feminist texts" (p. 17). Spivak challenges this by stating that the subaltern must be heterogeneous, "but one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (p. 26).

Homi Bhabha's (1994) work adds to this discussion by incorporating the role that stereotypes have played. He speaks of the role of ambivalence in writing about the stereotype and the fixidity, which gives it power but also contradicts. He speaks about this as important to understanding the regime of truth in order to understand colonial power. The use of the stereotype was crucial in colonial discourse and used to justify conquest and colonialism itself. There was no previous history of colonialism and so discourse was created, and had to fit into what wasn't too new but also could never completely explain either. This is the notion of ambivalence and nonsense. This leads to the concepts of metaphor and metonymy where there are two sides to the use of a stereotype. One side can represent the narcissistic attitude behind colonialism, where the colonizer believed that what was being done was for the best and that there was good behind the action. At the same time, there is the aggressive nature of colonialism and the language around that, the savage and the taking of land and conquest. This can also connect back to the notion of nonsense and the problem of trying to understand culture in a fixed and binary view of one group versus another. As Weissman (2004) writes, this served a dual purpose.

> Colonized people are often represented in child/female imagery, in the need of
> protection by the colonizer nation depicted as adult/male. The process of
> rendering categories of victim and savior served as more than the pretext for

military intervention. It also provided the justification for efforts to substitute the

cultural systems and values of the colonized for those of the colonizer (p. 270).

It is important to challenge the notion of the other in human rights discourse.

Incorporating counter-narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) of the "human rights victim"

is essential to providing a holistic understanding of human rights work in Myanmar.

The Creation of the Savior

To question the human rights framework, is to understand how human rights

INGOs and NGOs are incorporating the knowledge and narratives of those on the

periphery. Are they active participants in human rights work? How are all communities

participating in human rights work? How are those stories being told? How are the

stories being told that actually influence policy and international aid to certain countries

and what happens when international involvement does take place? These are questions

we must begin to ask as we look at the literature.

Just as much of the literature stemming from postcolonial and third world feminist

theories speaks to how those from the Third World were constructed under colonial

times, there is also the way those from the West took that information for the purpose of

colonialism. The need to save the victims from themselves is a key part of the discourse

around colonialism. It was up to the colonial powers to rescue and save the

"uncivilized". The use of colonial narratives was a large part of this discourse.

Both Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002), and Mohanty's (1997) work on third

world women highlight this. Much of the role of Western work on the colonized or the

"other" has been to demonstrate that difference. This was done without recognizing or

challenging the West's history and complicity in colonialism and imperialism. As

Mohanty writes

> I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one
>
> hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship
>
> on the Third World in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on
>
> the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the
>
> Third World (p. 19).

Hirschkind and Mahmood's (2002) piece on the Taliban does an excellent job of

demonstrating and critiquing this notion of "Third World solidarity". Their work shows

how the Feminist Majority group demonized the Taliban and Fundamental Islam instead

of looking at a holistic picture of the history of Afghanistan and acknowledging the

West's own role in the condition of women there. "Feminist Majority statements

consistently ignored the devastation wrought by two decades of warfare in which women

and children had suffered most heavily and instead suggested a relatively benign picture

of women's lives prior to Taliban rule" (p. 345). Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) do

this through a critique of the Feminist Majority group and their work on bringing the

condition of the Afghan woman into popular media.

Janice Boddy's (2007) work, is another excellent discussion on the role the

British government played in "saving" Sudanese women and how that legacy continues

to play out today in the language and activism around female genital mutilation (FGM).

Her work aimed to highlight the subtle and then later obvert policies of the British to alter

the reproductive practices of northern Sudanese women and men. Her work also

challenges the dominant judgmental thought in the global debate around female genital

mutilation, that "female genital cutting regularly kills, has no valid meaning, and is inflicted on ignorant and powerless women by sadistic men" (p. 3). Her work challenges this thought as coming from Euro-Centric understanding with no contextual understanding. The role of British women also begins to appear as those who are there to "civilize" the Sudanese women. Boddy offers the reader a connection to the global debate around FGM and the way women were and still are represented in the discourse around FGM. In the conclusion she writes

> Step back and note the ostensible progression here from macro- to microbiopolitics. Once blamed for population decline and a consequent dearth of free labor, now female genital cutting is blamed for impeding cultivation of the *individual body* as a site of gratification and desire. Each response is logically keyed to a specific moment in the history of global capitalism; both spurn local specificities by reducing them to foils that clarify and reinforce hegemonic ideals (p. 311).

Boddy challenges us to move away from judgments of "others" and look more closely at the discourse and where it is coming from.

Boddy's work offers many other insights as well. Through the discussion around infibulation she brings in the larger issue of ways we understand the "other". This was an underlying theme throughout her work. She discusses this subjective notion of anthropology used by the colonial agents to understand and defend colonial practices. The notion of "savage" and "backward" native versus the "modern" and "civilized" British is a theme that is repeated through colonial history. Boddy writes, "moreover, they 'offered many Africans models of 'modern' behavior'. This observation leads us to

consider the founding of the civilian political service and the 'ethnographic' orientation its members espoused" (p. 64).

Finally, she highlights the repeated theme of colonialism as its existence to "save" and "civilize" the world. "In Sudan, differences between colonizer and colonized over female genital cutting were always about more than genital cutting alone. They were about how to be civilized, modern, rightly oriented in the world" (p. 310).

This work challenges us to think about the discourse around "humanitarian" issues even today. As discussed briefly above, the conclusion of the book brings the reader to current debates around FGM. It still remains the duty of the West to rescue or save women in the "third world". "The issue has arisen in debates about the 'clash of civilizations,' between Islamic societies- often labeled 'medieval' and 'barbaric'- and the 'civilized' West" (p. 2). Boddy goes on to quote Richard Shwedar discussing the global campaign against female genital mutilation as a debate argued by the rich nations of the world. Western human rights activists take up issues of alleged human rights abuses all the time, however with the same colonial language. As Boddy states in the conclusion,

> yet one wonders whose interests have been at stake in such interventions, as they
> so regularly denigrate those whose lives they wish to change. The obsolete
> language of social evolution, of barbarism and savagery that suffused the colonial
> past, persists in postcolonial diatribes that again claim for the West a monopoly
> on truth and proper personhood (p. 309).

Weissman's (2004) work is another example of how a Western power uses rights based language as a tool for exploitation. Her work is both a historical overview looking at the United States relationships with both Cuba and the Philippines in the early part of

the 20th century and a current understanding of how this continues to play out today. She
states,

> More recently, human rights concerns have served as a rationale for U.S. military
> intervention. Human rights norms are subject to malleable standards and have
> been capable of advancing U.S. strategic and economic interests through coercive
> means, often at the expense of humanitarian concerns (p. 262).

She highlights Said's discussion of the use of narratives, more specifically that the U.S.
uses care narratives to illustrate the ways that the human rights discourse
stipulates the need to rescue people of other cultures from themselves. It
examines how legal narratives in the media accounts and legislative debates about
human rights abuses can distort other cultural realities in the guise of sympathy
and support" (p. 265).

In her discussion of Cuba and the Philippines, Weissman demonstrates that human rights
ideology was used to create new legal systems in both of these recently independent
countries. "The point here is that the use of law as an instrument of domination has acted
to discredit the moral rationale of legal precepts emanating from former colonial power
and to compromise the human rights values with which the law is association" (p. 280).
This again speaks to the contradictions that arise around the human rights project.
Human rights in general are not what we need to question but the way they were put in
place and how is what we must be critical about. This is where Weissman's work is very
powerful. She calls on human rights activists to be critical of their work, "vital to this
task are self-awareness and humility, a consciousness of the complexity of the cultural
terrain, and a willingness to consider reparations for mistakes of the past" (p. 333). This

is where the power of her work lies. It is an excellent overview of much of the theory,

offers examples of how this theory has played out and most importantly offers some

thoughts on what we can do.

> Advocates must question whether human rights values formulated on the
>
> normative systems of dominant states, however deeply held in such sites, are
>
> capable of producing meaningful criteria in less powerful states whose views and
>
> concerns routinely have been discounted, if not disregarded (p. 335).

This research takes this call to a "consciousness of complexity of the cultural terrain" as

pivotal in understanding how local activists in Myanmar are embracing or resisting

human rights discourse.

Alternatives to the Way We Engage

The first two sections of this chapter offer many critiques as to how the human

rights project is steeped in legacies of European colonialism and how that affects the

work transnational activists are doing. Again, it is very important to offer the critique but

to do so without alternatives is not working from a place of hope. This section will offer

an overview of alternative projects around transnational activism.

Fuyuki Kurasawa's (2004) work on the idea of a "cosmopolitanism from below"

offers examples of how mobilizing across borders can continue today. His article uses

the alternative globalization movement (AGM) as an example of how solidarity and

global movements can work together towards what he entitles a "solidarity without

bounds". The author's offering of a new way to look at cosmopolitanism is a critique of

much of the current debates around cosmopolitanism.   The debates lie between whether

there should be a push for a universal value system in which all people adhere to, or the

creation of a large super-structure global government. Both do not take into account the situation of everyday people, and how they can engage with a movement like this. He believes that cosmopolitanism from below, is one that celebrates the unique experiences of the global community without asking them to dismiss national and local identities while at the same time, not just assuming that the only type of solidarity can exist through a large international government. Both of these critiques can connect to the human rights regime either through the notion of a universal value system, or that of a global power structure. The alternative globalization movement is offered as an example of where there is a middle ground in the notion of cosmopolitanism and what positive aspects can come from working across borders.

> By being exposed to others, civic associations can broaden their visions of human capabilities and of the necessary conditions for a full and realized life, as well as being exposed to diverse forms of injustice and domination, connected to neoliberal hegemony (p. 249).

> While Kurasawa uses AGM as an example, he does acknowledge the areas where AGM need work as well. Those areas are specifically again around challenging many of the post-colonial structures that exist not only at a governmental level but also on a personal one. The important piece of his work is that he highlights the work of the "subaltern" in this movement and stresses the importance of the differences between the groups. "Thus, for many civic associations, participation in the AGM is based upon both solidarity with the excluded of the world and opposition to the specific state of affairs and forms of oppression they confront in their everyday lives" (p. 241).

I appreciate Kurasawa's definition of cosmopolitanism not as a global identity but as "embracing the simultaneous existence of multilayered local, national and global identities" (p. 240). He goes on to write,

> it is also premised upon an ethos of cultural openness that actively seeks out and tries to understand and appreciate ways of thinking and acting found in different societies, as well as listening to the voices of those who are not often heard in the elite cosmopolitan discourse (p. 240).

This is exactly where he is attempting to address how we pull in those voices, can and how can the subaltern speak? He specifically defines the subaltern as "subaltern groups whose identities and livelihoods are threatened by the current world order: women, indigenous peoples, workers, immigrants, people of colour, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, farmers and so on" (p. 240-241). While he does this, he fails to examine the complexities of the members of these groups, and also fails to discuss how these very different movements with varying levels of power can all come together.

Michael Hardt's (2002) piece "Today's Bandung?" also incorporates the alternative globalization movement as he looks at the similarities in the Bandung Conference in Indonesia and the more recent anti-globalization conference that took place in Porto Alegre. "Both were conceived as attempts to counter the dominant world order: colonialism and the oppressive Cold War binary in the case of Bandung, and the rule of capitalist globalization in that of Porto Alegre" (p. 112). Like Kurasawa, Hardt is offering examples of a global solidarity that is needed to challenge the current oppressive systems, being dominated by the West. Also, like Kurasawa, Hardt fails to incorporate the role of relationships and relationship building into his discussion. While he does

acknowledge the major difference between Bandung and Porto Alegre as being a racial one and offers this as a slight barrier, he fails to use postcolonial theory to work through how to move forward.

> On the one hand the Bandung Conference, which brought together leaders primarily from Asia and Africa, revealed in a dramatic way the racial dimension of the colonial and Cold War order, which Richard Wright famously described as being divided by the 'colour curtain.' Porto Alegre, in contrast, was a predominantly white event (p 112).

This is the only place where he addresses what can be a big divide in challenging these global dominant systems. That being said both Hardt and Kurasawa offer a framework and examples of not only the need for a global solidarity movement but also works in progress. They offer hope and steps, "recognizing the commonality of their projects with those in other parts of the world is the first step toward expanding the network of movements, or linking one network to another" (Hardt 2002, p. 113).

This research not only attempts to provide counter-narratives to the traditional human rights discourse, but also to center the question of what solidarity across borders can look like, offering the hope needed to answer the question of "what now".

Participatory Action Research

There are two important areas to focus on as we think of alternatives to doing transnational work in the name of human rights activism. The first is the importance around building authentic relationships across borders and being willing and open to recognize the legacies of power from old colonial structures. The second is around the production of knowledge and how we write about this work. Participatory action

research must also be addressed as an alternative not only as a research methodology for this particular project but also as a theoretical concept for what it can offer the discussion around challenging oppressive legacies. Koirala-Azad's (2008; 2009) PAR projects with Nepali youth in Nepal and transnational Nepali students in the United States demonstrate using PAR as a challenge to power structures. The section below will offer a historical overview of PAR and then look Koirala-Azad's work as an example of using research methodology as an alternative to engage.

Participatory action research came about in the 1970s as researchers and academics felt the need to break away from the traditional scientific outlook towards research as it was neither helping to explain human suffering nor helping to offer suggestions to stopping it. Many academics were beginning to leave traditional academia to work on real issues at the local and regional level on emancipatory educational, cultural and political processes (Borda 2001, p. 27). Academics and activists began to work on new ways to fighting oppression. Borda's (2001) article gives an excellent overview of the origins to PAR, and also shows how during the 1970s many separate movements were taking place in regions all across the world such as India, Colombia, Tanzania and Brazil. Paulo Freire's work on education in Brazil is one example of this push towards new ways to work with communities (Freire, 1970).

As this new research paradigm came about, it had very specific goals. Participatory action research is a research process that is attempting to reform research in knowledge in a systematic way by looking for "innovative cognitive procedures like doing research work with collectivities and local groups so as to lay foundations for their empowerment" (Borda, 2001, p. 28). Participatory action research pushes to restructure

scientific research but more so to "obtain knowledge for what we judged to be worthy causes". Borda (2001) goes on to write

> we therefore declared that the common people deserved to know more about their own life conditions in order to defend their interests, than do other social classes which monopolized knowledge, resources, techniques and power; in fact, we should pay attention to knowledge production just as much as the usual insistence on material production, thus tilting the scales towards justice for the underprivileged (p. 29).

He clearly laid out the first goal of Participatory Action Research in that it must be participatory, conducted by the community, and incorporate into academic research previously marginalized groups. As Navarro, Prevost and Romero (1995) suggest

> research is conducted with a community rather than on a community. Research methods are based on community participation, education, and action. In contrast to traditional research, participatory research's activist orientation places a higher value on the generation of new ideas and strategies, and on the actions taken by a community, rather than on the documentation of a community's condition (p. 18).

> Robin McTaggart's (1997) work outlining some important points on PAR states

that "careful attention to ensure that otherwise unheard voices (for example, disenfranchised groups) are given expression" (p. 14).   Her article also questions how this is done. One problem that can exist is that there is an assumption that just by including previously excluded groups, that the research is participatory. This is not true. As McTaggart goes on to write

authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership: responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice. Mere involvement implies none of this, and creates the risk of co-option and exploitation of people in the realization of the plans of others (p. 6).

This is very important in looking at the how local groups can connect human rights into their everyday practices. As one of the three criteria for transformative education given by Lord & Flowers (2006) is that the community must be involved. "Outsiders may be involved in planning and supporting programs at their inception, but ultimately human rights education and peace education need to be grounded in local people and local needs" (Lord and Flowers 2006, p. 445). It is also extremely important in beginning to understand the role that PAR can play in creating their understanding and dialogue around people's own spaces. As Borda writes "participatory research was then defined as a vivencia (life experiences) necessary for the achievement of progress and democracy" (p. 31). Koirala-Azad and Fuentes (2009) write "it transfers the power to create and use knowledge to those who have been systematically abandoned or denied access to what has traditionally been accepted as legitimate spaces for knowledge acquisition and production" (p. 2).

The second goal of Participatory Action Research is that it must lead to social change. This social change can be small but there must be some sort of change, not only with the community but also with the researchers as well. The process of encouraging social change and helping communities understand this change is properly addressing the

role of empowerment through research. McTaggart (1997) gives the key definition in

that to call research participatory action research, "we are suggesting that it is likely to

have improved the lives of those who have participated" (p. 26).   She then goes on to

discuss some basic ideas of PAR. First, PAR is research not just activism. It must be a

study of a situation in order to understand and produce knowledge (p. 27). Participatory

action research is about creating equal relationships. While it is clearly political in its

nature to create social change, it can be conducted by anyone. "Participatory Action

Research is an obligation undertaken by all people at all levels and in all kinds of

institutions who seek to develop the quality of their work and the symmetry and

reciprocity of their relationships with others" (p. 6).   One important thing to remember is

that while PAR can be conducted by anyone or anywhere, it also has a very specific goal

to incorporate previously marginalized groups.

As McTaggart (1997) states "individuals cannot accomplish change of much note

by themselves, and they cannot change anything unless they change themselves at the

same time" (p. 6). The researcher must not only challenge their own knowledge but also

challenge how that knowledge was produced. They must understand this own

relationships with their institutions and communities. Questioning within the study about

ways in which both the research question and the methodology used are framed by the

relationship between researcher/author and his or her institutional obligations (McTaggart

1997, p. 14).

Lastly, PAR must attempt to create positive social change, not only within the

community but, as was written above, with the researcher as well. Dona's (2007) work

on participation in the context of refugee studies clearly links the two goals together and

their importance. "Intrinsically linked to the term participation is the adjective 'participatory' which in social sciences and development studies has come to define a distinctive approach to research, which is collaborative and aims to achieve social change from below" (p. 214). This second goal to create social change that meets the second criteria of transformative education by Lord and Flowers calling for a long-term commitment. Unless the community can change and develop programs themselves to work on this change, then the long-term commitment will not be possible. As Lord and Flowers (2006) write, "although factual knowledge may be conveyed in a short course, transforming attitudes and mastering skills require time, repetition, and reinforcement" (p. 445). This is important for social change to occur and a project, which incorporates the community and then continues the process on their own, is the only way to guarantee this.

Participatory Action Research must be critical, transformative, flexible and reflexive. In order to guarantee this, steps should constantly be taken to ensure the process meets its goals. One of the most important characteristics is that constant reflection must occur. "Overlapping of action and reflection was designed to allow changes in plans for action as people learned from their own experience" (McTaggart 1997, p. 27). Freire (1970) describes this process as essential to fight oppression.

> Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one
> must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the
> praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (p. 51).

Olitsky and Weathers (2005) work on ethical issues with student researchers, stressed the importance of reflection and flexibility because it allows the research design to constantly check to be sure the process is in line with the participants true objectives. Part of what is driving this collaborative approach is the search for a research process that is more ethical, in that it is empowering rather than exploitative and meets the needs of the researched rather than the interests of the researcher (p. 1).

Koirala-Azad's (2009) example of her work with transnational Nepali students brings the reader back to the reason of why PAR is a key methodology to create alternatives that challenge colonial structures and global power dynamics. As she writes "participatory action research as a 'democratic practice of research' holds challenges and promises for Third World contexts, where histories of conquest by colonizers, internal oppressive regimes, and neoliberal development strategies have created deep wounds of debt and dependency" (p. 94). The methodology itself, not only challenges the power structures that exist, but creates the space for reflection and accountability. Koirala-Azad discusses how as a researcher, she also had to negotiate her role. Her research is an excellent reflection on how she navigated conducting transnational activist research while challenging much of the assumptions on the Third World. While her work was in the field of education, it offers a model of what needs to happen in transnational human rights activism and aims for building solidarity. In this way, it provides "a hope for change" which will push researchers not to replicate the past (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009, p. 2).

This research is a PAR project both as a methodological practice and as an alternative way to engage in solidarity across borders. It is an attempt to once again contribute marginalized narratives to those "theorizing spaces" Anzaldua (1990) calls for.

Conclusion

There are three main critiques that come out of traditional human rights discourse that we can arrive at from a post-colonial and Third World feminist lens. Those critiques are around the way the West has dominated the discourse around human rights work, and how that domination has led to the creation of the "victim" of those coming from the Global South. In creating this "victim", it was up to the West to become the "savoir", and this has often happened by reproducing much of the colonial power structures.

This leads us to challenge the way the West has engaged in human rights work in the Third World, and push for alternative ways to engage. This literature review has offered a few examples of alternative visions to engage in solidarity work. Finally, it engages the reader in a discussion on participatory action research (PAR) as one example of an alternative tied to engaging in cross-cultural research projects.

Engaging in a PAR project with two local co-researchers gathering narratives from local activists is an attempt to incorporate counter-narratives to the "victimization" that occurs in human rights work. By listening to these narratives, we pose alternatives to the way one can engage across borders that are "vigilant" around not "saving" but collaborating with hope.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to collect narratives of human rights activists and community workers inside of Myanmar. These narratives will challenge the narrative of victimization that has existed around the country within the human rights regime. The goal is through the conduction of a participatory action research project, the research team is now able to understand the legacies of colonialism in human rights work at a deeper level and offer suggestions for new ways to engage in human rights work across borders given by the research participants.

Research Design

As introduced above, the role of incorporating voices and narratives into academia are key for the purpose of this research, as one of the research goals is to create new understandings of human rights work in the community of Myanmar people. Participatory action research offers the framework to allow for those not traditionally part of academia to conduct a collective research project.

Also mentioned above, one of the inspirations for this project is to shift away from the traditional paradigm, which has kept certain groups out of producing theory. I assert that one of the most important things the research team attempts to challenge in this research is the notion of where and who produces knowledge and understanding the power that holds. How can we move into transforming the theorizing space (Anzaldua, 1990)? As the international human rights regime has its historical groundings in the West, there are legacies of colonialism that still exist. There is a wealth of literature from foreigners (Clapp, 2007; Fink, 2009; Lemere & West, 2011) writing about Myanmar, and doing so through the lens of Western thought. How can we challenge this? How can

voices of community workers in Myanmar be brought to the table? In this research, the aim is a critical understanding of stories that have been and are being told about Myanmar and at the same time highlighting the stories being told by Myanmar. Participatory action research creates the process for these stories to be told.

Yet, another reason I have chosen to use PAR is to challenge my own privilege. I am not from Myanmar, nor am I from a periphery country. I am an educated U.S. citizen and have to recognize the privilege that brings with it. As Joyce Ladner (1971) writes

it has been argued that the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and to some extent, the quality of the interaction between him and his subjects" (p. iii).

 PAR begins to shift those relationships, allowing for a more democratic process. By conducting the research with two co-researchers from Myanmar, it opens up space for a different type of process. Gaventa (1993) also reiterates the role of PAR,

with Freire's theme in mind, participatory research attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production, by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge (p. 34).

Finally, to do what is right and what is ethical, this project must not only contribute some knowledge, but also contribute to positive social change. I did not want to produce research that is useless for the community.

At a common sense level research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those

who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested

things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs

(Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 3).

I wanted to challenge myself; I did not want the research to only provide a dissertation but be a process of social change. The "action" component of PAR is key. As Fine (1994) states, "knowledge is best gathered in the midst of social change projects" (p. 28). If research is to make a change in the lives of those whom the research is meant to serve, then an action component had to exist.

As this project is a participatory action research project, the research team followed the five phases as highlighted in Maguire (1987). This section will discuss each phase of the research modeled from Maguire's work with details and the specifics from this particular project.

Phase one was the organization of the project and knowledge of the working area. I had been to Myanmar once in the summer of 2010 prior to starting the project in the summer of 2014 and also have been involved in local events here in the Bay Area with the Burmese community. This is really important because "a key guideline is that the research problem should originate in the community" (Maguire, 1987, p. 42). I was also able to communicate with one of the co-researchers, Saw Raymond, through Skype prior to the visit. During my first visit to Myanmar, I engaged in a number of different group meetings with various activists through a presentation at a local organization located in Yangon and through a presentation with a class at a religious university. I was able to conduct both of these presentations with co-researcher Saw Raymond. This previous work helped to build some of the relationships and prior working knowledge that were

needed to start this project. Co-researcher Mon Law also participated in the presentation at the religious university.

Phase two and phase three merged together in the "definition of generating principles" and "objectivization and problematization"(Maguire, 1987, p. 42). This is where initial dialogues take place to begin to understand the problems. These dialogues can problem-pose and should reach deeper levels.   Reza (2006) provided an example for the various levels that problem posing should reach. Level I questions are to question how the co-researchers and the participants sees his/her world and how the issues are defined. Level II begins to bring in the co-researchers personal life and how they feel about the issue at hand. Level III begins to break down the issue at hand and look into who is involved and the consequences or implications. Lastly, level IV looks into what sort of change can come from this dialogue. This phase looks into the action part in the research (Reza, 2006, p. 7-8). Upon arriving in Myanmar in late June of 2014, the very first evening there, the co-researchers and myself met over a typical dinner. We met for the first week, drafting our research questions, and creating our list of who the research participants would be. This was all done collaboratively between the three co-researchers, myself, Mon Law and Saw Raymond.

Phase four is where the team begins to research the "social reality and analyzing collected information" (Maguire, 1987 p. 43). We decided to conduct 7 interviews initially, and later once we were in Pin Oo Lwin, we added to our list. All of the interviews were conducted by at least two of us at a time. One person would be responsible for note-taking and the other would be the one to ask questions. There were

only two occasions where translation was needed and in those two moments, Mon Law

was the interviewer and would translate to me to take notes.

Phase five is where the action component is incorporated into the project and the

co-researchers and participants decide on what action they would like to take in response

to the data collected (p. 43). Upon completion of all the interviews, the research team

came back together and gathered all the requests from each participant. The final

question for every interview was what could we do as a research team to support their

work. With all of the gathered information, we put together a list of action steps and

planned them out. We then divided up how we would tackle each of the steps. Finally,

after our data analysis, we also came back together to create one final action component

that would incorporate all of the knowledge of our interviews. This final action

component was drafting a unit on Human Rights in Myanmar and was co-taught by

myself and co-research Saw Raymond. Saw Raymond also plans to continue to integrate

that unit into his teaching at a religious university located in Yangon. Another final

action component is the dissertation itself. While all the co-researchers recognized the

process of this being for a dissertation, they also believed it to be important to share the

knowledge with larger communities, especially those in the United States who may be

coming to work in Myanmar. The process of writing the dissertation was specifically

discussed as a team and was decided that I would write the dissertation alone. They

would include their narratives, field notes and journals, however the process of including

all of that information into a written product was my responsibility. This is an important

point to highlight, as again, it speaks to the power that comes from the University setting

and so as a team we had to discuss it, and it was not only the my choice but the choice of the whole research team. This will be discussed more in findings.

Research Settings

The research took place in three different regions in Myanmar. Myanmar is located in Southeast Asia bordering India, Bangladesh, Thailand and China. Myanmar has a population of around 51 million as of March 2014. It is a multi-ethnic state, with the largest ethnicity, Burmese, making up about 66% of the population and over 132 recognized ethnicities. It is also a predominantly Buddhist country with 89% of the population being Buddhist[2]. The geography of Myanmar ranges from the topic region bordering the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, all the way to the pre-Himalayas bordering China and India. As discussed in Chapter 1, Myanmar has had a conflicted history, with a very recent election where the pro-democracy group, the National League for Democracy won the majority of the seats in Parliament. This is the most significant transition to democracy in the last 60 years ("Myanmar election: Suu Kyi's NLD wins landslide victory", 2015).

The central location where the research team met and conducted all the planning was located in the former capital, Yangon. Yangon is also the base for many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and the home of one of the co-researchers. Yangon, formerly known as Rangoon was the capital of Myanmar until 2005, when the government suddenly packed up and moved to Naypidaw, 450 miles north. Although the government is no longer based in Yangon, much of the non-governmental organization (NGO) and INGO world is. Also, the majority of universities

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[2] According to the CIA World Fact book.

and social services are still based in Yangon. Yangon is also the largest city in Myanmar

with a population of 5.21 million as of 2014. It is one of the more humid parts of the

country and in the summer months, can be quite wet. The city itself is a mix of new

high-rise luxury condos and old colonial buildings. Many have labeled the old colonial

landscape neglected, however, I think it offers a charm to the city, and also reminds us of

the history. Having been to Myanmar in 2011, I quickly noticed the changes in the

economy that accompanied the transition to democracy. Cars were much more prevalent

than in the past trip, and traffic took twice as long. We always had to allow at least an

hour to make our meetings. Yangon is also a very diverse city in terms of religion, ethnic

minority groups and socio-economic status. The center square has a Christian church, a

mosque, a Buddhist temple and a Hindu temple all on the four corners surrounding the

city hall. This theme arose a lot in our discussions around choosing our participants, as

we wanted to be sure to reflect that diversity.

After spending a week in Yangon, one of the co-researchers and I moved to Pin

Oo Lwin, the hometown of co-researcher, Mon Law.   Pin Oo Lwin, formerly known as

Maymyo, is located in the northern part of the country about an hour north of Mandalay.

Pin Oo Lwin was the former colonial capital of Burma in the 1900s. The British moved

there to avoid the intense heat of the lowlands. It still holds very much to the feeling of a

British Hill Station, with large brick colonial buildings everywhere. Now, Pin Oo Lwin

is a military training ground with some of the largest military universities in the country

located there. It is also a large tourist location for wealthier Burmese, as it is much cooler

than Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw in the hot months.   It is home to a large

percentage of the Gurkha population, of which Mon Law belongs. Many of the Gurkha

talk about the similarities between Nepal and the hilly region of Myanmar and that is where you will see the largest concentration of this ethnic group.

This was our second base, where many of the interviews took place, either in the city itself as with three volunteers from a local non-profit, and many of the Gurkha community members, or in short day trips into Shan state, in which many Gurkha also live. Shan state's border is about a 20 minute ride outside of the city along the Mandalay-Lashio road. This is the main highway connecting Myanmar to China and the road we took to visit a local non-profit school and the home of one of the research participants.

The Research Team

Background of the author/ co-researcher 1

A large part of what motivates me to enter into this project is the personal relationships I have developed, and a personal commitment to do what is ethical and what is right. I traveled to Thailand in 2008 to study a Masters in Human Rights at Mahidol University right outside of Bangkok. I was excited to continue to dig deeper into the study of human rights and was even more excited to see the program as diverse as it was. In the program, I had classmates from Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Maldives, Indonesia, Pakistan, Mongolia, Japan and Europe. I was able to develop relationships and friendships with many new people, and also was allowed to travel and participate in some amazing work with local activists. At the same time, I witnessed a great divide between the work I was able to participate in through my new friends and the theory we were studying in our classes. This caused me to begin to question, not only what my role was, as a citizen of the United States, and a women of color, grandchild of immigrants

from Nicaragua, but what is the role of studying theories which didn't represent the work I felt most passionate about.

The relationships, not only with my classmates, but later my husband as well, is what is pushing me to do what is right. I must recognize my own privilege in being an educated woman from the United States and having some power to include those voices and stories into academia. I want to work on this project out of a place of love. Love for my husband and my friends, colleagues and classmates who inspired me everyday while being in Thailand. Love, for the work they were doing, risking their own lives in taking tiny steps to better their own communities, and love for the role that education can play in transforming lives, including my own.

My husband and I speak of going back to Myanmar one day. I also believe that if that were to happen, I want to go with a little something to offer. I would like to follow in the footsteps of those who have inspired me by taking risks. And so I do so, I will take a risk to write and research from a place of love. And in doing so, maybe I can transform not only myself but someone who may happen to take interest in this project. I will end my introduction to this research project with a quotation by bell hooks (1989) which speaks to the position I am hoping to express

> In reconceptualizing and reformulating strategies for future feminist movement, we need to concentrate on the politicization of love, not just in the context of talking about victimization in intimate relationships, but in a critical discussion where love can be understood as a powerful force that challenges and resists domination (p. 26).

Co-researchers

As this is a Participatory Action Research design, there were two co-researchers and myself working together as a group. Both co-researchers have been actively engaged in community work in Myanmar and had strong connections to many of our research participants. I also have been to Myanmar previously and worked with both of the co-researchers on projects before.

Mon Law- co-researcher 2

The first co-researcher is Mon Law. We met in Nepal in 2008 where he had moved from Myanmar in 2000. He left Myanmar to study, and as he is ethnically Nepali, spoke Nepali language and was able to obtain Nepalese citizenship. He is 36 years old, and is currently living in Oakland. He is from the northern part of Myanmar and is ethnically Gurkha, descendants of Nepali soldiers who fought with the British during World War II. Mon Law is a yoga teacher in San Francisco and Oakland but in both Myanmar and Nepal he was involved in many different community activities. Upon moving to the United States, he continues to return to teach yoga camps to Gurkha children. He has also helped raise money for an orphanage in Myanmar. He has remained close to both his family and community in Myanmar and also to his community work in Nepal. After the research trip in 2014, he returned to Nepal in April of 2015 where he brought 16 yoga teachers on a cultural exchange. He has also been heavily involved in raising funds for various cultural heritage points and villages in Nepal since the 2015 earthquake. Mon Law wanted to be a part of this work to "share stories of those in Myanmar, we are not just waiting to be helped but have a ton of community projects that can be examples to others" (Mon Law, research team dialogue, June 24, 2014).

Saw Raymond- co-researcher 3

The second co-researcher is Saw Raymond. Raymond and I knew each other from our studies in Thailand. We engaged in many conversations around what we witnessed in our program and often discussed working together on a project. Prior to this project, I had been to Myanmar and led workshops with Raymond in his classroom teaching at a religious university and also a local organization. Raymond is 38 years old, is married and has two young children. He lives on the outskirts of Yangon, in a neighborhood once created for civil servants. Both of Raymond's parents were English teachers and civil servants. Raymond is from Yangon, Myanmar. He is ethnically Karen and is Christian of the Baptist denomination. He is currently working for a large INGO in their legal department. Raymond's experience in Thailand studying is what really motivated him to work on this project. There was a moment during his studies where a professor questioned his ability, due to the fact that he was from Myanmar. He felt that he was "viewed not as an activist or a human rights defender but as a victim, one who wasn't able to advance because of how people view my government. I want to change that view so that when Westerners come here to work, maybe they will see me." (Saw Raymond, research team dialogue, June 24, 2014).

Research Participants

The research participants represent a range of people from different class backgrounds, different educational backgrounds, job experience, gender, religions and ethnicity. We attempted to both incorporate participants with experience working and in contact with large international non-governmental organizations and participants with

only small local level projects. In the section below, the biographical information for each participant is given.

Vishnu Dai

Vishnu is a well-known Gurkha community member.   He lives in Yangon, although he is from the mountain city of Taunghi. He is college educated and is married. He is 42 years old. Vishnu speaks English, Nepali and Burmese fluently. Vishnu and Mon Law knew each other from Nepal. Vishnu spent 10 years living in Nepal and teaching at a private English medium school in Kathmandu. Upon his return to Myanmar, he has been heavily involved in organizing educational opportunities for the Gurkha community. He funds scholarships, organizes youth programs and shares information about higher education with the Gurkha community. He has also been involved in international fundraising work as well; he just recently did a huge fundraising mission to support earthquake victims from the recent earthquake in Nepal. He has worked on a number of other projects, outside of education. He helped organize many in the Gurkha community to advocate for the national I.D. card and he is involved in the NRN (Non-Resident Nepali) organization of Myanmar. We met with Vishnu twice, in Yangon, once for a formal interview, and the second in a informal dinner setting.

Tara Didi

Tara Didi is a local community organizer. Tara was born in a very rural area in Shan State, in Northern Myanmar. She currently lives in Kyaukme, a small town located on the Mandalay-Lashio road. She lives in a large mixed family and is the center of her families home, really taking control of the children's education. She studied until class three and she is now 43 years old. Tara's native language is Nepalese and she also

speaks Burmese. Tara is the older sister of co-researcher, Mon Law. She owns a small business and her husband's family has a large dairy company. Apart from her work, Tara is the co-president of the local women's organization. This organization hosts monthly meetings, facilitates a lot of the cultural activities in the community and is a support group for any women in need. Tara has never left Myanmar, however, she has a deep desire to visit Nepal and her sisters who are living there. We met with Tara once formally and she also participated in the visit to the local non-profit school with us.

Ashin Min

Ashin Min is a Buddhist Monk organizing in his community. He is living in a small village in Chan state, the same village where he was born and raised. He is college educated and spent time studying in Germany. He is ethnically Chin, 38 years old and not married. Ashin Min speaks Chin language, Burmese, English and German. We were introduced to Ashin Min through activists that had worked on the Thai/Burma border with Ashin Min.   Ashin Min was involved in many of the protest movements during the 1990s and then moved to Thailand and then on to Germany as an exile in 2000 before returning in 2011. He has returned to his village outside of the town of Monywa and is engaged in a number of projects, supporting a kindergarten school, a library and also advocating for villagers who have been coerced in a voter registration policy from the government. We visited Ashin Min's village once and were able to observe his work during this one day visit.

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw are two active volunteers for a local non-profit providing health and funeral services in Pin Oo Lwin. They are both married, live in Pin

Oo Lwin with their families and volunteer once or twice a week with the organization.

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw both finished secondary school.   Pho Zin Oo is 25 years

old and Kyaw Kyaw is 32 years old. Neither of them spoke English and so Mon Law

translated this interview. They only spoke Burmese.   Mon Law and I were passing by

the organization and met them. They both conducted an interview together and also

referred us to meet with the Board Member Sin Mya Thwe. We met with both of them

once during a formal interview in the office of the non-profit.

Sin Mya Thwe

Sin Mya Thwe is the current president board member of the same local non-profit

mentioned above. She was born and raised in Yangon but moved to Pin Oo Lwin with

her family. She was college educated with a Masters degree. She is now retired from

work as she is 60 years old, and volunteers with the non-profit. Sin Mya spoke fluent

English as she had been in the NGO sector and had worked with outside groups before.

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw introduced us to Sin Mya. Sin Mya has worked in a number

of different NGOs throughout her career. Sin Mya and I met alone for a formal interview

in her office.

Thwe Zin

Thwe Zin is an active educational and volunteer projects. She was born and

raised in Yangon, Myanmar where she is currently living. She is ethnically Burmese and

was college educated. She is in the process of studying a Masters in Education.. Thwe is

32 years old and speaks Burmese and is also fluent in English. Thwe Zin and Saw

Raymond had worked together in various projects at a local organization based in

Yangon. Thwe currently works for the Ministry of Education on a project that is

formalizing community work as part of the curriculum. Thwe Zin was also the founder of a volunteer organization that did extensive work in the Delta Region. We met once for a formal interview at a local café in Yangon.

Thin Thin Tun

Thin Thin Tun has worked both in large INGOs and conducted small community projects. She was born and raised in Yangon. However, her father's family is from the Delta region. She is half-Mon and half-Burmese however, she only speaks Burmese and English. She studied English education and continued her Masters degree in Thailand. She is 43 years old and is married. Thin Thin studied alongside Saw Raymond and myself in Thailand and that was our connection. She has worked for a number of different local NGOs and INGOs. She was heavily involved in local community work around the Cyclone Nargis because of her connection with that region. She is currently working for a large U.S. NGO based in Myanmar working on democracy issues. We were able to meet twice, once in Yangon, where she was just beginning her current work and then again in the United States when she visited for a work trip. The first interview was conducted in Myanmar where she spoke about her previous work and community involvement and the follow up meeting, she was able to speak more about her current work as well.

Nora Tha

Nora has worked with some of the only INGOS working in Myanmar initially. She was born and raised in Yangon. At the time of the interview, she was living in Thailand studying a Masters in Sustainable Development at a prominent Thai University. Nora is married with two young children, all of who remained in Myanmar during her

studies. She is 30 years old. Nora is Karen and speaks Karen language, Burmese and English. Saw Raymond was convinced that we had to speak and so we were able to arrange a time for us to speak online.   Nora has been very involved in INGO work in Myanmar for many years. She has done educational aide work and environmental work. She is hoping to return to Myanmar and engage in sustainable environmental development work and conservation, which is what she was studying in Thailand. Nora and the research team spoke by SKYPE once.

Ram Prashad

Ram Prashad is a local educator. He was born in Shan State, Myanmar and is ethnically Gurkha. Ram lives in Lokhu with his wife and is 36 years old. He is the Sanskrit teacher at a non-profit college in Lokhu village, about five miles off the Mandalay-Lashio road in Shan State. He attended the same school that he is now teaching at. Ram speaks Burmese, Nepali, and Sanskrit language. Mon Law wanted to include the work of the school community in the project and Ram was willing to offer us time to speak about his work with the school. This college is a free school, where students from low-income families can come to study Sanskrit language, Nepali, computer science, math, history and English. The school provides low-income students with skills they will need to get a job, or to continue studies in India or Nepal.

Data Collection Procedures

Co-researcher dialogues

As described in the above section discussing the research design of the project, the research team came together at the very beginning of the project to work on building a list of our basic assumptions as a research team, drafting our research questions, and

drafting our list of research participants. We then came back together as a group to reflect on the research and to plan the action components. The first meeting took place on the evening of June 24th, 2014. This is where we tackled Phase II of the research, defining our generating principles and really looking at the problems. Some of the questions we focused on were:

-Why we wanted to work on this project?
-What our previous experiences were around human rights work?
-What previous observations have we had on human rights work?
-What problems did we see initially?

The second meeting took place two evenings later, on June 26th, 2014. During this second meeting we addressed how we hoped to gather our information, which we decided would be interviews, and then drafted our interview questions. This meeting just roughly put together a list of things we wanted to learn. The third meeting, conducted one evening later was on June 27th, 2014. At this meeting, we brought our lists together of possible research participants and began to reach out to them to schedule the interviews.

After the majority of the interviews were conducted, we all came back together as a research team, to work on the implementation of the action components. It is important to note that these dialogues are an important aspect of the data collection. These spaces became an important place to process and reflect up on the data gained from the interviews, and through these reflections, data was also produced. As a research team, we prioritized our time to come together to reflect, either in partners or as a whole group. As Crane and O'Regan (2010) demonstrate below, PAR is a constant process of reflection, observation, planning and action.

Figure 1: The basic Action Research cycle
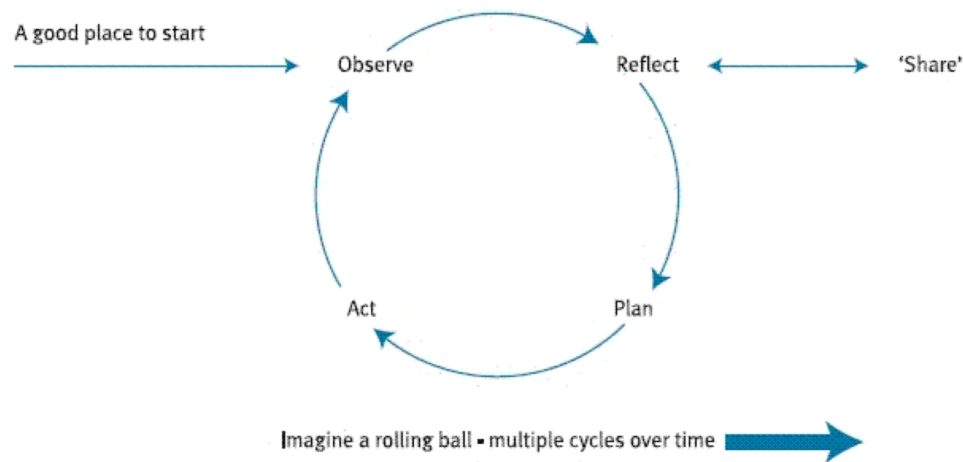
(p. 1).

Interviews

As discussed above, interviews were decided upon as a large portion of our data collection for this project. The research team brainstormed the list of participants together and then reached out to schedule the interviews. The interviews took place over three weeks in Pin Oo Lwin, Shan State, Chin State and Yangon. All interviews were conducted by a minimum of two co-researchers. Most of the interviews took place in English, except for three, which were translated by co-researcher Mon Law. The research questions used for the interviews are as followed:

-What kind of work do you do?
-How do you label or name the work you do?
-If you do/ do not label your work human rights work, why or why not?
-Have you ever worked with foreign-born people on a project related to the work you are speaking about?
-What was that experience like?
-How could those coming from abroad support the work you are doing?
-How can we in this specific research team, further support the work you are doing?

None of the interviews were recorded. Do to the long history of government oppression and military dictatorship; there was still a lot of stigma in engaging in

dialogue and discussions with foreigners. Although the co-researchers were both native

to Myanmar, there was a lot of distrust around research and the recording of one's words,

which will be discussed more in the findings section.   For all interviews except one, at

least two of the co-researchers were always present and one co-researcher was assigned

the task of note taking, trying to catch word for word the content of the interview.   The

other co-researcher would engage in the dialogue and also jot down, thoughts,

interpretations, and observations. After each interview, the co-researchers would come

together to review the notes and add anything that was left off.

The action component

Again, one of the main components of PAR is the conduction of an action

component. For the purpose of this project, the research team conducted both minor

projects specifically responding to the direct requests of the research participants and one

larger component addressing the reflection and knowledge gained from the entire

research projects. The action components were discussed within the research team,

reflected upon and therefore are also data for this research. The smaller action

components consisted of organizing a drive within Mon Law's family to bring yoga mats

to the school of Ram Prashad, facilitating transportation to guests visiting Ashin Min, and

drafting a pamphlet in English for a local non-profit in Pin Oo Lwin to be able to share

with future foreign visitors. The large action component was the creation of curriculum

around human rights work inside of Myanmar to be taught within the Social

Development program at a religious university in Yangon. Co-researcher Saw Raymond

and myself co-taught a class prior to my departure from Myanmar.

Field notes and journals

All three co-researchers kept a journal throughout the research process. We referred to these especially at the beginning of the project and at the end. These journals were used to process questions and reflect. One challenge was both Mon Law and Saw Raymond preferred to process in dialogue instead of silent writing time. The journals became more of space for them to store notes and main themes and also to process when we were not all together. Field notes were also taken in every interview as discussed below.

Co-researcher reflections

After each interview, the co-researchers always came together to reflect upon the interviews and write each of their own reflections. These were all recorded in a notebook that was then transcribed. Upon the completion of all the interviews, all three co-researchers came together for a final reflection. This was done in a dialogue and reflections were written and transcribed.

Data Analysis

As stated above, participatory action research is a collaborative process. The two co-researchers came together after each interview to reflect upon the process and add any missing notes. Upon completion of all the interviews, except for that of Nora Tha, the team came together and reviewed all the notes. Initial themes were highlighted from dialogues of research team and the interviews with the research participants. These initial themes were then used to help guide the action components. Upon the completion of the initial steps in the various action components, the research team came back together for one final reflection. During this final reflection, we drafted three themes that we felt

covered the data from the interviews. Upon return to the United States, I then went back

over all the data again for the purpose of the dissertation writing.

Reliability and Validity

In beginning to speak about validity and reliability of this PAR project, I will

follow closely in Fine's (2008) footsteps. In her work "An Epilogue, of Sorts", she

writes a letter in defense of YPAR researchers in the academy. She clearly lays out

arguments addressing objectivity, validity and generalizability.

On objectivity, Fine quotes Harding's (1987) work to incorporate the

understanding of strong objectivity. She writes

> strong objectivity is exercised when researchers work diligently and self-
>
> consciously through their own positionalities, values, and predispositions,
>
> gathering as much evidence as possible from many distinct vantage points, all in
>
> an effort to not be guided, unwittingly and exclusively, by predispositions and the
>
> pull of biography (p. 222).

She goes on to state, "biases are not to be denied but displayed, dissected, challenged,

and pooled" (p. 223). For the purpose of this research, given that I am not from

Myanmar, it was extremely important that I constantly examine my own understandings

in relation to those I am working with. Given the differences in culture and background,

there were many assumptions I brought into the project and even misconceptions. The

PAR process allowed for these to be highlighted and discussed. Other feminists agree

that to not be aware of our bias is to not recognize our privilege. Feminist scholars across

disciplines "situate themselves proudly atop a basic assumption that all research projects

are (and should be) political; the researchers who represent themselves as detached only

camouflage their deepest, most privileged interests" (Rosaldo, 1989).   Throughout the project, the co-researchers and I engaged in constant dialogue on our own understanding and meaning construction. Saw Raymond and I would do follow up discussions after every interview and activity. Mon Law and I had a practice to share out each evening at the end of the day. Then every whole team meeting, we would always share out both the data and then the dialogue that we had after the interview. There were many moments where Saw Raymond and Mon Law challenged and highlighted how I misunderstood something, which will be discussed further in the findings section.

On validity, Fine (2008) addressed it from two perspectives, expert validity and construct validity. On expert validity, Fine brings back the main framework that PAR rests on. She writes, "PAR stands on the epistemological grounds that persons who have historically been marginalized or silenced carry substantial knowledge about the architecture of injustice" (p. 223).   The design of this research was to specifically address who is the expert on human rights work in Myanmar, and I take the same ground that the "experts" are the co-researchers and research participants of this project. I want to honor their words, voice and knowledge.   On construct validity, Fine discussed the importance of the reconstruction of theories that takes place in the YPAR projects of the book (pp. 225-226). The PAR process allows groups to situate themselves in the theory that is written about them, challenge it and create new meanings and understandings of those theories. In working with community workers in Myanmar, the hope of this project is that as a group, we can retell the stories that have been told.

Finally, Fine speaks of generalizability and how findings can be brought out to other populations. She actually expands the definition to two ways to think about it,

theoretical generalizability and provocative generalizability. "Theoretical generalizability refers to the extent to which theoretical notions or dynamics move from one context to another" (p. 227). This is about making connections, if the experience of one group is similar to another, we can look at those experiences of oppression as they relate to large structures of injustice. There are shared experiences and PAR projects can highlight those. This project is looking at a very specific group, community workers living inside of Myanmar. The co-researchers come from different ethnic backgrounds with very different upbringings. The hope of this project is to highlights some of their shared experiences and how those can relate to other experiences.

Provocative generalizability is described as something which "offers a measure of the extent to which a piece of research provokes readers or audiences, across contexts, to generalize to 'worlds not yet' in the language of Maxine Greene; to rethink and reimagine current arrangements" (p. 227). This also speaks directly to a goal of PAR, which is researched designed for social change. This type of generalizability allows the researchers, the co-researchers and the participants to imagine and also plan. It was the aim of this research that through working together and through the community built, action and collaboration happened, which it did, and also that future action and collaboration will continue to happen.

Protection of Human Subjects

When working on issues related to human rights inside of Myanmar, the topic can be very risky for the co-researchers and the participants. Although the last couple of years has been filled with transitions and democratic reforms inside of Myanmar, one still must be very cautious, and there still random periods of crackdown. For the purpose of

this project, all co-researchers and research participants have been given a pseudonym. Written consent forms were given to all participants that the co-researchers decided to work with and they were translated in English and in Burmese. Another consent form was drafted for the research team, in which we discussed the research process and the various phases of the PAR process so that we were all working with the same understanding. We also discussed our process so that as a team, we were sure that we followed all ethical practices as we conducted our research. Upon the completion of the research project, documents summarizing the interviews were sent to all the research participants, so they could also confirm that everything discussed was properly translated.

Finally, Institutional Review Board approval was requested and the research was given an exempt status. IRBPHS was received prior to the conduction of the research project.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The goal of this research is to highlight narratives coming out of local community activists in Myanmar, share their work, their relationship with outside activists and their thoughts on what solidarity can look like.

Mon Law and I arranged for a car the night before to take us to a local non-profit school that served the low-income Gurkha community about an hour's drive from Pin Oo Lwin, north along the Mandalay- Lashio highway. The car picked us up around 9am and to both of our surprises, the car was filled with three of Mon Law's sisters. They wanted to join along to learn more about the school and watch Mon Law's interview. We got into the car and the driver made one more unexpected stop, at Mon Law's older brother's home. He also wanted to get involved. We all squeezed into the car and began the journey. Through the trip, Mon Law reflected on the conversations his family had. They spoke about all of their experiences both in school in general and Mon Law and his brother spoke about their experience at this particular school and another one very similar in another village.

After the hour-long drive through the green lush hills of Shan State, we exited the main highway and took a small dirt road another three kilometers into the campus of the school. When we got out of the car, Ram Prashad was there to meet us. All of the family made introductions and a few of the students also came out to greet us. Two of the young boys ended up being distant cousins of Mon Law and so lots of family talk pursued. Right away, Mon Law jumped into the interview, with Ram Prashad touring us around the campus and enthusiastically responding to all of Mon Laws questions. Given the hectic nature of the setting, Mon Law was not able to translate directly, and so I took a bit

of a step back, and observed. I observed how excited Mon Law's family was to participate and how much they had to offer the conversation. I observed how much interaction they had with the students. I was especially surprised when we all got ready to get back in the car, how they all added to the note-taking process.

I start with this brief story because it speaks to the importance of engaging community members in dialogues on their practices, work, institutions and families. In each and every interview, the co-researchers and I met brave and determined individuals doing amazing work in their communities every day. They were excited to share their stories. I now present those stories here. The stories presented here are organized under the four main research questions presented in Chapter I. Those questions are 1) how do community workers in Myanmar engage in discourse and practice around human rights; 2) what do the relationships and interactions between local and foreign activists look like; 3) how can human rights activists from abroad engage in human rights work in Myanmar that builds solidary from the perspective of the local activists in Myanmar? Under each question, the findings are further sorted under themes, which will be discussed below. Finally, the chapter ends with a section on the role of participatory action research in reinforcing the stated outcomes of this research project.

Participants in Myanmar

The majority of the discussions during each interview were around the sharing of the research participants' work. As a research team, we hoped to share practices and hear about how people were engaging in work that benefited the community. We wanted to understand how the research participants described the work. The specific interview question that spoke to this were:

1) What kind of work do you do?

The first section of this chapter will speak to an overview of the work of each of the research participants.

Vishnu Dai

The first interview that we conducted was with Vishnu Dai (Dai being a Nepali word for older brother). Vishnu was acquainted with Mon Law through their work at a school in Nepal. Vishnu is also very close to friend of ours in Nepal, who insisted that we meet in Myanmar, as his work has been very profound within the Gurkha community. We were able to meet with Vishnu twice during our stay in Yangon, one was a formal interview and the second was an informal dinner. On both occasions we were able to learn about his work, however, the second visit was documented after in our field notes. The first time we met Vishnu, we met in the lobby of a large hotel that was located near to his home in a more residential part of the city. Mon Law, Saw Raymond and I were all a part of this interview. Vishnu is very well known in the Gurkha community for his work around education. He was heavily involved with gathering funds within the community to offer scholarships to families that could not afford to pay for the fees in primary schooling, secondary schooling and even at the college level. Depending on the need of the family, tutoring and room and board could be funded as well. Vishnu traveled all over the country to raise the funds and also to meet the community members. He would organize community meetings to bring together families that were donating funds with the families that needed support. Upon completion of various levels in school, small ceremonies would celebrate the student's completion. Vishnu would also attend these to honor the work of the students. Apart from his work around education, Vishnu

had also worked closely with organizing the Gurkha community around citizenship

rights. He worked closely with families to arrange the necessary paperwork and to

educate families on what they needed to apply for a national card. This work allowed for

the Gurkha community to continue to be integrated into mainstream Burmese society.

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw were introduced to the research team a different way

then the many of the other participants. One of our goals in designing the research

participant list was to interview someone doing work with a local organization. When

Mon Law and I arrived in Pin Oo Lwin, we took a neighborhood walk through a section

of the city that housed a lot of organizations working on health and wellness. We passed

one organization that had a large amount of people passing through and thought we

would go inside to ask about their work. That is how we met Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw

Kyaw. Both were volunteering on that day and were willing to share some of the work

they were doing. They said that they felt most comfortable speaking with us as a team,

that way they could support each other in their answers. At first, we spoke in English,

and Pho Zin Oo finally shared, "it is not possible for us to share in English" (Pho Zin Oo,

interview, July 9, 2014). That is when Mon Law jumped in and starting to explain in

Burmese. Immediate relaxation happened with both Pho Zin and Kyaw Kyaw.

Kyaw Kyaw had been volunteering with this local organization for about three

years and Pho Zin Oo for almost five. The organization's main responsibility was

providing transportation to and from the hospital, similar to that of an ambulance and also

providing transportation costs and resources needed for a funeral service. This was the

main role of the organization, however, it also helped provide funding for those in need

of medical services and organized a database around blood donors. Pho Zin Oo worked

specifically on this project. He would go and meet neighbors and community members

to encourage them to join the database. Then, if there was a local emergency or the local

hospitals (both the government and private) needed blood, they would contact Pho Zin

Oo, who would then work with the database and collaborate with the donors of the proper

blood type.

Kyaw Kyaw had begun to volunteer with this same organization as a driver. He

had a family member who needed transportation to the hospital and had received support

from this organization. He was impressed and as he drove for work, he wanted to offer

that skill. The drivers would sign up for shifts, so that they would be made available for

anyone in need during the hours of their shift. Kyaw Kyaw spoke about going out into

the community to make sure that the community knew about the services of the

organization. He also collaborated with the local hospitals so that it wasn't just the

individual who would call, but the hospital could also recommend the services to the

patients or the families of the patients.

Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw gave us a tour or the facilities and spent a lot of time

sharing how the volunteer database worked. One particular moment, Pho Zin Oo pointed

out, "look at all the religions we have in our volunteers"(Pho Zin Oo, interview, July 9,

2014). He then took time to introduce Mon Law to a woman who was volunteering that

day who was Gurkha. After the tour, Kyaw Kyaw shared that I needed to meet with

someone on the board, "she speaks English and you must meet her. She knows much

more about all of the things you are asking" (Kyaw Kyaw, interview, July 9, 2014). He

asked us to wait while he made a phone call, came back a few minutes later and told me to return later that afternoon. Sin Mya Thwe was looking forward to meeting me then.

Sin Mya Thwe

Kyaw Kyaw set up the meeting with Sin Mya Thwe and so we knew that we had to be there at the time suggested. Mon Law had a commitment with his family and so this was the only interview conducted alone. I arrived back at the offices of the organization and was immediately taken to a large room on the top floor. It was a cool room, with all the windows open allowing for a nice breeze. I was offered tea and local snacks, and right away noticed the more formal nature of an interview, that had not existed when Mon Law and Saw Raymond were present.

Sin Mya Thwe spoke excellent English. She had a graduate degree and while she had never lived or traveled abroad, she spoke with a fluency in English that suggested she had. She had been on the board of this organization for about five years, since her and her family moved to Pin Oo Lwin to retire. Her main job with the organization was fundraising and overseeing the volunteer structures. She had worked in a number of non-governmental organizations, all around the health industry and providing access to health services. She was excited to bring that experience to an organization that was "so loved in the community" (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014). As she was one of the only English speaking board members, she said, "I am who they call, when people have questions" (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014). During most of the interview, Sin Mya shared the work of the organization in detail. She spoke about how all the funds come from local people, and some local business. She shared about how much community outreach has to be done so that the community knows about their services.

She really did not veer away from the work she was doing with this specific organization and rarely spoke about her other positions. "You are here so let's focus on this work", she shared at one point (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014). At the end, she thanked me for my interest and hoped that we would remain in touch.

Tara Didi

Tara Didi (a Nepali word for older sister) was Mon Law's older sister. Mon Law had arranged for us to interview her from Yangon. In the informal dinner with Vishnu, Mon Law's older brother and sister-in-law joined us. In a discussion around the interview, Mon Law's sister-in-law shared that Tara Didi had been doing organizing work around women's issues for years. Mon Law had no idea and so immediately called his sister to be sure she could meet us in Pin Oo Lwin.

Tara joined us in my hotel room, one rainy afternoon. The three of us sat around on the marble floor with the windows open to allow for a cool breeze that accompanied the rain. Tara spoke no English and so Mon Law took the role of a translator. I would ask the questions in English, and Mon Law would translate word for word. There were moments when he would jump in, and then always took a step back to translate what he had asked or shared. Tara immediately commented on how she wished her daughter was here, as she could translate and learn at the same time.

Tara had been working as a leader of a women's organization in her local community for the last seven years. Her work had been to conduct and recruit women for women's empowerment workshops, which included things like health awareness, yoga, singing and lectures on women's engagement in business and entrepreneurships. Some of these workshops included women from all over and had had up to 500

participants at one time. She was also a community leader in organizing a women's

festival in her town, and then would share these ideas with women in other villages. She

would fundraise, plan and execute the festival as a way to celebrate women in the

community. She would also help to fundraise around issues of preserving traditional

dresses, cultural practices and religious celebrations. She worked very closely with the

women in this organization to offer a microfinance program where they would raise the

funds within the group, and every three months, choose which family needed the funds

the most. She shared that anyone in the community could seek help from the

organization and provided an example that she had recently been involved with. She

shared about a woman in the community who was in a dangerous relationship and the

group had helped to facilitate a separation by working with both families. She also has

worked very closely with a number of women to help them start their own business. "It

is important that we all have the tools we need to live fulfilled lives" (Tara Didi,

interview, July 11, 2014).

Ram Prashad

Visiting a local free college just north of Pin Oo Lwin was another goal that Mon

Law had included from our original list. Mon Law and two of his brothers were educated

in a similar college and he believed it very important to share the work of this free

educational facility. Our arrival to the school is discussed at the introduction to this

chapter.

Ram Prashad met us and he was kind, soft-spoken man.   He had spent most of his

adult life working at the school and "offering his services to the young Nepali community

of Myanmar" (Ram Prashad, interview, July 13, 2014). Ram Prashad spoke a little

English, but as Mon Law's family was involved, Mon Law requested that he conduct the interview in Nepali. As mentioned above, I took a step back and observed. Mon Law filled in later on all the work that Ram Prashad had been involved with. He was currently serving as the main teacher living on campus. He was also the Sanskrit teacher and was working on a project to get the college accredited by an Indian University so that students could go abroad to study. University studies were still quite unpredictable in Myanmar at the time of the research. The government could close the institutions at any time. Also, for many families not living in a large urban area, access to institutions of higher education were very difficult. This was Ram Prashad's goal, to help students be able to study to the level they would like to. Ram Prashad himself had studied at the school and was deeply committed to the role it played in the Gurkha community. It was an option for many poor families to educate their children, not only in skills that will be needed for employment, but language skills, and cultural practices, that "should not be lost, even though we are away from Nepal" (Ram Prashad, interview, July 13, 2014). He had been able to travel to India to study Sanskrit and he wanted to create those learning opportunities in his own community or provide options for students where not many other opportunities existed.

Ashin Min

Ashin Min's interview was set up through a friend from the United States connected to the refugee community living in Thailand. Ashin Min had done a lot of work along the border and knew a great deal of people. We were told that we had to meet him. Mon Law and I arranged with his brother-in-law to take us to the village. It

was almost impossible to arrive by bus as the road to his village was not paved and during the raining season, it had very little access.

Mon Law's brother-in-law picked us up early as the journey was to take a few hours. A few hours, it did indeed take, with Binaju (a Nepali term for brother-in-law) stopping every few minutes to constantly check for directions. We finally arrived at a junction where we were met by a young man on the back of a motorcycle wearing the crimson colors of a Burmese Buddhist monk. "Follow me this way," shouted Ashin Min, in an English with very little accent. We followed him for about an hour on a dirt road, where we finally stopped at a small tea shop located on the side of the road. Ashin Min poured us all tea and then said that this stop was not his home but he wanted to show us the new preschool that was community run. It was an open building with cots, where all the children were napping on one side, and small tables and two large chalkboards on the other. Two mothers from the village were organizing snacks. Ashin Min shared how he had helped to organize the mothers so that they could staff the preschool, each mother working a specific shift. He then trained the mothers in the evening at the library he was building in the center of the village. After tea, he gave us a quick tour and introduced us to the teachers and some of the waking students. They all greeted us in English, shouting "Hello, how are you?".

After the stop, we traveled another 15 minutes to a much more densely inhabited village. In the center, was a large cement building, most of the other buildings including the preschool were all single wall construction made of found materials. This building was the recently constructed library that was the pride of Ashin Min. In the library, he tutored local villagers in reading and English in the evening, trained the preschool

mothers on teaching young children and was hoping to house a number of books so that the community could come and learn. He had created this space as a community building right after he returned to Myanmar after spending more than ten years abroad. He used this space to tutor but also to meet with the community to hear about their local concerns. One of the recent initiatives he was working on was to help fight electoral fraud in his village. Many of the government representatives were coming to the villagers to collect signatures. Ashin Min was helping to organize the community to reclaim their signatures so the government officials could not claim these particular villagers as party members. We visited with Ashin Min for the afternoon, having more tea and snacks and taking a tour around the community. As the afternoon got late, we had to head back as the journey to the main road would be a long one.

Thwe Zin

Thwe Zin and Saw Raymond had worked together previously through some organizing efforts at a local organization in Yangon. Raymond arranged for an interview when Mon Law and I returned to Yangon after our trip up north. We met Thwe Zin at a local café near a trendy part of the city. Thwe Zin, Raymond and I found a quiet space in a backroom and all ordered tea. Thwe shared about her recent job working for the ministry of education around organizing standards and curriculum for community engagement. She was trying to document the work of local communities and also what she believed was a deep commitment to volunteer work. Saw Raymond slightly nudged Thwe Zin to also share more about her work outside of her official job title. Thwe immediately lit up and shared about her work in the Delta region and as the founder of a volunteer organization. Thwe founded an organization that pulled human resources to

offer communities of high need. She rallied young professionals to offer their skill set, in

what she termed mobile clinics. In these mobile clinics, a group of volunteers would

travel to rural communities and offer workshops around health, art, the environment, and

teaching pedagogy. Often times, the clinic would work with students directly offering

workshops and activities, and other times, they would just work with teachers offering

help with curriculum and activities. They did the same thing with mobile health clinics

as well. The idea was that the clinics would take place for a short period of time,

however, in that time period, it was essential to train a small percentage of the local

community to be able to offer that particular skill set when the clinics were gone. She had

done this work for five years, predominately in the Delta region of Myanmar, which was

drastically affected by Cyclone Nargis in 2007.   She also had been invested in

connecting with the exiled communities and engaging them in volunteer work to serve

the local communities inside Myanmar.

Thin Thin Tun

Thin Thin Tun was a close friend of Saw Raymond. I had also met Thin Thin

through Saw Raymond while studying in Thailand and we all agreed that she would be

excellent to interview. She had done a lot of local level work both around education and

disaster relief. She had worked closely with refugees while in Thailand and upon her

return to Myanmar had worked for a number of different INGOs. Her most recent

position was with a Western organization working on elections and democratic

participation. Thin Thin, Mon Law and I all went to local noodle shop to meet. She was

excited to speak about her past job experiences and scheduled a second time later to

speak about her current work, as she had just started the position and wanted to be there a bit longer before speaking about it.

Over a noodle dinner, Ma Thin Thin, (Ma is a sign of respect, signifying older sister in Burmese) shared about her work in the Delta region organizing relief after Cyclone Nargis. She did this work as part of a member of a local civil society organization. While working, she studied her B.A. in English education from Open University's distance learning course. She received a scholarship to study a Masters in Thailand. While in Thailand, she worked with an organization located in the North of Thailand working with the refugee community on providing education and scholarships to young adults. When she returned to Myanmar, she worked for two different INGOs prior to her current work. Both were large development organizations. Thin Thin was excited to share her work. She shared, " sometimes it is good to be able to share, it helps me remember and also appreciate what I have worked on" (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 27, 2014). Thin Thin visited the United States for work in March of 2015 and we were able to continue the interview about her current work on democratic participation. She shared that she is traveling all over the country, to many places she had never been before, to conduct trainings on how to engage in electoral politics. She shared that this is new for her and she is very happy to learn this process and be able to participate in a new phase in her country's history. She also had a lot to share about the relationships within her organization. However, she definitely shared about the power that working on trainings with local groups on the ground offered.

> I think that we are going to teach something about democracy, but the groups we
> are working with, they know what they want and it is more our job to help

facilitate that. I am learning a lot, and I love being in the trainings and even the

chance to collaborate with people all over the world, like the recent training I am

coming here for (Thin Thin Tun, interview, March 20, 2015).

Nora Tha

Nora Tha was the only interview that we could not conduct face to face. She was

currently living in Thailand studying and Saw Raymond believed that she was very

important to speak to. Nora had been involved in some of the only INGOs working in

Myanmar for years. She was specifically involved in human rights trainings through her

position (although they were not specifically named that). Saw Raymond arranged for a

Skype conversation on one of the final nights in Yangon. We all met in my hotel, as it

had reasonable access to the internet, and gathered around the screen. Nora had worked

for the last 10 year in large INGOs. She also spoke English perfectly and her parents

were civil servants who had taught her English. In her most recent position, she was a

project manager leading trainings and workshops for local organizations funded by the

large INGOs. She had just recently moved to Thailand to study a Masters in an

international program there. She was really excited to complete this degree so that she

could become more involved in the environmental sustainability movement. She was

hoping to work combating many of the extractive industries and look at sustainable

development. As will be discussed below, Nora provided a lot of suggestion for those

coming to work abroad. She shared that most of her experience was work related but she

was happy to offer what insight she could.

Apart from sharing about each participants work, the interviews continued to

discuss how the participants labeled their work, how they have connected with the

international community and what they envisioned solidarity could look like across

borders. The data around these questions is shared below, organized by three themes that

arose, which were previously described. Again those themes are around the type of work

that was labeled human rights work by the participants, how the participants discussed

what they were doing, either in relation to a job or as a part of their life, and how they

viewed the interactions they had with the international community in terms of power

dynamics.

The Discourse and Practice of Human Rights Work

The next set of questions in the interviews, were around how the participants

labeled their work. We wanted to question their own understanding of the term "human

rights" and how they used it. The specific interview questions that spoke to this were:

1) How do you label or name the work you do?
2) If you do/do not label your work human rights work, why or why not?

The rest of the chapter will discuss the findings based on three themes that arose, those

themes are 1) understanding human rights as civil and political rights; 2) human rights

work as a way of life; and 3) how human rights work can reinforce a global power

structure.

Although very few of the participants named their work specifically human rights

work, we did see themes arise around who labeled their work human rights work and

why. As a team of co-researchers, we highlighted these three themes as a group. The

first theme connected to an understanding of human rights work as only being civil and

political rights.   This theme arose from the very beginning of the research, even within

our discussions as a research team. It first arose while brainstorming our research

questions and our participant lists.   Saw Raymond, went back and forth on his list of who

would qualify for doing human rights work. We realized that we had to come up with a definition that all three of us could accept. We each wrote down our own definition and then shared with each other. We decided on the definition of human rights as being "rights all people have to live in dignity". After we decided on this, I specifically asked Saw Raymond, if he himself thought he was doing human rights work, and he answered "No way, Amy! I am not out every day in the streets; I have not risked my life to protest this government, I couldn't call myself a human rights activist" (Raymond, co-researcher team dialogue, June 24, 2014). I then asked Raymond what pushed him to study a Masters in Human Rights, and he shared the following:

> I was working at the (local organization) for wealthy kids who would do and pay anything for English classes. They had so many resources and many were already in private schools and would come here to learn the language of English so that they could then go and study abroad. I remember one day leaving my job, and walking out to the street restaurant to have my lunch and there was a young boy waiting on me. He wasn't at school, and he was very young, maybe eight or nine. He should have been at school and he wasn't. I felt bad that I was working there and so I spoke to my wife about going back to school to use my degree in law for good (Raymond, co-researcher team dialogue, June 27, 2014).

Mon Law entered at this point, "sounds to me like human rights work" (Mon Law, co-researcher team dialogue, June 27, 2014). Raymond went on to share that his work with large international non-governmental organizations (INGO) didn't always feel like "doing the work". He has worked for two other large organizations prior to his current position in a legal department of another INGO. After this dialogue, as a research team,

we were able to expand our own notions of human rights work outside of the realm of civil and political rights; however, with the research participants we witnessed some of the same assumptions.

An interview with Thwe Zin also revealed a similar discussion of her work as that of Raymond. Raymond and Thwe Zin had done a lot of work together at a local organization in Yangon.   When we met with Thwe Zin in Yangon late in July, she had spent the last five years running the volunteer organization discussed above.   When asked how she would label her work, she said "these are voluntary activities for the community", (Thwe Zin, interview, July 25, 2014). When asked if she labeled her work human rights work, she said, "I am not sure, I know that I am doing what I need to do as a contribution for my community" (Thwe Zin, interview, July 25, 2014).

While up north in Pin Oo Lwin, our interview with Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw resulted in a similar discussion around the importance of their volunteer work. When asked if they viewed their work and the work of the organization as human rights work, Kyaw Kyaw shared a very similar response to Raymond. He stated, "No, human rights is political and fighting with the government. Here all we do is provide a need that doesn't discriminate against gender or religion" (Kyaw Kyaw, interview, July 9, 2014). When asked about specific services that the organization supplied, they shared about organizing and helping people to have a dignified death without the costs. Pho Zin Oo added that "we don't fight with the government, we just help provide services that our government doesn't have the ability to provide" (Pho Zin, Oo, interview, July 9, 2014).

It was interesting that Kyaw Kyaw did not connect the notion of discrimination to human rights work. This was a connection that Tara Didi made quickly. When Mon

Law questioned Tara about how she would label her work, she responded that it was "women's work" (Tara Didi, interview, July 11, 2014). When Mon Law said do you consider that human rights work, she wasn't sure at first. Mon Law not only translated the word human rights but also then gave a brief definition as "rights all human beings have to live in dignity" (Mon Law, interview with Tara Didi, July 11, 2014) and Tara said "yes, well this work is women's rights so therefore I could say that it is human rights as women are human" (Tara Didi, interview, July 11, 2014).

Ashin Min, the Chin monk, living in a small rural village, was the interview where the clearest use of human rights came through. Ashin Min had returned back to his village in 2011 after living abroad from 2000-2011. When asked if he considered his work, human rights work, he said, "most definitely! Helping the villagers better their life is important and more so, making sure that we have the right to participate in government and that the government doesn't take advantage of us is my goal" (Ashin Min, interview, July 22, 2014). He connected this back to his work with the villagers petitioning to get their signatures back. The center was also a place where people would come to participate in village life. He was also very clear to connect his work in the library and the preschool to human rights. "The right to an education is such a basic dignity, it is very important to provide this" (Ashin Min, interview, July 22, 2014).

Another theme that came up from the interviews and the dialogues was how the participants' spoke about the work they were doing. The research team noticed a stark difference between the discussions around those who were doing projects and those that were doing work as a job. Nora Tha, had been working in large INGOs since the start of her career. She had worked on a number of projects, around HIV/ AIDS awareness,

Human Rights Education (however, was not called Human Rights Education, but dignity education) and health and emergency response work. When asked how she labeled her work, she stated, "these were my jobs, and they are what I am trained to do"(Nora Tha, Skype interview, August 10, 2014).   The conversation with Thin Thin Tun was very similar. She spoke about the various work settings she has been in, but did not speak very much about her time in the Delta. When asked what kind of work she does, Thin Thin said, " I work for organizations that do human rights work and democracy work" (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 27, 2014).   These both contradicted a bit to what Raymond has stated in our initial dialogues, where he didn't believe he was doing human rights work, "because these are my jobs, I get paid to do them, instead of risking my life to fight for what I believe in" (Raymond, researcher team dialogue, June 24, 2014).

Vishnu Dai has been involved in what he labeled "community work" since returning to Myanmar from Nepal 15 years ago. Vishnu has been involved in a wide variety of programs, and it was fascinating to hear his name pop up in other spaces throughout the trip. Within the Gurkha community in Myanmar, his work is widespread and well known.   In the interview, he specifically focused on a Nepali Foundation in Myanmar, which provides scholarships to attend all levels of education. The organization also supports 1000 young children from low-income families to pay their school fees.   The way he described his work rotated between community work, and at times social and cultural work.   Vishnu connected to what Raymond spoke about as doing this work as a part of who he is, but did not use the term human rights. When asked about how he would describe his work, he stated that "I am a community worker,

and at times a social and cultural worker, I do this for my community"(Vishnu, interview, June 28, 2014).

Ram Prashad, the teacher at the local non-profit school in Shan state, shared Vishnu's dedication to his work at the school. When asked how he labeled his work to the school, he shared "you must give back to the organization. It is just what we do" (Ram Prashad, interview, July 13, 2014). Mon Law wrote in his reflection on the interview that

it is common for students of the school to remain after they graduate to offer their services. Then as new graduates need work, the teachers will move on to other communities so that a new job can be provided to the students. Many graduates will continue to be in service to the Gurkha community by teaching Nepali language classes in the small villages around the country (Mon Law, journal entry, July 15, 2014).

Sin Mya Thwe, a board member at the local non-profit in Pin Oo Lwin shared very similar views to Vishnu and Ram Prashad. She had spent a lot of her time working in the NGO community, however, at the time of the interview, she was just a volunteer board member. When asked how she labeled her work, she said that she was

dedicated to something so needed, the need to fight discrimination. When the humanitarian aid sets standards the government can't provide, the society looks to ways to provide for themselves. That is what I am helping to do, provide a need that many poor people have and so I don't want them to not be able to access such an important thing (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014).

One final theme that came up a lot in our research team dialogues was around the relationship between those who had access to large international organizations and opportunities to study abroad and how that impacted the work that they did and the relationships they had to a discourse on human rights. It was apparent that those who had access to the discourse did have more opportunities for employment in some of the larger institutions.

Thin Thin Tun really focused on this in her discussion of those who she worked with. She shared about how much experience she had, for example,

> I have worked with Civil Society in Burma for years, prior to going to Thailand, and so much of what I did in the Delta and with other smaller organizations was very important, however, I don't have a level of English as that of my wealthier, more educated and younger colleagues who get to be the bosses (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 26, 2014).

She shared about a colleague that had gone abroad to study both undergraduate and a Masters and had a very high level of English and was immediately given a management position.

Nora Tha shared a bit of a different dialogue. She really focused on how the majority of the work she did around social change was always with a large international organization. Nora had a very lengthy resume of the work she had been involved with. She worked for two very large INGOs, both were some of the only INGOs to be working in Myanmar under the military regime for a very long time. In both organizations, she was able to work training local people on projects around education, health and social

welfare. Many of these projects had to be very careful with the government, and yet it was meaningful work. She shared that

> my first organization was one of the first to be working in Myanmar since the 1960s, and so while we had to be careful, we also had a lot of protection, even though, we couldn't say terms like human rights openly, we could do the work and have discussions within our organization. We had a holistic approach and maybe the international connection influenced that" (Nora Tha, interview, August 10, 2014).

This is where Raymond brought back his own understanding of human rights work into our reflections. Raymond felt that this protection from the large INGO world limited the role activists could play. In our reflections, he was still hesitant to say that this was indeed human rights work. He, himself, was doing this work, but it was still a job and he had this protection from the large international organization. He constantly raised questions about those who were in exile, who had risked their life, and who were incarcerated. "Aren't these the true activists? They are underground and are forced to be underground to make the change that we need" (Saw Raymond, journal entry, July 26 2014).

As the narratives shared from the research participants showed, there was not a unified process to how local activists engage in human rights discourse. It was varied and nuanced, and this is a theme we will continue to witness.

Cross-Cultural Interactions in Human Rights Work

The second question that the research team hoped to explore was that of how interactions take place across cultural backgrounds and national origin. We wanted to

understand what the relationships looked like in a transnational activist setting from the perspective of those inside and from Myanmar. The interview questions that specifically addressed this were as follows:

1) Have you ever worked with foreign-born people on a project related to the work you are speaking about?
2) What was that experience like?

Again, as a team, we constantly noticed how the various themes arose around each research question and will share the responses in the same vein.

The interview with Ashin Min was the only interview set up through an outsider to the research project. Ashin Min was already quite well known with activists from abroad. Ashin Min started the interview sharing his life story. He was heavily involved in the democracy movement until 2000 when he had to flee. He first went to Thailand where he helped to build a library for the refugee communities living along the border and then made his way to Germany. In Germany, he was very involved in the democracy movement and the exiled democracy leadership. He organized peace marches in a number of major cities both in the United States and Western Europe and the sole purpose of these were to highlight the human rights conditions of those living in Myanmar.   He shared that "the peace marches were a way from me to keep the situation at home highlighted and I was able to use the language of human rights to do so. I also had the connections and support to help highlight my work" (Ashin Min, interview, July 22, 2014).

The idea of human rights work as a way of life was really highlighted in the way the participants discussed the relationships that they had and what those relationships looked like. Out of the nine research participants, three had relationships with

Westerners, and all of these relationships were based around their working relationships in an employment situation. Nora Tha, Thin Thin Tun and Sin Mya Thwe all worked in international non-governmental organizations and this was where foreign staff were most likely to work. They were the only three participants that had in-depth relationships with Westerners and all three of those were because they worked in large INGOs and so spoke of their relationships through their jobs. Thin Thin Tun and Nora Tha both had very intensive relationships in a variety of jobs they had.

It was an interesting contrast in hearing about the work of Thin Thin, Nora and Sin Mya with that of Vishnu. Vishnu was constantly traveling all around the country to work with the Gurkha community. He also remained deeply connected to the Nepalese community where he worked while he lived in Nepal. In the spring of 2015, there was a large earthquake in Nepal. Vishnu was able to organize a huge fundraising campaign with the Gurkha community and sent money and supplies to Nepal. His work fundraised over $100,000 to bring to relief work in Nepal. He also was able to visit Nepal and organized a small team of Burmese, other ethnic minorities including Gurkha that visited Nepal and worked on earthquake relief in some of the most affected villages. Vishnu believed that "it is so important that our community here share and model how we are able to come together to support. This is what the other communities can learn from us" (Vishnu Dai, Skype interview, June 22, 2015). The first time we met, he shared that when a community is self-reliant, it can offer a model for others. He stated

> I want to see self-motivation for the Nepali community here in Myanmar, and that
> we can be self-reliant. When we start with our own community, and take care of
> each other, then we can go to the government and show our work, both as a

claimer of our place here and as a model for future work" (Vishnu Dai, interview, June, 28, 2014).

As this notion of self-reliance within the community was so strong, Vishnu did not believe that there was a strong need for international support and did not have much history working with foreigners from the West, only with the Nepali community in Nepal. His connection was also quite different, as it was not one based on work but on his own relationships in his own community.

When discussing the cross-cultural and transnational interactions, the notion of human rights as reinforcing the global power structure was one that really came up again and again, both with the research participants and also within our own research group reflections. Saw Raymond was constantly sharing his own experiences and was able to pull out a lot from the interview notes. One particular story that stuck with us all was when Raymond shared about a specific interaction he had at work.

I really felt that there was disdain for me as a local, from my managers and my coworkers. One day, I had left the office and my manager chased me out of the office to make sure that I didn't take my laptop home, how absurd is that? Would that ever happen with a Westerner?" (Saw Raymond, research team dialogue, June 27, 2014).

He also shared how many of his coworkers would question why he was a manager. "My expat coworkers complained to my boss once telling him that I lacked the necessary management skills without providing any details" (Saw Raymond, researcher team dialogue, July 28, 2014).

Thin Thin Tun's narratives around her expatriate coworkers were very consistent with the narrative Saw Raymond shared. She addressed themes of both language and nationality and how both of those created divisions within her organization. She shared about working for one organization, and all of her supervisors were predominantly from the West with a few from India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. She, again, raised points about the language distinction, when she shared that, "the only Asians who are in positions of management come from English speaking countries" (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 26, 2014). Thin Thin also shared about the working dynamics of her organization.

> The salaries and the lifestyles were set up to be so different from us, the local staff. There were four office cars and yet only the foreigners could use them, it was so difficult for local staff. I had a boss who needed help to find housing, and the demands were that they meet European standards. I can understand that is what he was used to but $4500 for rent when my salary was less than $1000. This creates an unequal and uncomfortable situation (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 26, 2014).

At one point later in the interview, Thin Thin stated, "sometimes I just think human rights is a term created to give white people a job here in Asia" (Thin Thin Tun, interview, July 26, 2014).

Nora shared many of the similar experiences of Raymond and Thin Thin. She shared about the difficulty the foreign staff had to work with the local government and about the constant miscommunications.

Foreigners had a hard time to work with the local government. There was a lot of miscommunications around the way we did things. They just didn't understand and also wanted the government to work with them on their demands. There was a lot of tensions between those of us on the ground and the directors around how to work with the government. Sometimes you just have to know how to get around things, but the foreign staff weren't willing to do that sometimes (Nora Tha, interview, August 10, 2014).

Another aspect that arose around the interviews was a fear of sharing information with those who are not local. Mon Law and I, when visiting the non-profit in the Pin Oo Lwin office, experienced resistance at the idea of a formal interview. Pho Zin Oo questioned why we wanted to know about their work. He shared, "we just provide services here, we are not protesting or doing anything special, just helping the local people" (Pho Zin Oo, interview, July 9, 2014). Mon Law reflected on this later, stating, "it was as if their work wasn't important, or as if we couldn't possibly think the work was important. What was it that made them think we wouldn't want to hear about it?" (Mon Law, journal, July 10, 2014).

Sin Mya Thwe also spoke to this fear when she asked exactly what the purpose of the interview was for. She shared, "people come to Burma and look for controversy to write about. I have given interviews in other jobs and often times it was just for a headline, not at all about the work" (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014). Sin Mya wanted to be sure that what she shared was going to be properly presented, " I am very happy to share this amazing work, as I think it can offer a lot for people to hear that we can take care of ourselves" (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014).

We witnessed that the majority of the cross-cultural work took place in employment settings and that many of these settings actually replicated a global power structure based on nationality and access to English language.

What Solidarity Looks Like on the Ground

One of the final research questions was one that was a very important from my perspective in this research project. This question asked the participants what they would like to see in terms of partnerships and working relationships across national boundaries. It was moving beyond what is, to the imagination of what could be, the ideal. The specific interview questions that spoke to this were:

1) How could those coming from abroad support the work you are doing?
2) How can we, in this specific research team, further support the work you are doing?

These were the moments where the research participants smiled and thought of the possibilities. There was one particular moment with Thwe Zin, where we both laughed and we caught ourselves getting all excited about the ideas of partnership. Again, the data is shared under the three themes, and we focused on how the research fit both as the theme itself or as a challenge to it.

There were very few requests out of all the research participants that focused on a discussion of human rights. Ashin Min actually wanted more literature on specific human rights treaties and books on human rights. He wanted direct resources to help his community understand their rights. " I want to be able to add to my library a knowledge that is hard to get in Burma, Human Rights pamphlets and books would be a great resource, especially if they were accompanied by English teachers! " (Ashin Min,

interview, July 22, 2014).   He also stressed that he would love to host volunteers who would like to teach English through human rights.

Tara Didi also spoke about human rights directly when answering what she could benefit from out of a transnational partnership. She shared that she "would like help to establish women's rights more in the dialogue. Maybe there are tools we could use for our women's empowerment that could be more encouragement to women" (Tara Didi, interview, July 11, 2014). Tara and Ashin Min spoke to requests that included knowledge about human rights.

The majority of the research participants really shared a lot of excitement at this question, and it really had to do with a life outlook and dedication to doing community work. Almost all the research participants called on the need to volunteer with local communities, and how important it was to give back. Thwe Zin stated

> here in Myanmar, we have a long history of volunteerism.   It is part of our
> culture and it is deeply embedded. I know that is not what you think of when you
> here about our country, but it is because we do it unpublicized. We have had
> volunteer networks, literacy campaigns that last over 25 years and connect to
> other volunteer networks abroad. This is what we need to keep doing! And
> maybe people need to know about this (Thwe Zin, interview, July 25, 2014).

Tara Didi demonstrated this legacy of community involvement in her own work. She shared that "I am very proud of the work that I do, and happy and excited to share it, there is just so much to share" (Tara Didi, interview, July 11, 2014). Kyaw Kyaw had a similar response when talking about his volunteer work and others who are involved. He shared

it is important to volunteer, to give back if you can, (local non-profit name) has a big database of all the people we can call on to help, either donate blood, drive or just offer support in the office. This is important for people to know. We can provide for each other (Kyaw Kyaw, interview, July 9, 2014).

There was a definite theme around a notion of giving back. Ram Prashad shared that "you have to give back to those organizations that have helped you. That is why I am here." (Ram Prashad, interview, July 13, 2014).   This actually inspired both Mon Law and his brothers to organize donations within their family to purchase new yoga mats for the school. Both stressed that this hit home for them as well. Mon Law reflected, " I was reminded of my own responsibility and to bring supplies every time I come, this is what I can do" (Mon Law, research team dialogue, July 28, 2014).   This reflection also sparked discussion in one of our research team dialogues. I raised the point about giving money, and both Mon Law and Raymond responded, "sometimes that is what we can do" (Raymond, research team dialogue, July 28, 2014). Mon Law added that, "there are ways we can give that don't have to be weird, they can just be about giving because we can" (Mon Law, research team dialogue, July 28, 2014).

It was interesting to see the two ways in which the participants called for collaboration with the international community. Some would call for ways to access the international community, and others wanted to call the international community in, to understand more and gain a deeper understanding. They wanted the international community to access more of the knowledge around Myanmar. For example, Sin Mya Thwe had a very specific request. She shared how her organization "is doing find on our own, we raise our own funds with our volunteer base and that is where we want to stay".

She went on to request, "however, we could use some literature in English to share our work as a model" (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014). This was something that we as a research team were able to help with.

This notion of sharing work also came up with Vishnu's request. His was not a specific request but spoke about a project that he was deeply committed to. Vishnu wanted to put together a history book on the Gurkha community in Myanmar.

> We have a strong history of self-motivation and self-reliance as a community, and it is important to start with our community to know this history, and then we need to share it. We can offer examples to the Burmese community of our work and even to the West. This can be a model of how we have integrated into Myanmar (Vishnu Ji, interview, June 28, 2014).

Nora Tha's discussion was more around calling the international community in, to understand the local culture and context more if they want to work in Myanmar. When asked about what solidarity would look like for her, she shared three main points.

> It always depends on the outsider of course, as there are different regions of the world and they come with different cultures and issues, however, all of my experience points to some basic things that would be good. Learn about the local culture first, know how the community wants the development of their community to be, try and understand the people and their culture, and do not underestimate the local people. They may not align with the international standards, so you should adjust them. Also, look at both sides, the United States has always been against our government, but they aren't always the bad guys, narrow the gap and work with both (Nora Tha, interview, August 10, 2014).

We see this theme of an understanding of local practices, cultures and abilities as a key one to engage in across cultures and national borders. The research participants called for access and connections to the international community and also called the international community in, which means learning about the community they are working with.

The Role of Participatory Action Research

Finally, the research called on a reflection of what PAR had to offer this process. How did PAR allow us to deepen our understandings of what we as a research team where engaging in? What can PAR offer to cross-cultural work and to work on the discourse of human rights? Again, the data will be shared under the three consistent themes.

The notion of what human rights actually are constantly came up, possibly more in the research team reflections than in the actual interviews. Raymond and I were able to reflect on our own education in Thailand and so we were able to see human rights work as more than just the democracy movement, however, it was still a process for Raymond as he shared in one of his reflections.

> I know that human rights is also about the giving resources, education, and health and housing and dignity, however, I keep wanting to go back to those who fight for democracy as being the true human rights activists. To see myself as one, as a worker or teacher or as someone who strives for access to legal aid, just feels off. I am not sure if I will change the way I label myself, but I did feel inspired to hear from my fellow citizens. Maybe I will look around and see activists everywhere now (Saw Raymond, journal, July 25, 2014).

One interesting dialogue that took place with the research team was around our

discussion of the work of Pho Zin Oo, Kyaw Kyaw and Sin Mya Thwe. The organization

they were involved with provided free funeral services. I believed that to have access to

a funeral service connected to the human dignity. However, Mon Law actually pointed

out that this work was supporting the right of non-discrimination. I did not understand

and he shared,

> people who benefit financially off death are seen as very bad people. Often times,
>
> those jobs are seen as the last resort or maybe given to someone who will then be
>
> pushed aside by the society. The organization providing free services, and access
>
> to transportation to the hospital, provides a direct service to the person but also
>
> helps to diminish discrimination against those that might have to do this work
>
> (Mon Law, research team dialogue, July 28, 2014).

Mon Law was quick to share this aspect of how their work connected to a deep

understanding of discrimination. This is an area that I, had I been the lone researcher,

would have quickly overlooked. I did not have a deep enough understanding of

unspoken cultural practices. In my own reflection on the interview, I wrote

> Wow, I am so excited to hear about this work of providing health and funeral
>
> services. It really speaks to the implementation of social and economic rights in a
>
> way that I had not previously thought of. Here we do have a lot of organizations
>
> that advocate for access to health services, yet I never even think of that as human
>
> rights organization, within the context of the United States and I have really never
>
> thought of the process of death either (Amy Argenal, journal, July 10, 2014).

In this reflection, the notion of discrimination never arose, until the research team came together to reflect on this interview.

This chapter started with a brief story of involvement of Mon Law's family. It was shared because it demonstrated what can take place when knowledge production happens in a community space. The fact that the community around Mon Law was so willing and excited to participate offers us a lot around the role of communities creating and defining their narratives. Mon Law shared the following,

> To be able to hear the stories of my sister and conduct a formal interview about her work, gave something back to her work. I was hearing about something I had not really heard before and now am able to share it with others. She was able to see me doing something that is important as well as my other siblings and they also believed it was important. To share with someone from outside, as a way to learn about our culture and practices has meaning (Mon Law, journal, July 15, 2014).

Raymond also shared a very similar reflection after our interview with Thwe Zin. During the interview, Thwe and myself got a bit carried away in how much our work aligned. We were laughing and thinking about all the ways that we could connect the young people that we worked with. Raymond wrote about how this made him feel.

> To see two friends from different countries so excited about community work was really moving. I knew that Amy and Thwe Zin would share ideas but to be so passionate about it, made me really happy. It also reminded me of how much my country has to offer. I know we have lots of bad things too, but that is not the

only thing we have. Amy is learning, she is learning from this process and can

share this as well (Saw Raymond, journal, July 25, 2014).

PAR as a research methodology allowed for multiple narratives to enter into the

discussion. It held the outside researcher, myself, accountable to critique on my own

interpretations. This is especially important, as one of our research goals was to offer

local narratives. In my own interpretation of the local narratives, I could unconsciously

continue to reinforce a normative understanding of human rights. With two local co-

researchers, I was held accountable to their interpretations and deeper understandings of

the local context.

A specific example of where this arose was around the creation of our research

participant list. As briefly mentioned above, while Saw Raymond wasn't sure exactly

who he would label as a human rights activist, he and Mon Law both had a very clear

direction of who we should interview. This list would have looked very different if I had

drafted it on my own.

The majority of the research participants on my list included groups or

organizations I have read about prior to visiting Myanmar. Saw Raymond pointed this

out during our research team meeting. "The three groups you have on your list, are well-

known to the international community, why do you think that this? Don't we want to

hear more from the groups and the people, you don't know about?" (Saw Raymond,

research team dialogue, June 27, 2014).

This level of deeper understanding also played out in the dynamics of the

interviews. As I noted above, the only interview that was conducted alone was the

interview with Sin Mya Thwe. The setting was much more formal then rest of the interviews and I questioned if it impacted what was shared.

> Today's interview with Sin Mya Thwe was the one space where I really felt the role of researcher versus researched. It was conducted in a large, more formal room, and the process was very much of reading off the list of questions and allowing her to respond. There wasn't the same small conversation and loose dialogue that existed. I wonder if our meeting with Vishnu and Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw had more to do with language or familiarity? (Amy Argenal, journal entry, July 11, 2014).

Another space that PAR allowed for a challenge to the global power structure was in the adaption of the action component. Saw Raymond and I were able to create a unit on human rights work inside Myanmar where we incorporated the research data into the unit. We were then able to co-teach this lesson. Co-facilitating a lesson on local human rights practices with Saw Raymond, allowed for the team to share the narratives with the community. Providing those examples allowed for a space to reimagine what the current narrative was around human rights work. Saw Raymond reflected on that after

> I watched my students ask questions, pay attention; they stopped the selfies for a moment because we were talking about things that are relevant to all of us. In the past I just teach the treaties, and if I was feeling really brave, maybe talk about the NLD (National League for Democracy). Now though, I wasn't teaching risky language and it was things that our community was doing. That has meaning for me and the students (Saw Raymond, journal, July 30, 2014).

The idea of local knowledge remaining with the community was also something that Mon Law reflected on in our one of our final discussions. Mon Law shared

> it means so much to me that my sisters and brothers heard the story of the local
>
> school. It also was so great to hear of my sister's work because I shared
>
> that with my brothers and it is something that we can share with our younger
>
> nieces and nephews. It is like is has now become family knowledge, something
>
> that we can hold on to (Mon Law, research team dialogue, July 30, 2014).

All three of us were able to share a take-away from the research and what we hope to continue to do. In our final research team dialogue, we each shared what we hoped to continue, where there was still room for work and how we can do that. Mon Law stated, " I want to make sure the school is being supported and hopefully my family will be my motivation now. Actually, they may continue to work while I am gone" (Mon Law, research team dialogue, July 30, 2014). Saw Raymond wanted to continue to work with his students, "there is a part of me that is ready to give up the night job of teaching but now I think this important to share" (Saw Raymond, research team dialogue, July 30, 2014). I shared how excited I was to hear all of the work, and I hope that I can be inspired when I return home, I hope to stay connected and continually ask how I can support, versus invent projects" (author, research team dialogue, July 30, 2014).

Research Findings Summary

This chapter has presented a wide range of work, some of them by individuals involved with large international non-governmental organizations, like that of Thin Thin and Nora, and some in smaller more local based organizations like that of Pho Zin Oo, Kyaw Kyaw, Ram Prashad and Sin Mya Thwe, and some very local led initiatives like

those led by Thwe Zin, Tara, and Ashin Min. Some of the work shared represented work around providing direct resources, around providing awareness and educational trainings, around cultural practices and the defense of language, and also around democratic participation. The participants varied in how they described their work and also in the tactics of how they worked with local communities. The research findings were diverse and spread across religion, ethnicity, language and geography. The three themes helped to organize the data and the following chapter will discuss the connections these individuals had both with each other and with the theory around these narratives.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to gather narratives from local community activists inside Myanmar to highlight the work they are doing, discuss how they labeled their work and what that work had in relationships to those coming from outside the country. The research team wanted to understand how the participants were using the discourse of human rights, if at all, and if relationships with those coming from outside, were impacting this. I share a brief story below as it highlights one of the themes that arose in the research.

On an evening flight home from an academic conference, I was sitting next to a man, who asked me, about my travels, starting a conversation about my research and human rights work. I shared my work with community workers in Myanmar and their human rights work. The first thing he said to me was, "that is human rights work?, I thought human rights work was about protesting and fighting for the right to vote". I looked at him and said, "exactly what many of the community workers in Myanmar said as well". He responded, " I think about 90% of Americans would say the same thing too". This conversation got me thinking about the larger questions framing this study. Where did this narrative around human rights come from? The assumption around human rights work as predominantly an act of protest is certainly something that arose from our conversations in Myanmar as well. Why is that we have nine international treaties explicitly laying out human rights, codified human rights, international laws carved in treaties and yet the only human rights many people think of are the civil and political rights?

The research highlights nine narratives from local activists participating in a variety of community-based projects. A large percentage of the participants did not specifically label their work human rights work. All of the research participants were working on some level of fulfilling social, cultural, economic and political rights, however, the language to describe that work, rarely touched on human rights discourse. Also, those that did use a human rights discourse had more extensive relationships to Westerners, either having lived in the West or through working relationships in their places of employment. The narratives also shed light on the nature of the relationships between foreign-born human rights and development workers, and the research participants themselves.

Myanmar, in particular, had been under a military dictatorship for many years prior to this research project, and it could easily be argued that the educational system under the regime, did not allow for any nuanced understanding of human rights. Christina Fink (2009) writes that to live under a military rule, "survival depends on submitting to those in power" (p. 7). Were the community activists engaged in this research project "submitting to those in power"? They were engaging in the work every day and had been for years despite the military government, it was not their actions that were silenced, nor was it an understanding of human rights as civil and political rights. If it isn't the silence due to the years of a military government as Fink (2009) would argue, what is the reason for this disconnect from a general human rights discourse and more specifically a holistic understanding of human rights? Is it a lack of understanding or an intentional resistance around the discourse? Has a global power structure infringed on the "Third World" from truly developing their own understanding around human rights? The

gentleman on the plane had almost the exact response, word for word as Kyaw Kyaw, "human rights work is political and fighting with the government". What happens if this is the face of human rights work? What powerful language gets removed or left out? What history and narratives get overlooked? There is a long and powerful history of people in the global south fighting for strong protection of economic, social and cultural rights (Prashad, 2007), yet where is that narrative in human rights discourse?

This chapter will engage in a discussion on how narratives from Myanmar either contested or reinforced an understanding of human rights as civil and political rights. It will also highlight, what type of relationships exist around human rights work and what these relationships can tell us about how transnational activism is taking place from the perspective of local activists from Myanmar. Following that, this chapter will discuss implications for this work both in fields of global studies and human rights programs. Finally, this research will offer recommendations on future projects to continue to challenge notions of the "victimized global south" to one of hope and solidarity. The chapter will end with some concluding thoughts on the research project.

Discussion

As introduced in chapter four, three themes arose from the narratives of the research participants. These themes speak to the research questions in different ways, and at times contradicted each other. This section will introduce the three themes, engage in a discussion around how the data connected with each theme, offer an analysis of each theme through the lens of human rights discourse, and infuse further analysis to engage the reader in pushing the discourse through a post-colonial and third world feminist critique.

Human rights as civil and political rights

One of the most contested parts of the research was the discussion around what could be labeled as human rights work. As discussed in Chapter IV, even the research team was not all on board with the same use of the term. I really believed in a large umbrella term for people working on improving the life dignity for others in their community. However, Saw Raymond pushed back both in a reflective way and with the group. His vision of an activist involved someone on the front lines. This image was reinforced many times with both Kyaw Kyaw and Pho Zin Oo and also with Thwe Zin. They did not use a discourse around human rights at all and when directly asked, their only connection to human rights was an idea that it was protesting against the military regime. Human rights was political activism according to many of the research participants while community and social work was the way many of the participants spoke to the research team's understanding of human rights as improving the life dignity for those in their community. Traditional human rights discourse might argue that this is because the authoritarian nature of the military regime and the complete suppression of civil and political rights. Fink (2009) makes this exact argument, "successive regimes have used violence and a climate of insecurity to instill fear and political passivity in the people they have ruled" (p. 4). While this can be the case, not all of the participants were completely silent, nor were any of the participants silent when it came to their work and action. Also, while the military regime, had been very repressive towards any sort of political dissidence, what about social, economic and cultural rights?

A more critical human rights perspective can help us understand this through the notion of how the West privileges civil and political rights. Howard (1995) explains this challenge as

> the continued unwillingness of some liberals to accept the idea of economic rights. Some Western liberal thinkers reject the principle of economic rights as irrelevant and idealistic: Only civil and political rights are considered true human rights (p.2).

 Howard (1995) goes on to explain how a disregard for the poor in the United States has pushed the denial of economic rights and that the human rights discourse has really become "a discourse of the privileged, of relatively well-off members of social categories that experience discrimination" (p. 10). Bob (2005) expands on how this can impact the third world by the funding that the West gives to international human rights work.

> On the supply side of this market are a small number of influential NGOs with no reason to choose one desperate movement over another. On the demand side are myriad local groups for whom international linkages hold the prospect of new resources and great clout in their domestic conflicts. This disparity in need creates an unequal power relationship. As a result, movements must often alter key characteristics to meet the expectations of patrons (p. 5).

Ashin Min spoke to this directly when he described how his peace marches were utilizing a language that he knew would connect to an international community in order to gain attention to the issues facing Myanmar.

Critical human rights scholars are recognizing the power imbalance, however are still analyzing the situation from the vantage point of the West. Post-colonial and third

world feminists allow our understanding of this to move from the vantage point of the

West, to those of the narratives of the local activists. One of Said's (1993) three themes

of "decolonizing cultural resistance" speaks directly to an idea of resistance as an

"alternative way of conceiving human history" (p. 97). Understanding the narratives of

those who are using the human rights discourse, like Thin Thin, Nora and Ashin Min,

those willing to learn more like Tara, or rejecting their work connecting to human rights,

like Vishnu, Kyaw Kyaw and Pho Zin Oo, allows us to see the agency each individual

has in choosing the ways and tactics that will best advance the work they are doing.

When Sin Mya Thwe states, " we are doing fine on our own", it can be interpreted as a

rejection of an imposed framework, that some local activists are not willing to buy into.

When Pho Zin Oo states, "we are not out there fighting against the government", he is

rejecting an imposed idea. Even when Ashin Min chooses to use human rights discourse,

he is acting on agency which comes out of the direct need for his own community, not

out of an "attempt to get on with their own lives as best they can while indulging in the

dream that perhaps one day the United States or the United Nations will swoop in and

remove the regime for them" (Fink, 2009, p. 3). When we refocus the lens to the

narrative of the local activists, we are pushing for a more nuanced understanding of what

human rights work looks like and what defending the human dignity of communities look

like.

Human rights work as a way of life

It is interesting to see the wide range of ways people engage in human rights

work. Nora and Thin Thin were the only two involved in large international

organizations, and they were also, with the exception of Ashin Min, the only participants

that really utilized human rights discourse. All of the research participants were engaging in a wide variety of human rights work according to rights discussed under the UDHR, including access to education, health care, the right to cultural celebrations, ceremonies around death and citizenship. However, apart from Ashin Min, only Nora Tha and Thin Thin Tun invoked their work as human rights work. This was a point of contention for Saw Raymond. He really struggled with a job being something that could be considered human rights practice. This tension was a place of resistance for him, and that tension stemmed from the connection to large international organizations. For Saw Raymond, it was a trickle down way to bring reform to the country. It was acting upon Fink's (2009) assumption above that people are just waiting for the international community to come in and rescue them. From a traditional human rights framework, this is what the work is about. Large international and non-governmental organizations implementing policies and putting pressure on 'bad' governments to implement human rights standards. Kennedy (2002) describes this as "the generation that built the human rights movement focused its attention on ways in which evil people in evil societies could be identified and restrained" (p. 125). And while Kennedy's work is critical and calls the question of "how good people, well-intentioned people in good societies, can go wrong, can entrench, support, the very things they have learned to denounce" (p. 125), it still leaves the activists themselves out of the discourse and also is not critical of "how" we label the "evil people in evil societies". This is where a post-colonial and third world feminist critique is crucial. It turns the question not on those from outside but back to those on the inside and highlights how they are challenging their local governments and societies. Said's (1993) third theme of "decolonizing cultural resistance" is what he calls a more

"integrative view of human community and human liberation" (p. 97). Recognizing that the research participants were doing this work as a part of their human liberation and that is also part of their survival. Vishnu, Ram Prashad and Ashin Min are providing educational opportunities to their communities because if they didn't, there are no other options. Pho Zin Oo, Kyaw Kyaw and Sin Mya Thwe recognized the need for access to health services and death ceremonies as something that the government couldn't provide but something they could. While it is important to lobby governments to provide these resources as a traditional human rights discourse pushes one to do (Meernik, Aloisi, Sowell, & Nichols, 2012), the participants recognized that they also have the means to work with the community to provide for themselves. This resists the notion that saving must take place from outside. The creative and dynamic ways the research participants were organizing to provide for their communities is a challenge to the notion that reform, and change must come from outside. It is also a challenge that the reform must only come from the government. Abu-Lughod (2002) raises a really important point about this when she writes "save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something" (p. 788). Again, by the participants creating their own community projects, outside of the realm of the international human rights community, they are, as Said (1993) states, imagining an "integrative human community and human liberation". They are also imagining a different way "of being saved to something". Again, it is the community demonstrating their agency to decide what needs exist and how to address them on locally decided terms.

There is one other point that must be raised around the notion of human rights work as a job instead of doing the work for survival. Thin Thin also raised the point of

how these jobs in large human rights and development organizations connected back to those who had access to them. These jobs created incomes and salaries for a new Western educated middle class. When Thin Thin commented that she believed that human rights was about creating jobs for white people, she connected back to an understanding that jobs are created to support a system. There are two problems that are important to highlight with this; the first is that when these jobs are created, they isolate those in these positions from understanding the local, community needs. Spivak (2003) claims that there is "a real epistemic discontinuity between Southern human rights advocates and those whom they protect" because this same Southern elite is "often educated in Western or Western style institutions (p. 174). The Sangtin writers alongside Richa Nagar (2006) highlighted a main problem of this in their work around community activism in India. They write that

> individuals who are far less informed than we are about the issues of communities we work among sometimes seize credit for our work on the strength of their English, and sometimes we are forced to accept their interpretations of our work that we disagree with (p. 5).

The second problem with this is that while a more educated class is lured into these positions, they are further disconnected from the needs of their community and are distracted away from the pressure they were putting on structural change. Smith (2007) writes about this discussing what took place in the United States with the Native American community, when they are diverted from their activism. She writes "the offer of well-paying jobs in the non-profit sector seduced many Native activists into diverting their energy from organizing to social service delivery and program development" (p. 7).

This really speaks to Kamat's framework of "development hegemony" (2002) in which the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006) explain

> NGOization as processes by which development ideology is reproduced in the resistant spaces of political action- through homogenization, through the politics of funding, through the articulation of universalizing discourses of the modern state (e.g. nationalism, secularism) in state apparatus, and in the histories, ideologies, and traditions of the intellectual class that is active in the grassroots (p. 146).

This made it powerful for local activists to state, "we are doing fine on our own" or "I am doing what I need to do for my community". Through a post-colonial and third world feminist critique, it is a sign of resistance to a dominant ideology. These narratives are examples of local community activists deciding what is needed in their communities and creating plans to provide it. They are not being subjected to decisions from outside organizations, and again, there is power in this resistance even if it may not be clearly defined as resistance.

Human rights and a global power structure

This theme arose most in the research when the participants would discuss their relationship with their foreign co-workers. Saw Raymond, Thin Thin and Nora Tha all spoke of a level of arrogance around the foreign activists they worked with. This immediately creates tensions around the idea of what human rights represent. During the research team meetings and dialogues, we all agreed that human rights language and values are a good thing. The values that they represent are things we all witnessed the participants striving for, however, when those coming from abroad to do "human rights

work", do not live those values, what residue is left? Saw Raymond and Thin Thin shared about both inequitable work environments and also outright disdain by their foreign coworkers for what they offered as local staff. Looking at this from a more traditional human rights framework, one would suggest that the personal relationships are not that important, that it is all about the law and the legal standards. Donnelly (2006) argues that human rights aren't just a good thing to strive for, or things that give good feelings, that they are a set of legal documents and that is how individuals should interact with them. However, most of the more critical human rights scholars do challenge this. Weissman (2004) specifically challenges this notion that the laws themselves are neutral, when she provides a historical account of how the law has been used as part of the colonial project, "the use of law as an instrument of domination has acted to discredit the moral rationale of legal precepts emanating from former colonial power and to compromise the human rights values with which the laws is associated" (p. 280). Merry's (2006) work on bringing human rights standards into local practices is also critical of how the standards are used in a local context and would critique a one way, top-down movement of rights into a community. These are important critiques and Nora's, Tara's and Ashin Min's negotiation of human rights discourse into their own practices exemplify Merry's (2006) understanding of the vernacular of rights. Bajaj's (2014) discussion of what she labels the "productive plasticity of rights discourse" would also align with this, in that human rights can and are being negotiated in how communities are using them. It is not a one-size-fits all narrative.

One thing, however, that is not discussed in this, is what happens when these negotiations are not on equal footing. When local activists are negotiating their use of the

human rights discourse, and they are doing so within the context of an international organization, the power imbalance can damage relationships, which can then also impact an association with the human rights community. For example, when Saw Raymond discussed the disdain that he felt from his co-workers around his position as a manager, he was clearly able to locate the racism imbedded in that. When Thin Thin, was responsible for finding her manager housing that cost more than three times her monthly salary, she found it hard to disconnect that from the same language around equality, non-discrimination and freedom that the same people were spouting in their human rights and development work. This is what a post-colonial and third world feminist critique offers. It goes back to understanding how this power structure connects to larger systems of inequity in our world. This directly connected to the work of Richa Naga and how many of the local level activists that worked for the larger NGO were treated by the management. The Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006) really highlighted this when they stated, "whenever our group sat down to imagine the future of Sangtin, the conversation returned again and again to inequalities of organizational rank and salaries" (p. 124). These ranks and salaries represent a power structure.

> Because we are rural women making two cents for our labor, people find it easy to make us a target of their sarcasm. But what goes uncommented on are frauds involving millions of rupees and the thick stacks of salaries that are distributed in the name of rural development and women's empowerment (p. 102).

Smith (2007) also highlighted the critique foundations and non-profits have received for the "explicit support of First World interests and free-market capitalism" (p. 13) and how

that plays out in the funding and support of local organizations. Often times, the work done by locals more connected to the community needs are not going to get that funding.

Spivak (2003) connects this hierarchy directly to colonialism. She writes "yet it is some of the best products of high colonialism, descendants of the colonial middle class, who become human rights advocates in the countries of the South" (p. 169). This was something both Raymond and Thin Thin experienced in their work place. It wasn't only about funding, but even what responsibilities were acceptable for them to have, again depending upon pre-conceived notions of what they could do. These narratives demonstrate that human rights are something lived and that they are also about the relationships. It isn't only about being able to access a right as something given on a piece of paper, but that how individuals engage in a dialogue on those rights really is impacted by the relationships that exist with those who have most been representing these rights, most often large international human rights organizations. It is the analysis of these relationships that postcolonial and third world feminist frameworks contribute to the previous work of critical human rights scholars. They refocus the discussion to the perspectives of those most affected and most engaged in the local community based work. In the next section, the research will address how and where this problem can be tackled.

Implications

Thinking about moving forward, one thing this study offers directly is the advice from those on the ground doing this work. Nora's suggestions and recommendations say a lot. As institutes of higher education continue to prepare students to live and work abroad, a shift in the discussion of those we are going to encounter when we go abroad

must happen. Nora's request is not a difficult one, she asked for simple cultural competency skills, know the local culture, do not underestimate the local people, and be willing to be flexible with the list of standards or human rights documents that you come in with. Every situation and every person is not going to interact with international law in the exact same way. The situation is not always one way or the other, but can be a dialogue.

The suggestions from the research participants speak to a notion of both "calling in" and "exploring out". The "exploring out" was represented by a willingness from the research participants to learn more about human rights discourse and possible partnerships that can support their work. Tara, Ashin Min and Sin Mya Thwe all expressed this idea in their thoughts on what solidarity could look like. The "calling in" was a request for those coming from abroad to learn more about the local culture and context. Vishnu, Nora and Thwe Zin all stressed this. They want those to know about their work, to understand that it is a history of a people, not silenced by an authoritarian government but one where community comes together in spite of it.

There are also two other important points to stress, one is that as much as the traditional human rights discourse stresses a static list of legal treaties, they can mean much more. They have a potential to be a list of ideals to strive for, and to encourage and inspire activists, however, to be that, they must be seen as negotiable, as willing to dialogue about, while recognizing an unequal power balance in access to these rights. Saw Raymond, Mon Law and I had evenings just thinking around how those using the discourse were different from those not, and what would be the benefits or not of using them. The second point is the need to re-imagine solidarity. There must be a challenge

to the notion of "saving" those we are going to work with, that the notion of "calling in" speaks to. The two sections below will discuss these two points.

Human rights as a dialogue

The importance of seeing human rights as a dialogue and a negotiating tool is very important. It is where Bajaj (2014) and Merry (2006) demonstrate how local activists and groups on the ground are using the human rights frameworks, however, what gets overlooked or dismissed, is how the international community can also use human rights as a dialogue around the work of those on the ground. For example, as Nora, Thwe Zin and Vishnu suggested, there is a lot to learn from the local context, the histories and the struggles of communities. A human rights framework in constant negotiation with local groups would put those stories and narratives at the center, before the standards even enter into the conversation. It allows for a new way to engage across borders, and it calls for a new way to engage in curriculum in the West; one that centers narratives not as victims but as active agents in their stories and their struggles. As Kennedy (2002) writes about human rights vocabulary is that it "is used in different ways by different people, and that the movement is split in ways that make blindness more acute in some places and times than others" (p. 103).   Given that the question is around vocabulary, we have to see the potential for what a human rights vocabulary can offer. It can be used as a framework to understand one's own situation, but does not need to be used as a constant broker between communities and the government. Bajaj's (2012) work on human rights education (HRE) in India is an excellent example of how this can take place in the context of schooling, however it can also be integrated into the practices of human rights work as well, not only in the classroom.

Re-imagining solidarity

Another important thing to take from this research is the notion that people do not want to be saved. If we are to engage in human rights work across borders in a way that does not reinforce an inequitable global power structure, especially one where large INGOs managers are making three-fifths times that salary of a local, on-the-ground activist, then these relationships cannot be built on notions of saving those "poor black and brown folk" over there. How can we incorporate the idea of "solidarity without bounds" that Kurasawa (2004) speaks of, one where the unique experiences are celebrated in a global community without dismissing national and local identities? At the same time, we must take into consideration that the global community does not see these experiences through the same lens. The citizens of Myanmar were not all there waiting for the U.S. and the U.N. to come in and save them. They were actually organizing in creative ways as they have been doing for a very long time, according to Thwe Zin. We have to remove the arrogance that Abu-Lughod (2002) writes about, because no one wants to be saved.

While many of my assumptions around the influence of Western workers was one of disrespect to the local workers, as shared by Raymond and Thin Thin, there was still a desire from many of the participants to collaborate with international workers. Ashin Min would love to have human rights students from universities in the West come and work with his villagers, and possibly teach English through a lens of human rights education. Tara would love to have more information on human rights as it relates to women's rights so that she can add that to her work. There is a desire by all the research participants to engage across borders in a variety of ways, even at times financial support,

however, all the participants wanted to their stories to be heard and honored from their perspectives. As the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar shared about some of their work (2006), "solidarity is achieved through an active engagement with diversity rather than presumed from outside through constitution of groups defined homogeneously by neediness or powerlessness" (p. 141). The research participants were not calling for isolation, they are just asking for a new way to engage. In Howard's (1995) work on a common understanding of human rights, he defines community as a "group of individuals who have a sense of obligation toward one another. This obligation can be thicker or thinner, as one moves from smaller local communities to larger communities such as the city or nation" (pg. 4). It can be a very positive thing to engage in community across borders, it means that we are building on a sense of obligation toward one another. This research implies that this obligation should also be around understanding the histories and narratives of the places that are different from the places we call home.

What can it look like to reengage in solidarity built with love? Thwe Zin and I had a moment during the interview that Saw Raymond spoke to in one of his reflections, where we were sharing and laughing and getting excited about each other's work. Often times, Raymond, Mon Law and I would talk into the nights imagining the possibilities. People coming together in an exchange of ideas, and sharing hopes and aspirations is what this can look like.

Research as solidarity

Finally, we must also discuss what the research methodology offers this new understanding of solidarity. Participatory action research calls for a critical outlook in how one engages in the research. Through this project, there were two other co-

researchers who were there to constantly check my own understandings, biases and assumptions. Koirala-Azad (2009) writes specifically about this process of accountability as a place to push the research towards transformative action. She writes

> by choosing to do PAR, one has to commit to a larger research process, accountability to the participants and co-researchers, and to a process of critique that questions issues of power and representation in pursuit of transformative action based on consensus (p. 90).

We were able to reflect together as a group, and co-construct meanings. The PAR structure also allowed for critique and pushed my role as the researcher to be open for this. This critique also allowed our process to move into theorizing spaces. The Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006) write about how important this is to connect to larger processes.

> The thinking behind making this work public was based on the understanding that whenever we reflect deeply and collectively on a set of personal or structural issues, that reflection ceases to be a critique of a specific individual or organization. It becomes connected to all those social, economic, and political conditions and processes within which we are living (p. 12).

PAR allows for a process of reflection, and this reflection is very important when taking into account the notion of an outsider engaging in research with a community. My role in the research had to be open for critique by the co-researchers, the research participants and my own self-reflection. Feminist scholarship brought forth this notion of "reflexivity in research, a process of critical self awareness, reflexivity and openness to challenge" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 166), however, that does not mean that I can speak to

experiences in the same way the local co-researchers could. Including their participation, while still being aware of the power differentials was an important aspect to this research project. As Koirala-Azad (2009) writes "a commitment to the ideals of PAR, which include transparency, frank dialogue, reflection, and action, helps to relieve these tensions as accountability to and trust among co-researchers are established through the process of relationship building" (p. 94). Weissman's (2004) also called for human rights to be more critical, that the work needed to allow for "self-awareness and humility" and a "complexity of cultural terrain" (p. 333). It is, as Koirala-Azad writes, in the ideals of PAR that can allow for this to happen in human rights as well.

Mon Law and Raymond also held the research accountable to the local communities because they were the connection to ensuring the research and the knowledge obtained from the research remains with the local communities. This would have been a challenge for me as a sole researcher, due to language barriers, and location. While it was an important goal that the data gleaned from this research reach those coming into Myanmar, it is also important that the knowledge remain within as well. Raymond's curriculum that was developed through this project is one way. While as a research team, we were able to co-facilitate a class that incorporated much of the data from this research project; the unit and lesson plans remain with Saw Raymond. The knowledge remains with the local community. The participation of Mon Law's family in the project is another example of where the knowledge remains with the local community. PAR creates a structure for this to take place.

Recommendations

From the perspective of the research team, we came to the final conclusions that it is important to hear narratives of local community activists connected to a language of human rights. We assert that by offering the narrative of the "not-so-obvious" human rights activist, we offered a narrative to the discourse that is left out and that this lacking narrative is an important one to challenge unequal power structures that human rights organizations can often reinforce. However, stating that the research team, as a group came to this conclusion, we did not really address the question of what beneficial gains can come directly to the activist by using this label. Is it useful to have a large and fluid understanding of human rights or not? Does it matter that the research participants did not use the language of human rights, could they access a larger community if they did? Is it useful to have teachers, and health providers and volunteer workers see themselves as human rights workers? These are questions that we did not ask directly but are worth exploring in the future. We are stating that many of those interviewed did not label themselves human rights defenders because they had a very narrow understanding of what human rights is, however, we did not further investigate what Bob (2002) and Merry (2006) talk about as the connection to a larger community to support the work that they are doing.

Another area for future research is to continue to investigate the cross-border relationships that exist from the perspective of the foreign activist. Heron's (2007) work with white Canadian women who did development work on the African continent explored the notions of why the women went to work abroad. Bob's work looks at the funding and support of movements; however, neither are questioning how the foreign-

born activists would like to engage. Looking at the individual relationships from the perspective of the foreign born activist would be an excellent next stage in the research. Locating for indicators of solidarity and potentially other elements that are less oppressive from the foreign born activist perspective to accompany the narratives discussed here would greatly add to the research and continue to push the dialogue forward.

Conclusions

Engaging with local community activists in Myanmar alongside two co-researchers allowed this project to highlight narratives that are often overlooked or left out of the discourse on human rights practice. The voices and narratives that we hear in scholarly writings on human rights reinforce the notion of victims, as the discourse focuses on the violations or if we do happen to hear about activism, it will be as Bob discusses, those that most align with the West's values and motivations. Sharing narratives here of a participant list drafted by locals to a place, allowed for a sharing of the so-called silent activist, the ones that many of the studies on human rights in Myanmar left out.

Taking these narratives and honoring their work was an important goal in this project. However, it also must be accompanied by a critical understanding of how these narratives can actually impact the work of those abroad. While the role of PAR allows for our own self-transformation as co-researchers, we also have the responsibility to push for change within our own spheres of influence.

We also must speak to a notion of "solidarity from below" where everyday citizens cross into each other's work to hear stories and learn about each other. We must

re-think what it means to "be responsible for someone else", that is not about power over a community or control over that person. We must challenge the notion of saving someone else, and realize that it needs to be about saving us all.

Looking back on the process, I felt inspired and motivated by the work of the co-researchers and the research participants. They were neither "silenced" nor waiting for "salvation". They were using their agency every day to actively engage in social transformations within their communities. The human rights project must refocus itself to create space for the exchange of narratives if we are to engage in transnational activism based on solidarity and reciprocity. These are the narratives that we must be studying and reading about in human rights classrooms and curriculums.

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