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# Human Rights Narratives From Myanmar: Decolonial and Relational Approaches to Solidarity

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## Abstract

*Pulling from a participatory action research project with human rights activists in Myanmar, this article builds on post-colonial, decolonial and third world feminist theories (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahrouse, 2014; Mohanty, 2003; Mutua, 2001; Said, 1993; Weissman, 2004) around inherent power imbalances in international human rights work by highlighting voices often left out of the human rights discourse. This form of “speaking back” to dominant discourses offers a public pedagogy of human rights education. In this article, nine research participants offer narratives on their relationship with human rights discourses and discuss their practice. By looking at questions of how community activists from Myanmar engaged in a human rights discourse, the*

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*study offers nuanced understandings and critical analysis of how and why certain activists embrace or reject the use of human rights standards and practice. Based on these findings, the article offers suggestions for how Western human rights activists can engage in solidarity with local community agents in ways that do not reinforce narratives of victimization and salvation. Given the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, international solidarity and human rights work with the country are even more urgent; these efforts would do well to incorporate the voices and thoughts of local activists in order to be more responsible and effective.*

**Keywords:** Human Rights, Myanmar, Transnational activism, Decolonial human rights

**O**n February 1, 2021, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized power in Myanmar after almost ten years of civilian rule. Having spent time in Myanmar under the previous military regimes as a researcher and activist since 2011, I recognize the real threat and risk to activists who have made their work public over the past decade during the period of civilian rule. For those of us in the field of human rights and human rights education, it calls us to question the role we play and how solidarity efforts might be galvanized. How do we engage in international solidarity with resistance movements? What is the role of education in supporting the next generation of international human rights activists to engage in solidarity and transnational activism without recycling the power dynamics that have plagued human rights work in Myanmar for decades? What is the role of decolonial human rights approaches in transnational solidarity work? Drawing on research conducted with human rights activists on their work during the previous military regimes, this paper highlights narratives as a form of human rights public pedagogy from Myanmar that can help inform global discussions about the country and its current political turmoil.

This article explores the notion of building transnational solidarity across borders by examining relationships within the field of human rights activism inside of Myanmar, offering suggestions for scholars, practitioners, and activists ready to engage in transnational solidarity movements. Pulling

from a participatory action research (PAR) project with human rights activists in Myanmar, this article builds on post-colonial theories (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahrouse, 2014; Mohanty, 2003; Mutua, 2001; Said, 1993; Weissman, 2004) around inherent power imbalances in international human rights work by highlighting voices often left out of the human rights discourse. Using postcolonial frameworks, this article offers analysis of nine 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 analysis of how and why certain activists embrace or reject the use of human rights standards and practice. Based on these findings, the article offers suggestions for how Western 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 perspectives from local activists in Myanmar on building solidarity across borders in a way that focuses on nurturing local relationships based on trust and collaboration that make room for a constant examination of power dynamics. This is a dialogue that must take place in preparing the next generation of human rights activists and therefore, this is a call to educators to practice the 'soft skills' of building relationships across difference in an effort to challenge power imbalances. This is the work of decolonizing human rights and is the important first step to walk in solidarity with human rights activists in Myanmar struggling for democracy.

### **Decolonial Approaches to Human Rights**

In order to move beyond "decolonization as a mere metaphor" (Tuck & Yang, 2012), we must begin to explore the ways we live out the colonial project in our relationships, in our academic spaces, and in our research. Scholars have continuously highlighted the colonial legacies that exist in human rights work (Bob, 2005; Rieff, 2002; Spivak, 2003; Vinjamuri & Ron, 2013; Kennedy, 2002). 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). However, much of the research and scholarship around human rights is still focused with the human rights project as a structure, as an entity of international governance (Mutua, 1996). Much of the research is missing the importance of how this structure can affect the relationships among communities most marginalized from the system itself. What do decolonial practices of human rights work look like? Can they exist across borders? How do they manifest within borders? This is where critical human rights education (Zembylas & Keet, 2018) can play a role in its examination of how those in the human rights community address power asymmetries and seek to equalize them in relationships.

If we are to engage in authentic relationships that focus on reciprocity and solidarity rather than on the notion of “saving the other” (Spivak, 1988), we must be willing to examine these relationships. Transnational 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. These relationships are especially true for the case of Myanmar. Prior to 2011, Myanmar had been isolated from the global community. 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, apart from the story of Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>1</sup> (Johansen, 2012). What people did know seemed to reinforce the same narrative of victimization and lumped all the diverse ethnic groups together as “Burmese citizens” despite their vastly different experiences (Clapp, 2007; Fink, 2009).

After the 2010 elections, the country saw a sudden transition to democracy after years of authoritarian rule (Kundu, 2012) and more aid and human rights organizations began flocking into the country, including more

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<sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi gained international attention due to her work advocating for democracy. She also spent many years living abroad and was unable to see her British husband and children for many years.

foreign-born activists and development workers (Rieffel & Fox, 2013). Then, with the most recent coup in 2021, many of those people left and Myanmar has once again been isolated from the global stage.

Greater discussions and interrogation of the way in which human rights work is engaged in by global actors are sorely needed, and Myanmar provides an opportune site in which to do so given the influx of foreign aid for human rights over the past decade.

### *The Creation of the 'Victim' and the 'Savior'*

This research centers the voices that have been left out of traditional discourse on human rights and, as a process to challenge colonial legacies, and argues these voices must be included to transform the theorizing space and also to transform the lives of those of us involved in human rights and peace work. Post-colonial studies critiques how people are theorized about and are used in this study to challenge the narrative of the 'silenced' human rights victim (Mohanty, 1991; Mutua, 2001; Said, 1993; Spivak, 1988).

Human rights narratives tend to focus on the human rights violations of groups of people. This is because much of 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 act. Weissman (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).

In the context of Myanmar, much of the literature on human rights during the previous military regimes speak of horrific human rights violations and yet few highlight what people in Myanmar have been 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). Such studies lead one to assume that nothing was taking place locally; however, further in-depth research shows that there

have been and continue to be extensive movements of resistance inside the country (Beatty, 2010; Rioumine, 2013).

Christina Fink's (2009) work is an example of the representation of the Burmese voice offered through a language of victimization. Her book argues that there exists a "culture of silence" inside Burma<sup>2</sup> 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 leaves little room to explore the agency of the Burmese people and the ways that silence may be a tactical tool utilized as part of strategic resistance.

Mutua's (2001) construction of the three-dimensional metaphor "savage-victims-saviors" (p. 201) speaks to exactly this idea. The way that the human rights "discourse is unidirectional and predictable, a black-and-white construction that pits good versus evil" (p. 202). This article draws from Mutua's work and pushes beyond the theoretical notions of the state and the human rights regime to focus on how individuals understand and engage with notions of human rights, centering narratives from those labeled as "victims."

The creation of the "other" is often 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, what Mutua (2001) terms the "savages-victims-saviors construction" (p. 201). Two important themes 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, for example, "all third world women" need saving (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This language further justifies the first point because its logic holds that "all" of this type of person are the same, therefore, the only "saving" can come from someone outside.

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<sup>2</sup> I use Myanmar to speak of the country in this article, however, I use Burma when that is the term used by the person being referenced.

Edward Said's foundational work *Orientalism* (1977) challenged 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, etc.) 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." The notion of the narrative of the "other" helps to reinforce colonial and Western control by the notion of "saving or civilizing the savage." The narrative is used to portray the "other" as savage or brutal. Much of the role of Western work on the colonized or the "other" has been to demonstrate that difference.

This is where scholarship highlights the importance of examining power structures that may be rooted in intense constructions of the "other" and how human rights organizations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) may be extending the use of such problematic narratives. Weissman's (2004) work exemplifies 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 20<sup>th</sup> century and a current understanding of how this continues to play out today. 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). Weissman critiques the way that human rights work plays out and how standards of human rights are implemented. 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 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. 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.

This discussion of how the “other” has been created and used throughout the colonial project is one that is needed in a decolonial approach to human rights education. As Zembylas and Keet (2018) define critical HRE as the need to move away from “accepted truths” (p. 10), the work of human rights educators is to engage students in nuanced dialogues around human rights situations in places other than home. As activists use narratives, there must be a critical reflection on the role that narratives can play in furthering stereotypes of the third world as those ‘lands filled with human rights victims.’

### **Participatory Action Research in Myanmar**

In June of 2008, I moved to Southeast Asia to study a master’s degree in human rights in an international program made up of students from all over the world, with the large majority being from South and Southeast Asia. While there, I was able to meet local activists from Southern and Northern Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, India, and Indonesia. I was invited to visit many of their organizations and to 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 Vinjamuri and Ron (2013) highlight, those from Europe and North America

tend to dominate the scholarly writing as well as the leadership positions in development and human rights work and I was witnessing this in the curriculum.

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 in the discourse and began to question why it wasn’t there. Fellow colleagues and activists from Southeast Asia and I began to dialogue on this large gap we noticed. The two co-researchers from this project were part of these dialogues and it was from there that the idea sparked to work on a project that highlighted narratives of those from Myanmar. Given my own privilege as a U.S. citizen, studying in a U.S. institution, it was an opportunity to dedicate my then-dissertation research to a project that felt authentic and accepted by at least some members of a variety of communities within Myanmar.

The goal of the research was to highlight narratives coming from local community activists in Myanmar and share their work, their relationships with outside activists and their thoughts on what solidarity can look like. This research highlighted nine narratives from local activists participating in a variety of community-based projects., from different regions of Myanmar. It took place between 2012 and 2015, collaborating with two co-researchers in Myanmar gathering narratives through semi-structured interviews from community activists. The research addressed the following 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?

The co-researchers, Mon Law and Saw Raymond, were active in all stages of the research project. We agreed to use pseudonyms for all the co-

researchers and participants involved given the risk of identification in the political climate in Myanmar. As mentioned above, the three of us had been working together on other projects prior to this research. The nine participants were *Vishnu Dai*, a well-known Gurkha community member, living in Yangon; *Tara Didi*, a local community organizer in a very rural area in Shan State, in Northern Myanmar; *Ashin Min*, a Buddhist Monk organizing in his community living in a small village in Northeast Myanmar; *Pho Zin Oo and Kyaw Kyaw*, two active volunteers for a local non-profit providing health and funeral services in Northern Myanmar; *Sin Mya Thwe*, the president board member of the same local non-profit mentioned above; *Thwe Zin*, an active manager of educational and volunteer projects in Yangon, Myanmar; *Thin Thin Tun*, a local community worker in Yangon; and *Nora Tha*, who had worked with some of the only international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in Myanmar initially.

All of the interviews took place in Myanmar. The research team, which consisted of myself and the two co-researchers, co-created the interview questions, the participant list, and analyzed all data collaboratively. Meetings were held after each interview in which all notes were coded according to themes chosen by the team. This was done in a collaborative process with the research team. The research team also kept journals to record personal reflections. With the data, a few small action projects were conducted, that included collaboration with some of the participants and the research team. One in particular was the creation of a human rights curriculum that Saw Raymond and I co-facilitated around centering the work of local activists. The action projects are discussed further in Argenal (2016); this article focuses on analysis of the data through presentation of two of the three themes that emerged from the narratives of the participants: (1) human rights work as a way of life; and (2) human rights and a global power structure.

## **Human rights work as a way of life**

The first theme that emerged across analysis of the narratives of the nine participants was that human rights was a way of life for the participants, not just a profession. This idea is a direct challenge to the professionalization of human rights (Rodríguez-Alcorón & Montoya-Robledo 2019), and one in which HRE is directly implicated. Much of the early work in the field of HRE (Tibbitts, 2008) was preparation to be “in the field,” as part of one’s job. This tension between those training for work versus community survival builds on an already unequal position. It is important to highlight how many participants from this project did not view their work as a job, one that they were paid for, but one in which was necessary for their and their community’s survival. This contrast to the professional human rights worker is very important to bring into educational programming around human rights work.

The participants only spoke directly to human rights as a larger field of professional practice if they were working for a human rights organization or had spent time living in the West. 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, it was not called human rights education, but rather ‘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, a region in the southern part of the country, organizing post Cyclone Nargis. 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 what Raymond 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).

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 utilized human rights discourse to name their work, giving specific reference to human rights language and treaties. All of the research participants were engaging in a wide variety of human rights work according to rights discussed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), including access to education, health care, the right to cultural celebrations, and 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. In one dialogue, I specifically asked Saw Raymond how he labeled his work and he shared that “I am not out every day in the streets, I have not risked my life to protest this government... my work doesn’t feel like [human rights] work” (Raymond, co-researcher team dialogue, June 27, 2014). 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 conventional and normative human rights framework, this is what the work is about: large international and non-governmental organizations investigating abuses and putting pressure on ‘bad’ governments to implement human rights standards. Kennedy (2002) describes it further: “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). While Kennedy’s work is critical of human rights in general and raises 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 is not critical of “how” we label the “evil people in evil societies.” This is where a post-colonial and decolonial 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. Edward Said's (1993) theme of "decolonizing cultural resistance" is what he calls a more "integrative view of human community and human liberation" (p. 97). The research participants were doing this work as a part of their human liberation that was also part of their survival.

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 research. 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 for students to attend all levels of education, closing the gap between the right to education and the real hindrance that obstacles such as school fees pose to the realization of such rights; specifically, the organization 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, a 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).

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 non-governmental organization (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.<sup>3</sup> 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)

Vishnu, Ram Prashad and Ashin Min were providing educational opportunities to their communities because if they didn't, there were 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, seeking to close the gap between promised rights and ground realities themselves.

While this approach may seem to let the state off the hook for its obligations, it also counters the cultural hegemony and erasure that many communities have experienced that comes with state involvement. 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 above (i.e., the government) or outside (i.e., international organizations). Abu-Lughod (2002) raises an 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) stated, imagining an "integrative human community and human liberation." They

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<sup>3</sup> It is not accepted that someone profits off death in Burmese culture, and so by providing free services, the organization address discrimination towards those of lower status backgrounds who would have to do this work.

are also imagining a different way “of being saved to something” (Lughod, 2002, p. 788). It is the community demonstrating their agency to decide what needs exist and how to address them on locally decided terms.

Another way in which this theme arose 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 an undergraduate and a master's degree and had a very high level of English and was immediately given a management position.

Thin Thin described how 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. 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 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 may not put the same emphasis on seeking structural or systemic changes. This made it powerful for local activists to state “we are doing fine on our own” (Sin Mya Thwe, interview, July 9, 2014) or “I am doing what I need to do for my community” (Vishnu, interview, June 28, 2014). Through a post-colonial and decolonial 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, or aid that is conditioned upon certain approaches; and, again, there is power in this counter-narrative to the global human rights regime even if it may not be clearly defined as resistance.

### **Human rights and a global power structure**

When discussing cross-cultural and transnational interactions, the notion of human rights as reinforcing the global power structure was one that 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, in a large INGO in the capital city.

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 where 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). The power imbalances in the international aid and human rights communities in the relationships between expatriate and local staff mirrored for some participants colonial-era inequalities and hierarchies.

Nora shared similar experiences that Raymond and Thin Thin had. She discussed the difficulty the foreign staff had in working with the local government and about their 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 from the interviews was a fear of sharing information with those who are not local. Mon Law and I, when visiting a non-profit in their Pin Oo Lwin office, experienced resistance at the idea of a formal interview. Sin Mya Thwe 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. 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 represent we all witnessed the participants striving for; however, when those coming from abroad come to do "human rights work," and do not actually 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 and normative 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).

However, critical and decolonial human rights scholars 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) scholarship on bringing human rights standards into local practices is also critical of how the standards are used in a local context and critiques a one way, top-down movement of rights into a community. 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 the ways that communities are using human rights. Human rights are not a one-size-fits all approach.

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 one’s desire to associate 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 embedded 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 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 decolonial critiques offer: an understanding of how this power structure connects to larger systems of inequity in our world. Smith (2007) 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. Oftentimes, the work done by local activists connects directly to the community needs, but they are not entrusted or considered worthy of international donor funding.

### ***Challenging power dynamics***

Some participants called for ways to access the international community, and others wanted to call the international community *in*, to gain a deeper understanding of Myanmar. For example, Sin Mya Thwe had a very specific request. She shared how her organization “is doing fine 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.

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 for the international community to learn more about the communities they are working with.

Thinking about moving forward, one thing this research 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 in the United States to live and work abroad, a shift in the discussion must happen to create more equity in global human rights and international development.

Spivak (2003), in her writing, tied the types of hierarchies experienced by participants 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 workplace. 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. Human rights aren’t only about being able to access a right as something given on a piece of paper—something that the government grants or takes away. Individuals engage in a dialogue on those rights and that dialogue is impacted by the relationships that exist between and among local and international human rights advocates, activists and organizations. Post-colonial and decolonial frameworks center the focus on the perspectives of those most affected and most engaged in local community-based work.

## **Discussion**

There are many ways the narratives presented earlier ‘speak back’ to the othering and silencing of local voices in human rights work in Myanmar and likely elsewhere in the global South. In the discussion of the data, I focus on the ways the participants called for centering dialogue and reimagining solidarity.

### ***Human rights as 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 coming from outside to know about their work, to understand that it is a complex history of diverse peoples, not just silenced by an authoritarian government but one where community comes together in spite of it.

There are also two other important points to highlight; 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 the 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 adaptable to local contexts, as open to dialogue, while recognizing an unequal power balance in access to these rights. Saw Raymond, Mon Law and I spent evenings just thinking around how those using the rights discourse were different from those who choose not to, 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 widely-held belief of many Western activists that they are “saving” communities in an approach that Teju Cole (2012) terms the “White Savior Industrial Complex.”

The importance of seeing human rights as a dialogue 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 dialogue with local groups would put those stories and narratives at the center, before the standards even enter into the conversation. It allows for an authentic way to engage across borders, and an approach that centers narratives not as victims but as active agents in their stories and their struggles. Kennedy (2002) writes about a human rights vocabulary that “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). Human rights 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, 2012).

### *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 managers at large INGOs are making three times the 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 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 Western arrogance that Abu-Lughod (2002) writes about from human rights efforts.

While the data pointed to a general feeling that Western human rights and aid workers disrespect local workers, as shared by Raymond and Thin Thin, there was still a desire from many of the participants to collaborate with members of the international community. For example, Ashin Min expressed her desire 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 expressed a desire to have more information on human rights as it relates to women’s rights so that she can add that to her work. There was a desire by all the research participants to engage across borders in a variety of ways, even at times to secure financial support; however, all the participants wanted their stories to be heard and honored from their perspectives. As the Sangtin Writers and scholar Richa Nagar (2006) shared about some of their work, “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 seeking a new way to engage. 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, with cultural humility, the histories and narratives of the places that are different from the places we call home.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

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 often reinforce the notion of one-dimensional victims, as the discourse focuses on violations; if we do happen to hear about activism, it will be as Bob (2002) discusses, those that most align with the West’s values and motivations. Through this research, narratives of activists in Myanmar were highlighted—activists who have been doing the work resisting authoritarianism and inequality, and who will continue to do so for many years to come. Some of these are the so-called silent activists, the ones that many studies on human rights in Myanmar have failed to recognize. As transnational activists continue to engage in solidarity around the most recent coup in Myanmar, we must be called to reflect on how we engage. There is powerful resistance work happening now both from within Myanmar and within the diaspora communities. As human rights educators and scholars, we must think of how to partner with and follow the lead of these activists.

Drawing from these narratives through the PAR process allowed for our own self-transformation as co-researchers, and it also reminded us of our own responsibility to push for change within our own spheres of influence. Through this form of “solidarity from below,” where everyday citizens cross into each other’s work to hear stories and learn about each other, we can transform savior narratives into more equal and reciprocal partnerships in

international human rights work. This study sought to highlight narratives that can inform a public pedagogy of human rights and allow for readers to consider in what ways such voices can inform human rights education, whether in formal, nonformal, or informal settings. These spaces are needed now, people-to-people solidarity working against injustice globally, as recently shared by a Burmese-American activist.

Looking back on the research 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. These are the narratives that allow for an education that pushes beyond assumed truths about human rights and centers local movements. The work I witnessed and learned about has deeply impacted my work as a scholar and educator. Human rights education is not just about content, but it about the skills to see communities as whole, and to collectively pursue visions of shared liberation.

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