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Clara Mi Young Park

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Gender and generation in rural politics in Myanmar: a missed space for (re)negotiation?*

Clara Mi Young Park

**ABSTRACT**
The changes that have swept rural Myanmar, transforming landscapes and affecting livelihoods, have ignited rural politics and civil society and grassroot organizations’ strategies to counter, resist, negotiate and adapt to these changes. Rural politics have centred on broad calls for agrarian and environmental rights and social justice that do not address women’s rights, gender and generational justice explicitly. Based on fieldwork carried out in Myanmar’s Taninthary region, and engagement with grassroots organizations, I examine how gender and generational power dynamics play out, transform and are transformed in processes of agrarian and environmental change and rural politics.

**KEYWORDS**
Gender; generation; social justice; agrarian transformation; environmental transformation; rural politics

Introduction

In Myanmar, land and natural resources have been historically the focus of extractivist initiatives that benefited colonial administrations, central states, the military and powerful elites and deprived small farmers, fishers and forest-dependent groups, including ethnic groups, particularly women and girls, of access to natural resources, shelter and livelihoods (Karen Human Rights Group 2006, 2015; Tavoyan Women’s Union 2015; Barbesgaard 2019; see also Kramer forthcoming; Sekine forthcoming, this collection). Starting in 2012 the neoliberal orientation of recent civilian governments, discursively legitimized by agendas for economic growth, sustainable development and climate change mitigation and adaptation, has bolstered this tendency. Since 2011, legal reforms in the areas of land use, land conversion, and investments have facilitated the entrance and operations of international capital and investors in the country. In addition, the 2012 preliminary ceasefire between the Union Government (UG) and several Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) has enabled access of domestic and foreign capital to

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once secluded areas, including Tanintharyi region in the South, which had long been a hotspot of conflict and ethnic insurgency and had thus remained relatively isolated (Bryant 1994; Malseed 2009; Woods 2015a, 2015b).

The surge of extractive and infrastructure development initiatives, combined with conservation plans to restrict access to protected and designated areas, have accelerated the transformation of Myanmar’s rural landscapes and livelihoods. This, in turn, has sparked civil society and grassroots organizations’ strategies and actions to resist, negotiate and adapt to these changes. Members of affected communities, often with support from grassroots and local civil society organizations, have resisted, mobilized and strategized on ways to advance their own counter-visions of development (Park 2019). Coupled with opportunities to engage in ‘contentious politics’ (Tarrow 1994; Tilly 2002, 2004) as noted in the introductory article of this Special Issue, the mobilization from below has expanded the repertoire of ‘contentious performances’ that are being developed dynamically and in conversation with the political, social and economic context (Tilly 2002, 2004). In Myanmar, just like in other countries in the region, women and men, young and old, have taken active part in these political struggles; women, notably, have been at the forefront of protests and diverse forms of activism, often at the cost of their bodily integrity and the breakdown in family relations. Research from other countries confirms that women, including older women, participated in protests often as a strategy to curb violent repression and retaliation by the military and the police, to protect their sons and husbands, and in some cases as activists in their own right (see for example, Brickell 2014; Lamb et al. 2017; Park and Maffii 2017; Tavoyan Women’s Union 2015; Morgan 2017).

While these changes affect different people, including their political agency, in ways that are mediated by gender, age, ethnicity and other social and power differences, the urgency and fluidity of the issues on the ground requires cohesion in mobilization and swift action. Partly because of this, rural politics have tended to centre on broad calls for agrarian and environmental rights and social justice that do not address women’s rights, gender equality and generational justice explicitly. Women’s groups have also been often side-lined; whereas youth have been engaged by environmental and ethnic grassroots groups within the frame of well-defined scripts that do not challenge power, gender and age hierarchies. The exclusion of women’s groups and gender equality from agrarian and environmental justice movements, and the reasons underlying it, have been highlighted by many feminist scholars (see for example, Harris 2015; Park 2018; Deere 2003; Stephen 2006; Krishna 2015) who have called for urgent convergence to avoid the risk that movements for social justice could be void of gender and generational justice. Krishna (2015), for example, notes that in India some of the larger movements that have led to state formation have failed to recognize women’s claims for gender justice in spite of their conspicuous participation and even leadership. In the Andes, Harris (2015, 171) highlights the disconnect between feminist and indigenous and other movements and calls for a better articulation of ‘feminist analytics and organizing’, advocating for going beyond women’s engagement towards adoption of a feminist agenda that questions power structures. The fight against patriarchy has also been central to the demands of peasant women in international movements such as La Via Campesina.

This article explores the potential of rural politics to be catalytic of change that promotes gender and generational justice and contributes to making the case for the
need for not one but multiple convergences—feminist political ecology with feminist political economy, agrarian and environmental movements with feminist movements. Based on fieldwork conducted in Tanintharyi between 2014 and 2018 and engagement with local grassroots organizations, I examine how gender and generational power dynamics play out, transform and are transformed in processes of agrarian and environmental change and rural politics. I look at the conditions that support a (re)negotiation of gender roles and relations and how these could be conducive to gender-transformative rural politics, that is, politics that fosters gender equality and generational justice as a key dimension of social change and social justice (Cornwall 2014).

**Rural politics through the lens of feminist agrarian political economy and political ecology**

In this paper, I bring together two strands of feminist theory and practice, feminist (agrarian) political economy and feminist political ecology, in response to recent calls for convergence (see for example, Leach, Mehta, and Prabhakaran 2016; Scoones, Leach, and Newell 2015; Park 2019).

As Leach and colleagues argue (2016: Section 3, para. 11), the current context of resurgent neoliberalism highlights

the need to interweave both feminist political economy critiques of macroeconomics, trade and labour relations, and feminist political ecology approaches that highlight gendered access to and control over resources and links with subjectivity, identities and the politics of knowledge ... Using both approaches to revitalize debates concerning care, commons, commoning and cultures of sufficiency, solidarity or enough can thus provide powerful critiques of current growth-oriented paradigms and their destructive impacts on ecosystems and local people.

The two approaches offer complementary ways of looking at how gender and power relations and hierarchies shape and are shaped by agrarian and environmental change and rural politics in the context of structural changes of economies, natures and societies and highlight the interconnectedness of environmental change to changes in agrarian systems of production and reproduction. Feminist political agrarian economy (FAPE) puts gender at the centre of analyses of access to and control over land and natural resources, labour and social relations of production and reproductions in the context of agrarian change (Razavi 2003, 5). I use this approach to understand how the changes on the ground have gender implications in terms of different people’s access to resources and reorganization of labour. Feminist political ecology (FPE) highlights the linkages between society, ecologies and nature (Haraway 2008), shedding light on how power and gender inequalities and diverse relationships to natures shape different people’s experiences of access to and use of resources and inform their participation in political struggles over them. I argue that the embodied gendered relations with natures shape different people’s understanding of and engagement in struggles to counter the states’ territorial strategies. FPE research on global environmental policy governance, including climate change (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Arora-Jonsson and Sijapati 2017; Nightingale 2015) and environmental sustainability and conservation (Ojeda 2012), also promotes attention to ‘complex and multi-scalar processes of neoliberalization shifts’ (Harris 2009, 388).
Attempts to bring materialist and structuralist approaches closer to each other coalesce around what Tetreault (2017, 19) identified as a third form of Political Ecology. An approach that ‘takes into consideration both the materialist and symbolic dimensions of evolving nature-society relations, and social conflicts’, and can serve as a basis for explaining the ‘complex and multi-dimensional power relations involved in social environmental conflicts’. Taking this further, FPE aims to be a political project for doing ‘environmentalist, justice and feminism differently’ in activism and academia (Harcourt and Nelson 2015, 9); a project that commits ‘to feminist epistemology, methods and values, where dominant, (colonial) masculinist conceptions of knowledge and authority are recognized and challenged’ (Elmhirst 2015, 519).

I also adopt the concept of generation as a social process, co-constituted with other social differences, by which young people’s agency, identity and claim-making are shaped by generational and gender power dynamics and relations (Huijjsmans 2016, 2018). According to Ansell (2016), generation is a discursive and material exercise of power that shapes people’s identity but also prospects in very concrete ways, often leading to contestation and renegotiation.

I maintain that a converging feminist political approach is needed at the current junction where in Myanmar and elsewhere, different visions and pathways towards transformation and sustainability are confronting each other and shaping the politics of agrarian and environmental change (Leach, Mehta, and Prabhakaran 2016; Scoones, Leach, and Newell 2015). It is especially important in the context where we see an initial convergence around agrarian and climate justice struggles in Myanmar (Borras and Franco 2018; see also Sekine this issue). In times of crisis, ‘existing gender norms may be reinforced; or they may decompose, with individual men taking on roles normally associated with women, and vice versa; or they may be transformed through deliberate collective action, by civil society groups, or by governments’ (Elson, 2010, 204). The same holds true for age-related and other social norms. In refuting growth-centred neoliberal paradigms, dressed in discourses of sustainability, new spaces for addressing power imbalances and structural inequalities can be created within counter-visions of social justice, environmental sustainability and alternative economies (Tsing 2005).

Field sites, methods and methodological reflections

The research on which this article is based was conducted between 2014 and 2018 under the umbrella of a project implemented in Myanmar and Cambodia by a consortium of partners from academia and activist and grassroots groups from the Global North and the Global South. The fieldwork was carried out in various areas in Taninthary. With support from CSO partners, I conducted the fieldwork in five villages mainly or exclusively inhabited by Karen groups, located south of Myek in an area that spans two oil palm plantations, run by Myanmar Stark Prestige Plantation (MSPP) and Myanmar Automotive

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1The MOSAIC project ‘Climate change mitigation policies, land grabbing and conflicts in fragile states: understanding intersections, exploring transformations in Myanmar and Cambodia’ was implemented from 2014 to 2018 by a consortium of partners from academia, activist and grassroots groups from the Global North and from the Global South. These included: the International Institute of Social Sciences of Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Regional Center for Sustainable Development at Chang Mai University, the Transnational Institute. At the country level in Myanmar: the Land Core Group, Dawei Development Association (DDA), Metta Foundation and Southern Youth; in Cambodia: Equitable Cambodia, the Cambodia Peacebuilding Network and the Prey Lang Community Network.
Company (MAC) respectively, and the Lenya National Park project (for details about the cases see Park 2019). The area is under the mixed control of the Union Government and the Karen National Union (KNU), with some communities under exclusive or mixed governance arrangements.

MSPP is one of the best-known cases of land grabbing in Tanintharyi. A venture between Malaysian Prestige Platform, part of a Malaysian conglomerate, and Myanmar-based Stark Industries, the company is owned by a Myanmar businesswoman with connections to domestic elites and the military (OpenCorporates 2017a). In 2011, MSPP was granted a concession of over 42,200 acres of land in an area where four villages have their farming and community land. According to a CSO report, the government had ‘incorrectly’ classified these lands as ‘vacant’ (Tarkapaw et al. 2016, 29). Altogether, 13 villages have been affected in terms of access to forests and livelihoods.

MAC, a joint venture between Korean Auto Industrial Co. (AIC) and Singaporean Resources & Resource Pte. Ltd was registered in 2011 (OpenCorporates 2017b) but struggled to get its business of the ground. In 2010 the company was authorized by the Myanmar Government to operate a logging and palm oil business on 133,600 acres of land, as stated in their website (Auto Industrial Co., Ltd. n.d.). According to a Karen grassroots leader, as of February 2016, the company had cleared more than 10,000 acres of forest but planted only 100 acres; at the same time, 13,000 tons of timber had been shipped to unknown destinations, presumably in cooperation with a domestic company active in logging in the area (Advancing Life and Regenerating Motherland et al. 2018).

The Lenya National Park (LNP) is an iconic example of green grabbing, ‘motivated by efforts to attain the ‘common good’ promoted by conservation projects and discourse’ (Hall, Hirsch, and Li Murray 2011, 60). Although the park has not yet materialized, its anticipated impacts are already felt and shape the lived experience of villagers in the area. The establishment of the LNP will affect 13 villages, nine of which are Karen, and 2470 people whose farmland is in the designated park area, in addition to all the IDPs and returnees that have started returning since the ceasefire and whose numbers are expected to increase (Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari, 2018). Most villages in the area were abandoned, destroyed and rebuilt numerous times during the 70-year-long civil war between the KNU and the UG.

For the collection of primary data, I used qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and interviews, and participant observation in different settings such as houses, community buildings and village common areas, but also at the margins of trainings, workshops and consultation meetings that involved the participation of community-based organizations and grassroots groups. I used mixed focused group discussions to collect views about the issues affecting the communities, including investments, conservation plans and government policies. Segregated groups were a source of information on the division of labour, access to resources, decision-making and participation in grassroots politics. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a selected and limited number of

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3 Thein Pyin, Kawat, Baw Sa Nway and Swae Chaung Wa.
5 Personal interview with Karen grassroots leader, 17 July 2016.
women and youth, boys and girls, were used to gain subjective reflections. Interviews with representatives of local and international non-governmental organizations, including local and national women’s organizations, grassroots organizations, farmers groups and unions, as well as local authorities, and central government representatives gave me access to information on the institutional and political context, and access to information on specific cases and episodes.

In total, I conducted 14 FGDs with 79 male participants and 36 female participants. In addition, I held 9 in-depth interviews with members of a youth organization (4 females and 3 males) and 37 individual interviews with people in various contexts including CSOs, international and national NGOs, local government in Dawei, Myek, Yangon and Naw Pyi Taw. All interviews and group discussions at village level were carried out with support from grassroots partners who acted as brokers and translators but also co-creators of knowledge. All names and reference to specific villages have been omitted to protect people’s privacy and security. I thus use numbers to refer to villages. Finally, my reflectivity as a researcher was influenced by my situatedness and experience as a development practitioner and feminist scholar (Hawkins et al. 2011). I tried to be alert to power differentials, assumptions and expectations that partners and subject-participants and partners reflected on me vis-à-vis my multiple identities as a middle-age woman, a foreigner from a developed Asian country, a ‘gender expert’ and official working with a development organization, and a researcher. Displaying these created openings and closure from different people in different settings. For example, often women were eager to ask me personal questions about my family and children, while young people were curious to know about Korean pop culture, and older men wanted to know about agricultural development and the development history of my country. In all situations, I introduced my research topic and aims and asked people’s consent to be interviewed.  

Gender and generation in Myanmar

In Myanmar, similarly to other countries in Southeast Asia, the notion that women enjoy high status in the household and society, strengthened by colonial era narratives (Andaya 2006), has often been used as a pretext to dismiss the importance of gender equality and the need to advance women’s rights. In practice, however, women’s marginalization is evident and sanctioned by patriarchal codes of conduct, traditional social norms and religion (see for instance, Ikeya 2012; Nwe 2003; Than 2013). Even so, in recent years, the gender equality and social inclusion agenda have made its way into government policies, including the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013–2022 (NASPANW), which focuses on women’s equal rights to resources, opportunities and services, and participation in decision-making at all levels.

The current situation marks an improvement compared to the past, according to women’s groups in the country. As one Myanmar women’s rights advocate explained,

It was only after Cyclone Nargis [and the arrival of international aid and organizations] in 2008 that the government started allowing gender programs. The concept of gender has always been thought as something imported from the west and we were not able to talk about it.

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6The research for this paper was carried out as part of the doctoral project of the author.
So post the cyclone, we used the concept of women’s protection […] Only recently in 2011 there was an opening and we started referring to gender. 

7Interview with founder of Gender Equality Network, Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw, 8 May 2018.
Another activist highlights:

There is a general problem of awareness and understanding. Even many women in Parliament are not aware. There are only two women ministers and there is no gender perspective [...] Even my family had a difficult time to accept gender equality. The land department, for instance, did not accept my mother’s name on the certificate.8

Another woman, a member of the executive committee of a local grassroots group active in Tanintharyi, shares similar concerns:

Most people don’t think that gender is a problem - there’s overall lack of respect for women. In Dawei we are the only ones working on gender. We have to work harder than other organizations. Stereotypes are strong: women should not get involved in politics at community, regional level etc. Men discriminate. And there’s also lack of promotion of women’s activities in the media.9

She belongs to one of the 13 region-based organizations that are part of the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) which were based in Thailand before 2012. She remarks they are mostly not invited to meetings organized by agrarian and environmental organizations in spite of having a track record of working with communities on environmental justice: ‘We work very hard with our communities and participate in other organizations’ activities, but the opposite is not true’.10

According to a female farmer leader and activist, it is also more difficult to motivate women to get involved in politics. In general, she says, young women are less interested and even if they were, they could not easily get involved or take on leadership roles because of domestic responsibilities and pressures from the family.11 Another activist thinks that part of the problem might be also that most women who work in CSOs rarely have interest in land and livelihood issues and even environmental CSOs have a hard time recruiting woman. Moreover, the reports that are produced tend to put women in a box and depict them as vulnerable and this perpetuates their marginalization.12

The political and public space are overwhelmingly dominated by men. For example, in mixed group discussions in the field, women, boys and girls tended to speak less and sit in the back. Than Than Nwe (2003, 3–4) highlights that: ‘In aspatial relationships the juxtaposition of equity and inequity in Burmese society is subsumed. They become more pronounced however, when boundaries in real space based on gender are drawn.’ According to her, male chauvinism permeates society, sanctioned by the Buddhist notion of women’s spiritual inferiority. Younger men are also affected by the cultural practice of respect of the Buddha, monks, parents, teachers, and anyone older than self, which is also expressed spatially (Than Than Nwe, 2003, 9).

This broad picture was also confirmed by interviews and FGDs during my fieldwork thus indicating that women’s position and gender relations among Karen groups are not far from the general picture presented by the women’s group leaders interviewed

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8Personal interview with the Secretary General of the Women’s League of Burma, an umbrella organization made of 30 organizations, of which 11 are based on ethnicity and 2 are rights based. Yangon, 21 July 2016.
9Interview with a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Tayoian Women’s Union, Dawei, 12 May 2016.
10Interview with a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Tayoian Women’s Union, Dawei, 12 May 2016.
11Interview with female farmer leader, Dawei, 12 February 2017.
12Interview with the national coordinator and programme officers of the Women’s Organization Network of Myanmar (WON), Yangon, 24 May 2018.
and found in the literature. During group discussions, when asked about decision-making, women provided varied responses often pointing to joint decision-making for matters such as buying and selling land, farming and children’s education. However, in the everyday politics (Kerkvliet, 2002, 2009) that animates community life and inter-community exchange, while women, including older women, and young people join community meetings on a regular basis, decision-making tends to happen following rigorous gender and age hierarchies. ‘We don’t know about the issues, so we don’t talk. Husbands do the talking. We think these issues are not related to us.’ Participation is open to everybody in the village, including the few families from other ethnic groups; in practice, however, women do not have much say. It was not uncommon for women to tell me that they do not feel confident enough to speak because they are ‘ignorant’ and ‘uneducated’. Faxon’s (2017) research points to similar findings noting women’s estrangement from male decision-making spaces.

For young people the situation is similar. In one of the villages affected by the expansion of an oil palm plantation, I asked a group of youth between the ages of 15–30 years about youth-led political initiatives. The answer of one young man is illuminating: ‘We don’t have a strategy to do anything. We trust [our] parents’ opinion and follow that.

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We respect our parents. Parents don’t talk about it but we do talk with each other.¹⁶ This and similar responses might be a reflection of the normative position of being ‘a good child’ and trusting the older generation, as Karen children are instructed to be (cf. Karen Human Rights Group 2006). It is also important to note that young people’s responses in focus groups are socially and relationally produced and may be subject to acceptability filters including to please the young grassroots activists who were doing the translation and myself, the researcher.

I now turn briefly to the research site to place rural politics in the context of the changes that are driving community mobilization and strategizing in Tanintharyi.

**Tanintharyi: clashing visions of development**

Tanintharyi, the southern tip of the country, extending between the Andaman Sea and Thailand and Mon state to the north, covers over 43,344.9 km², and, as of 2014, had a population of around 1.4 million, with just over 50% female. The region accounts for only 2.7% of the country’s population and is one of the least populated states and regions, with a population density of 32 people per square meter (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015). Seventy-six per cent of the population resides in rural areas. The population is relatively young; of the total rural population, 28.4% is below the age of 14, 60.9% is between 15 and 64, and only 4.8% is over 65 years. The share of people aged 15–64 reported as ‘employed’ in agriculture totals 43.7% (52.2% male and 27.4% female) (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015). During the civil war, the region witnessed major waves of displacement of people from their houses and villages, either within the country or to Thailand. According to UNCHR data, as of 2015 a total of 97,356 verified refugees (both registered and unregistered) were living in camps spread along the Thai-Myanmar border (UNCHR 2018).

Southern Tanintharyi remained relatively untouched during the civil war, except for selected investments by domestic cronies and the military. After the ceasefire various initiatives have started burgeoning thanks to the end of armed conflicts, the new favourable legislative and policy environment, and the governance structure characterized by the unclear demarcation of powers between the UG and the KNU, especially in the so-called ‘grey areas’ where the two coexist. As a result, between 2012 and 2015, 126 cases of land confiscation resulting from infrastructure projects, natural resource extraction projects, commercial agriculture, and confiscation by the military were reported in Karen areas in southeast Myanmar (KHRG 2015). The combined effect of the Farmland Law (FL) and Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law (VFV), both promulgated in 2012, exacerbated tenure insecurity for small farmers and ethnic communities. The FL legalized the sale and purchase of land with land use certificates (LUCs), also known as Form 7, making all those farmers who do not have a land certificate squatters. Additionally, within the provisions of the VFV, land that is not titled or being used can be reclassified as vacant, fallow or virgin and given out including to investors for other use. This affects especially ethnic communities as most of the lands classified as VFV are in

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¹⁶Youth FGD, Village 4, 16 May 2018.
ethnic areas where shifting cultivation is practiced. Community-managed resources have also become more vulnerable to confiscation (Franco, Twomey, et al., 2015, 9).

New injections of foreign capital have further revitalized the expansion of oil palm plantations, revamping a 1999 plan to make Tanintharyi the ‘oil bowl’ of the country. Since 2010, agricultural concessions have been granted to joint ventures between foreign companies and Myanmar partners (Tarkapaw et al., 2016). According to Tanintharyi-based civil society organizations, a total of 1.8 million acres were allocated for oil palm production between 2011 and 2016, totalling about 35% of all agribusiness concession areas nationally. According to different assessments, however, only five companies actively produce oil palm and barely 29% of the total area granted will be put into actual production. Instead, the fact that most of the land is cleared for logging signals that oil palm production may not be the first objective and interest of investors (FFI, 2016; Tarkapaw et al., 2016). In 2016, following escalating protests by affected communities and grassroots organizations and with the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government taking office, several initiatives to address villagers’ grievances started to materialize, including an order for the controversial Myanmar Stark Prestige Plantation (MSPP) company to stop expanding.

Tanintharyi is also the target of several conservation initiatives. With 2.5 million hectares of deciduous forest lowland, home to a number of endangered species (CAT 2018) and endowed with inland water resources and ecosystems and a coastline that includes an archipelago of over 800 islands, the region hosts three of Myanmar’s 39 Protected Areas (PAs), two proposed and one existing. Cumulatively, these three PAs extend over a land area of 1.7 million acres (Istituto Oikos, 2011), with a possibility to be connected in the future through the Tanintharyi Nature Corridor, which would bring up the total land area to 2.5 million acres (Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari, 2018).

While little happened in the designated area for a long time, the recent acceleration of investments and expansion of agribusinesses has prompted international environmental and conservation NGOs to accelerate efforts to preserve Tanintharyi’s biodiversity and ecosystems from ‘agricultural expansion, shifting cultivation and conversion of forest to plantations’ (Istituto Oikos, 2011, 4), discursively promoting the idea that shifting cultivation is environmentally harmful. These initiatives have created many concerns among affected communities. The Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari (CAT) highlights that PA proposals have been carried out without the required free prior and informed consent (FPIC) of the Karen indigenous communities whose access and use of lands and resources, and livelihoods would be affected. Furthermore, many returning IDPs and refugees have found their customary lands included in areas demarcated as PAs (2018, 28).

The tension between conservation efforts and agribusiness expansion also highlights the conflicting mandates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MOALI) and the Ministry of Natural Resource, Environment and Conservation (MONREC), and

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17 On 11 September 2018, the Union Parliament promulgated an amendment of the VFV law, requiring anyone using VFV land to apply for a 30 year concession within three months from the enactment of the amendment. Anyone who fails to do so can have the land confiscated and if the land is awarded to someone else or a company, be condemned to up to two years in prison for criminal trespass offence.

18 Interview with Karen activist, Yangon, 23 May 2018.

19 CAT is a coalition of Karen community organizations working in the region whose stated aims are ‘to promote conservation of biodiversity together with people, and protect the rights of indigenous communities’ (Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari, 2018).
the resulting growing institutional conflict between them (Woods 2015a). More broadly it exposes the intersecting interests and conflicting priorities of different institutional actors and sectors, including the communities themselves, who are all ‘producing sovereignty’ on the ground (Lund 2011). According to Lund (2011, 888), not only the state but a range of different competing institutions through granting and/or ratifying access to land, ‘engage in the co-production of property and political subjects’, creating fragmented sovereignty. These processes are imbued in power struggles and relations underwritten by strategies of territorialization (Vanderveerst and Peluso 1995), as new and existing political subjectivities and authority of engaged actors are forged and confirmed. Within this complex and fluid context, different CSOs and community mobilization initiatives and alliances coalesce, separate and regroup in strategic ways as opportunities and issues materialize, contributing, in turn, to the creation of alternative visions of development from below.

Against this background, in the next section, I briefly illustrate grassroots mobilization and tactics.

**Grassroots mobilization: ethnic identity, collective performance and prefigurative politics**

Communities have been actively mobilizing with the help of local CSOs, although to varying degrees and in different ways.

The role played by ethnic CSOs has been and is influential in shaping grassroots politics and organizing. At a youth camp I was invited to join, I witnessed a lot of identity ‘building’ through mini-lectures – for example on FPIC – prayers and songs, which are a very important part of the process of building young people’s identity and knowledge. Cross faith communal prayers, involving religious leaders and people of different faiths, have also been part of the repertoire of communities’ mobilization, together with awareness-raising, sharing of lessons across villages, supporting each other’s mobilization efforts, and training and sensitization sessions for young people and children.

Songs are an important dimension of grassroots mobilization. David Brenner (2018) shows how karaoke becomes a way for Kachin rebel grassroots groups to perform rebellion and, at same time, how rebel subjectivities are created through reiterated acting which brings ‘into being certain kinds of realities’ (Butler, 2010, 147). Independent artists moving within the Kachin national framework also ‘coproduce rebel political culture’ with songs that reflect concerns related to social justice and environmental degradation (Brenner, 2018). At the youth camp, three songs were taught and sung every day at different times during the day. All in the Karen language, they included a song about the importance of water, a nationalist song and an environmental song. On the final day of the camp, the songs were played through a loudspeaker while people of all ages jumped into the fresh waters of the nearby stream to gleefully dance and sing while splashing water at each other. The outbreak of joy magnified and epitomized the affirmation of sovereignty and attachment to nature with the intent to create and strengthen environmental activist subjectivities of all those involved, regardless of sex, age, class or other social differences.

The youth camp is an illustration of the approach shared by many Karen groups, which centres on discourse around traditional lifestyles and values, material closeness with
nature, and indigenous identity building. This, in turn, contributes to the creation of shared ‘other’ visions of development in contrast with those created in the mainstream. So, while as Nancy Peluso (2012, 79) highlighted that ‘commodification of ‘nature’s products, places and processes’ produces new sorts of socio-natures’, communities in Tanintharyi are also producing other socio-natures, based on the adaptation of their traditional knowledge and experience of natures, through collective defiance of such processes and pre-figuratively creating their own vision of development, which includes revamping communal and customary access and use of resources, traditional conservation practices and forms of solidarity. This is not to say that tactics end in the discursive realm. Grassroots groups also support communities in very concrete ways, including through providing legal and practical support to file complaints, organizing signature campaigns and staging demonstrations, promoting community resource management and community forests, facilitating participation in policy fora and liaising them with parliamentarians and government representatives and keeping them abreast of changes in a rapidly shifting context.

However, this process of community building and mobilization tends to overlook existing inequalities by not openly addressing gender, age, class and power differentials. It takes at face value the traditional gender roles and recognizes youth so long as they represent ‘the future’ of communities but without providing them with a space to exercise agency and meaningful participation in decision-making. This we will explore in the next section following an overview of changes in traditional livelihood and systems of social reproduction.

Figure 3. Celebrations at the youth camp. (Source: Author, July 2017)
Changes in livelihood and access to resources: solidarity and conflict

In all the areas I visited people practice upland rotational (or shifting) farming – *toungya*, from *toung* (hill) and *ya* (cultivation) – of rice, vegetables and spices, mainly for family consumption, in combination with betel nut and cashew nut trees which provide the cash income. Betel nuts for cash were introduced in the 90s. Until a couple of generations ago, there was no market for the nuts and people did not have cash crops. If in need, families could borrow what they needed, including rice, from other villagers, which they would return the following year. Nowadays, because of the reduced availability of land due to the expansion of concessions and forest demarcations, people focus more on cash crops.²⁰ The intensified engagement with the cash economy has triggered processes of social differentiation and a breakdown of solidarity as some families have more betel nut land and thus cash income, including for paid labour and children’s education. Additionally, land-based conflicts, for instance with returning internally displaced people (IDP) or between people who fled and those who resettled, contribute to changing social relations.

‘Rice is for eating and ordinary life. Betel nut is for the future, for our sons and daughters’, explained one woman.²¹ A betel nut garden can produce a cash flow of 100,000 Kyat (62 USD) per acre, which means over 1 million Kyat per harvest on 10 acres. In Village 3, most families reportedly have about 10–15 acres of garden land, a few have as much as 150–200 acres, but people clarified that the land area ‘depends on the [number of] family [members] and how hard you work.’²² This indicates that the re/productive ability of households is largely internalized (Bernstein 2009; Chayanov 1986) with the exception of those who have can afford seasonal labourers.

Villagers called ‘gardens’ betel nut or cashew nut plantations on which they also plant other crops and fruit trees – for instance, mango, durian, pineapple. This is also the land that is passed onto children, together with the ancestral land which is also cultivated. The youngest child, regardless of sex, receives the house and the ancestral land to make up for the less time s/he has under direct parental care and to build up his/her own assets. The remaining land is most commonly divided equally between sons and daughters. This finding was consistent across cases and interviews, but there were also variations, depending on the family’s history of displacement and its current situation. For example, if the parents do not have land to give, the children receive nothing; and if women inherit in their native village but move to other villages after marriage, they can arrange for their relatives to take care of the land.

Although *toungya* continues to be practiced, the economy is increasingly commodified. *Toungya* land is often converted to betel nut cultivation after one year and no longer after seven years, as it was traditionally done.²³ ‘On 5 hectares [12.35 acres], we can have 3,000 trees which is enough for a family. So if we don’t get enough from *toungya*, we buy the rice at the market in nearby villages or Myek.’²⁴ Conversion to permanent crops also allows families to register and – in their views – secure as much land as

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²⁰Interview, Karen grassroots leader, 17 February 2017.
²³Colonial time texts refer to the 10–15 years rotation practiced among Karen groups (Bryant 1994).
²⁴Personal comment, local man, MAC area, 16 October 2016.
possible, while hoping there will continue to be enough forestland to clear for shifting cultivation. The introduction of the cash economy does not seem to have yet eroded the emotional and cultural attachment to toungya. When I asked whether rice from toungya was for selling, I would be laughed at. This is not to romanticize the traditional Karen way of life (for a counter argument see, Walker 2001, 2004), as people are well aware of and do not shy away from opportunities to generate cash income through the sale of betel and cashew nuts. However, viable strategies to promote shifting cultivation as a sustainable practice are still lacking, which is what some CSOs try to do.

Traditionally families slash and burn forest land each year to plant rice. The following year, on the same land, they can plant betel nut seedlings, which take 5–7 years to reach full productivity. If some people have a rice surplus, they can loan it to other families who have less and recoup it with the next harvest. Each household does their own farming but there is, or used to be, also a system of labour exchange, in which families help each other. Normally, the preparatory activities start between December and February. First of all, the right land is identified using various rituals and practices to test the soil. Then it is cleared of small trees and bushes, an activity carried out by women and men together and normally taking one week. Afterwards groups of people take turns to fell the big trees and finish clearing everybody’s land. While these activities are done jointly by women and men, those tasks that require more physical strength, like cutting down big trees, are men’s responsibility. Groups of 15–20 people working together can normally clear one family’s plot in one day. This means that if there are 50 households in one village, in about 20 days every family would have its land ready. Once the land is cleared, the burning takes place. Within one week to 10 days of clearing the land, households can start planting rice and also vegetables, sugarcane, chili and sesame, which are planted again in June when the new seeds are ready. In the early days, the time between March and May was for resting, but now people are busy keeping the betel nut gardens clear of weeds. In June and July, rice is planted. Again, this can be done working in groups. From then onwards, weeding becomes important as the paddy needs to be kept clear. By September-October, flowers and fruits are blossoming in the fields, with harvesting of the rice finally taking place in December.

Some people can use the extra help in their garden as well, depending on how much land they have. Young unmarried men in particular engage in this type of work, once they are done helping their families. This enables them to earn some petty cash for fuel or snacks or to top up the credit on their mobile phones. ‘This is part of the traditional lifestyle. It is an exchange of labour when we need it’, commented a male farmer. ‘However, now our lifestyle has been affected because people want to get paid as much as the companies pay.’ This social differentiation and the breakdown of solidarity is a common outcome of agrarian transitions among indigenous communities (see for instance, Park 2018; Park and Maffii 2017).

It is important to highlight that the participants of the focus group discussion above came from different villages and included both men and women and young people, boys and girls. In Village 2, internal divisions and conflicts, including among KNU and the government,

27Since 2012 and after the ceasefire, all villages have a KNU and UG leader.
escalated following some people’s decision in 2017 to take the compensation offered by MSPP – about 30,000–100,000 Kyats per acre. Soon after, the company also offered to buy land and some people sold their land, mostly IDP families who returned to the refugee camps after selling the land. Although they did not have land certificates, they were asked by the company to sign papers for the sale. Those who did not take the compensation, 12 households, do not live in the village but have their ancestral land there.28

Land is the main cause of disputes in Village 4, which is a resettlement village. Although people have lived there for a long time, they do not feel as if they fully belong and this adds to the sense of insecurity: ‘Here it is not our land. It is other villagers’ land so sometimes there are problems. But we complain and make the case they [the other villagers] should appeal to the army since it is the army that forced us here’, said one old man reminiscing about his old village. Another man added that they have temporary land certificates, Form 10529, and had already been in the village for 18 years. He also highlighted that the area was once part of their traditional customary land. Thus, increased pressure on land and conflicts pressures people to secure access to land through formalizing what once was customarily held land, promoting a transition towards capitalist property rights within the span of one generation.

While customary tenure systems and forms of solidarity and reciprocity are still in place, they are being impacted by the changing situation. This also explains why many of the cohesion building efforts of ethnic CSOs also focus on building a shared vision.

The next section delves on the gender and generational implications of the changes connecting women and young women and men’s lived experience and concerns with their prospect of translating them into action through participation in rural politics.

The gender and generational face of change

Gendered and generational implications of reduced access to land and natural resources

Households are in a state of flux as they struggle to resist and adapt to the changes triggered by the combined impact of encroaching investments, conservation initiatives and government policies that disrupt customary rules of access to land and traditional forms of labour exchange and solidarity. As a grassroots leader explained,

According to tradition, most land was community land, governed by traditional laws. People marked the land to delimit the boundaries and everybody acknowledged that. There were no conflicts but a common understanding. But now with company grabs they can no longer say ‘this is my land’ because MSPP says ‘if this is your, show me your registration form, Form 7’. But they don’t have that. In this area people do not ask permission from the government [to use the land]. We are the community and we are doing shifting cultivation because this is our tradition.30

As a result of the increasing pressure on land, conflicts within and between some communities have also increased. Another important effect is the process of social differentiation

28A woman from Village 2, FGD, 18 October 2016.
29Form 105 is a certified map that has information on the ‘owner, grantholder, lessee’, on the land itself (plot number), the status of the land and land type.
30Personal interview with Karen grassroots leader, 17 July 2016.
that is triggered by land scarcity between families who were able to turn more land into permanent cultivation of cash crops and those who could not. As seen above, it is garden land under permanent cultivation that can be registered and formally bequeathed.

Among young people, particularly young men, access to land has become a sombre reproduction concern motivating some of them to be actively involved in community mobilization. In a village near the MAC concession, one young man explained: ‘The new generations will have limited land. Land is decreasing, so I worry that it will be more difficult to marry [...] toungya will be more difficult. Our parents give us land when we marry but this is garden land [that is, betel nut or cashew nut].’ In the case of young men, reproduction is associated with the ability to produce rice, that is food for the family, and this in turn shapes their masculinity and sense of worth.

Shifting cultivation may become more difficult but we are studying and we want to support the livelihood [of our families] but we depend on our parents. There is nothing we can do by ourselves because the traditional activities depend on our parents, remarked another young man venting his frustration at the situation and hinting at the desire to break with traditional norms that expect children to acquiesce to their parent’s decisions. During the same group discussion, one young woman shared her disappointment at not being able to continue studying: ‘My education is not finished. I want to study in another city but I can’t because shifting cultivation is very hard and I have to help.’ Another girl echoed her sentiments, highlighting that her parents may not be able to continue supporting her education because they do not have the resources. Beyond the surface of contentment with village life and cohesion, there lies a reality of reduced access to land, and hence labour and education which concerns and affects young people, especially those from resource poor families, in very concrete ways limiting their ability to have an income, start families of their own and transition into adulthood. This, in turn fuels their feeling of injustice and desire to act on it. For young women and men, land as an embodiment of their reproductive capacity identifies with their struggle to enter adulthood and become independent, which however does not hold the same promises for women and men, as we shall see later in the section.

Gender roles and gender, social and power relations are also transformed along the way. In addition to families’ income and access to food, reduced access to forests and forest products affects women specifically in terms of income, workload, physical security and emotional distress. Women have to walk further to reach the fields and to collect firewood, herbs, vegetables and water and are forced to leave the children behind, which creates additional practical and emotional challenges for them. Decreased access to land and forest also has implications for access to cash. For example, rattan, which women used to sell for cash, is no longer widely available. Family diets and access to water resources have also become more challenging, placing additional strains on women’s work and wellbeing:

31Young man, youth FGD, Village 4, 16 May 2018.
32Both the UG and KNU recognize community forestry, although each with a set of different strings attached. The UG recognizes 30-year leases for community forestry under the 2016 Community Forestry Instruction, which recently released some of the restrictions under the 1995 instruction. The KNU recognizes it under its Forestry Policy.
33FGD, Myek, 20 July 2016.
34FGD, Myek, 20 July 2016.
Wild vegetables cannot be found anymore. We had a lot of fish before but now the logs drain the lake. There are no more wild animals to hunt in the forest. Water is also a problem. In the summer we have to collect water far away because we cannot drink anymore the water [from the stream] because it's become very dirty and polluted and there is less.\textsuperscript{36}

In net terms, according to young women, ‘the impact [of no land] is the same for women and men because we do the \textit{toungya} with men and livelihood is interdependent’.\textsuperscript{37} This was echoed by women of all ages in group discussions and interviews. Women said they work alongside men and in community groups doing the same activities. In my research, among FGD participants, 74\% (34 out of 53) of women referred to farming/shifting cultivation as their main occupation, while as only 8\% defined themselves as housewives. Those who highlighted sharing farming tasks with their husbands did it with a sense of pride and realism. Instead, activities such as fetching wood and water, collecting vegetables and herbs, cooking, washing and taking care of children and other family members were clearly identified as women-only responsibilities. This strict separation of roles, when it comes to domestic work, has a spatial dimension whereby the kitchen and the back of the house are considered women’s space. This not only adds to women’s work burden but also affects negatively their entrance into other spaces, including those where decision-making and rural politics happen, as women CSO leaders also highlighted.

While women think of themselves as men’s partners in farming and livelihood activities, they do not feel equally entitled to voice their concerns in community fora and trust their husbands will do so on their behalf. Men are also not as keen to listen to women’s opinions. This was evident in mixed groups dynamics where it was usually senior men who took the floor and led the discussions. Similarly, several women interviewed told me that they did not feel competent or confident enough to speak up because of their lack of education and ignorance of the issues. Limited or no knowledge of Burmese also constraints people and particularly women in their interaction with investors and authorities during negotiations and land registration. Travelling outside the village to reach the district office is time consuming and difficult if no socially acceptable means of transportation are available for women who are unlikely to have access to motorcycles. Finally, within the cash economy on plantations or other people’s fields, women’s work is stigmatized as less worthy through unequal wages, thus reinforcing or inferring the idea of women’s lower status. Casual labour was paid 3500–4000 Kyat a day for men and 3000–3500 Kyat a day for women, based on physical strength.\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, while women are being impacted in very concrete ways by the changes and have a lot to share about them, they are not given an equal space to voice their concerns in formal spaces and opportunities.

It is in exceptional and limited circumstances that women are recognized as grassroots leaders. At a workshop organized by CSOs, sharing her experience of participating in community mobilization with other villagers, a female teacher in her mid-fifties emphasized: ‘I am a school principal, a government official. In the past I was afraid to speak up but now I know that this is my right and I have to do it for myself and my children as well’.\textsuperscript{39} In her case, the education and status that come with her job, usually a man’s one in traditional

\textsuperscript{36}Women FGD, Village 4, 17 May 2018.
\textsuperscript{37}Young woman, youth FGD, Village 4, 16 May 2018.
\textsuperscript{38}FGD, Village 2, 23 January 2016.
\textsuperscript{39}Personal comment during awareness raising meeting, Village 4, 21 October 2016.
Karen society, along with the support provided by CSOs, played a decisive role in boosting her confidence: for other women the reality might be different. Nonetheless, this testimony confirms that women’s participation in rural politics can have an empowering effect (Park and Maffii 2017; Park 2018; Morgan 2017). While the existing empirical evidence clearly indicates that CSOs and NGOs play an important role in facilitating and supporting women’s organizing (Agarwal 2015), there was no sign that this was happening systematically in the areas I visited, in spite of very active social movements. The curricula for training and awareness-raising of local CSOs did not include gender equality or women’s rights among the topics discussed. Instead these have entered to an extent the repertoire of national and apex groups, as also emerged during the negotiations over the NLUP. So, instead of being ‘transformed through deliberate collective action’ (Elson, 2010, 204), existing gender norms are mostly being reinforced while new ones are being created that marginalize women further.

It is only recently that the partners I was working with more closely have started introducing gender equality in their trainings, probably as a result of their engagement in donor-funded projects. On the positive side, the involvement with grassroots groups seems to broaden young women’s expectations and hopes for themselves. A young woman in her twenties who works with a grassroots organization active with communities in the area says she hopes to be a good leader in her community one day, although she knows it is not easy for women to be community leaders.40

**Gendered and generationed experiences of youth’s involvement in rural politics**

Confirming the important role of CSOs, the engagement with local grassroots organizations influences young women and men’s sense of belonging, participation in rural politics and knowledge of the issues concerning the community.

In a village affected by the expansion of MSPP, young people seemed optimistic. In this village, several Karen grassroots groups have been active for a while, promoting community-based development initiatives, including mapping of natural resources, watershed management and community forestry. The effects of the long-term engagement in activities around community-based natural resource management and indigenous rights are visible in the way the village is maintained and how people, including the young ones, articulate their stances and participate in community initiatives and mobilization. Pride and affection for the village and traditions are widely held and expressed. ‘In my village we have clear air, mountains and land. Because of this, we don’t want to stay in the city. Also, we would get very low [quality] jobs, since we don’t have an education. We love our village,’ said one 15-year-old girl during a group discussion.41 The majority of the youth I interviewed in the villages, both male and female, overwhelmingly said they would prefer to stay in their village and continue traditional farming and gardens, albeit this was sometimes associated with their lack of education and alternatives, indicating a tension between the ideal and the material manifestation of their reality. Going away, mainly for studying, was perceived as a temporary option.42

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40Interview, 7 February 2017.
41Young woman, youth FGD, Village 2, 15 May 2018.
42There was hardly any migration to Thailand or the cities in the villages I visited.
These young people’s somewhat idealistic depiction was in contrast with the grim illustration that adults gave at community meetings and group discussions. In fact, the mapping of resources was initiated in reaction to the increasing loss of biodiversity and deforestation following the appearance of MSPP and others. As the local administrator points out, many other companies and small local cronies are involved in land grabbing in addition to MSPP. None ever conducts proper consultations with the villagers and they also do not know who authorized the concession as the company hardly ever interacted with them.43

In this scenario of land scarcity and uncertainty, many villages in rural areas of Tanintharyi are empty, with youth more likely to be the ones to migrate for continuing their education or in search of work.44 In several group discussions, participants noted that youth migration, especially of boys, might become necessary for poorer families, even if most parents would prefer their children to stay and help. Until recently, access to land was not a problem, including for new couples. Some young people, both female and male, could get land from their parents and/or in-laws, as seen above. In addition, as pointed out by several respondents, while waiting to have their own betel nut gardens fully productive, young men could work for cash for other people in the village. But now things are different.

The situation of youth in the villages thus seemed to be shaped by a combination of forced choice, due to a lack of options, class and the education that children, especially boys, from better off families could afford. Also, the village history, exposure to advocacy around indigenous culture and tradition, engagement with CSOs, and the compliance or not with gendered social constructs and expectations all made a difference on individuals’ experiences. The combination of factors did not always amalgamate smoothly, sometimes leading to frictions and contradictions that emerged in the form of conflicting statements during the discussions and interviews. For instance, the specific ways in which gender and age differently shape the lived experiences of women and men emerged clearly during an impromptu discussion with young women aged 13–24 that I had during the youth camp introduced above. The women were curious to know about my life and eager to share information about theirs. They said that at the age of 18 most girls are already married. ‘Sometimes I feel hopeless and have no dreams. We are not free’, said one woman, pointing to her multiple responsibilities. She missed going to the forest with her father and also wished she could go back to school but, with two children, it was impossible, and her husband would not allow it. Both women said they joined the youth camp to improve their knowledge about issues affecting the community as they do not talk with their husbands about these issues and had not been aware of land grabs.

The experience of these young women contrasts sharply with the reality of a young man, also in his twenties and married with two children. This young man, from the same village that benefitted from community-led initiatives, is very active in his community and with local CSOs. He was formerly responsible for community forestry and helped in setting it up. According to him, young people in his village are interested in traditional farming and there is no migration of youth. ‘Most young people understand that if we keep the land, it will be beneficial for the community. When they go to the cities, they

43 Interview, Village 1, 23 January 2016.
44 Interview with local CSO staff, Dawei, 10 May 2016.
realize the value of land. We are very happy about solidarity in the community. In contrast to the testimony of other young people who indicated they did not have much say in community politics, he thinks that young people have the opportunity to contribute to community mobilization, whether against land grabs or for other issues that affect the community. There is a youth group, formed by the village leader, which holds social and community activities, but they also engage with CSOs in organizing awareness-raising meetings. ‘We are also more mobile as we have motorbikes and can join meetings in other villages too. In the political discussions, we are not involved as much but always support with logistics etc’.

The quote masks the existence of age and gender inequalities. Girls generally do not have motorbikes and if they are married and have children are constrained by care responsibilities; and youth play a supportive role when it comes to political issues. At the same time, it reveals that young people, under certain conditions, are able establish their social age as young adults through participation in rural politics, even beyond their own communities, as noted above. In some instances, this goes as far as circumventing traditional gender and generationed roles. For instance, in one of the villages, the youth leader is a very energetic single young woman who confidently explained that the youth in her village plan to collaborate with the ‘old people’ in the village development plan and want to secure their lands working with grassroots organizations. She thinks that they [youth] have the opportunity to share their views in community meetings and she explains that she is free to decide what to do because she has a job as kindergarten teacher. In her case, social age and gender roles have been (re)negotiated and (re)constructed through the opportunities created by her education and job, her position as a youth leader, environmental activism, and her status as a single woman.

During the field work, I also exchanged extensively with the young activists working with the local CSO that facilitated my access to the villages. Many of them said that they had to gain the trust of the community before they could be perceived as honest and knowledgeable brokers particularly by the elders. On the ground, this was expressed through performing the repertoire of respectful behaviour, which is mindful of age and gender hierarchies. For instance, young women would sometimes help older women in the kitchen. Once they gained the trust of the villagers as bearers of valuable knowledge and support, young women and men activists alike were well received by all community members. While committed to improving the conditions of the communities, all of these young women and men found their key source of motivation and inspiration in the possibility to work with their peers for their future, thus transcending generational barriers.

Contrasting the experience of these young activists with young women and men in the villages confirms the transformative potential of the engagement of young people in rural politics. When this is structured through formal or volunteer work or recognized by others, it does have an empowering effect on boys and girls alike, such as in the case of the CSO young activists or the young men and woman who emerged in community leadership roles. However, for this to become the norm, particularly for young and older women, there needs to be overt attention and action to redress gender and social inequalities and power imbalances.

Discussion and conclusion

The expansion of agribusinesses and conservation initiatives in Southern Tanintharyi have clear intersecting and overlapping conjunctural impacts on physical landscapes, different people’s access to land and natural resources, and their livelihood strategies and politics. There are also clear gender implications stemming from existing norms and hierarchies that marginalize women to the domestic realm in spite of their active contribution to households’ livelihoods and reproduction. This means that women, whilst being impacted on par with and differently than men by reduced access to land and natural resources and participating actively in community mobilization, are not always as informed and/or do not have a say in community decision-making. Grassroots groups are active in supporting communities to navigate and mitigate the impacts of the changes. This is done through a combination of strategies that spans from building ethnic identity and connection with natures, creating awareness of the issues and providing legal support, and promoting the space for bottom up participation in agrarian and environmental politics. However, they fail to promote gender justice as part of their strategies and advocacy, thus missing the opportunity to address and transform the gender and social norms and power relations that are exacerbated by agrarian and environmental change as part of communities’ counter vision of development. In addition, women’s groups, especially at the local level, are often marginalized and isolated, being unable to connect across geographical areas and struggles and with environmental and agrarian movements. Linkages are missing both at the horizontal level among different organizations as well as vertically between national and very local chapters of women’s groups.

Young people who are often claimed to be at the centre of community and grassroots politics are also embedded in gendered and ‘generationed’ systems of social norms and power hierarchies, which keeps their agency within socially acceptable paradigms. Through engagement in community politics and grassroots mobilization, especially young men and single young women are able to some extent to break age and gender stereotypes that relegate them to marginal roles. However, this is more likely to happen in the presence of conditions such as education, social status and external support. Young women’s early entrance into adulthood through marriage creates material and emotional burdens, restricting their mobility, access to information and meaningful participation in community politics.

Grassroots organizations need to specifically raise the issue of gender equality, generational justice, and women’s rights and actively promote a better understanding of gender roles, the recognition and redistribution of care, and the meaningful participation of women and young men and girls in rural politics to avoid reproducing existing patterns of injustices and power asymmetries.

The activism fostered by local grassroots organizations can potentially be disruptive of a neoliberal reorganization of nature and, importantly, gender and power inequalities. Just like the use of pre-figurative and discursive repertoires is supported by concrete actions to promote and create the bases for an alternative vision of development, women and young women and men’s engagement should systematically be grounded on principles of gender and generational justice. As younger women and men break away from traditional gendered and generationed roles through their engagement in rural politics, especially trans-local land politics, there is a chance for politics to be
gender-transformative if women and youth, girls in particular, are supported by local CSOs and grassroot organizations.

Finally, there is scope for research in this area to better integrate sound gender analyses that take into account how intersecting social, gender and power inequalities may be reproduced and even exacerbated by agrarian and environmental change and politics therein making a pressing case for multiple convergences — feminist political ecology with feminist political economy, agrarian and environmental movements with feminist movements within a feminist political project for doing ‘environmentalist, justice and feminism differently’ in activism and academia (Harcourt and Nelson 2015, 9).

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Clara Mi Young Park is the Senior Gender Officer of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Office for Africa. She holds a PhD in Development Studies with a focus on feminist political ecology of resource scarcity from the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. She has authored numerous publications, articles in peer-reviewed academic journals and book chapters. Recently she has co-authored ‘Gender-transformative climate change adaptation: advancing social equity’, background paper to the 2019 report of the Global Commission on Adaptation; and a chapter in the book ‘Negotiating Gender Expertise in Environment and Development’. 

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