

Education, Employment, and Everything The triple layers of a woman's life

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Majella Albion
Pauline Collins



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Educating Women: Enabling or Disabling – A Case Study

Elisabeth Adcock (adcockb@usq.edu.au)

Faculty of Education

University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350 Australia

Abstract

This study argues that many women from all parts of the globe have, for far too long, been oppressed and had their human rights denied, regardless of education, social status, ethnicity or wealth. This significant assertion will be supported by the case study of Aung San Suu Kyi and her ongoing struggle for political freedom in Burma. It is argued that her unfortunate position illustrates the situation of women world-wide, as she strives against oppression by traditional male authority, such as a military regime. Aung San Suu Kyi is one of the most controversial female world figures, attracting international attention and endless media speculation. As the leader of the pro-democracy movement in Burma, the National League for Democracy, Suu Kyi is engaged in a fierce, protracted struggle for recognition from the country's military leaders who consider her efforts treasonous. In May 1990, her political party won 80% on the vote at the parliamentary elections. Suu Kyi had been placed under house arrest in July 1989 and for most of the time since then has been under detention. This paper addresses the 'struggle for democracy' undertaken by Aung San Suu Kyi, her political oppression, detention and human rights issues. This analysis focuses on her position as it applies to women attempting to break through the "marble ceiling" in their fight for equality.

Introduction

Education for women has often been seen as the bridge from oppression to self-actualisation and equality and brings about improvement in society. Over the past centuries the expectations of education for girls has changed, as it waxed and waned in the public interest, but it was through the efforts of remarkable women such as the eighteenth English woman, Mary Woolstonecraft, that the limited expectations of women were expanded. She contested Rousseau's notion that women should be educated to make them attractive and pleasing to men as she believed that this contributed to women's unequal education and subordination. (Gutek, 2005, p. 210) Woolstonecraft asserted that women should be educated in the whole knowledge of professions and occupations, not only to become nurses, but study medicine and become physicians as well. If women were educated they could be free of dependency on men and this independence would lead to the right to participate in politics and have the right to vote. Her efforts and theories continued to be built upon in the nineteenth century when fear of uprisings, following the French Revolution, took hold in England and a demand

for a system of state education, free to all, began to be articulated. While there were many movements in Europe and the United States to establish public schools and allow children from all classes of society access to them, the motives of the founders were mixed. New theories on child development such as the first kindergarten, established in Germany in 1837 by Friedrich Froebel encouraged the establishment of many schools. Because of these schools, education for females was not entirely ignored. One reason for including them was that educated women would have a calming influence on men and so promote social stability (Boxer & Quataert, 1987)

In the twentieth century, progress was made when many milestones in educational rights for women were accomplished. Firstly, at the end of World War One, in 1918, English women over the age of 30 were given the right to vote and then, between the wars, in many countries, girls' schools were established and there followed a steady rise in the numbers of girls progressing to higher education. (French, 1990)

Later, in the 1960s, there was an upheaval in the form of the feminist movement which caused women to question deep-rooted assumptions about their place in society and placed women and their education in the political arena. This period provided new opportunities for women in areas of employment while raising their expectations. But most importantly, it improved the sense of self-worth of women as a whole (Boxer & Quataert, 1987) Employers expected higher levels of education for young people, and in the case of girls, there was a growing awareness that a good schooling was essential. This awareness had spread to various countries in South-east Asia following the end of the Second World War and the upheaval of nationalism. Many forward thinking parents took care to educate their daughters, Aung San Suu Kyi being one of them.

Case Study

Aung San Suu Kyi: Her Education.

This case study seeks to discover if there are genuine indications that education was the key factor in Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle for freedom in Burma. In order to discover the background of education of women during the past and in the present situation, in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, a wide range of texts have been consulted to allow for opinions of critics, as well as

works written by Suu Kyi herself. It is essential to appreciate the background and perspectives that emerge from Suu Kyi's writing, especially in *Aung San of Burma*, a book that she wrote about her father's life, which is particularly revealing in its identification of Aung San's place in history through his daughter's own perception. (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991)

Aung San Suu Kyi was born on 19 June 1945 in Rangoon, at a significant time in the history of Burma following the Second World War, when the country was engaged in a struggle for independence from Britain following Japanese occupation. She is the only daughter and youngest child of the Burmese nationalist leader Aung San, a Buddhist, who is considered to be the father of modern Burma, an honoured, national hero and cultural icon. Her mother Khin Kyi, a Christian, became the first woman to head a Burmese diplomatic posting as Burma's ambassador to India in 1960.

Suu Kyi's early education began in Rangoon at St. Francis Convent, and then the Methodist English High School. Clearly, her destiny had been set towards an education directed at the West through the influence of Christian education, rather than traditional Buddhist instruction. The values, duties and pastoral care from these schools may have provided a more comfortable transition to study and life in the West. When her mother moved to India in 1960, Suu Kyi was enrolled at an exclusive school attended by Rajiv Gandhi, who was to become the Prime Minister of India. After studying briefly at Delhi University, Suu Kyi began her serious Western education in England at St. Hugh's College, Oxford University, where she studied philosophy, politics and economics. It is suggested that she was influenced in her choice of major subjects because of a strong sense of duty towards Burma. In an interview in the *Financial Times*, (24 October 1988), she admitted that she would have preferred to study English, Japanese or forestry, but her choice was influenced by what she understood to be of most use to a developing country. Suu Kyi was awarded her B.A. in 1967, followed in 1990, by an M.A. Honorary Fellowship, from Oxford University.

This Western education led to employment, when from 1967 to 1971, Suu Kyi moved to live in the United States, working as an assistant secretary for the Advanced Committee on Administration and Budgetary Questions, at the United Nations Secretariat, New York.

It was while studying at Oxford, that Suu Kyi met her future husband, Michael Aris, an Englishman, who was studying Tibetan civilisation, a field in which he became recognised as an international authority. In 1972, she returned to England to marry him, and the following year they moved to live in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan where Michael was employed as a tutor to the royal family. Because of her experience with the United Nations, Suu Kyi was employed as a

research officer on United Nations affairs by the Foreign Ministry.

In 1973, Suu Kyi returned to Oxford with her husband, where her two sons were born and she devoted herself to learning more about her late father, Aung San, who had been assassinated when she was just two years old. In her book *Freedom from Fear*, her husband observes that "Some would say she became obsessed with the image of the father she never knew". (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995, p. xviii) Certainly, she consciously and regularly refers to his political legacy. In her search into her father's past, Suu Kyi could hope to fully understand what was past and link its meaning to the present, in the sense that Aung San's murder robbed Burma of the benefits of his personal leadership. Therefore, Suu Kyi took up the mantle, as a kind of natural imperative to follow her father's ambition in line with the paternalistic society of Burma. In the introduction of *Aung San of Burma*, Roger Matthews comments on Suu Kyi's references to her political connections through her father. In response to criticism that she knew nothing about the politics of Burma, she replied, "The trouble is that I know too much" (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991). While this statement may be true, Suu Kyi has been referred to by her military opponents as "the Oxford housewife", encoding her as the ultimate Western woman with no political stance in Burma. In her defence, Joseph Silverstein has argued that, "On the basis of her education and writing, her experience at the United Nations, in Japan, India and the Himalayan states, and her observation in Burma, she is better prepared than most to comment on, and criticise the rule of the military and to argue for an alternative system – a return to the democratic ideas of her father" (Lwyn, 1994, p. 60).

Her research on her father was further developed when, in 1985, she travelled to Japan as a Visiting Scholar, employed by the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Kyoto. This research allowed her to look at Burmese material from World War II, and more importantly, documents related to her father and his 'Thirty Comrades', a group of young nationalists who were trained by the Japanese in the early 1940s to overthrow British rule in Burma (Silverstein, 1993). She also interviewed people in Japan who remembered her father, while she and her youngest son Kim, who accompanied her to Japan, learnt Japanese language. Birtil Lintner (1990, p. 15) considers that this time in Japan was important to her intellectual development as she had time to reflect on her father and to recognise who she was in historic terms.

Reuniting with her husband and eldest son Alexander, in Simla, northern India, Suu Kyi was offered, and accepted, a fellowship to work on a manuscript comparing Burmese and Indian nationalism.

This was when she wrote the extended essay *Burma and India – Some Aspects of Intellectual Life under Colonialism* (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995). Upon returning to Oxford with her family in 1987, Suu Kyi decided to enrol for further study – a doctoral program in Burmese literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University. She had just begun this thesis when, in 1988, her mother suffered a stroke, and Suu Kyi returned to Rangoon to care for her. For four months she stayed by her mother in hospital, eventually bringing Khin Kyi to her family home in University Avenue, Rangoon, to live out her last days.

In late July 1988, there was the explosive situation when Ne Win, an original member of Aung San's "Thirty Comrades", and leader of the Socialist Program Party for twelve years, resigned. The leaders of the armed forces then established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the supreme political power in Burma. They seized power, suspended the Constitution and abolished all institutions established under it (Ang, 1998). In 1985 Suu Kyi had written of her country, "The economy has not been well managed and Burma today is not a prosperous nation. However, with its wealth of natural resources, there is always hope for its future, and that future lies in the hands of its people" (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991, p. 57). In 1988, the people had begun to strive for this future. Conscious of her family obligations in the United Kingdom, Suu Kyi tried to remain in a neutral position, but in August, the military government massacred people in the streets and she saw the demonstrations all across the country. People carried portraits of her father, Aung San, a reminder that he had once supported a free, democratic and prosperous Burma. Suu Kyi now recognised the time had arrived to continue the legacy of her father. The family tradition in the "second struggle for independence" fell upon the daughter. In a patriarchal society such as Burma this caused surprise, but according to Josef Silverstein, Burmese women had held important positions of influence and power during the colonial period and also during the nationalist struggle (Lintner, 1990). Since 1962, however, the military-dominated dictatorship has reduced the role of women in politics.

In the Asian region, much pride has been taken by the traditional societies in sameness and stability, and western education has been seen, not so much as a threat, but rather irrelevant to those whose future was in the control of these societies (Milner, 1996) In Burma, in the 1880s, Western education, in the form of missionary conversion was not just for boys, but also focused on girls, particularly the ethnic Karen group. The Karen Girls Training School and a maternal association for Karen women were established in 1885 by American Baptist missionaries. These establishments, especially the latter, were used to gain

recruits to Christianity among children by working through the concerns of mothers, and thus advocating that education had cultural values in domestic life (Lwyn, 1994). Post-colonial discourse on Burma often repeats the 'motherhood' discourse of the missionaries from colonial Burma. This notion of women who are innately peaceful, de-politicises women's role in revolution and renders them powerless. They must, as the Third World woman, patiently wait. Aung San Suu Kyi is much more complicated as she moves between two contradictory positions of being a 'Western' subject and 'Third World' Other.

Discourse on Aung San Suu Kyi suggests that in the post colonial era, she is an embodiment of Western ideals and therefore acceptable and trustworthy to the West. The converse suggestion is that she is seen by her detractors as an agent of the West, thus perceived as the *Other*, whose power as a Third World woman is considered illegitimate. More controversially, Lwyn (1994) has suggested that "Her insight into the situation in Burma is explained in terms of 'Western' influence, rather than an insight that was born of being Burmese" (p. 70). She may be all these things, but a deeper awareness of her position to the people of Burma emerged when she heard the reports of the army firing on unarmed protesters, killing as many as three thousand citizens between August 8 and August 13, 1988. There was a general conviction that she could not remain inactive when she was reported as stating, "I obviously had to think about it. But my instinct was, this is not a time when anyone who cares can stay out. As my father's daughter, I feel I had a duty to get involved" (Current Biography, 1992, p. 5). This sense of duty could have been a result of her deep respect for her father and country, or perhaps a result of her Western education directing her attention to constructing a political system which would lead to a free and equitable nation where she could apply her understanding of democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi did become involved, making her first major public speech on 26 August 1988, at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most sacred shrine, before a crowd of more than 500 000 people, during which she emphasised the importance of human rights. The most important one was the right to choose one's government, which she identified as 'Burma's second struggle for independence'. Her study of Western politics could have influenced her call for free elections. It has been claimed that her most important support to the movement was her strong attachment to the armed forces, based on awareness of their former revolutionary role of which her father was an original leader. The events of August – September, 1988 which involved civil unrest in the form of huge demonstrations and strikes, led to the SLORC's crack-down on human rights in Burma. It closed the

universities, banned political demonstrations and gatherings of more than four people, while at the same time claiming the right to arrest and sentence citizens without trial. Aung San Suu Kyi was not deterred by this licence to kill, and continued her rallies against the SLORC around the country. She was almost gunned down on 5 April 1989 by six soldiers who were ordered to kill her (Ang, 1998). The SLORC insisted that Suu Kyi was taking part in a demonstration, guilty of breaking the law. For her part, Suu Kyi held little hope that the military junta would allow multi-party elections to be held in 1990, but continued her defiance, accusing the junta of showing its “true fascist colours” after it gave authority to the army to execute political protesters without trial. (Current Biography, 1992, p.7)

Aung San Suu Kyi had been placed under house arrest on 20 July 1989, arousing international condemnation against the Burmese military government over the detention. In May, 1990, ten months after her arrest, Suu Kyi’s party won 392 of the 485 seats contested. In two years, Suu Kyi had succeeded in demonstrating that the SLORC’s claim that they were the rightful rulers of Burma to be contrary to the wishes of the people. (Ang, 1998) That election result is the main factor in the apparent permanent inability of Suu Kyi and the military regime to negotiate with each other. She claims that Burma elected a democratic government, and that it must be honoured.

International condemnation was again aroused against Suu Kyi’s detention by the military junta when she was awarded the Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for Freedom of thought in July 1991, and the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize in October 14 of the same year.

During her long detention, Suu Kyi continued to write and reflect. Her fourth publication, *Letters from Burma*, a collection of fifty-two letters written for a Japanese newspaper was written soon after her limited release from house-arrest in 1995. This collection was awarded the Japanese Newspaper Association’s Award for 1996. They contain a transcript of the opening keynote address by Aung San Suu Kyi, read on video to the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing in 1995, and her many press interviews and statements.

This year Suu Kyi turned 62, imprisoned in her neglected home in Rangoon, and has spent more than 11 years in detention (Buncombe, 2007). Her phone has been disconnected and her mail intercepted by one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Basic human rights have been denied. For example, when her husband was dying of prostrate cancer, he was denied a visa into Burma to visit Suu Kyi and she knew that by leaving the country to visit him, she would not be allowed re-entry to Burma. While the mental battle persists between the military government and Aung San Suu Kyi, one must consider how this amazing woman sustains her mental strength. In her writings she makes

reference to more involvement with her religion and speaks of *metta* (loving kindness), a vital part of Buddhism. She indicates that *metta* exists within her political party (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997). While her Western education has given Suu Kyi insight into the world outside Burma, she has attempted to come to terms with the two traditions. She has stated that even without the sophisticated techniques and methods of economic and political analysis common in the West, the Burmese could find answers to the terrible socio-economic conditions and political problems in Burma by turning to the words of the Buddha and applying them to their situation (Silverstein, 1996). This indicates that Suu Kyi accepts that her education cannot overcome the traditional attitudes of the Burmese.

Just recently, the State Peace and Development Council, formally the SLORC, announced that Suu Kyi’s detention had been extended, even though it was due to expire at the end of May 2007. At the current ASEAN meeting, the US have publicly criticised the Asian group for, “failing to bring enough pressure on Burma to restore democracy and free Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi” (ASEAN aligns, 2007, p. 12).

Has education enabled or disabled Aung San Suu Kyi? She has considerable influence at the grass-roots level in the form of public support, however, the military junta that controls Burma ignores Suu Kyi and her political party, implying the adherence to the Asian tradition of sameness and stability, ignoring a western educated woman and her ideas for change. Education has enabled Suu Kyi to achieve recognition by the international community of her struggle for human rights in Burma and because of her cross-cultural experience, place her on the world stage. These experiences may have allowed Suu Kyi self-actualisation as her patriotic passion shines through her actions, but despite her commitment to democracy and an unflinching faith in the Burmese people, there remains clear evidence that she is effectively isolated, caged and silenced by the military who intend to retain control of Burma. The military would seem to see her as an icon of the intruding West, as evidenced by her marriage to an Englishman and years spent living outside Burma. The full possibilities of what she wanted to achieve for the future may not become reality within her life-time and her writings may well constitute the most enduring testimony to Suu Kyi’s life and work. This study is surely evidence that there is now a “marble ceiling” preventing one educated woman from attaining her full potential and making a difference for her country and the society which is being denied basic human rights.

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