Local NGOs and their empowerment of women

A field study on the enforcement of women's political participation in Burma

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Abstract

This thesis intends to contribute cumulatively to the understanding of the circumstances that women's rights-focused NGOs work in when operating in a post-conflict country with an authoritarian regime. It also aims to argue on the importance of the NGOs' role to empower women by political participation under those circumstances and discuss why it's often very challenging for the mentioned NGOs to reach their goals. The country in focus for this study is Burma, where a two month field study has been carried out within the framework of Minor Field Study.

The empirical findings derive from qualitative semi-structured interviews in the field, with local Burmese NGOs which focuses on women's rights. The theoretical framework intertwine with the results from the inquiry, arguing that obstructiveness from the government and entrenched norms towards women will force the NGOs to continuously find new strategies to enforce an increase of women's political participation. Education at the grass root level, a mutual understanding between the NGOs and its donors, an extensive networking between NGOs, and a religious approach to the community when needed, will extensively strengthen the NGOs' possibility to succeed to increase women's political participation.

Key words: NGO, authoritarian regime, Burma, women, political participation
Number of words: 9910

Preface

Finally, I would like to phrase my deepest admiration for all those Burmese activists who, despite all challenges and adversities, struggle for a better life for Burmese women.

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Abbreviations

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women

KNWO – Karenni National Women's Organization

KWAT – Kachin Women's Association of Thailand

NGO – Non Governmental Organization

NSPAW - The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women

UNDP – United Nation Development Program

USDP – Union Solidarity and Development Party

WON – Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar

WPN – Women Peace Network - Arakan

1   Introduction

The women's rights-focused NGOs have become essential actors for the struggle of women's political empowerment in development countries. The NGOs provide what is called the 'missing link' between marginalized women and decision-makers in the development process. Furthermore "NGOs have often proven to be the most powerful (if not the only) voice against authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, repression, and injustice" (Jahar 2011, p. 8). Thus is the role of women's rights-focused NGOs crucial for the empowerment of women in countries which are in the beginning of their democratization process. Scholars argue though, that to enforce women's rights and their political participation in countries with authoritarian regimes and entrenched norms towards women is unified with great challenges for the NGOs (Hunt et. al. 2015).

The endured absence of women's representation in policy processes is recognized by numerous actors within the development field as a consisting and widespread problem. The absence preserve women's de-politicization which edge to women as victims instead of women as actors with influence in the political sphere (Hunt et al. 2015). "If women are not in the ceasefire discussions then women cannot raise their voices [about their needs and] the human rights violations will continue" (SBK 2015, p. 3).

The intention of this study is to contribute cumulatively to the understanding of NGOs´ role in the process of empowering women and their endeavor for women's political participation. The inquiry will strive to chart out how NGOs can work to achieve empowerment for women's political participation in a country which is recognized for its entrenched norms towards women, its religious fundamentalism and an authoritarian regime.

The selection of case is local NGOs in Burma[1], a country which is a former military dictatorship and which is step by step progressing on its way for democratization. Burma, which ratified the CEDAW in 1997, is one of few countries in the world where there's no substantial enforcement of laws conformable with the Convention, even though the country has ratified the document. The recommendations from the CEDAW Committee to work for essential equality between genders in Burma haven't been followed up even the slightest by the current regime, according to many Burmese women's rights-

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[1] Burma is sometimes referred to as Myanmar. However, in this study I have chosen to coherently use the name Burma.

focused NGOs. The current constitution in the country, that became effective in 2008, has been condemned by the opposition parties in Burma and by different human rights- and women's NGOs (UN 2015; GJC 2012; WSP 2009; Syahirah 2015, s. 520; WLB 2014).

This study relies on a theoretical framework which argues on the importance of women's rights focused NGOs in a political and societal climate such as in Burma. It profoundly discusses the challenges that those NGOs can come upon, and how to deal with them. The inquiry will endeavor to make sense of those challenges and examine how the NGOs can deal with them. Hence, are the data collection and empirical analysis relying on the understandings and narratives of Burmese women's rights-focused NGOs, carried out through qualitative semi-structured interviews in the field.

The NGOs' part in the process of enforcing women's political participation, in a country which is in the beginning of its democratization process, is relevant and important for the field of political science. There's a lack of research about the NGOs' significance and ability to influence the politics, especially in a country such as Burma. The knowledge about the contexts and the pressure that lies on those NGOs is, according to scholars, largely unexplored. Consequently, a field study about NGOs where the inquiry aims to make sense of how those NGOs can operate in such disadvantaged circumstances, is relevant because it raises awareness of the importance of those organizations. Further it can demonstrate how their role in the society may be fundamental for the struggle to change the entrenched norms towards women (Hailey – James 2004; Jahar 2011, p. 2).

1.1   Purpose and research question

The objective and purpose of this study is to examine how NGOs are working to enforce women's political participation in Burma, a country which is still afflicted by conflicts and which is in the beginning of its democratization process. The study intends to contribute to the knowledge on how the NGOs can operate in empowering women by enforcing their political participation. It further intends to answer on how the NGOs can conduct when there's a limitation of women's ability to affect the political arena and how to deal with those challenges. The research question this study intends to answer is following:

How do the Burmese NGOs enforce the increasing of women's political participation in Burma, what obstacles do they come upon and how can they deal with those?

For this study to reach cumulativity there is also a broader and more general research question which follows: *How do NGOs enforce their agenda in disadvantaged circumstances?*

1.2   Disposition

This study takes its offset by shortly chart out the political landscape in Burma and its modern history. Thereafter the political environment for women in Burma is defined, followed by a short description on the climate for Burmese NGOs and the NGOs that figure as informants for this study. Subsequently the study immerse into the inquiry's methodological and epistemological framework where discussions on the choice of method, the spread of sample and ethical considerations for the field work takes place. The theory is thereafter deepen into, starting with the theory on why women's rights-focused NGOs are well needed for enforcing women's political participation and how post-conflict areas are challenging to operate in. A theory on how NGOs can work to achieve their goals in an environment with entrenched norms towards women, obstructive authorities and a rigid religious community, thereafter takes place.

Subsequently, the empirical analysis discusses the empirical findings (ergo the interview material and to some extent the observation material). The empirical analysis strives to contribute cumulatively to the mentioned theoretical framework and to make sense of how the NGOs, questioned for the inquiry, can enforce women's political participation in Burma.

2   Background

Burma has a long history of military dictatorship. The country became independent from Great Britain in 1948 and thereafter followed years of civil war between the ethnic groups in the country. The military coup took place in 1962 and the junta ruled the country with an authoritarian and undemocratic agenda for over 50 years, until 2012 (UD 2013; Sida 2015).

The official statement is that the military junta was resolved in 2011 and that the civil government USDP since then governs the country, referring to their rule as being a 'disciplinary democracy'. Notwithstanding the military still controls much of the political decisions in the country since they are guaranteed, by the constitution, a fourth of the seats in the Burmese parliament. The new constitution was adopted and elected in 2008 on, what many argue, an undemocratic way. The government prohibited over 500.000 from voting, made it difficult for people to get access to vote and faked the results of the vote in favor for the new constitution to be elected (Sida 2015; UD 2013; ICTJ 2009).

2.1   Burmese women and the politics

In 1997 the regime ratified the CEDAW, which obliged them to take action to end the discrimination against women in Burma. The Burmese regime has since then been strongly criticized for doing nothing, or very little, to follow the obligations they agreed to, when ratifying the CEDAW. Aye Win, National Information Officer at United Nations Information Centers, states that greater achievement must be made to guarantee full involvement and participation of Burmese women through all divisions and stages in the peace process in Burma. The commitments that have been made by ratifying the CEDAW must be translated into concrete actions and by doing so ensure that the women's participation in politics goes forward (UD 2013; Win 2015).

Men working for the regime argue that issues concerning women's rights have to wait. The Gender Equality Networks describe in their report from 2013 that there's no specific legislation for equality between genders in Burma to prevent discrimination of women due to their gender or protecting the rights of women (GEN 2013).

The NSPAW (National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women) was launched in 2013 by the Burmese Government with the assistance of Myanmar Women's Affair and Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs Association, after pressure from the CEDAW Committee. The NSPAW is said to show the government's commitment and vision of empowering women in Burma and have been congratulated by UNDP to be the milestone of a tool that's needed to promote gender equality in the country (UNDP 2013; CSW 2013). NGOs interviewed for this study argue though that the NSPAW doesn't fulfill its objective and that the agreements in the document are far from enough to make any changes for girls and women in Burma (WON 2015; KNWO 2015).

Though the country has ratified the CEDAW more than a decade ago and even though the new plan for women empowerment (NSPAW) is launched by the government, it's not at all reaching the people, especially in rural areas. More than 9 out of 10 women are being battered by their husbands, a number confirmed by one of the informants in the inquiry (SBK 2015; WON 2015).

> Those kind of problem are deeply traditionally and customarily formalized, women are at the time not aware of raising their women rights, they don't know anything at the grass root level, that's why they think that it is their fate [to be battered by their husbands], they think that that is the life of being married, to be violated by men, it's the normal way of marriage (WON 2015).

NGOs which are working for women's rights continuously lobbies for influence and for the right to participate in peace building committees and agreements of ceasefire with ethnic armed groups. The response is though that gender issues have to wait until those agreements have been settled. Further, Burma has one of the world's lowest representations of women in parliament. In the parliament on national level, before the election in November 2015, only 4,42 % were women and in subnational level they were 2,83 % whereas in township level the women answered for 0 % (SBK 2015; Minoletti 2014, s.1,8).

2.2   The Burmese women NGOs

Even though the climate for women is harsh, concerning the ability to influence and be represented in decision making institutions, there's an extensive number of active NGOs that are working for women's rights. Many Burmese women's rights-focused NGOs were founded in the end of the 20th century and beginning of 21th century, due to instability in the Burmese politics and the lack of rights for women. Many of the organizations had to operate in exile since the workers security couldn't be guaranteed inside the Burmese boarders (WPN 2015; WON

2015; KWAT 2016). In the coming section are the women's rights-focused NGOs, which are figuring as informants for this inquiry, presented.

2.2.1 Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar (WON)

WON is a network based organization, consisting of 30 member organizations, and was founded in 2008. The organization network has three approaches: the women's rights approach, the network based approach and the women community approach. WON operates both in the states that are still afflicted by armed conflicts and in the post-conflict states. The organization network has its head office in Yangon, Burma (WON 2015).

2.2.2 Women Peace Network – Arakan (WPN)

The WPN is a NGO with a focus on women's rights, security and peace, especially with the objective of the Arakan state in Burma. The organization is largely focusing on local advocacy training on CEDAW and resolution 1325, and on political concepts. The organization's main goals in longer term are equality for women and peace in the country, on short term it is to educate women and encourage them to participate in elections so that women's political participation can be higher. The organization's head office is in Yangon, Burma (WPN 2015).

2.2.3 Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT)

KWAT is a NGO specialized on the women from the Kachin minority who lives in the Kachin State and Northern Shan state. The organization was established in 1999 because of the economic crises and political instability. The organization operates from Chiang Mai in northern Thailand but most of the grass root activities take place in northern Burma. KWAT is strongly working for gender equality and has a program for ending trafficking. They also have a women political empowerment program and are further working with health care and to educate people in rural areas about democracy and federalism (KWAT 2016).

2.2.4 Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO)

KNWO is a NGO which focuses on the women from the Karenni minority. The head office is in northern Thailand and the branch office in Loikaw, Burma. The organization is both working as service oriented and advocacy oriented. KNWO is combining service such as a safe house for women with advocacy training such as

education about women's rights. By doing so they can both provide care, counseling and legal advice combined with advocacy training. KNWO's main objectives are to work with women capacity building and to respond to women abuse (KNWO 2015).

3 Methodological and epistemological framework

The methodological appliance for this study is qualitative interviews conducted in Burma and northern Thailand. The interviews have a semi-structured character to give room for free and elaborated answers from the informants. The empirical research for this study focuses on the practice, experience and understanding of NGOs, which are working for women's rights in Burma.

Qualitative interviews with Burmese NGOs are chosen as the method for the study since it's considered to be a providing method for data collection. Interviews can lay out the experience and understanding of those being interviewed, therefor relying on interviews with Burmese NGOs can be rewarding. The interviews aim to both collect data of the course of events and conditions that the NGOs inform about, and therefore they should be referred to as informants. But the aim is also to collect the NGOs' subjective values and views; one could therefore argue that they should be referred to as respondents. However, it's often common to combine the two. Since the interviews' primary objective is to collect information rather than subjective values, the interviewees will be referred to as informants. Informant interviews are preferable when the aim of the study in first intends to collect information about the reality and how phenomena appear in particular circumstances (Teorell – Svensson 2012, p. 89; Esaiasson et.al. 2012, p. 227-228).

Qualitative interviews have the advantage of being able to register unexpected answers as well as giving the prospect to follow up. The strength of semi structured dialogue interviews is that the informants can elaborate their answers and that the questions can be adapted to the informants. Since the informants diverge in some characteristics and experiences the questions will diversify, even if they follow the same type of thematic framework. To reach high validity for the inquiry, ergo the absence of systematical error of measurement, the themes and thematic supportive questions follows the characteristic of the research question and the theoretical framework (Esaiasson et.al. 2012, p. 227-228; Teorell – Svensson 2012, p. 55).

The interviews consist of themes with supportive thematic questions which have been defined with the support of the theoretical framework. The purpose of this layout is to give the informants the possibility to elaborate their answers in their preferred direction (for the phenomena which the question concern). For the quality of the interviews they aim to follow the criteria of stimulating reflective

and relevant answers from the informant, short questions and long answers, and interpretation throughout the interview. Another factor for high quality during the interviews is the type of documentation. To record as documentation is considered preferable since the interviews in that case can be more of a dialogue than if the interviewer takes notes (Esaiasson et.al. 2012 p. 265-268; Roulston 2010).

To member check the interpretations with the informants will strengthen the validity as well as show awareness of adequate understanding of the informants' answers. In the post-interview phase the data will be transcribed accurately from the recorded documentation, it will thereafter be coded and categorized for the empirical analysis. The transcriptions are verbatim since it's considered to be raw data but for the sake of the informants the grammar mistakes are corrected when quoting them in the study (Roulston 2010; Patton 2002, p. 441).

Vanner argues that interviews are one of many methods in research where power dynamics is manifestable, when in postcolonial countries (Vanner 2015). Since I, a university student from a western country, complete my field research by interviewing NGOs that are dependent on western donations, it puts me in a delicate position towards my informants. A position where neutrality is hard to achieve fully and where there might be a discrepancy between the informants' perceived reality and what they say during the interviews. The study's epistemological premise on how to reach knowledge lays on the assumption that informant interviews can chart the course of event and experiences to answer the study's research question. However, as argued by Roulston (2010), one must not consider interview research to lay out the absolute truth, which is not the ambition of this study either. The aim of the study is not to generalize on the experience of all NGOs, but from the ones which figurate in the research and what can be learned from their experiences.

This study will strive for cumulativity by answering the research question: *How do the Burmese NGOs enforce the increasing of women's political participation, what obstacles do they come upon and how can they deal with those?* and thereafter to some extent generalize from the results of the field work. But for the cause of cumulativity will the inquiry also strive to answer the second research question: *How do NGOs enforce their agenda in disadvantaged circumstances?* The generalized question intends to contribute to the discussion about NGOs' work in broader terms. Notable is that emerging into a generalized discussion about NGOs in disadvantaged circumstances worldwide is not the objective with this study, with that said it can however be rewarding to have a general discussion concerning the topic to strive for a cumulative result (Teorell – Svensson 2012, p. 281).

3.1   Spread of sample

The spread of sample for this study has been chosen with a centrality perspective, where centrally placed sources operate as informants. When having a centrality perspective the informants are primary sources, which make the study's data collection reliable (Esaiasson et al. 2012, p. 251, 258, 283). The informants are therefore chosen with a strategically selection where they have fulfilled criteria which are crucial for this study. Teorell and Svensson (2012, p. 84) argue that the researcher oneself can choose informants based on central criteria for the inquiry.

For this study, the following criteria are required: the informants are women's rights-focused NGOs, their struggle for women's rights is focused on Burmese women and the NGOs are local organizations and not international ones. Thus the informants are operating for achieving resembled goals of empowering Burmese women and enforcing their political participation. In many other ways though, the informants are differing in several factors. First and foremost; some are concentrated on women of certain ethnic groups, endeavor to work for their ethnic rights as much as the women's rights. Secondly, some are operating in exile in northern Thailand while others are positioned inside Burma. The informants also diverge concerning their donors and what pressure they have upon themselves to deliver on behalf of what the Burmese women request or primarily on what the donor request. For the cause of empirical generalization the disparities in characteristic are intentionally while choosing the spread of sample. When a study has an intensive figure and characterizes of a handful semi structured interviews, with a strategically spread of sample, one can generalize empirically for the population's collective experience. When the informants differ a lot from each other but still inform of a mutual understanding of certain phenomena or issues, one can generalize for the population (Teorell – Svensson 2012, p. 44).

3.2   Ethical considerations

Since the study is carried out within the framework of minor field studies the study takes an approach of not only political science but also of development research, thus it is important to contemplate upon the ethics in field research. "[E]thical considerations are fundamental to the approach to development cooperation and research" (Mikkelsen 2005, p. 325).

Concerning the informant's integrity, all of them were informed of the possibility of confidentiality in the study. They were all given the chance to claim anonymity for their names or their organizations' names in the study; whereas some declined anonymity for their own name but all approved that the name of their organization

could be shown when citing them in the study. The question of recording during the interviews was also asked, to respect privacy if wanted, whereas all of the informants approved the documentation of recording. The consent of confidentiality and documentation was asked orally before the interviews were initiated with the informants.

The places of the interviews were always suggested by the informants and took always place at their offices, either at the head office or at the branch office. Some of the organizations wanted to hold the interview between me and the General Secretary or between me and the Office Manager, but some of the interviews were also held as group interviews, where several coworkers from the organization participated at the same time. The organizations themselves always chose which person(s) who should take part in my interviews, all for the convenience of the informants and to make the interview session dynamical (Esaiasson et. al. 2012, p. 268).

All the informants were given the possibility to read the study before it got published for them to feel more comfortable during the interview sessions (Roulston 2010). My hope was that this opportunity could minimize the possible discrepancy between what the informant considered as the honest answers to my questions and what they actually answered.

Concerning my objectivity towards my informants during the interview, I chose not to take position towards their statements during the interview. However, since some questions were of subjective and sensitive character the situation sometimes required that I sympathized with the informant. At other times the situation required my objectivity. Patton (2002, p. 47-48) argues that qualitative inquiry can be limited by the researcher's distant position to the informant or respondent and that openness sometimes may be preferable to reach those questions that might be sensitive. To emerge into a personal nature in the interview can spur the informants or respondents to reveal things that are of delicate nature.

3.3   Delimitation

When studying NGOs' struggle for gender equality in democratization processes, there's many different fields to immerse into. The recurring argument is though that the representation of women in the political dialogue is crucial for the ending of abuses against women. Thus, women must be allowed to participate in political institutions for the women abuses to come to an end (SBK 2015). With this argument, the delimitation of women's rights will be focused on the right to political participation.

The spread of sample is concentrated on local NGOs since they are born out of the local civil society and not by international actors. In the theoretical framework for this thesis it's argued that it's the local NGOs that provide the missing link between policy makers and discriminated women (Becker 2015; Hunt et al. 2015).

For the inquiry, four NGOs are operating as informants. The intention was though that more NGOs should participate in interviews for this study. Before departure to Burma I had correspondence with five more organizations, which for different reasons were not able to meet me when I arrived. With four interviews one could argue on the validation of my results, however can empirical generalization be done with a few interviews, if the informants are carefully chosen (Teorell - Svensson 2012, p. 44).

When having interviews with four NGOs, one could argue that an extensive triangulation between interviews and participatory observations would strengthen the inquiry's reliability (ergo the absence of unsystematical error of measurement) (Patton 2002, p. 21-23). The security situation in Burma is though unsure both for me as a scholar when completing interviews and for the NGOs when they carry out their work. When entering Burma one must sign a document where one promises not to interfere in Burma's domestic matters. When having my interviews with the informants inside Burma I considered that I truly interfered in the country's domestic interests and matters. Therefore I had to be very careful when going to the organizations' offices, approaching the interview sessions and what kind of questions I could ask without getting me or the informants in any serious trouble. Therefore the direct observations were very limited inside Burma, but could be performed to some extent in northern Thailand.

3.4 Participatory observations

To strengthen the quality of the data collection, direct observations has to some extent been carried out in the field work. It's common for field researcher to combine qualitative interviews with participatory observations as triangulation (Esaiasson et.al. 2012, p. 304). Observations will set off where there's a limitation to what people say and to entirely understand a complex situation. When using observations as triangulation with the semi structured interviews, the field work will enable to reflect on insights that cannot be obtained by using only interviews. Thus will the observations only be a complement for when the interviews don't fully cover the settings (Patton 2002, p. 21-23). The participatory observations for this study have been taking place in Loikaw and Chiang Mai through following the NGOs' work with campaigning and their educational material. Further one could argue that visiting the offices and follow how the NGOs operated and acted was a part of the observation as well.

4 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study consists of two segments. The first one argues on the importance of NGOs for women's political empowerment, in a country with an authoritarian regime. It also raises a discussion on the importance of a mutual understanding between organizations and donors. The second one charts how NGOs can emerge and become well-operated in disadvantaged political circumstances, how to accomplish an empowerment of women regarding political participation, what obstacles the NGOs may come upon and how to deal with those. It also raises the discussion of whether NGOs should distance themselves from the mainstream politics and from the religious community or if they should engage with them.

4.1 The importance of NGOs for women's empowerment

NGOs' struggle for women's political participation in post-conflict countries, often in post-independence era, is not seldom shaped by the entrenched social norms towards them. By becoming visual in the public sphere, e.g. in the politics, women can challenge the traditional norms that confine them. In cases where women do have a seat in the politics in the political climate mentioned, they might often be excluded from the crucial decision making and from central questions. Even though if authoritarian regimes in post-conflict countries, with entrenched norms towards women, have a women's wing in the party, the women rarely have much room to make their voices heard (Becker 2015; Jahar 2011, p. 24, 32, 78).

NGOs are argued to be the missing link for women's empowerment in countries which are afflicted by armed conflict or are post-conflict areas. The participation of women in policy processes is crucial for the realization of equality between genders, but the processes in post-conflict states are intensely slow. For the agenda of women's rights to even be raised in the political context, there's a need of influence by international agencies and institutions (Becker 2015; Hunt et al. 2015). Thus is the role of donor governments important.

The decision makers and women from NGOs need to interact and the women's participation requires to be systematically implemented in the policy institutions and agencies. "The participation of women's rights organizations offers huge

potential for equalizing power-imbalanced relations between donors and people"
(Hunt et al. 2015, p. 349). Scholars consequently underline the importance of a
centralization of local women's rights NGOs in policy making processes in
countries with authoritarian regimes (Hunt et al. 2015; Slenes 2014).

Women's rights-focused NGOs need to enter the participatory processes in an
early stage since it will empower the participants and ensure a greater chance of
equality in the decision making. This will give the women from the NGOs the
possibility to share their thoughts and perspectives in the processes of
implementation, evaluation and conceptualization in policy making. The NGOs'
ability to participatory development and to achieve equality between genders in
policy making and within political participation relies on reliance by government
authorities. In the case of countries with firm and authoritarian regimes, which are
not willing to reform, it is very difficult for the NGOs to implement their agenda
(Hunt et al. 2015).

4.2 The advocacy NGOs – and which obstacles they front

Jahar (2011) charted how well-operated NGOs, in similar political environments
as Burma, worked to achieve their goals for women's political participation. She
raised the complications that the NGOs struggled with in countries which were
not yet democracies, which were formed under strict religious norms and cultures,
and which were post-conflict areas. She discussed the problems concerning that
both people and decision makers were skeptical to the empowerment of women
and how entrenched norms were difficult to work against (Jahar 2011).

Jahar thorough explained how a NGOs could establish itself under a strict and
authoritarian military regime, by mainly different approaches to the religious
community and an extensive networking with other NGOs. She exemplified how
a NGO became prosperous by carrying out to derive from advocacy rather than to
be service-oriented. The NGO in the example operated at both micro, meso and
macrolevel. The microlevel was referred to as the grass root level where the NGO
worked with information and education to locals. The mesolevel was referred to
as the intermediary level which operated at community level with organizations,
local government institutions and activists. The macrolevel, also known as the
legislative and decision-making level, focused on policy making (Jahar 2011, p.
75-76).

The three levels which were charted by Jahar (2011) had different agendas, targets
and goals, but were in the same time floating into each other. The coordinators at

the mesolevel were having dialogues with the local government institutions as well as other NGOs which were working at the local level (Jahar 2011, p. 76). Networking and collaboration was crucial in the case of NGOs operating successfully at the mesolevel, according to Jahar (2011).

To increase women's political participation, the NGO had a strategy on the microlevel to go door to door in rural areas and give education to women. The method was associated with many difficulties; the men did often not let the women from the NGO even meet their wives or daughters. That women would be active in politics was often seen as unacceptable, the entrenched norms towards women did at many times prevent the NGOs from carrying out their activities. Jahar (2011) claimed that it's grounded on a view where men don't see women as equal individuals. The entrenched norms of a woman's role are preventing her from being visual in the public arena. To be visual in the arena is considered to be well needed to change attitudes and norms towards expectations on women. It is said that women's "visibility in the public arena will enhance their status and change social attitudes towards them" (Jahar 2011, p. 79, 81-82; Becker 2015; Curnow 2015).

To promote education for women is argued to be a successful strategy in the goal of enforcing women's political participation. In cases where it's traditionally uncommon for women to get education, especially at higher level than elementary school, it's effective to let female teachers come to the women's homes. The NGOs part in the processes is to locate where the home education is needed (commonly in the rural areas), and to arrange for female teachers to go there and educate. The NGOs could even be the teachers themselves. The education should also consist of political character, by educating women about their rights and how the politics works. This has shown to encourage them to candidate and has been seen to have a great correlation with the success of enforcing women's political participation (Elias 2015; Slener 2014; Jahar 2011, p. 25, 77, 84).

On the mesolevel, the community networking is crucial for promoting women's political participation. By having a network of organizations at community level with representatives that people trust, it's easier to gain attention for the NGO's agenda. On the mesolevel there's also the aspect of making yourself reliable as a NGO. It's often seen that women's rights-focused NGOs refer to arguments others than pure equality between genders in the political sphere, as a method to appear trustworthy. It's more common that the NGOs base their arguments of increasing women's participation in the politics as a cause for achieving something else. To gain acceptance of the notion of women participation in the politics it's often common that the NGOs lean on arguments concerning that women tend to be more peaceful. They argue that to have more peaceful individuals are positive for the political outcome. There are also arguments such as that a country cannot achieve democracy if there's no women represented in politics (Elias 2015; Jahar 2011, p. 84-86).

Thus it's for prosperous NGOs often more common to promote an increasing of women's political participation as a reason of apprehension for everyone's welfare, and not for the struggle of gender equality. The instrumental arguments of economic worth and the need for promoting women's participation are more commonly used than the feminist argument of equality for the cause of justice (Jahar 2011, p. 88-89).

The NGOs' struggle for women's political participation is often fought in a climate that restricts their actions in many ways. Therefore they must "earn to become adept at recognizing these limitations while finding new ways to circumvent them and push their agendas forward" (Jahar 2011, p. 17). The authoritarian government often obstructs the NGOs by working against them. In some cases, an authoritarian regime can be seen as capable of operating in favor of women's empowerment. More commonly though, the regime is subversive towards the women's rights-focused NGOs, they work against them and are not giving any room for women's empowerment. Therefore, the NGOs have to rely on outside funding from donors to be able to carry out their work (Jahar 2011, p. 8, 40-41, 78-79).

The relationship between the donors and the NGOs can thus be essential for the survival of the organizations. It's argued that those NGOs, which are familiar with working under the donor's framework, are more likely to be invited for consultation. The work carried out by the NGOs has to rely on experience and understanding of what's needed in the field. The women affected by certain reforms or programs, carried out by the NGOs with the funds from donors, must themselves be a part and have a say in the matter. If the NGOs are too controlled by the donors, it might lead to misjudgments and inaccurate efforts (Hunt et. al. 2015).

4.2.1 The religious community

How entrenched the religious and cultural norms are in the society and how those norms regard gender equality, and more accurate how those regard an increasing of women's representation in the politics, set the stage for how NGOs can work to enforce women's political participation. Thus is the discussion of whether the NGOs should work within the religious framework or disengage with it, central for how they carry out their work. "Religious fundamentalism directly impacts not only the kinds of activities that NGOs are involved in, but also how these activities and the NGO community are viewed by the larger population" (Jahar 2011, p. 13). Thus is the relationship between the NGOs and the religious community central for the discussion on how the NGOs are working to promote women's political participation in a country which is strongly influenced by rigid religious norms (Jahar 2011, p. 13; Slenes 2014).

Since NGOs don't operate in a political and religious vacuum, the activities that they immerse and emerge into will be characterized by the environment they work in. The NGOs, which are operating under previously mentioned circumstances, must compromise when going from vision and agenda to real actions and activities. If they cannot achieve to carry out their work so that it can be accepted by the religious community the NGOs may have difficulties to convince the people and by failing to do so, they are even more in upwind than before (Slenes 2014; Jahar 2011, p. 1, 14).

4.2.2 Joining the mainstream politics or distance oneself?

To reach the goal of improving women's rights the NGOs must campaign for women's political participation. "Women must become part of government structure in order to bring about any meaningful change in their lives" (Jahar 2011, p. 79).

Ferguson claimed that a feminist approach by the opposition was not compatible with bureaucracy. The question is then if the NGOs, which are struggling for women's rights, should engage in politics and thereby recognize the state's political arena to be an influential and crucial platform for enforcing the women's rights to political participation. It can also be the contrary, that the proponents (in this case the NGOs) consider a strategy of disengagement with the state's political bureaucracy to be the effective and appropriate way of dealing with feminist approaches (Slenes 2014; Ferguson 1984, p. 180).

The NGOs which consider distancing themselves from the mainstream politics would consider the political bureaucracy in the country to be unable to promote and deal with demands by feminist actors. Those NGOs would consider an increase of women's participation in political institutions to be an ineffective way to deal with the agenda of strengthening women's rights. It is argued though, that the first scenario is more effective in the case of prosperous NGOs. To join the general and mainstream politics, even though if it's governed by an authoritarian regime, have become the somehow amended way of acting among NGOs which are working for women's rights. The reason is due to the constant failure of adequate distribution of women's rights where the democracy is only a façade of the government structure and the ruling party (Jahar 2011, p. 79; Slenes 2014).

4.3   Summary

To summarize the theoretical framework; the interaction between NGOs and decision makers is essential for the NGOs possibility to empower women for political participation prosperously. However, in the case of women's rights-focused NGOs in post-conflict countries with authoritarian regimes, the decision makers are often obstructing the NGOs rather than consociating with them. But even so, it's often preferable that NGOs join the mainstream politics instead of detach themselves.

The entrenched religious norms towards women are often hindering NGOs from working effectively. Thus they may carry out their activities with a religious approach towards the community to be able to reach the marginalized women at the grass root level. Further, networking between NGOs can strengthen their work since their collaboration can increase attention towards the women's rights-focused agenda.

The mutual understanding between donors and the NGOs are fundamental for the NGOs' activities to be accurate for what's needed in the field. If the donors set up improbable demands it may lead to improper interventions. One of the most prosperous tools, to empower women for political participation, is to educate women about their rights and about political concepts. By doing so the NGOs both encourage and empower women to be more visual in the public arena and to know what demands they can make on changes for their lives.

5   Empirical analysis

This section will present the empirical findings during the field study and hence central selections from the interviews with the informants. These will intertwine with the theoretical framework and recurrently resubmit and follow the intention of answering the study's research questions. The sections of the analysis will discuss how entrenched norms towards women, the government's obstructiveness and the religious community in different ways oppose the NGOs. It will also discuss the NGOs' strategies to circumvent those complications and how grass root education to women, a well-balanced understanding between the NGOs and the donors and networking at community level will facilitate and promote their implementations and hence the enforcement of women's political participation.

5.1   Entrenched norms, slowness and the politician's disinterest of empowering women

 "The problem is that men always are chosen before women to participate in the politics, even in cases where the women have more knowledge than the men" says the informant from WPN (2015). All informants witness the slowness of women empowering as a cause of men's incomprehension to understand why women need to have a say and seat in the politics. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, entrenched norms towards women may hinder the NGOs from prosperously implement their agendas.

The government's incomprehension is so vivid that "when we are talking about the women participation in peace process and women participation in politic like in parliament, they are just thinking that their wives can participate" says the informant from KWAT. "They are understanding it in a different way" she continuous and laugh, "we are not talking about women participation as their wives" (KWAT 2016). Thus, the lack of understanding from authority, such as the government, seems to be obvious but could also be understood as that they appoint their wives to be able to have control over what decisions that are being made. KWAT argues that the newly founded Myanmar Women Affair in Burma is formed by the military and that most of the women are wives of the military; "all of the leaders of that Myanmar Women Affair are the wives of the general, officer or military. So how can they understand the women from the ground? They cannot" she says, arguing that military wives have very little insight to what

marginalized women in rural areas need (KWAT 2016). This could be connected to the argument, in the theoretical framework, claiming that even though authoritarian regimes have a women's wing, those women have very little power to make any changes.

As mentioned earlier, the Myanmar Women Affair is one of the organizations behind The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) that was launched in 2013. The NSPAW is one of the actions from the government side to show that they are following the restrictions from the CEDAW Committee and that they are implementing in line with what was promised. But as understood from the informants during the interviews, the new plan is far from reaching the issue of preventing discrimination against women. "We show ministers that it's not concerning specific for women" WON (2015) describe, referring to the organization's work at the macrolevel, and continue by explaining that they are using the NSPAW more as a cover-up than a tool. "We can rely on it [the NSPAW] as pretending that it's for women and based on our guidelines, we pretend that we are implementing directly to this plan" says WON (2015). Hence, WON is pretending to join the mainstream politics in that manner by relying on NSPAW from the government as a cover-up tool for their activities.

Thus the NSPAW, according to the informants, are not the tool that was promised and the government is not taking its responsibility to fulfill the obligations followed by ratifying the CEDAW. "The Burmese government women group cannot take action to the military government because their husbands are in the military, so that's why only the outside women organizations can fight for the women's rights" says one of the informants from KWAT, charting out how the so called "disciplinary-democracy" is still in the stranglehold of the military (KWAT 2016).

As mentioned in the Background chapter, the UNDP has congratulated the Burmese government for taking actions to follow the demands and requirements needed after ratifying the CEDAW. But according to WON, the Burmese laws are not at all in line with the recommendations in CEDAW. The informant from WON argues that the government has a total responsibility to promote the women's rights, at all levels, but that the government transition from military dictatorship to disciplinary democracy, as they call it themselves, is only a symbolic transition and that one can argue that it is partly just an implementation activity. Further she says that the country isn't at all only going forward towards a more free and democratic country, but instead that some of the signs from the government, such as the religious law, make the country go backwards. "How can the government side dare to say that all of their laws are in line with the CEDAW!?" says the informant from WON (2015).

5.2 How the government and the military oppose the NGOs

One of the biggest challenges, commonly mentioned for all the informants, was the counteraction by the government. "When we go to the community to give awareness training, the government is controlling, we can't do it everywhere", "all the time they are watching us" says KNWO, referring to when the organization carry out its work at the microlevel (KNWO 2015). To continuously be watched and followed by the government side limits them in their work, says all the questioned NGOs. "Every minute every second we are violated" says one of the informants. Another one claims that the community leaders are afraid to let them educate women about politics because of fear of the consequences from the government or the military. The counteraction by the authorities is once again shown to obstruct the NGOs in their work, as the theoretical framework likewise argued.

WON argues that the government is funding fake organizations to get the donations from the west into their own pockets.

> "The government declare and form a lot of fake organizations […] the government side declare 'please don't support exile group, it is better if the donations go to the community instead' so the exile civil society organizations are really in shortage because of government advocacy" (WON 2015).

Thus, the informant explains how a lot of the donor money from outside goes to the government and military instead of to where it is needed. She continues by explaining how most of the donations to the NGOs come from donor governments and that the organizations are depended on those donations to be able to sustain their work. "No way that we can get government side to support us, that's why we have to rely on the donor" says WON (2015).

To be able to successfully achieve in enforcing women's political participation and better equality between genders in policy making, as a NGO, is dependent on the reliance by the government authorities, according to the theoretical framework. Thus is the situation in Burma truly challenging for the NGOs since, it is very difficult for the NGOs, in a country with a government which is not willing to reform. Consequently one can argue that the governments' antagonizing lead to a climate in Burma where the NGOs have a hard time to carry out their work and constantly needs to find new strategies.

To discuss if the government's actions obstructed the NGOs' work were in almost all cases a very sensitive subject, whereas some chose not to answer at first or at other times one could hear the change of their tone while they were speaking. One

informant lead off by answering that the government did not oppose them in any way but later on mentioned many circumstances where they felt obstructed by the government side. A recurring strategy to pass round the issue of the governments' obstruction was to pretend that the activities carried out in the community were under the religious flag, rather than of training for political empowerment character. KWAT explained how their strategy is to approach the community leaders, ergo at the mesolevel; "when we organize the training we are approaching to our community leaders and which mostly are religious leaders, and then they'll organize it with people like under religious activity, it's a big challenge" (KWAT 2016). What the informants experience with the rigid religious and cultural norms in Burma are, as argued in the theoretical framework, a challenge for those NGOs which want to enforce women's political participation. The relationship between the NGOs and the religious leaders is crucial when wanting to approach to the people, especially in rural areas. This is essential both for the acceptance from the community leaders but also from the people. Thus, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, using a religious language and approach can be an effective tool to reach the community.

Even though the informants argue that the government is working against them, many of them claim that joining the mainstream politics is the best way to make a change for women's political participation. The informant from WPN explains how they are mostly trying to engage in the mainstream politics but that they also work from outside and influence from distance. When asking why engaging with mainstream politics is preferable she answers:

> "Women need to be participating in the politics in all stages
> for there to be any change for women's rights, women in our
> society are being listened to but are not taken serious and
> what they say are not taken for consideration" (WPN 2015)

The informant continues by saying "Women must be able to make their own decisions, without their men or the community telling them how to think and what to do". Hence, women's visibility, action and participation in the political sphere is believed to be the primarily approach to gain acceptance for women's rights, and needs to be taken seriously (WPN 2015). As argued in the theoretical framework, joining the mainstream politics may often be seen as one of the most effectual ways to promote women empowerment. An increase of women in the government structure will eventually change the gender structure.

When asking the informant from WON if she considers that the best approach, to enforce women's political participation, is to join the mainstream politics or to work and influence from distance she answers that they have to use all the strategies that they can. "We cannot use only a one way approach; we have to do everything we can, both outside of politics but also from within" (WON 2015).

5.3 The donors – why the linkages and mutual understanding is crucial

The informants picture very different views on their donor's role. WON's narratives about its donors depict how they have a lot more to say about the organization's work than is desired. She explains how the workers in WON are totally overwhelmed by the donor's demands, on exact reports of dates and activities that the organizations implements in the rural areas. She continues by explaining how it's difficult for the donors to understand and know what has to be done inside Burma compared to other developing countries: "the practice is totally different in other developing countries, so that's why some of the settings and implementations must be decentralized" (WON 2015). WON's recital of the organization's relationships with its donors shows strongly how the donors and the organization aren't agreeing on which activities to prioritize in the country. The donors are controlling what kind of work WON should focus on. I ask her if they can operate without those donors, and she answers that they are dependent on the donations. "We cannot sustain without the donors, that's why we have to rely on their budget" (WON 2015). WON's narrative concerning its donors truly correspond with what was argued in the theoretical framework; that a mutual understanding between the NGO and its donors is key for the efforts to be put where they are needed.

KWAT picture a totally different story, arguing that the donors don't control them at all.

> "[W]e have our stand you know. Some donors like to control but if it is that kind of donor we don't accept them […] some outsiders think that we are under donor control and concept and that we follow what the donors want us to change, but we would never, we have never been controlled by the donor. […] We will do what our people need; we just follow the request from the people from inside, from the grass root people from the ground" (KWAT 2016).

One can argue that KWAT's relationship with its donor is built on what the people ask for, through the NGO. Hence can the donations be placed where the people and the organization consider them to be most accurate.

KNWO on the other hand, explains how their donor's requirements resulted in forcing them to open a branch office inside Burma, even if they preferred to operate from northern Thailand because of the security risk inside Burma (KNWO 2015). The informants' different narratives show how falling under the demands of the donors, as argued in the theoretical framework, can lead to misguide efforts. If the organizations have the chance to turn demanding donors down, they can engage in the work that they truly believe in.

5.4 Education at the grass root level

All informants interviewed for the study claim that education on grass root level is the most crucial and effective tool for NGOs to empower women in long term. The NGOs' experience goes hand in hand with what was argued in the theoretical framework. By educating women about the political situation in the country, what democracy is and how the constitution work, the NGO KWAT encourage women from the Kachin state and northern Shan state to take more place in the public arena and to candidate for elections. When asking if there are any concrete examples of the effectiveness of their program, they say: "we have founded the Kachin women union based in Kachin state. And then one of the leaders from that Kachin women union is a represent of the Kachin State Democratic Party, now she has won" (KWAT 2016). Their example show how a NGO's presence and struggle for educating women about politics and their right to participate in the politics can have concrete results. To encourage women, by education, to participate in the political life and be more visual in the public arena can lead to changing norms about women, which is also argued in the theoretical framework.

KNWO explains how they use their safe house, where exposed women of the Karenni minority can hide, as a place to educate women about their rights. "We are counseling there, giving education about politics and legal guidance" (KNWO 2015). By giving political education to those women they can help the women not just by hiding them and keeping them safe, but also through empowerment by giving knowledge about politics and about their rights. As stated in the theoretical framework, scholars argue that there's a great correlation between educating women about their rights as well as different political aspects and the success of enforcing women's political participation.

5.5 The importance of networking

All the NGOs interviewed for the inquiry said that networking with other organizations is an important factor for becoming prosperous. WON describes though how they have to operate their networking with a low profile: "we are hiding because as a network organization we cannot register" (WON 2015). As mentioned in the theoretical framework, networking at the community level is considered crucial for enforcing women's political participation. Consequently WON prioritize networking even though the organization cannot register and therefore has to network with great precaution. Through networking with their member organizations WON has been able to collect data to rapport to the CEDAW Committee, "this time is the first time so that's why we are very proud of our organizations" she says (WON 2015). Networking has in WON's case

shown to have a very successful outcome. Hence networking is, as argued by in the theoretical framework, an important factor for NGOs to gain attention for their agenda. For the NGOs figuring in the inquiry for this thesis, networking is a much needed method to reach the goals of increasing women's political participation.

6   Conclusion

Women's rights-focused NGOs are important, if not crucial, actors for the empowerment of women and the enforcing of political participation in countries with authoritarian regimes. Burma, a country where women are strongly afflicted by discrimination against them, has a long way ahead to reach the demands from the CEDAW Committee. Little has been done from the government side to follow the obligations after ratifying the CEDAW. Further, the new rapport launched (the NSPAW) is condemned by the Burmese women's rights-focused NGOs to not reach its goals of ending discrimination against women.

The regime's willingness to assist the NGOs may be settling to whether the organizations can carry out their work in the way which would be the most prosperous. When the NGOs get opposed by the government, they have to find other strategies for their activities. Even though, when the government counteracts the NGOs, they still argue that joining the mainstream politics is the preferable way to enforce women's political participation. Women have to take place in the politics in order to make any meaningful changes for themselves.

The research question for this study was: *How do the Burmese NGOs enforce the increasing of women's political participation in Burma, what obstacles do they come upon and how can they deal with those.* The NGOs for the inquiry argued that encouraging women to be more visual in the public arena will enhance the social attitudes and norms towards them. Entrenched norms are often difficult to work against and are one of the greatest challenges mentioned by the NGOs. To empower women, political education for women at the grass root level is said to be one of the most effective approaches and has shown results for the Burmese women's political participation.

Further, the mutual understanding between donors and NGOs is crucial for the work to be prosperous. The resources are easily misled if the donors have too much to say about the NGOs' agenda and work. To maintain an extensive network between the NGOs is also argued to be one of the essential factors to implement their work prosperously. Through networking the NGOs increase attention for their agenda and become more socially accepted, both by the people and by the religious community. By utilizing a religious approach, the NGOs can converge towards the community and consequently implement their activities prosperously.

All approaches mentioned above may, as argued in the theoretical framework and by the informants for this inquiry, lead to a greater and more enhanced political

participation for women in Burma. Resubmitting to the second and more general research question for this study: "*How do NGOs enforce their agenda in disadvantaged circumstances*", one could draw the conclusion that NGOs in disadvantaged circumstances persistently must find new strategies, and by doing so often reach to the existing religious and political landscape.

6.1 Reflections on the field study

To perform interviews in the field were very providing. My presumption is that I would never reach the same quality of my interviews if they would be completed via for example Skype. To be located in the field intensely increased my understanding and knowledge. It provided valuable experiences that, in my view, could increase the value of this study. I consider the four interviews in Burma and northern Thailand to be very qualitative and with many profound reflections and much detailed information from my informants. Many of the informants expressed their wish of me bringing their stories home to Sweden, and by publishing them - raise their voices. However, due to the scope of this study, a lot of their narratives, which reflected on the marginalized women's situation in Burma, were not discussed during the empirical analysis. My hope is though, that the issues discussed in this thesis may, to some extent, increase the understanding of the difficulties that challenge women's rights-focused NGOs in Burma and how they may deal with those to increase women's political participation in the country. An increase can hopefully, in the future, make the lives for Burmese women better.

6.2 Suggestion for further research

Since this study only focuses on a handful of Burmese NGOs, further research can preferably immerse into the work of women's rights-focused NGOs in other developing countries. As this study has strived for cumulativity it is suggested that the results of this study only is a fragment on how NGOs can work under disadvantaged circumstances to enforce women's political participation. By carrying out similar interviews in resembling political climates for women, one can reach a consensus on what challenges these organizations are facing and how they may deal with those. By further immerse into this field, one can reach an understanding concerning which conditions women's rights-focused NGOs are operating in, what part they play in changing the women's rights and the entrenched norms towards women in developing countries with authoritarian regimes.

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