The narrative of Women's Empowerment

- A narrative analysis of the global versus the local narrative of Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

Empowerment, and particularly women's empowerment, has become a catchphrase in the development industry over the past decades. The concept of women's empowerment was developed by critical feminists largely originated in the West, which has raised several questions about how women's empowerment translates across different cultures and contexts. This study intends to contribute cumulatively to the understanding of women's empowerment and how the global narrative interplays with the local narrative of women's empowerment in Myanmar.

The aim of this paper is to examine what narratives are prevailing in the report written about women's equality by Karen Women's Organization and what possibilities and limitations using different narratives can bring. The empirical findings indicate that global narrative points can be distinguished in the report which may be understood as a strategy towards being a part of the universal human rights community. The findings also suggest a different understanding of the concept of women's empowerment as opposed to the concept developed by feminists in the West. The notion of 'vernacularization' is discussed in relation to how Karen Women's Organization adapts the global narrative to the local context in order to make sense in specific circumstances in Myanmar.

Keywords: Narrative, Empowerment, Feminism, NGOs, Myanmar
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Abstract

1.   Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a popular phrase in the development industry and in the human rights discourse. It is a term used by grassroots organizations that are fighting to confront and transform unequal power relations between men and women. The term is however also used by coalitions of corporations, fashion companies, banks and global (and local) non-governmental organizations. As 'women's empowerment' has been used by several different actors who all have attached different meanings to it, the definition of women's empowerment is ambitious and can in some cases be misleading and vague. It has become an effective and favorite phrase for fundraising and fashion companies use the term for marketing purposes.[1]

This raises questions about women's empowerment and if the concept has been 'hijacked' by empty slogans and a magic bullet for development issues such as violence against women or women's low level of representation in political decisions.[2] It also raises questions about how the term translates across different contexts and cultures as the definition of empowerment is heavily influenced by western and feminist narratives.

As the awareness for women's rights and women's empowerment has increased, governments as well as organizations have formulated gender policies and strategies to combat gender-based inequalities. NGOs have an important role in the process of enforcing women's rights and empower women in economic and social qualities. They face many challenges in promoting empowerment effectively, particularly in countries that influences strongly by patriarchal norms.

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[1] Batliwala, S. (1994). The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action. In: Sen, G., Germain, A. & Chen, L. C. (Eds) (1994). *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights.* Boston: Harvard University Press, page 132

[2] Cornwall, A, Anyidoho, N-A ''Women's Empowerment: Contentions and contestations'' (2010) *Society for International Development,* page 146

In Myanmar[3], local non-governmental organizations play a significantly important role in empowering women. Not only due to the fact that Myanmar is at the beginning of a democratization process and women's representation is more important than ever, but also because Myanmar has no substantial enforcement of laws conformable with CEDAW even though the government has ratified the convention.

This study will examine the narrative of empowerment used by the Karen Women's Organization in Myanmar. My theoretical framework will rely on two segments, the first theory explores the feminist understanding of women's empowerment and the second theory explores how the 'women's rights packages' integrates in accordance with local norms.[4]

1.1.   Purpose, aim and research questions

As outlined in the introduction, women's empowerment is still an important and unfinished work where NGO's play a great role. However, challenges in relation to the work of NGO's towards women's empowerment have emerged. NGOs in general face numerous challenges in promoting gender equality, and rural NGOs in particular face even greater challenges. Understanding the importance of NGOs in a local context is essential. As the language of rights has increasingly been adopted by development institutions such as international development agencies and NGOs, more and more people realize their rights, and in particular women who have been outside the political and economic system and have maintained a lower status than their male counterparts.

An ever-growing debate is taking into account how global ideas are incorporated into local contexts. Greater attention has therefore been directed towards possible divergences between local cultures and the feminist narrative deriving from the Western culture. One

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[3] When the military junta decided to change the country's official name from Burma to Myanmar in 1990, a major discussion arose within the international community as to whether the name-change should be accepted or not. There is still no full agreement on this, but more and more countries are now beginning to accept the change and call the country Myanmar. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the term Myanmar (Burma). I will in my study use the term Myanmar since the Swedish authorities use Myanmar as well as the majority of the population in Myanmar.
[4] Becker, Margaret, 2015. ''Constructing SSLM: Insights from Struggles over Women's Rights in Nepal'', *Asean Studies Review,* vol. 39, no. 2, p. 247

such organization, the Karen Women's Organization, is fighting for women's equality through projecting and promoting women's rights through support from Western development actors and their idea of equality.

Consequently, this paper will contribute to the existing research which seeks to raise awareness of the important aspect of cultural sensitivity in work with women's empowerment. Since many NGOs are dependent on international aid, it raises curiosity in how the international perspective of donor's interplays with the local perspective of the NGO. The research aim of this study is to examine what narratives are prevailing in the work of a Myanmar NGO, the Karen Women's Organization, in their work on empowering women, and what possible effects can be ascribed to their way of work. This will be done through the following research questions:

1. How is the interplay of local versus global narrative depicted in the report ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' on empowering women?
2. What possibilities or limitations do the narrative findings suggest?

1.2. Material

The primary material used in this study is one document from The Karen Women's Organization. This document is a report called *Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty* and is a two-year report of 2018 and 2019. This section will start by simply introducing the report my analysis is based on and go through the main topics of the report.

1.2.1. The ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' Report

The report ''*Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty*'' is a 64 pages long report composed by The Karen Women's Organization. It was published on September 23, 2020 and is one of several reports on its national website. The report reveals updates and reflections of the organization's two years of activism for equality and highlights their main achievements for 2018 and 2019. The report in question is an overview and recognition

of efforts and challenges the Karen Women's Organization has encountered. It is as well a report bringing awareness to women's needs in the Karen[5] community.

The report ''*Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty*'' acknowledges the organization's donors, its programs, developments and progress, program information, operational challenges, finance and accounting and lastly their future plans. The organization expresses great gratitude to its donors and members who are by funding the organization and constitute the opportunity to continue its work promoting women's leadership and supporting women's empowerment.

For the sake of my research aim, I will focus on the particular efforts and commitments expressed in the report which are made for women's empowerment by the Karen Women's Organization. Beyond explaining efforts, the report also provides information on strategies of capacity development and advocacy. The aim is through this material, to answer the questions formulated above.

1.2.2. Limitations

I am aware that the organization relies on contributions from international and national donors which means that there is a risk of an economic purpose behind the report. This means that there is a possibility that some statements or information in the report might be exaggerated or underestimated. However, this study investigates how the Karen Women's Organization expresses itself in the report and is not investigating whether statements in the report are true or false.

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[5] Myanmar is a country of ethnic diversity with a population divided into 135 ethnicities and 8 major ethnic groups. The Karen ethnic group is included in the major ethnic groups and is as also a state in Myanmar.

2.   Background

In order to understand women's situation in Myanmar, this section provides a brief background of women's political situation, the concept of empowerment and feminism from the local perspective.

2.1.   Women's political situation in Myanmar

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is a Buddhist country located between two of the world's most populous countries, China and India. Myanmar is a least developed country ranked 148 of 189 countries on the 2020 Human Development Index[6] and is ranked 118 of 189 on the Gender Inequality Index[7].

Myanmar became independent from colonial power Britain in 1948, which led to a civil war between the ethnic groups and the political situation remained unstable. In 1962 the military seized power in a coup and ruled the country into the 2010s. The military junta ruled the country with an authoritarian and undemocratic agenda for over 50 years, until 2012 when the first 'free' elections in Myanmar were held.[8] The unstable political situation, almost 60 years of civil wars and 50 years of authoritarian rule – women's rights have for long been the least priority. According to the 1947, 1974 and the 2008 Constitutions, women are to enjoy equal rights with men in all levels of society, but as patriarchal institutions and cultural norms have kept women outside the political and

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[6]   Human Development Index, UNDP 2020. ''Myanmar'' (Electronic) Available: http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MMR

[7]   Gender Inequality Index, UNDP. 2020. ''Myanmar'' (Electronic) Available: http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII

[8] UD, Utrikesdepartementet. 2013. ''Myanmar (Burma), MR-rapport 2013'' (Electronic) Available: https://www.regeringen.se/4a721d/contentassets/eddbebf9b0da4aab9452a782b93f98bb/myanmar---manskliga-rattigheter-demokrati-och-rattsstatens-principer-2019.pdf

economic power, women do not only lack power but are also seen as caretakers for the family.[9]

The political liberation and democratic transition began in 2010 and today Myanmar has a civilian government led by Nobel-prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite democratic elections, the constitution gives the military and armed forces a great influence over politics and 25 % of the parliament is reserved for the military, which also appoints three key cabinet ministers.

As the democratic transition began to take hold in 2010, the women's rights movement began to move forward. Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations have completely different conditions to operate in today compared to when the junta ruled the country. Today there are over 10 000 local civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations all over Myanmar who are both providing services the government is failing, such as health and educational services, and collaboratively work with the government trying to implement national projects and programs.

The military junta did ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 and the leading government agency for women's issues drafted the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women based on the CEDAW recommendations.

2.2.   Women's empowerment and feminism in Myanmar

Gender inequality remains a critical concern in the current context of deeply rooted patriarchy, outbreaks of civil wars in Myanmar's ethnic areas and military oppression against several of the ethnic populations. Women's social status has for long been marked by patriarchal norms and they have been kept from their entitled freedoms and potential. However, as political reforms opened up space for NGOs and especially women's NGOs, the means of women's political and economic empowerment have become core priorities

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[9] Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing, ''Feminism in Myanmar'', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung,* Enlightened Myanmar research Foundation, page 1

for many organizations in Myanmar.[10] Several international actors have started to support women's rights policy-making initiatives in Myanmar and more NGOs have adopted a women's rights strategic approach.

The priorities of women's rights organizations have been to empower women's economic and political participation. Female labor force participation has been one tool for NGOs to economically empower women. As international economic sanctions were lifted in 2016, and the international community started to engage with NGOs as well as with government, foreign investment generated many job opportunities and particularly in the garment sector where a majority of the employees are women. However, despite the growth of female labor force, the impact of women's livelihood has been limited. One reason is that women earning more than their husbands may in many cases threaten the manly 'ego' and the traditional norm of the husband providing the family.

Aspects of empowerment are thus very important to recognize. Many development strategies or non-governmental organizations frame their interventions as empowerment is a product that can be delivered.[11] In Myanmar, women's empowerment processes have been embedded in goals such as 'preserving Myanmar culture' which has resulted to strengthen already existing traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity.[12]
The concept of feminism is seen as favorable to Western ideology and is viewed as an extreme ideal of women's rights. Feminism is not a part of the Burmese vocabulary and has no actual Burmese translation. The concept of feminism is seen as something biased towards women and something which is demanding radical change for women's rights. Feminists in Myanmar have found that the word ''feminism'' appears to be negative for women's rights defender to use.[13]

The government of Myanmar uses 'gender equality' which seems to be more acceptable for the population. Patriarchal religious and cultural institutions play a huge role in Myanmar. The manly-dominated institutions have enormous power and have dominated

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[10] Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing, ''Feminism in Myanmar'', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung,* Enlightened Myanmar research Foundation, page 1
[11] Batliwala, S. (2007) ''Taking the Power out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account'', *Development in Practice,* page 559
[12] Aye Lei Tun, La Ring & Su Su Hlaing, ''Feminism in Myanmar'', page 9
[13] Tun, La & Hlaing ''Feminism in Myanmar'' page 15

community affairs for a long time. Around 88 % of the Myanmar population is Buddhist and even though the Buddhist literature is typically characterized as non-discriminatory, the practice of Buddhism in Myanmar is favoring patriarchal values.[14] People in Myanmar express great gratitude and loyalty to the religious institutional structure, and the religious institutions have been an untouchable issue for long, which has resulted in little awareness for women's rights in the religious community.[15]

As feminism is viewed as a radical perspective, many women in Myanmar including women's rights activists are reluctant to accept feminism. Feminism has a negative connotation among both men and women and many tries to avoid being labeled as feminist.[16]

2.3. Myanmar's plan for Women's Empowerment

In 1997 the regime ratified the CEDAW, which means that the government is obliged to act to end discrimination against women in Myanmar. Even though the regime since then has been strongly criticized for doing very little to follow the obligations they agreed to, there is a national plan for the integration of gender equality and women's rights.[17] *National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW)* was launched by the government of Myanmar in October 2013 and is a ten-year plan embodying its ''commitment to promoting and protecting the human rights of women'' in Myanmar. The implementation of the gender equality strategy is ongoing in collaboration with CSOs and NGOs, but due to stereotypical and patriarchal values about women's roles and responsibilities, commitments and actions against gender discrimination have been slow. There are structural barriers to women's participation at all levels. Women's political participation has increased slightly in recent years but are still at a very low level.

The lack of improvement in women's status in Myanmar can be understood in relation to two connected issues. First, the majority of Myanmar's societies and villages are based

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[14] Ibid, page 15
[15] Ibid, page 18
[16] Pistor, Nora, ''What 'feminism' means in Myanmar'', *Women of Asean* (2014), Myanmar Times
[17] Myanmar Laws and CEDAW ''The Case for Anti-Violence Against Women Laws, *Gender Equality Network,* p 1

on patriarchal norms with traditional gender roles resulting in excluding women in many economically, culturally, socially, legally and politically levels. The second issue is the fact that Myanmar has been under military authoritarian rule since 1962 and started a democratization process in 2011. Still today, the military is one of the largest and strongest institutions in Myanmar with strongly militarized societies all over the country. This has led to a further marginalization of women in political life. Women's representation in the Parliament remains low, however, remarkable success was made in the 2015 election when the largest number of women was elected to public office in Myanmar's history.[18]

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[18] Tun, La & Hlaing ''Feminism in Myanmar'' page 11

3.   Method

In this section, I will present the choice of method and discuss it in relation to my research questions. The chapter begins with a description of the method and then continues with providing the reader with understanding how the method will be used in accordance to answer the asked questions. The strategy is provided in the operational section.

3.1.   Analyzing text and discourses in narrative analysis

Analyzing texts, discourses and narratives are crucially important in today's society. We are daily exposed to a large number of texts – some of them in the daily paper which we choose to read, and some of them are texts on posters or advertising and are just there as unavoidable parts of our surroundings. Textual analysis is about identifying and studying different parts of texts. Narrative analysis was almost exclusively used by historians but has spread to all of social sciences different branches. Narrative analysis is both a theory and a method and should not be mixed up. If the narrative theory is the theory about the story and its narrative, the narrative method is the methods used to collect and analyze oral or written texts. Narrative analysis is about how we create an understanding of our world through the stories we take part in and which we tell ourselves. Narrative theory is, in a broad sense, the story of the narrative.[19]

The narrative analysis focuses on storytelling and its narrative form and is a highly relevant method when to capture underlying points in a text. In the literature on narrative theory and method there is a plethora of concepts that there doesn't seem to be any consensus on how to define them. This could be considered either problematic or positive for the narrative analysis field, depending on the scientific view. Problematic because

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[19] Robertson, Alexa ''Narrativanalys'' i Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), *Textens mening och makt: metodbok i samhällsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*, 3., [utök.] uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, page 219-223

there is no consensus on what narrative method should contain, but positive because it gives great freedom for the individual researcher's opportunities to be able to analyze material outside an established framework. [20]

When analyzing material from a narrative perspective, three starting points can be applied. To keep the *whole* in data, to *sort* or *categorize* data and *interpret* based on narrative points or to understand actions based on the narrative points. I have chosen to use the first starting point, which means that I will keep the whole in data while analyzing the material. By applying this kind of method, the researcher aims to identify what characterizes the text in general, what the main plot is, which directions the text moves towards and so on.[21]

It is through the stories we tell and hear that we make society understandable; it is through narratives we understand our situation – and everyone else's – in the political and cultural landscape.[22] However, the understanding of our situation in the order of things is not something that arises in a political vacuum, especially not within certain constellations of power. The study of narratives is thus considered to produce insights into society and politics, which is one of the main reasons why I have chosen the narrative analysis.

3.2.   What exactly is narrative analysis?

Narrative analysis is an interdisciplinary approach but the assumptions underlying narrative studies are perhaps what researchers agree on most. Although they express themselves in different ways, they agree that we structure our experience mainly through narratives. It is through narratives that others can understand what our words and actions mean.[23]

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[20] Robertson, Alexa ''Narrativanalys'', page 224-229
[21] Kvale, Steinar & Brinkmann, Svend, (2009) ''Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun''. 2. Uppl. Lund: Studentlitteratur, page 243
[22] Robertson, Alexa ''Narrativanalys'', page 222-23
[23] Ibid, 224

Apart from the assumptions shared by many of those who study narratives, one reason why studying narratives is important is to learn more about how power regulates processes of understanding society and, in relation to it, about how people understand their surroundings. Another reason for studying narrative is to develop our understanding of culture and society.[24]

The relationship between the researcher and the academic world is also about studying narratives. The narrative researcher aims to uncover the nuances in narratives and to see things that would be overlooked in other types of studies, which enable the researcher to be more receptive to or aware of the voices of the marginalized society. The voices drowned by the powerful and those who represent the 'common' good.[25]

Two significant influences must be mentioned in the section of narrative analysis studies. *Structuralism* and *postmodernism* are two central components in the study of narrative. The study of narrative draws attention to the structures, which studies underlying and unconscious elements of a text. A text can follow certain structures without being aware of doing so, so the task of the narrative analyst is to detect this underlying structure. Narrative analysis is also often associated with p*ostmodernism,* which is (in the sense of narrative) characterized by an attitude of skepticism or rejection toward what is describes as grand narratives or metanarratives associated with modernism.[26]

The term narrative can be vague and overarching that it is sometimes of no use at all, and not everyone makes an effort to define it. A central question for the definition of narrative is its relation to discourse, in the sense of what is expressed in a certain text. Some researchers argue that narratives are separate from discourses – narratives are sets of statements in specific social contexts. Others see narratives as conceivable forms of discourse – as a kind of text among many in the circulation of society.[27]

Simply stated – the narrative approach reaches many levels of analysis and recognizes stories that communities, organizations and individual people have and how there is a

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[24] Ibid, 226
[25] Ibid, 226
[26] Robertson, Alexa ''Narrativanalys'', page 226-28
[27] Ibid, page 228

mutual influence process between them. For people who lack social, political or economic power the narratives available are often negative or written by others for them. Most of the texts we read tell us stories *about* people without hearing their actual voices, which means that the voices of the people we claim to represent are often in the background.[28]

A narrative can have a powerful influence on social as well as personal change, as narratives can be understood as resources. Resources is the meaning of - which stories are legitimated and by whom? Who tells the stories? Who has the right to another person's story? Which stories are considered to be true/false? If we understand narrative as a powerful tool and as resources – we quickly see that like most resources, it is distributed unevenly. It is important to understand the impact the narrative can have in a given social structure and to understand its potential power. Those most in need, marginalized or poor women, are least likely to have control over their own stories and one strength of the narrative approach is the new ways to hear and understand such voices.[29]

3.3.   Operationalization

In order to investigate the research questions posed in this study, it is important to identify and specify which aspects and narratives of the collected data will be taken into consideration in the analysis. It is necessary to be able to recognize narratives in the particular material in order to analyze it. The main focus of this study will rely on the *content* of the report, whereas aspects of characteristics and attitudes presented in the report will be of main focus. Narratives such like ''empowerment'', ''feminist'', ''feminism'', ''gender equality'', ''women's human rights'' will be of particular interest for my study. Hence, as suggested by the theoretical framework, and the Myanmar State's stance on women as outlined in the background chapter, I have done the following distinction of narratives:

Narrative approach:	Global	Local
Narrative points	Empowerment	Women's human rights
Narrative points	Feminist / Feminism	Gender equality

[28] Rappaport, Julian ''Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings'', *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 23(5), page 803

[29] Rappaport, Julian ''Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings'', page 804

The analysis will be guided by the main research question: *how the interplay of local versus global narrative is depicted in the report of the Karen Women's Organization and what possibilities or limitations those narrative findings show.* The global narrative is identified based on the theoretical findings from Levitt and Merry, on how the global women's rights package refers to a set of ideas that emerged in Western countries but shapes the agenda and activities of NGOs in all countries. It is also identified based on the theoretical framework of the feminist understanding of 'women's empowerment'.

4. Literature overview and previous research

The research area for women's empowerment and NGOs are extensive and includes numerous of central aspects. This literature overview presents existing research on empowerment, how NGOs work with it related to historical, political and cultural aspects. Today, much of the funding for women's empowerment work comes from international aid upon which numerous of studies have focused on as they argue it may have an impact on the work of NGOs.

Previous studies on women's empowerment, NGOs and the relationship between local and global, have outlined the popularity of the term "empowerment", but that very few have a clear concept of it. Aminur Rahman[30] takes the initiative to clarify the concept and make a conclusion with an alternative analysis of women's empowerment in his article *''Women's Empowerment: Concept and Beyond''.* Rahman is critical of the way women's empowerment treats women as a homogeneous category, as an undifferentiated mass. Whereas women differ significantly not only in historical and cultural perspectives but also in their needs and interests.[31]

Women's empowerment approach has been criticized for its Western ethnocentrism, and its failure to recognize different cultural characters and ethos of countries of the East. The Western feminist discourse has been known to present a Eurocentric feminist narrative for long and the discussion is similar to the postcolonial feminist thought of how Western feminists see global south women as homogenous and the 'uncivilized' other.

The same problematic perspective is argued by Jenny Pearson[32] in her study on women's empowerment process in Cambodian NGO, where the global understanding of women's

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[30] Aminur Rahman, ''Women's Empowerment: Concept and Beyond'', *Global Journal of Human Social Science Sociology & Culture,* vol. 13, nr. 6, 2013
[31] Aminur Rahman, ''Women's Empowerment: Concept and Beyond'', page 395
[32] Pearson, Jenny, ''No Visable Difference: A Women's empowerment process in a Cambodian NGO'', *Development in Practice* (2011), Vol. 21, No 3

empowerment fails to capture the cultural reality of women's existence locally. The results of an empowerment process should not be predicted. The context of historical, political and cultural aspects heavily influences the awareness, understanding and confidence women have of concepts of empowerment. This example of a Cambodian NGOs working for women's empowerment shows the irrelevance of many Western models of empowerment in different cultures.[33]

Furthermore, in the Cambodian example, narratives and definitions on women's empowerment were critical to the success of the NGOs' work. Pearson suggests that ideas and strategies generated by human rights and global feminist movements form the activities and programs made by women's NGOs. Many NGOs in Cambodia purported to have gender policies to empower women, but few have had successful programs that delivered results in women's empowerment. Pearson learned three challenges which prevented change for women's rights and empowerment. The first challenge was expected and concerned the understanding of what it means to be a woman in Cambodian society.[34] Women are expected to follow certain social norms and as the patriarchal society allow men to enjoy their 'gender privilege', women under-value their capacity and potential. [35] The second and third issue Pearson identified was fear and its controlling influence in women's lives and the lack of trust in the Cambodian society. These aspects are barriers for the women's opportunities to come together in a meaningful way and improve their empowerment status. These aspects are as well very important when putting empowerment in a context, Pearson expected women to come together and support each other and to see a change in women, their behavior, most importantly, their involvement in planning processes or participation in programs.[36]

As the title of her article, ''*No visible difference: a women's empowerment process in a Cambodian NGO''*, neither of the expectations came to fruition because her assumptions were deeply rooted in her own experiences and were not applicable on women's reality in Cambodia. They were deeply embedded in the ''*power over''* mentality and were more dependent on having a leader rather than independently take discussions and issues

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[33] Pearson, Jenny, ''No Visible Difference: A Women's empowerment process in a Cambodian NGO'', page 396
[34] Pearson, J, ''No Visible Difference: A Women's empowerment process in a Cambodian NGO'', page 398
[35] Neary, Rattanak (2014) ''Gender Relations and Attitudes: Cambodia Gender Assessment''
[36] Pearson, J, page 399-401

forward. Having women participate in programs and workshops did however generate in success in other ways than expected. New knowledge about empowerment resulted in women sharing it with important people in their lives and in that way generating discussions among family and friends.

Previous research concludes that the results of an empowerment process should not be predicted. The context of historical, political and cultural aspects heavily influences the awareness, understanding and confidence women have of concepts of empowerment. The example of a Cambodian NGOs working for women's empowerment shows the irrelevance of many Western models of empowerment in different cultures. Because of this it is highly necessary and vital to study how western understanding of women's empowerment is expressed and adopted by local actors, such as NGOs.

Additionally, the Cambodian reality, being a nation going through rapid social and economic change built on traditional, hierarchical and patriarchal structures that dominate the social norms and values serves as a good example for the reality of women in surrounding states, not least Myanmar. As a post-conflict society, top-down control has been the reality for Cambodians for centuries. 'Participation' simply means supporting authoritarian leaders rather than 'participation' as a notion of an including process that could change the distribution of power. As the culture of top-down control has been embedded in the mind of leadership for centuries, Cambodians lack in trust for the authorities. Women, who are especially disadvantaged and are lacking both power and status in society, are traditionally expected to act as the family's caretaker and faces significant challenges in pursuing jobs outside the home.[37]

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[37] Ibid, page 401-403

5.   Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this particular study consists of two segments, the first provides an understanding of the concept of empowerment, second discusses the phenomena of vernacularization and how NGOs are working with the universal empowerment framework locally. Lastly, a theory with a more critical approach argues for the vitality of a culturally sensitive approach instead of a universal one which has in some cases shown that NGOs shaping the feminist discourse in a 'western feminist' narrative can result in contradictions in the NGOs implementation of women's empowerment. In order to understand why this study is focused on narratives produced in the report of The Karen Women's Organization, this theoretical framework provides an overview on different views of empowerment and what impact it can have.

5.1.   The understanding of 'empowerment'

Women's empowerment, a term with radical roots from the 1980's, is a mainstream development concern used by global NGOs as well as multinational corporations. The question of what empowerment *actually* means becomes especially relevant as the term has become akin to a panacea – whereas empowering women is championed as a means to lift economies, improve women's skills as mothers, increase opportunities for women's economic engagement and involve women in political participation. This narrative of women's empowerment has led to a focus on the instrumental gain of empowering women where empowerment is seen as an outcome rather than paying closer attention to the individual or collective journey of empowerment.[38]

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[38] Cornwall, Andrea (2014) ''Women's empowerment: what works and why?'', *World Institute for Development Economics Research,* United Nations University*,* page 1

Empowerment is closely related to power; and Batliwala[39] argues that empowerment is about changing power relations in favor of those who previously didn't have power over their own lives. Power is about having control, not only over your own life but also over recourses (physical, financial) and thoughts (values, beliefs). These two aspects are central in understanding power relations and the process of gaining control. Empowerment is defined by Batliwala as 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over sources of power'.[40]

The feminist understanding of empowerment is broader and goes beyond formal and institutional definitions of power. Empowerment is a *process*, and is not a fixed-state or an endpoint. It is more than just opening up access to decision-making. The processes leading to people perceiving themselves as able and entitled to occupy the space of decision-making is also empowerment. Feminist scholars argue that elements of *consciousness-raising* and *personal development* should be included into the concept of empowerment. Rowlands[41] argues that empowerment is a dynamic process including three interrelated dimensions: personal, relational and collective. Empowerment could therefore be seen as having a psychological aspect whereas it includes a sense of self-confidence where people seeing themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence. [42]

Empowerment should not be described as zero-sum – the more power one person has, the less the other has. It should rather be understood as an increased ability to resist and challenge the 'power over'. Empowerment is about bringing people who have been outside the decision-making process into it and enable the access to the economic and political sphere. The meaning 'empowerment' can be seen in the user's interpretation of power and is connected to the individual's opportunity to maximize their full capability without the constraint of structures.[43] Empowerment should be understood as working to remove the existence and effects of unjust inequalities. Most of the empowerment work

[39] Batliwala, S. (1994). ''The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action. In: Sen G., Germain, A. & Chen,l. C. (Eds) (1994) *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights*

[40] Batliwala, S. (1994). ''The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action'', page 558

[41] Rowlands, Jo, ''Development and Social Diversity'', *Development in Practice*, Research Gate (1995)

[42] Rowlands, Jo, ''Development and Social Diversity''*,* page 88

[43] Rowlands, J, page 86-87

includes forms of group work and can take place on small scales whereas linking peoples with others in similar situations through network building, education or support, or in larger scales through policy development, community organization or legislative lobbying. [44]

5.2.   Glocalizing Women's Empowerment

The empowerment of women by which many NGOs work by is by Levitt & Merry[45] discussed as "global women's right package". The global women's right package stresses improvement of women's position in society by making them equal to men and having access to the same opportunities. The opportunities may be explained as the right to occupy both the public and private sphere by embracing an agentic self. [46] Concretely, the global women's right package proposes ideas of women having the right to divorce, own property as well as inherit money and land, earn income and express their views. Additionally, women should be protected from discrimination, domestic violence and should have the right to enjoy reproductive autonomy.[47]

The package is upheld by different international and national practices and laws, among which the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and International Women's Day, as well as multiple women's and feminist's theoretical contributions. Furthermore, through mentioned forms, the package strives to promote women's practices on the ground, both directly and indirectly, by merging with existing women's movements.[48]

To integrate the 'women's rights packages' in accordance with local norms is not always a process of peace. In much of the empowerment literature, there is an inherent normative bias towards liberal norms which in the interplay between the 'global' and the 'local' in women's empowerment can produce new power relations. The set of 'global' values is

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[44] Ibid, page 89
[45] Levitt, P & Merry, S, ''Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States'', *Global Networks* 9, no 4
[46] Levitt, P & Merry, S, ''Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States'', page 442
[47] Levitt, P & Merry, S, p 447-448
[48] Levitt, P & Merry, S, p 448

often a prefix for the universal moral framework and the cosmopolitan awareness. This view of global norms leads to that norms rooted in other types of regional, national and sub-national groups are often ignored. Norms of women's rights and empowerment derived from other than Western democracies are rarely acknowledged and included in the international empowerment discourse.[49]

Human rights in general, and women's right in particular, is a hot topic in the discourse of international human rights. Women's rights have gone from only being a feminist matter to a human rights issue, which started to emerge in the 1990s as feminist activists successfully convinced delegates at the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights that women's rights are human rights. Even though the Vienna Conference led to increased attention to the importance of women's rights [50], it was also dominated by the Western feminist discourse where the ''indigenous feminism'' is seen in stark contrast to ''Western feminism''. The narrative of the East versus the West has left a mark on the feminist scholarship even though such formulations have been rejected since the origin of feminism cannot be found in a culturally pure location. The idea that Western liberal values of emancipation and individual freedom needs to be exported to the rest of the world is a very problematic approach that assumes that Westerners are the most important actor on the global stage. This leads to that the capacity for change and resistance within non-Western societies is ignored and the "local'' efforts are seen with limitations.[51]

As feminism was associated with Westernization, multiple governments rejected the notion of women's rights and gender equality claiming that the liberal discourse of ''rights'' was a way for West to incorporate ideas and reforms as a tool of Western imperialist forces. As a result, lively discussions around women's rights and empowerment started to emerge by feminist movements and women's NGOs.[52]

Research from Levitt and Merry (2007) discusses the important role of local agents in NGOs in the process of *vernacularizing*, the process of appropriation and local adoption

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[49] Björkdahl, A & Gusic, I, ''Global' norms and 'local' agency: frictional peacebuilding in Kosovo'', *Journal of International Relations and Development,* Macmillan Publishers Ldt, page 268

[50] Levitt, P & Merry, S, page 442

[51] Chubin, Fae, ''Glocalizing Women's Empowerment: Feminist Contestation and NGO Activism in Iran'', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* Vol. 49 (6), page 717

[52] Chubin, F, ''Glocalizing Women's Empowerment: Feminist Contestation and NGO Activism in Iran'', page 719

of globally generated ideas and norms. Levitt and Merry examine how global ideas of women's rights and empowerment are used in four different contexts (China, India, Peru and the US), and their research shows that the process of vernacularization is a widespread practice but that it takes different forms within different kinds of organizations and in different culturally and historical contexts.[53] Finally, interesting arguments from Levitt and Merry show that the global women's rights package shapes the agenda and activities of many local NGOs. This is highly remarkable since this package refers to a set of ideas that originated from Western countries and institutions.

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[53] Levitt, P & Merry, S, ''Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States'', page 442

6.   Analysis

The disposition of the text will be arranged in accordance with the research questions. The analysis has been guided by the main research question: *how the interplay of local versus global narrative is depicted in the report of Karen Women's Organization and what possibilities or limitations these narrative findings show.* The selected content of the report will be analyzed through the narrative analysis, by examining what narrative is dominated.

It is of great significance for understanding the following analysis to keep in mind that feminism has a negative connotation amongst many people in Myanmar, including female women's rights activists.

6.1.   Feminist narrative

By examining the ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty''[54] report, several interesting features can be distinguished. Findings in the analysis of the report suggest a domination of a global narrative, based on the theoretical framework presented above. For example, on page 8 it states:

> We improved the Karen Young Women's Leadership School (KYWLS) adding a gender perspective to the topics to be in line with *feminism*.[55]

This quote tells how the NGO has improved the Karen Young Women's Leadership School by adding a feminist perspective to the gender approach. As outlined in the background chapter, from a Myanmar perspective, the feminist approach can be criticized not only by governmental authorities but also by cultural and religious institutions who regard feminism as a Western feminist discourse and is marked for its Western ethnocentrism.

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[54] Karen Women's Organization, ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' Two Year Report 2018-2019
[55] Ibid, page 8

Furthermore, page 32-33 states:

> To train women to become *feminist* politicians.[56]

This quote tells how the NGO is operative in training women to become feminist politicians. It is a goal for the women to not only become a politician, but rather to have a feminist perspective in politics and to be a feminist politician. The feminist narrative demonstrates a global narrative, rooted in a Western feminist discourse. The Western feminist discourse could be argued to have failed to capture the cultural reality of gender-relations in non-Western parts of the world, such as Myanmar. In Myanmar, feminism is viewed as biased towards women and against men. Feminism is also not in the Myanmar vocabulary and there is no translation of the word 'feminism' which further strengthening that the use of the word "feminism" in the Karen report point towards a narrative.

The presence of the global perspective in the report can be identified even on page 35, which states the following:

> A specific focus has been made on indigenous rights and *feminism* following a decision made in 2019 by the KWO Central Standing Committee.[57]

These quotes are prime examples of how the global narrative is illustrated in the report. The quote above is in the same line as the others, telling that a specific focus has been made on indigenous rights and feminism. The word feminism appears several times in the report which indicates a presence of a global narrative of a feminist gender perspective.

I argue that the reference to feminism indicates a strong affiliation to the Western notion of women's rights. The feminist narrative draws attention to the Western feminist discourse of an exclusive and convoluted model for women's rights. The rhetoric of Western feminism can be understood as an effective tool in order to ''fit into'' the universal set of ideas of human rights. To emphasize the feminist agenda can be appealing for NGOs reference to the international and to the universal because those qualities make them useful as political statements. It allows the NGO to operate in the world of human rights activist and would be a part of the international human rights movement, embodied

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[56] Ibid, page 32-33
[57] Karen Women's Organization, ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' Two Year Report 2018-2019, page 35

in the idea of all humans having rights regardless of gender. The Karen Women's Organization is a leading women's organization in Myanmar but is an NGO who are depending on foreign funding. Not only can the dependency on overseas funding compromise the organization's performance and accountability to the people they work with, but it may also have ''strings attached'' meaning that in order to receive funds, but the organization must also commit to certain reforms, such as universal values of feminism and the organization might inadvertently or deliberately work on behalf of the donor state. Lastly, it may also cause the organization to reorient their objectives at the cost of local priorities to what the donors are looking for at the moment.

The concept of gender equality instead of feminism is preferably used by governmental authorities and by the overall population. Deeply rooted patriarchy rule most of the daily life in Myanmar, and religious as well as political institutions are heavily influenced by these patriarchal norms which keep women outside the decision-making process. Feminism in Myanmar is regarded as biased towards women and a radical approach for women's rights. Gender equality is not only more preferable by the population, but it is also more acceptable for religious and political institutions that play a huge role in Myanmar. The findings of the feminist narrative in the report suggest not only a strategy for the Karen Women's organization to count as a suitable NGO of the 'international community', but also to integrate the 'women's rights package' and develop a discourse of international human rights.

Norms and practices of women's rights deriving from outside West are rarely recognized by the international human rights discourse. Norms rooted in other types of societies and cultures are often ignored which tend to result in ideas generated by the global human rights movement forms activities and programs made by NGOs in non-Western countries. As feminism has long been associated with West, multiple governments including Myanmar, has rejected the notions of women's rights claiming that the feminist discourse of women's rights is another way for Western countries to incorporate ideas as a tool of Western imperialism.

6.2.   The narrative of Empowerment

The narrative of empowerment is expressed broadly in the report and is used in several different ways. As my theoretical framework suggests, empowerment is a popular phrase in the human rights discourse and the meaning of the concept is often very vague. The feminist understanding of women's empowerment highlights the *process* of which empowerment consists of, whereas it is not something that could just be delivered. It is a process of *consciousness-raising* and *personal development* which therefore could be seen as having a psychological aspect whereas it a sense of self-confidence were people seeing themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence. The way empowerment is portrayed in the report suggests a different way of recognizing and understanding the concept of empowerment than from the Western notion of empowerment.

In the report, on page 35, empowerment is mentioned in the following way:

> With a goal of empowering and encouraging young women to see and achieve their leadership potential through engaged participation, the Karen Young Women's Leadership School (KYWLS) supports women in decision-making opportunities. [58]

The quote above is understood as a way of empowering women by engaging women to participation and to be a part of decision-making. Indeed, this is an important aspect of empowerment because empowerment is about bringing people who have been outside the decision-making process into it. This narrative of empowerment indicates a view of empowerment as something that can be delivered, by encouraging and supporting young women to be a part of decision-making, to goal is for the young women to be empowered.

Furthermore, on the same page it states:

> The project staff provide advanced training in sewing and weaving for women in the camps as a means to build their capacity and economically empower them. Women who participate in the training became skilled at producing beautiful garments of high quality. [59]

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[58] Karen Women's Organization, ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' Two Year Report 2018-2019, page 35
[59] Ibid, page 35

The latter quote is similar to the former of a narrative of empowerment as something which could be delivered by teaching women how to sew and weave in order to be economically empowered. The feminist understanding of empowerment argues for a dynamic process that sees personal development and changes in self-perception as central for an empowerment process to take place. Training women in sewing and weaving does not automatically mean that women's self-esteem or self-perception change, or women start to appraise themselves and their abilities more or perceive themselves as having more power than before.

However, female labor force participation is a tool to empower women's economic capacity, since it generates a daily income for women. To earn money can lead to more independence as well as a sense of agency whereas women both get a salary and also a feeling of being able to make decisions for their own lives. Which, according to Rowlands, is central elements of the 'personal empowerment' which includes self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of agency elements.

6.3.   Global vs Local narrative

The narrative analysis method has been useful in sorting and categorizing narrative based on narrative points. My narrative points have been to search for a narrative which could be labeled as either a 'global' narrative or a 'local' narrative. Studying narrative develops our understanding of culture as well as society, and it teaches us why being aware of nuances in narratives is important. In the ''*Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty*'' report, there has been a domination of narratives that could be categorized as 'global' narrative. The interplay between the 'global' versus 'local' has been very clear, whereas the narrative of feminism could be perceived as a prefix for the global narrative of the universal human rights framework. Feminism could be seen in stark contrast to the 'local' narrative which is more understood and labeled as ''gender equality''.

The understanding of empowerment is expressed differently from what the theoretical framework of Rowlands suggests. Rowlands argues that *personal development* and changes in *self-perception* are core elements of an empowerment process. It is a dynamic process that is connected to the idea of every individual's opportunity to maximize their

full capacity. On the contrary, the understanding of empowerment, expressed in the report, suggests a different understanding of empowerment which is more focused on the 'outcome' rather than the 'process'.

However, as discussed in the theoretical framework, Batliwala defines empowerment as 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over sources of power'. Linking women together through network building or training programs in sewing and weaving can generate success in other ways as women gain more control over their lives by having a daily income or are linked together with other women. For instance, to be capable to contribute to the family's financial situation may bring a great sense of empowerment and is as well a way to challenge the existing power relation in the private sphere, where husbands most often have the status as the provider.

The findings in the report in relation to the theoretical framework on empowerment and vernacularization suggest a risk of using a global narrative that it might fail to capture the reality of women's local context. The local context is not only determined by historical and political aspects, but also by economic and cultural aspects, which are very important factors to consider while studying different circumstances. In Myanmar, women may feel more empowered by having an economic salary rather than feeling differently about themselves and their self-perception. Therefore, programs of income-generating activities are of higher priority in Myanmar. Of what is said, I argue that the content of the previous analysis indicates a different understanding of the concept of empowerment. As a consequence of a vague definition of 'women's empowerment', the concept is open for interpretation and can be adopted by NGO's differently based on local contexts. The results of an empowerment process should therefore not be predicted because it can generate success in other ways than first expected.

7.   Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine what narratives are prevailing in the ''Solidarity in Times of Uncertainty'' report written by the Karen Women's Organization. By analyzing the narrative of empowerment, several findings demonstrated that global narratives have been incorporated into the report. This raises the general question of how global ideas are incorporated into local contexts. As the language of rights increasingly has been adopted by development institutions such as NGOs, greater attention has been directed towards possible disparities between a global understanding of rights and a local understanding of rights. The understanding of rights can be expressed through narratives, inspiring this particular research to engage in scrutinization of the mentioned report in search of narratives.

The findings indicate that the report appears to use narrative points that fit into a set of narratives used by the global human rights community. More specifically, the use of a *feminist* narrative in the local context of Myanmar, indicates a sense of desire by the Karen Women's Organization to fit into the global women's rights package. This set of ideas that emerged in the West, has the ability to shape the agenda and activities of NGOs, which thus appears as a clear example of. This could be understood as a possibility for the NGO, to be a part of the universal moral framework of the human rights platform. Limitations with using global narratives are the risk of losing the connection to the local context. In Myanmar, particularly in rural areas, the concept of feminism is seen favorable to the Western ideology and is viewed as an extreme ideal of women's rights. Said has resulted into many people, and even women's rights activists, avoid being labeled as feminists.

As of the narrative of empowerment expressed in the report, my analysis suggests that a slightly different understanding and approach is exercised in Myanmar. The global understanding of women's empowerment is focused on the process of making women *feel* empowered by enlarging women's self-confidence or increase women's self-esteem. However, to talk about women's empowerment, it is important to understand how the

concept of 'empowerment' translates across languages, contexts and cultures. The question of if we can apply a universal model of feminism and women's empowerment to all places on earth becomes highly interesting. Some will argue that a feminist vision of empowerment does translate across every continent, but others will question the associations of empowerment and imply that the concepts of empowerment are too extreme or radical.

There is a widespread belief in Myanmar that women do enjoy equality and high status just as men do, this because of the Constitution which states that men and women have legal equal status. NGO's play a crucial role in detecting discrimination and challenge the traditional gender roles which are repressive and oppressive against women. Women are especially disadvantaged in patriarchal countries like Myanmar, and the culture of top-down control from the authoritarian military junta have been embedded in the mind of people for centuries. To be 'participating' is supporting the authoritarian leaders, and not 'participation' as a notion of an including process that could change the distribution of power as suggested by the theory on women's empowerment. These historical, political and cultural aspects heavily influence the awareness and understanding women have of the concept of empowerment.

The process of 'vernacularization' becomes highly relevant to this discussion, understood as the process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and norms, the feminist vision of empowerment has in some expanses in the report, attempted to adapt to the local context of Myanmar in order to implement them on the ground. The global norms of feminism and empowerment have been embraced by the Karen Women's Organization, illustrating the organization's standpoint and position. Not only does the organization correspond to narratives of global norms, it have also constituted projects and programs in the agenda of global ideas of human rights and more particularly women's rights.

There have for long been tensions between global and local rights ideas. Myanmar ratified the CEDAW in 1997 but has been strongly criticized for not doing much to improve the equality between men and women. Stereotypical and patriarchal values about women's rights and women's roles heavily influence commitments and actions made in Myanmar and women's NGOs have been challenged by the male-dominated society whose purpose

is to protect the patriarchy ruling most of daily life in Myanmar. However, given global ideas simply not just move from global to local places, ideas and strategies developed earlier can control and influence in a considerable long time. Owing to the fact that adopting globally circulating ideas takes time, the development of the global feminism and empowerment depends on far more. The historical, cultural and religious context of Myanmar heavily affects the potential of NGO's or human rights movements to infiltrate global norms since the powerful institutions determine their paths, however, this seems not to be the case of the Karen Women's organization.

Finally, some feminists whom vision women's empowerment would say that it is not enough to economically empower women. It is not enough to have women take part in 'weaving and sewing' programs in order to build women's capacity and become skilled at producing garments. However, as discussed in the section of previous research, the irrelevance of many Western models of empowerment becomes illustrated in this study recognized that women's rights organizations in Myanmar have a different understanding of the concept of empowerment than feminists originated from the West. This is a clear example of 'vernacularization', whereas women's human rights ideas connect with the local context of Myanmar women.

8.   Conclusion

This particular paper has engaged in studying the interplay of local and global narrative on women and feminism in efforts on women's empowerment in the local context, and Myanmar in particular. The findings show a language on women containing both local and global narrative points implying an interplay of both narratives. The interplay of said narratives is depicted mainly by the use of reference points that are typical for the Western understanding of women's empowerment such as the use of the word feminist in particular, and empowerment in general; respectively the prevalence of the narrative points which are in line with the local government's language regarding women. The latter is exemplified through words and phrases with less focus on women, for instance, gender equality and in some cases women's human rights, instead of using the word feminist. Furthermore, the interplay of the narratives in the report can be explained or understood as a result of vernacularization where local actors, in this case the NGO, adapts the global narrative to the local in order to make sense in the context of Myanmar.

However, the interplay of narratives and possible vernacularization may have both positive and negative impact upon the organization and its work. The possibilities of vernacularizing ideas are that the global package is redefined in order to be easier adopted in the cultural setting it strives to operate in. While the negative impact or limitations may be that by interplaying between the two mentioned narratives a grey zone may arise where main concepts driving women's empowerment, for instance, maybe misapprehended. An example of the former is in the study shown by findings where empowerment is interpreted as something that can be delivered, such as economic empowerment. In contrast to the Western understanding of empowerment, economic empowerment does not necessarily translate to empowerment in other dimensions of women's lives.

Finally, the result of this research serves to contribute to the field of women's empowerment and its broader understanding of the concept and efforts in local contexts. Due to limitations by time and space, the findings generated here are not to be considered generalizing for Myanmar, but rather as a departing point for further research, suggesting discrepancies between the local and global understanding on women's empowerment.

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