The NGO–state relationship and SRHR in Myanmar

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List of abbreviations
CEDAW – Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSE – Comprehensive Sexual Education
GBV – Gender Based Violence
GEN – Gender Equality Network
INGO – International Non-governmental Organisation
LGBT – Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender
MoH – Ministry of Health
MOU – Memorandum of Understanding
MSI – Marie Stopes International
NGO – Non-governmental Organisation
NSP – Non-state provider
NSPAW – National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
OECD – The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAC – Post Abortion Care
POVAW – Prevention of Violence against Women
RH – Reproductive Health
SIDA – Swedish International Development Agency
SRH – Sexual and Reproductive Health
SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STI – Sexually Transmitted Infection
UNFPA – The United Nations Population Fund
USAID – The United States Agency for International Development
1. Introduction

When working with development the goal is that the developing state should be independent with sustainable institutions after the interventions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Actors in development need to know how much to intervene and whether there is a risk that they are hindering rather than helping state capacity building by implementing short term solutions. A challenge can be the tension between local tradition and values like respect for human rights. It can be particularly difficult to work with sensitive issues, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in a conservative context.

Myanmar is a young democracy with a history of isolation and military rule, which has gone through rapid political changes in recent years. It was chosen as a case because the rapid changes make it an unusual context for NGOs and this is a chance to study NGOs as a civil society is forming in the country. Even if the new democracy may not be as successful as many hoped,1 2 there have been quick and important changes in the area of SRHR, equality and civil society engagement. The case of SRHR should be particularly relevant for this thesis as the education and health sectors are not providing enough services on the SRHR area and it is still difficult to work with SRHR because of the norms making it a taboo subject, as we will see in section 2.2. Even if there is cooperation between NGOs and the government, SRHR stays politically sensitive which might lead NGOs to use strategic choices to keep control over their programmes. In this unpredictable situation, NGOs in the SRHR area must consider the issues above.

There is a need for both extended service provision and state capacity building. Before the liberalisation there was no tradition of cooperation between the state and civil society and it was uncommon for NGOs to cooperate with the state. Now, there is a possible dilemma for NGOs working with SRHR: they can either work together with the government and simultaneously build state capacity or they can choose to provide services independently from the government and reach people in need more quickly. It is likely that many NGOs cooperate with the government in some way (see Theory).

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1 Aung, ‘Myanmar Journalists Jailed’.
2 Lewis and McPherson, ‘Myanmar Appoints Panel to Probe Rohingya Abuses’.
The purpose of this thesis is to study how NGOs perceive cooperation with the state. I will study how close they believe the cooperation is and whether they see it as positive or negative. The latter is decided by the NGOs own statements and by the prevalence of conflicts between the parties. The second part of the question is how do NGOs work to alleviate potential constraints when working with sensitive SRHR issues in a developing country? The thesis is theory testing so it will compare answers from the literature with empirical evidence from interviews that I conducted in Myanmar.

The research question is:

_How do NGOs working with SRHR in Myanmar perceive their cooperation with the government in terms of closeness? Do they perceive the cooperation as positive or negative? What strategies do they use to stay independent?_

Generally the goals of the organisations in this study is to provide SRHR services and promote a more "progressive" view concerning sexual health (i.e. promoting the provision of services for young and LGBT people as well as safe abortion some times). A definition of reproductive health is "a state of well-being related to one’s sexual and reproductive life. It implies… that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so."³ It includes having access to appropriate health services. In this essay SRHR will include e.g. reproductive health care, family planning, abortion, post abortion care (PAC), and gender based violence (GBV). RH related problems are widespread and women are disproportionately affected which also makes it a matter of equality and the human rights of women.⁴

In the next section I will present a theoretical framework on the service provision - capacity building dilemma, NGO-government cooperation and different kinds of agreements, and strategic choice theory. Section 3 describes the current situation in politics and SRHR provision in Myanmar. Section 4 presents the methodology and why I chose to conduct interviews. Section 5 presents the collected material and how it relates to the theory, and a discussion on whether strategic choice is relevant in the Myanmar context. Section 6 gives a conclusion and suggestions for further study.

³ UNFPA. "UNFPA Frequently Asked Questions”.
⁴ UNFPA. "UNFPA Frequently Asked Questions”.
2. Theory

As a background to the question about how NGOs perceive cooperation with the state I explain why NGOs are important in resource poor settings, and why there can be a dilemma between service provision and capacity building. To answer the question I will describe how governments and NGOs have cooperated in other countries and different kinds of agreements. To answer the question of how NGOs stay independent I will use strategic choice theory. Research has mostly focused on South Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. They are all developmental states and three of them are South Asian so it is likely that they have some similarities with adjacent Myanmar. The specific difficulties of working with sexual health in Myanmar will be described in the next section.

What makes NGOs important?

A large and growing part of health care and education in South Asia is provided by non-state providers (NSPs). Both poor and wealthier people turn to NSPs because they have more trust in their performance than in that of government providers. Small informal NSPs are providing most of the services to poor people. NSPs can be for example commercial, religious, traditional and non-governmental organisations. They operate parallel to or in competition with public providers, or in collaboration with the government. Among NSPs, NGOs are the most common partners to governments, but also more likely to have their own opinion on how public policy should be written. NGOs, according to Batley and Rose, are “formally structured organisations that claim a philanthropic, non-profit purpose and that are not part of government.” Since this thesis focuses on NGO-government relationships I will only refer to NGOs from here on.

The service provision and capacity building dilemma

In order to secure a sustainable and equal access to services, governments of developing countries need to build state capacity. They also need to improve services for citizens both for the welfare of the population and because it gives legitimacy to the state. State fragility and conflict weaken service provision in which case other actors, like NGOs, can take over provision. There is a danger

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5 Batley, ‘Engaged or Divorced?’, 250.
6 Batley, 242.
7 Batley and Rose, ‘Analysing collaboration between non-governmental service providers and governments’, 230.
that they might become a parallel structure that gains legitimacy at the expense of the state. In cases where the state is in development the OECD recommends that the government retains the overall responsibility of policies and regulation, so it acts as steward but does not provide services. In this way the state takes responsibility and builds capacity while NGOs provide services. However, there is a risk that state intervention can do harm by hindering NGO provision of services without gaining any benefits. SRHR is a sensitive topic as we will see in section 2.2 and 3 so the combination of service provision and state building is particularly interesting in this case.

In conclusion, there are reasons for NGOs and the state to want cooperation. The government gets assistance with service provision, and the NGO can pursue a more sustainable effort if it is anchored in government. To answer the question we should know how cooperation has looked in other developing countries. In the literature a few different kinds of agreements appear.

### 2.1 Types of agreements

Firstly, a government-NGO agreement in a fragile context is rarely based purely on technical considerations. It is also shaped by previous relations, ideology, and differences in capacity between the parties. In practice, NGOs are often operating freely in low income countries, since the state does not have the means to control them. But there are some ways for both parties to structure the relationship.

The government-NGO agreement can be formal, with a written contract and clear roles, or informal. They can be hierarchical (one actor purchases a service from the other) or horizontal (none is subordinated or financed by the other). These categories should be seen as the ends of a scale and few relationships are purely one or the other. For many of the agreements, even legal contracts, personal relations and unwritten understandings between the parts make the engagement much more effective. This was the case in both India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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9 Batley and Mcloughlin, 136.
10 Batley and Mcloughlin, 135.
12 Batley and Mcloughlin, 141.
Formal agreements
Contracts are a way to formalise a relation between a government and a particular NGO, and gives the government more insight into the service output and standard. It requires that the state and the NGO have the capacity to design and manage the contract.\textsuperscript{13} These requirements mean that there is a risk that the contract will be dependent on donor support and that it might prevent the government from building capacity. Even if the contracts are meant to eventually put service delivery back on the government it rarely works in practice and may rather hinder state capacity building.\textsuperscript{14} Tight hierarchical contracts only work when the terms are clear, and the parties trust each other.\textsuperscript{15}

Regulation
Another way for governments to formally manage NGOs is regulation. Regulation is an intervention that can suppress NGOs or help them to work efficiently depending on how it is done. The governments examined by Batley (South Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) usually had repressive regulations that were not applied in practice. This led to an insecure environment where NGOs do not know when or how to invest. Ill-functioning regulation can do more harm than a lack of regulation since it can hinder NGOs from doing their job.\textsuperscript{16}

Informal agreements
Informal and local level agreements may be easier to manage than formal contracts. Neither NGO nor government is in authority and they both contribute with funds and personnel so it is not too demanding for either actor. They can start off on a small scale and give experience to local and national government officials. Informal relationships build up trust and capacity over time and make formal contracts possible at a later stage.\textsuperscript{17, 18} A challenge with these agreements are that they are hard to scale-up later.\textsuperscript{19}

It is possible that one type of agreement is better suited for an organisation working with SRHR particularly. Informal agreements might give more freedom to an NGO to pursue the kind of work

\textsuperscript{13} Batley and Mcloughlin, ‘Engagement with Non-State Service Providers in Fragile States’, 141.
\textsuperscript{14} Batley and Mcloughlin, 142.
\textsuperscript{15} Batley, ‘Engaged or Divorced?’, 249.
\textsuperscript{16} Batley, 244-245.
\textsuperscript{17} Batley and Mcloughlin, 144.
\textsuperscript{18} Batley and Mcloughlin, 138.
\textsuperscript{19} Batley and Mcloughlin, 148.
they want to do. Formal agreements might give more resources and impact depending on how it is written.

Those were the kinds of agreements usually seen in other developing countries. I will investigate how the NGO – government relationship looks in Myanmar. Cooperation between government and NGO is made more complicated by logistical challenges and a history of mistrust in many countries, possibly also in Myanmar.

2.2 Challenges to cooperation

Government reluctance to work with NGOs

Several South Asian states are formally supportive of collaboration with NGOs but not so much in practice according to Batley. Sometimes there has been a history of rivalry, e.g. about donor resources, or policy instability where NGOs cannot plan in the long term since they do not know how state policies might change. This causes lingering mistrust between state and non-state partners.\(^{20,21}\) Governments are more willing to spend their resources on the state’s own provision.\(^{22}\) NGOs and donors seem to be generally more willing than the government to initiate collaborations. Even though governments have been reluctant to enter partnerships they seem generally more open to collaborating with NGOs than other NSPs.\(^{23}\)

Even when government and NGO are willing to engage in a partnership there are often practical difficulties due to the lack of state capacity. Recurring meetings are resource intense, the government might not know which of all NGOs to involve and again there is sometimes mistrust between government and NGOs.\(^{24}\) Batley means that personal relationships between NGO and government have been an important platform for informal policy dialogue.\(^{25,26}\) These are possible challenges to cooperation.

\(^{20}\) Batley and McIoughlin, ‘Engagement with Non-State Service Providers in Fragile States’, 134.
\(^{21}\) Batley, ‘Engaged or Divorced?’, 243.
\(^{22}\) Batley, 247.
\(^{24}\) Palmer, 234.
\(^{25}\) Batley, 244.
\(^{26}\) Batley and McIoughlin, 137.
Sexuality education is likely one of the easier parts of SRHR to work with since many people are positive to having some form of it but there are challenges to implementing sexual education and that could indicate that other SRHR issues (e.g. abortion services) are even more difficult to work with.

**Providing comprehensive sexuality education in resource poor settings**

Many challenges to the implementation of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) in resource poor settings have been observed. Educational programmes have been poorly written and implemented, the environment has been unaccommodating, or sexual behaviours are difficult to change as they are rooted in culture. An article by Vanwesenbeeck et al. looks at a CSE programme implemented in eleven countries in Asia and Africa as a case study. In many places some lessons were skipped or shortened, especially if they were on a sensitive subject like abortion or homosexuality. Some practical issues like lack of teacher time and materials, or negative attitudes from staff made it harder to implement the programme as intended. In some countries it was hard for teachers to implement the programme because abstinence-only approaches were dominant in the school and Ministries of Education. There could be similar challenges to SRHR work in Myanmar as we will see in section 3.

Above I have discussed the reasons for cooperation, types of agreements, and challenges to cooperation. This will help to answer how NGOs perceive the cooperation with the state in Myanmar.

The next part of the question is how organisations keep their independence when cooperating with the government. There are some ways that organisations in similar contexts have managed to cooperate with the government and at the same time advocate for and work toward their own goals. Batley’s article on strategic choice considers NGOs in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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27 Vanwesenbeeck et al., ‘Lessons Learned from a Decade Implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Resource Poor Settings’, 472-473.
28 Vanwesenbeeck et al., 477–79.
2.3 Strategic choice

NGOs that want to improve services for poor people have the best chance of doing so if they cooperate with the government rather than working against or parallel to it.\textsuperscript{29} Such a cooperation, however, means that they are likely to give up some of their autonomy.\textsuperscript{30} NGOs that get support from government are more likely to align with the government’s strategies even if it is not required of them.\textsuperscript{31} To some degree the context decides what organisations can do, but they can also make strategic choices to stay autonomous and even change how the institutions work.\textsuperscript{32} \textsuperscript{33} To what extent they make strategic choices depends on how independent they are in terms of resources and skills.\textsuperscript{34} The resource dependence of NGOs means they are dependent on some resources that other actors, i.e. donors or the government, have control over. If they are highly dependent on another actor it can threaten the autonomy and legitimacy of the NGO.\textsuperscript{35} Here, focus will be on resources the government might have control over.

Government resources can be control of policy and funding. If control is strict it means NGOs are highly dependent on government. If government control of policy and funding is weak, NGO dependence is lower. It is also lower if the NGO is in a network of other organisations instead of having an agreement with government only.\textsuperscript{36} Organisations that are rooted in the community where they work tend to be less dependent on government.\textsuperscript{37}

NGOs generally prefer horizontal agreements where they are better able to keep their autonomy. Still they enter hierarchical contracts with governments, particularly if they have a high dependency on it, but regardless of the kind of agreement they have ways to keep some autonomy.\textsuperscript{38} \textsuperscript{39} When NGOs are confrontational and advocate for their cause they can get support from their finances.

\textsuperscript{29} Batley, ‘Structures and Strategies in Relationships Between Non-Government Service Providers and Governments’, 316.
\textsuperscript{30} Batley, 306.
\textsuperscript{31} Mitchell, ‘Strategic Responses to Resource Dependence Among Transnational NGOs Registered in the United States’, 70–71.
\textsuperscript{32} Batley, 307.
\textsuperscript{33} Batley and Rose, ‘Analysing collaboration between non-governmental service providers and governments’, 236.
\textsuperscript{34} Batley and Rose, 233.
\textsuperscript{35} Mitchell, 69.
\textsuperscript{36} Batley, 309.
\textsuperscript{37} Batley and Rose, 238.
\textsuperscript{38} Batley, 314.
\textsuperscript{39} Mitchell, 69.
contacts, expertise and grassroots.\textsuperscript{40}

These are the strategies that NGOs use to stay independent when cooperating with the government. 1) Avoiding resource dependence: either by having several sources for funding or avoiding funds from government. They cooperate but without a transfer of money.\textsuperscript{41} It helps to have a common goal with one’s donors. Some NGOs find donors that sympathise with their goals, rather than adapting the goal to the donors.\textsuperscript{42} This strategy can be used by NGOs with medium dependence.\textsuperscript{43} Funding liberation is a tactic where the NGO avoids restricted funding, i.e. funding that must be used for a certain purpose. Instead they try to get a bigger proportion of unrestricted funding (i.e. the NGO chooses how to spend it). This is usually grassroots funding rather than government funding.\textsuperscript{44} In a study by Mitchell, NGO leaders were generally willing to refuse money that could compromise their goals.\textsuperscript{45} Overall, having several different donors was the most frequently used strategy of all in that study.\textsuperscript{46}

2) Shape the environment of resource dependence. NGOs stay independent by becoming a source of expertise, or the link between the government and other agencies. Some organisations have enough knowledge and capacity to decide the terms of the agreement so they are independent or even in authority.\textsuperscript{47} This strategy is most likely to be used by NGOs with low dependence and/or high ability to influence others (e.g. government).\textsuperscript{48} The NGO can influence the government to work on the same goals as the NGO and thus have indirect impact on the population. Influence can be in the form of advocacy, training or knowledge creation.\textsuperscript{49} Sharing information is important and can let the NGOs’ experience and knowledge influence state policy.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{40} Uvin, Jain, and Brown, ‘Think Large and Act Small’, 1414–15.
\textsuperscript{41} Batley, ‘Structures and Strategies in Relationships Between Non-Government Service Providers and Governments’, 315.
\textsuperscript{42} Batley and Rose, ‘Analysing collaboration between non-governmental service providers and governments’ 238.
\textsuperscript{43} Mitchell, ‘Strategic Responses to Resource Dependence Among Transnational NGOs Registered in the United States’, 74.
\textsuperscript{44} Mitchell, 79.
\textsuperscript{45} Mitchell, 88.
\textsuperscript{46} Mitchell, 74.
\textsuperscript{47} Batley, 315-316.
\textsuperscript{48} Mitchell, 74.
\textsuperscript{49} Uvin, Jain, and Brown, 1411.
\textsuperscript{50} Uvin, Jain, and Brown, 1414–15.
3) Adapt the organisation to the resource environment: some NGOs cannot determine how hierarchical the government relationship is. They might accept a hierarchical contract, sometimes in the hope of gaining more independence later on.\textsuperscript{51} Adapting programmes to other actor’s preferences is likely most common among highly dependent NGOs.\textsuperscript{52}

4) Insider status: regardless of what kind of agreement the NGO enters into they will influence policy by being an example when they interact with the government and provide services. It is a common tactic among NGOs, trying to become insiders in the government. That way they gain influence while also staying independent. An important part of this tactic is to avoid conflict and give credit to the government for the things they achieve together to strengthen the relationship. This strategy is also called soft lobbying.\textsuperscript{53} This strategy can be part of any of the other strategies, but is also a strategy in itself so in the analysis I will see this as fourth strategy.

**Theoretical framework**

I will use this to examine how organisations perceive cooperation and answer how they stay autonomous when working with SRHR in Myanmar. Section 4 (Method) explains further how these aspects are examined through the empirical material.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What makes NGOs important, the service provision–capacity building dilemma.</td>
<td>These theories are meant to show the relevance of the research question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal agreements, regulation, informal agreements.</td>
<td>This shows the forms of NGO-state cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government reluctance, SRHR as a difficult subject.</td>
<td>This is used when examining what challenges there are to cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid resource dependence, shape the environment of resource dependence, adapt to resource dependence, insider status strategy.</td>
<td>Through this theory we can examine how NGOs stay independent.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\textsuperscript{51} Batley, ‘Structures and Strategies in Relationships Between Non-Government Service Providers and Governments’, 316.
\textsuperscript{52} Mitchell, ‘Strategic Responses to Resource Dependence Among Transnational NGOs Registered in the United States’, 74.
\textsuperscript{53} Batley, 316-318.
3. Background about Myanmar

This section will focus on recent political changes that could have implications for NGO and SRHR work, and gives a summary of the current SRHR situation.

Myanmar is a former British colony which gained independence in 1948. After two decades of unstable democratic governments, the military took power in 1961. During the latter part of the 20th century, Myanmar became famous for a harsh authoritarian regime and human rights violations. After the military suppressed protests in 1988 most international donors closed their programmes in the country. A few international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), like the UN, stayed in Myanmar but could not work with the military government because it was considered unethical.

New regime and opening of country

Most of the outside world started working with and giving aid to Myanmar again around the beginning of the 2000’s after some political changes. The cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008 and international assistance soared that year. In 2010 Myanmar held its first election in 20 years. Although it was controlled by the military it was a new start for democratic aspirations, and some civilian politicians could be elected. Notably, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the main opposition party, was released from a long house arrest after the election. The country, with a newly installed quasi-civilian government, started opening up. In the following years the media became freer and most of the censorship of political information on the internet stopped. Political prisoners were freed and some sanctions were eased. In 2015, free democratic elections were held and Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy won. However, one quarter of the seats in Parliament are still reserved for the military which still has considerable political

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54 Gravers and Ytzen, ‘Burma/Myanmar’, 143.
55 Gravers and Ytzen, 40.
56 Adam Burke et al., ‘The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development’, 44.
57 Gravers and Ytzen, 406.
58 Gravers and Ytzen, 402–3.
59 Adam Burke et al., 44.
60 Gravers and Ytzen, 19.
61 Gravers and Ytzen, 25.
62 Gravers and Ytzen, 49-50.
63 Gravers and Ytzen, 404–9.
64 Gravers and Ytzen, 21.
65 SIDA, ‘Utvecklingen i Myanmar’.
66 Adam Burke et al., 18.
influence. There are still active conflicts in some states.\textsuperscript{67} In the following, when referring to the government I mean the civilian government if nothing else is said.

With reforms and more international legitimacy the aid to Myanmar increased tenfold in five years.\textsuperscript{68} This also indicates an increase in NGO attention in the country.

During military rule the health and education sectors were severely neglected.\textsuperscript{69,70} The quasi-civilian government has budgeted more money to the education system and it is getting more support from INGOs.\textsuperscript{71} Aid programmes can now be made in collaboration with the government.\textsuperscript{72} However, progress is slow and social issues remain urgent.\textsuperscript{73,74} Health care has traditionally been provided by local, often religious (mainly Buddhist), civil society groups. They are still important providers today. Most people live in hard to reach areas and are dependent on traditional medicine.\textsuperscript{75}

### 3.1 SRHR situation

In 2017 only about half of married women in Myanmar used contraceptives while 16% had an unmet need for it. The fertility rate for married women was 4.99. The maternal mortality rate was 282 deaths per 100 000 live births. An estimated 246 000 unsafe abortions also show that the lack of reproductive health services is a big problem.\textsuperscript{76} The increase in NGO presence has led to more awareness on SRHR and sex education has become more normalised. Although at the time of this study it was only in the former capital Yangon that some people had received sex education within the education system. SRHR information is usually aimed only at married women.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{67} Utrikesdepartementet, ‘Mänskliga rättigheter, demokrati och rättsstatens principer i Myanmar’.
\textsuperscript{68} Adam Burke et al., ‘The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development’, 44-45.
\textsuperscript{69} Gravers and Ytzen, ‘Burma/Myanmar’, 126.
\textsuperscript{70} Gravers and Ytzen, 131.
\textsuperscript{71} Gravers and Ytzen, 132-133.
\textsuperscript{72} Adam Burke et al., 53-54.
\textsuperscript{73} Gravers and Ytzen, 121.
\textsuperscript{74} Gravers and Ytzen, 127.
\textsuperscript{75} Gravers and Ytzen, 127-128.
\textsuperscript{77} The Gender Equality Network, ‘Raising the Curtain’, 114.
Young people who lack sexual and reproductive health services risk sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy in which case the girl may not be able to finish her education and she will have smaller chances of getting a job. She may also get complications and health problems.\textsuperscript{78} HIV and AIDS is a big problem in Myanmar but the military regime did not recognise it and did not want NGOs working with it. Today NGOs can access affected areas and support local organisations. The people most at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS are sex workers, men who have sex with men, and drug users. These groups are criminalised which makes prevention efforts difficult.\textsuperscript{79}

It has been shown that boys get most of their information on sex from pornography. At the same time they do not have sex education to provide reliable information.\textsuperscript{80} Access to smartphones and the internet is increasing rapidly while censorship is decreasing. As the country is opening people are overwhelmed with new information and it can be hard to tell true from false. It is even more difficult regarding sexual health, as many adults do not feel comfortable to talk about it with young people.\textsuperscript{81} There is a taboo against speaking about sex in Myanmar. Regardless of gender many do not feel they can seek care for sexual and reproductive health problems. For example, having STIs or HIV can be associated with adultery or sex with sex workers.\textsuperscript{82}

Gender based violence such as domestic or sexual violence or human trafficking is a widespread problem and is often socially accepted. The Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey 2015-16 showed that about half of people thought it is acceptable to beat your wife for things like burning food, refusing intercourse, or leaving the house without telling her husband. The same survey shows that about a fifth of married women have experienced violence from their husbands.\textsuperscript{83} GBV is under-reported and the discrimination of women and girls means they are often blamed and stigmatised and perpetrators are not held accountable.\textsuperscript{84} Government stakeholders usually deny that there is inequality or GBV in their states, and mean that it is a problem in other states. Small local civil society organisations are often closest to rural people but they often lack a reliable source of funding.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{79} Gravers and Ytzen, ‘Burma/Myanmar’, 128-130.
\textsuperscript{80} The Gender Equality Network, ‘Raising the Curtain’, 111.
\textsuperscript{81} UNFPA Myanmar, 24-25.
\textsuperscript{82} The Gender Equality Network, 109-111.
\textsuperscript{83} UNFPA Myanmar, 35.
\textsuperscript{84} UNFPA, ‘Powerful Myths, Hidden Secrets’, ix.
\textsuperscript{85} UNFPA, xi-xii.
4. Methodology

The questions I am trying to answer are how NGOs perceive the cooperation with the government and what strategies they use to stay independent. In order to provide an answer to this I needed to get information from the actors themselves.

Interviews

The question about what strategies organisations have to adhere to their values while collaborating with government requires a complex answer since they can use several strategies or combinations of strategies, so a qualitative method is most fitting. Interviews are good for finding out what a person (in this case representing an organisation) thinks about a given situation. We get to know about their ideas and experiences and how they make sense of the system they operate in. The interviews were semi structured with a few questions written beforehand and adapted to each organisation (i.e. if they have different working areas).

This could possibly have been done with questionnaires but I wanted the flexibility to ask follow up questions and see what the respondents found most important. All six interviews were conducted in Yangon, Myanmar at the NGOs’ respective offices and we were largely undisturbed. They were conducted in English and lasted from about 45 minutes to around one hour. I recorded all my interviews which might limit how open the interviewed is, but it also ensures that their words are remembered correctly. Two respondents asked to have some questions in advance and received the questions in Appendix 1. This means they had time to reflect and to give answers that were more thought through and reliable. They could also have prepared answers that suited them but these organisations gave similar answers to the unprepared ones so I do not believe having the questions in advance altered the answers much. Several months later, in emails, I asked follow up questions about exactly what kind of agreements they have with the government and whether these were written or unwritten. One of them (local Akhaya) did not answer despite repeated attempts so that makes it harder to draw any conclusions about the difference between INGOs and local NGOs.

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86 Nyberg and Tidström, Skriv vetenskapliga uppsatser, examensarbeten och avhandlingar, 125.
87 Alvehus, Skriva uppsats med kvalitativ metod, 81.
88 Alvehus, 83.
89 Alvehus, 85.
Factors like my gender, age, ethnicity, background, use of language etc might influence how the respondent answers, a so called interviewer effect. Such characteristics will also have influenced how I interpreted the respondents. The fact that I am from Sweden, a country that gives funding to some of these organisations, and that I got in contact with them through the Swedish Embassy Section Office could encourage them to exaggerate their political influence further. But this, together with my limited experience of the Myanmar context and the fact that I am a young woman with a personal interest in these issues, may also mean they were more keen on giving me thorough answers.

Providing a framework for how the interview will be conducted and what the assignment is increases predictability and trust for the respondent. If they feel safer they will be able to answer more accurately and in more detail. I hoped to achieve this by giving an outline of my thesis subject and what I wished to study, both in the first emails and before starting each interview. Still, it is important to remember that interviewer effects cannot be avoided completely and it might have influenced my conclusions to some extent.

The choice of organisations
I wanted to interview organisations working with SRHR specifically. Their objectives (progressive SRHR provision) might differ from those of the government so these organisations might have a reason to use strategic choices to achieve their goal. I had a first interview with Tomas Lundström, SRHR advisor from SIDA at the Swedish Embassy Section Office in Yangon. He recommended several of the organisations I interviewed. I interviewed representatives from six organisations. They were usually Programme or Country Directors, or in one case, a Communications Manager so they have an overview of their respective organisations. The answers could have been different if I had interviewed NGO staff that work with implementing the programmes on the ground, but the answers I got should be relevant for my question as it concerns the relationship with the government. Akhaya and GEN are from Myanmar, the others are international organisations.

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90 Lantz, *Intervjumetodik*, 84.
91 Lantz, 91.
92 Lundström, SIDA, Interview.
Akhaya provides information and workshops on sexuality and gender equality.\textsuperscript{93} They have courses with the police and ministries and a survivor support programme for sexual harassment victims.\textsuperscript{94}

GEN is a network of about 130 organisations and individuals that conducts research on SRHR and gender.\textsuperscript{95} They use it for evidence based advocacy for gender equality. They were involved in writing the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) that has been made into a publication and a simplified booklet.\textsuperscript{96}

MSI and PATH provide reproductive health care.\textsuperscript{97, 98} MSI is an implementing partner of UNFPA.\textsuperscript{99} They inform communities about SRHR and provide services for STI and HIV prevention, and referral for sex workers and men who have sex with men.\textsuperscript{100}

Ipas provides reproductive health (RH) care training and information about RH.\textsuperscript{101} They are introducing appropriate technology for PAC. They educate people about the symptoms of complications after unsafe abortions so women can get early referral to hospital.\textsuperscript{102}

DKT provides SRH information and products with the goal to reduce unintended pregnancy. Their website has information about LGBT, sex positivity (which is unique for DKT), the difference between porn and reality, and about being a conscious consumer. They also have university health talks about SRH with female students which is part of advocating for sexual education in school settings. They sponsor medical education seminars and educate providers about DKT’s products and services to expand the contraceptives available.\textsuperscript{103}

All work with political advocacy and function to some extent like NGOs so I will refer to them as NGOs or organisations.

\textsuperscript{93} Akhaya Women Myanmar, ”Akhaya Women-about Us”.
\textsuperscript{94} Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview.
\textsuperscript{95} Gender Equality Network, ”Gender Equality Network-What Is GEN?”
\textsuperscript{96} Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
\textsuperscript{97} ”Marie Stopes Myanmar”.
\textsuperscript{98} PATH, ”About PATH Reproductive Health”.
\textsuperscript{100} Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{101} Ipas, ”Ipas-Where We Work”.
\textsuperscript{102} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{103} Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
Limitations

Note that this material reflects one side of the NGO-government relations since the question is how NGOs perceive the cooperation. There could also be differences between organisations across the country that are not accounted for in this thesis. Small, informal providers and organisations are important to many people. However, in this thesis I will concentrate on larger formal NGOs.

One part of this study was how NGOs work with sensitive areas in SRHR. There is a possibility that the answers would have been more straightforward and yielded different results with anonymous interviews.104 Similarly they might have covert strategies for achieving their goals when they are in an agreement with the government. On the other hand I got in contact with the organisations through a person at an institution they trust (SIDA) and this thesis will mostly be read by students in Sweden. Hopefully this means that the interviewed felt they could answer truthfully.

The interview material should be sufficient to answer the question since it is about the views and opinions of NGOs. The first question is quite straightforward, but the NGOs might not be completely honest if they have incentives to claim that the relationship is either positive or negative. The second part of the question is harder as I have tried to discern what strategies they use without asking frankly. For both questions most organisations have given similar answers so that makes them more reliable.

Only one of the respondents had English as their native language and neither is it my native language. There was some confusion because of the language at some points and I have had to leave out some small parts of the interviews because of unclarities. I have only used the parts where I am certain I know what the respondent means, but there is still a risk that I have misunderstood something.

Are the organisations representative of NGOs in Myanmar? I would have liked to include UNFPA and Population Services International who came up as suggestions. Unfortunately, practical issues made that impossible. Still, I interviewed six well known NGOs, all prominent in the SRHR area and who have connections with the government. Despite the similarities they have some important differences: four are INGOs and two are local. Some have specific areas of expertise and others not.

104 Nyberg and Tidström, Skriv vetenskapliga uppsatser, examensarbeten och avhandlingar, 137.
This could have led to different conclusions about my question, but as we will see in section 5 they do not. This could imply that most big NGOs in the country have similar experiences and therefore my NGOs can be said to be representative.

Interview questions

The questions have been open-ended to allow the interviewed to choose the direction of the discussion and to avoid eliciting certain answers. There is a sample of questions in appendix 1. Some questions have been adapted or left out depending on organisation.

To start answering the question how the NGOs perceive government cooperation I asked questions on what role they have in the country. I asked them what they provide and what is difficult to work with. This way I got answers on what they think is lacking from the state and public system. The theory and background predict that it is difficult to work with sexuality, key populations (LGBT people, sex workers and drug abusers), and abortion.

Some governments are unwilling to cooperate with NGOs. To see whether this is the case in Myanmar I asked what the relationship is like with the government and the Ministry of Health (MoH), how much they are involved in writing policies and how much influence they have (e.g. on the school curriculum). The prediction is that the government is formally positive to cooperation but not in practice. Note that here we will only see whether NGOs perceive any reluctance.

For the kind of agreement I simply asked whether they had an agreement with government and whether it was written or unwritten. The previous question also gives a hint to the quality of the cooperation. This question has no prediction but I examined which kind of agreement was used in Myanmar.

So far the questions were quite straightforward. For the question of how NGOs stay independent I used strategic choice theory. I did not ask directly about possible strategies but used clues (see Table 2) from the answers about what they work with and challenging norms and taboos that they have to handle. If they have any covert strategies they may not want to answer direct questions, and they might still have strategies that are not apparent here. According to the theory the NGOs will use strategies that are fitting for their level of resource dependence.
5. Analysis – the NGO state relationship

To interpret the results I have made a content analysis: the data was classified into groups and subgroups of similar statements. The categories were based on the theoretical framework.\textsuperscript{105} I discuss the findings under their respective headers and summarise the results in Table 1 for the first question, and table 2 for the second question.

I will start the analysis of my results by attempting to answer the first part of the question: how do NGOs working with SRHR in Myanmar perceive their cooperation with the government in terms of closeness and quality? I categorised the answers according to the theoretical framework so I am using the same headers as in the theory to arrange the results. Note that I am only presenting a sample of the collected material since it would be impossible to account for all of it.

5.1 Types of agreements

Batley and McLoughlin write that many NGO – government agreements are shaped as much by the parties’ capacity as by technical considerations and that personal relations are important for making the agreement effective. Here we will see what kind of relationships they have according to the NGOs.

Several informants answered that personal relations help to get policy influence or establish new projects, but it does not seem to be essential.\textsuperscript{106} “But [the relationship] is more to do with ongoing relationship building and collaboration, participation and contributing in policy, strategy, technical and coordination forums, and through interpersonal relationship.”\textsuperscript{107} Akhaya uses informal events like dinners where they talk to decision makers in a relaxed way rather than advocating formally.\textsuperscript{108} This is similar to the way Batley describes the importance of personal relations in South Asia. If it makes the agreements more effective they could also be considered more close and positive.

\textsuperscript{105} Nyberg and Tidström, \textit{Skriv vetenskapliga uppsatser, examensarbeten och avhandlingar}, 135.
\textsuperscript{106} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{107} Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{108} Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview.
At Ipas they said that all INGOs working in Myanmar need to have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the concerned departments. An MOU defines the main terms of an agreement. It is not a formal contract but some of its content can be enforced by law and it can be a preceding agreement before entering a binding contract.109

All INGOs mention that they have an MOU with the government and all except DKT say they have a close relationship with MoH.110 DKT works primarily with the private sector. The MOU is required to train doctors and midwives but they do not need formal approval from the MoH to do other workshops and events.111 “We do have MoU which is written agreement with the Ministry of Health and Sports.”112

The agreements are formal because the MOU is a written understanding of their expectations on each other. The agreements can be understood as horizontal because the organisations do not receive funds from the Myanmar government.113 It is interesting to see that informal agreements were so rarely used in this case. The only organisation to not have an agreement with the government was GEN. I got no answer from Akhaya so I do not know whether they have an agreement or not. GEN answered that they work with the government but do not have an agreement with nor get funding from it. They convince the government to include civil society groups in the policy making.114 Since they do not have an agreement or receive funds from government it can be seen as an informal horizontal relation. This is a sign of low dependency on government.

Regulation was only mentioned briefly by MSI and DKT. “Yes, we have to follow MoH’s regulations and guidelines.”115 E.g. there are strict criteria for when a woman can have a sterilisation, and NGOs can only provide products and information for PAC, not abortion services.116 117 Since these organisations have MOUs and want to have a positive relationship with the government they have

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109 Law, A Dictionary of Accounting.
110 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview; Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview; Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview; Gopalakrishnan, ‘E-Mail Conversation on SRHR’.
111 Gopalakrishnan.
112 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
113 Tun Thein, GEN, Email conversation; Aung, MSI, Email conversation; Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview; Gopalakrishnan, DKT, Email conversation.
114 Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
115 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
116 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
117 Gopalakrishnan.
to follow the laws and regulations. If they fail to follow them they might not be acknowledged as state partners. It would be much more difficult to work in the country, and they could not influence policy. To try and get around existing regulation would only make them lose influence.

**Perceived government reluctance to work with NGOs**

Batley wrote that governments are often more supportive of cooperation in theory than in practise. The only organisation to express this was GEN. The implementation of NSPAW was delayed by the government who did not include gender in the budget. The women’s groups turned to the UN Committee of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2016. Both parties defended their status in Geneva and the CEDAW committee gave 56 recommendations to the Myanmar government whereof one was to implement the NSPAW. “*And we could not work by ourselves at the national level, we need to use international pressure, so we use CEDAW to pressure the gov to implement this plan.*”¹¹⁸

This is a more straightforward kind of advocacy compared to all other examples where NGOs used a softer approach as we will see below. This could be an example of rivalry since it concerns the allocation of state resources. GEN is also the only organisation to say they did not have an agreement with government. Like Akhaya they are a national organisation, and Akhaya does not mention an agreement with government, so they might be in the same position. If there is no agreement between state and organisation they do not have obligations toward each other and might not have the same need to avoid conflict situations.

**Table 1.** How do NGOs perceive cooperation with the state?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory regarding the NGO-state relationship</th>
<th>NGO perception of the relationship in terms of closeness and quality</th>
<th>Empirical example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal or informal agreements will illustrate:</td>
<td>Forms of cooperation, close or not</td>
<td>Statements about the type of agreement, the closeness of the relationship or cooperation, and whether they are cooperating to a large extent. MSI: “<em>I can say that we have very positive working relationship with MoH at different levels. It can be those in</em>”¹¹⁸</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹¹⁸ Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
Naypyidaw and those working in the township and district level. So we have very close relationship and normally provide information to them what we are doing…”

PATH: “We work quite closely with MoHS, so that’s where we have our MOU.”

**Government reluctance will illustrate:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality: positive or negative experiences of cooperation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statements on whether the cooperation is positive or negative, few or many conflicts, easy or difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipas: “For us the relationship with the MoH is very good. We have close collaboration and close connection.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN: “But what is lacking is a government commitment. It’s not implementing [the NSPAW].”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates that statements about the closeness and quality of the cooperation often overlap. In these cases I have used e.g. the statements of MSI and Ipas above to say something about both categories.

In conclusion there were few signs that the government is reluctant to work with NGOs. No one has mentioned policy instability or practical difficulties. Although, there are some cultural challenges that need to be mentioned since they also influence the relationship. Several NGOs say SRHR is very sensitive and the culture is generally conservative.119 Even though some health care professionals know that abortion services are needed there are social and cultural barriers to advocating for it. “Some people in MoH are quite open [to changing the abortion law] but they still have barriers for them to really speak up about that.”120 “One of the good things is that the department that looks at maternal and child health and RH within the ministry in Myanmar, are very supportive of comprehensive sexuality and RH education, so it’s great because that faction of the MoH is really in support of all organisations that are working towards that goal and trying to integrate that into the care that is provided.”121

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119 Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview; Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview; Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview; Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.

120 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.

121 Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
It seems like many who work with health care or in the MoH could be positive to changing the abortion law and allow abortion in more cases. This is the NGOs’ impression and it could be that, through their work, they have contact with the most progressive people of the MoH. It is important to remember that the MoH consists of many subgroups and people so these opinions might not be those of the majority in the MoH. Even less so in the whole government. The interviewed say that it is still very difficult to talk about changing the law. That might be because a majority in the government are against it, but also because the norms and opinions of the public are against. Most organizations interviewed said they have had positive experiences when cooperating with the government. That is the civilian part of the government and mostly the MoH. It is still possible that some issues are made more complicated by the military part of government (if they are particularly opposed to LGBT rights for example), but that is not within the scope of this thesis.

In conclusion the answer to the question is that most NGOs perceive the cooperation with the government as close and positive, even though there are challenges because of the norms. The only organisation that brought up negative experiences was GEN, although they too have a close connection with the government. Below is the discussion relating to the second question.

5.2 Strategic choice

In the theory there are four strategies for NGOs that want to stay autonomous when working with a government. I will go through each type and show examples from the interviews. I have attempted to include both statements that agree and disagree with the theory. There were examples of NGOs using all four strategies. It may be because I was looking for that and interpreted the answers so they fit with the theory, but there is no reason to think the theory would be incorrect in Myanmar if it is correct in other South Asian countries. Table 2 is meant to give the reader greater insight in how the answers were interpreted which increases the transparency of the analysis.

The first strategy is avoiding resource dependence by having several sources of funding and finding donors that agree with your goal. Here I have also included networks and allies among other organisations as they can provide some resources (material and immaterial) and because a group of organisations have a stronger voice than a single one.
Ipas, PATH, DKT and MSI as international organisations, and GEN receive funds from foundations, governments, NGOs, corporations, individual donors etc so they all have many sources of funding. Some recurring donors are Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands who are well recognised as agreeing with these organisations’ values. It may be because the NGOs have found donors who agree with their goal. They may be more dependent on one or few donors, but they will still be more independent with several donors. Having several non-governmental donors also means that a bigger portion of NGO funding is unrestricted. The different organisations could have different sources of funding for their Myanmar branches. E.g. PATH has very little funding for SRHR in Myanmar so they work more with nutrition. They say their work depends on what donors want to fund. MSI and DKT Myanmar receive funding from several different sources. DKT sell contraceptive and related products, e.g. to partners who work with key populations.

An interesting factor is whether SRHR organisations get support from the USA. The Global Gag Rule states that NGOs that receive funds from US global health funds cannot engage in any abortion related work, including advocating for legal abortion. On the Ipas International page we can read that they received no funds from the US government in 2017. DKT are internationally for abortion and do not mention USAID in the interview or webpage. They have both chosen to work without the support of the USA.

PATH International gets over 28% of their funds from the US government. That means they should not be able to work with abortion. They said in the interview that they helped to introduce medical abortion in Vietnam so that might have been before the rule. Although, they also said “We don’t have funding to do that [advocate for abortion] here, but that doesn’t mean there’s not a need and we look for funding to support partners who try to address issues around unsafe abortion and adolescent sexual behaviour.” GEN has funding from USAID. They do not say that they want

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122 Ipas, ‘Giving to Ipas’; PATH, ‘PATH - Finances’; Gopalakrishnan, DKT, Email conversation; Aung, MSI, Email conversation.
123 Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview.
124 Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint; Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview; Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
126 Ipas, ‘Giving to Ipas’.
127 Gopalakrishnan, DKT, Email conversation.
128 PATH, ‘PATH - Finances’.
129 Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview.
130 GEN, ‘Gender Equality Network-What Is GEN?’
to legalise abortion, but only mention birth spacing.\textsuperscript{131} It could mean that both PATH and GEN just emphasise the danger of unsafe abortion and advocate for better access to contraceptives, without advocating for abortion. MSI has funding form USAID\textsuperscript{132} and say they are in favour of abortion globally but do not advocate strongly for it in Myanmar.\textsuperscript{133}

In conclusion, the organisations working most actively with abortion (Ipas and DKT) might avoid US funding. PATH and GEN are more vague about their view on abortion, or PATH may have changed their stance with the new policy. That makes it more likely for them to receive USAID funding. The most surprising case was MSI who receive USAID funds despite being in favour of abortion globally.

Regarding networks, several organisations say that allies are important. E.g. MSI: “\textit{We need to have allies beyond the MoH.}” All have worked together with each other or other organisations on e.g. laws and reports. They use each other’s educational modules and the groups advocate with the parliament in different ways to increase their influence. GEN is a network so they include several civil society groups when revising laws. E.g. “\textit{And when you’re talking about RH, in 2012 we produced together with the government and civil society and UN. We produced what we call the reproductive health policy of 2012.}” PATH supports partners with funding since they do not work a lot on SRHR in Myanmar.\textsuperscript{134}

Both PATH and GEN say they work a lot with civil society and DKT with private providers so they have some ties with community.\textsuperscript{135} MSI talk about “\textit{ongoing relationship building}” with communities.\textsuperscript{136} Networks and community embeddedness both make the organisations less dependent on government according to Batley and Rose. The funding and networks implicate that the NGOs have low dependence on government, but more factors come into play.

\textsuperscript{131} Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
\textsuperscript{132} MSI, ‘Marie Stopes International - Partners’.
\textsuperscript{133} Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{134} Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview; Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview; Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview; Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview; Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview; Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{135} Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview; Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview; Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{136} Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
The second strategy is to shape the environment of resource dependence. This was usually done by using the expertise or specialisation in the organisation to gain influence.

Akhaya were planning to have their gender workshops with all health department staff. They have trainings with the Union Attorney General’s Office. By raising awareness there they influence laws and policies. When working on the recommendations of the Prevention of Violence against Women (POVAW) law they invited a lawyer from Cambridge University, a person in their network, to share how similar laws were written in other countries to make sure it was effective. This indicates that networks and expertise overlap. Other organisations also acknowledge that experience from other countries and community representatives are important when informing policy. “We also need to learn from other countries experiences, how other countries did navigate the abortion law or change the law.” “We do want them to have knowledge. These are all policies from around the world that is collected, or our PATH staff that helped work on policies in other countries that we can help this government know about, that they wouldn’t know otherwise.”

DKT and GEN use their research and surveys for evidence based advocacy. DKT is also a business that sells RH products so they know what products are used in certain areas etc which tells them something about how people are behaving. “We want to be able to influence policy based on our experience and the work we’re doing on the ground.” GEN educate the government about sexuality education and gender. Ipas have specialised on PAC and developed the Standard Operating Procedures. They provide trainings for medical personnel so they can use new PAC technology.

The NGOs have specialised in some area and use their knowledge to influence others. The first and second strategies may be available to organisations with medium or low dependence, but they are also meant to increase independence further.

137 Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview.
138 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
139 Byrkit and Dr. Myint Myint, PATH Myanmar, Interview.
140 Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
141 Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
142 Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview.
The third strategy is to adapt to the circumstances and increase influence incrementally. Here I have included trade-offs, meaning the organisation abstains from working with some more sensitive issues because it might damage their image or even render them unable to work in the country. This is evident in how they speak about SRHR issues: often they must abstain from advocating for certain law changes. Informal dialogue was one important way to advocate for change without being confrontational.

Akhaya is an example of this. One of the dinners they facilitated was with a law maker from the supreme court, his wife, and survivors of sexual violence. They did not explicitly say they wanted to change the law but only talked about the issue and the women’s experiences (quoted in Table 2). This is a kind of soft lobbying that avoids conflict while they are heard by policy makers.

Several organisations told me that abortion in Myanmar is only permitted if the mother’s life is in danger and women die from unsafe illegal abortions. They see it as one of the most sensitive SRHR issues to talk about and a law change seems far away. Even if their global vision is for safe abortion they do not provide it here. They say that any activity that might be seen as breaking the law could risk their position in the country and interrupt their other work. DKT do not advocate for safe provision at all. MSI discuss having abortion for rape survivors, but do not advocate very strongly. The organisations instead try to help women and couples in other ways, usually with PAC and contraceptives counselling. (quoted in Table 2). DKT sometimes meet people who might try to get an unsafe illegal abortion. They cannot give information on how to get a safe one so they try to send them to other international resources that might be able to provide more information. “The best we can do is provide care post that situation, so it’s not the best, not the greatest of solutions but it’s what we’re allowed to do within this context and it’s what supported by the government...” Ipas educates people about the symptoms of complications after unsafe abortions so they can get early referral.

143 Htwe, Akhaya Women, Interview.
144 Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
145 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
146 Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview; Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview; Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
147 Tyebally, DKT Myanmar, Interview.
148 Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview.
This shows that there are things they would like to do but they have to avoid conflict with the government and find other ways to help. Especially Ipas, who work mostly with safe abortion, say several times that they try to advocate carefully, little by little, to come closer to safe provision. They point out several times during the interview that they do not provide abortion, but they advocate for abortion in incest and rape cases and say it is included in the forthcoming POVAW law.\textsuperscript{149}

In the new SRHR policy the participating organisations have written about the consequences of unsafe abortion and promote family planning. Some say it is an improvement that they can say the words “sexual” and “rights” in politics.\textsuperscript{150} Although MSI says they cannot yet talk explicitly about sex or rights, but they can talk about choice.\textsuperscript{151} So they work around the most sensitive issues in the way they speak. The contradicting answers make it unclear what they can say and discuss. It probably depends on the setting. This also shows that SRHR can be a difficult area as the norms for what you can say and do might change rapidly and depending on context.

GEN said that after the cyclone Nargis was the first time it was possible to address “women protection” in Myanmar. After they got a quasi-civilian government in 2011 it became possible to talk about gender equality and rights. “Only then we started talking and addressing and advocating the government about the need to promote gender equality and there was a welcoming of these new issues...”\textsuperscript{152} Ipas also mention the new government as an important factor in the change of attitudes.\textsuperscript{153} Some mean it has become easier to work with HIV prevention even if there is still stigma toward groups like sex workers and LGBT people.\textsuperscript{154} \textsuperscript{155}

We can see there are some examples of issues that they consider easier to work with now compared to a few years ago. The change can be both due to their advocating and the big political changes recently. It is most likely a combination. When they started talking about things like “choice” and “women protection” it was the start of a civil society that they did not have during the previous government.

\textsuperscript{149} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni.
\textsuperscript{150} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni, Ipas Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{151} Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
\textsuperscript{152} Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
\textsuperscript{153} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni.
\textsuperscript{154} Aung.
\textsuperscript{155} Thu Lwin and Ni Ni.
These findings indicate that the NGOs are using the adaptive strategy which is a sign of high dependence on government.

Lastly, one strategy is that organisations may try to gain an insider status in the government which I heard some examples of. Most organisations say they can bring up their issues with the government and that they work closely together. This could be a reason why so few NGOs said they experienced government reluctance to work with them. They may have succeeded, to some degree, in getting an insider role, or they have a bigger chance of succeeding if they avoid saying something negative.

GEN said “So I don’t see anything that is difficult for us to bring to the government.” MSI, PATH and GEN point out they have influence and inform the government on policy. Aung at MSI says “…I’m one of the core members of the policy revision group.” There seem to be several groups with different subjects. Both PATH and GEN say they are leading a technical advisory group. It could mean that they want to emphasise their role in the policy making, thus emphasising their role as insiders.

At MSI they want the abortion law to change and they say: “there is the need for very specific action to change the abortion law and we should go beyond health sector... But I think that advocates should be from the MoH because they know the situation, they know the burden of unsafe abortion, of abortion cases in the hospital and things.” Here she emphasises the role of the MoH more than NGO influence. It could possibly be a sign of giving credit to the government. It could also be an avoidance tactic if they are afraid to advocate for abortion themselves. I have coded it as the insider status tactic because MSI clearly states that they would like abortion to be permitted so they are not avoiding it completely. The emphasis on MoH achievements and responsibility is an important part of the insider status strategy.

Table 2 below summarises the findings.

156 Tun Thein, Gender Equality Network, Interview.
157 Aung, MSI Myanmar, Interview.
Table 2. What strategies do NGOs use to stay independent?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy from the theory</th>
<th>Empirical example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Avoid resource dependence | Several organisations mention their networks or collaboration which is a way to avoid resource dependence. They also mention having several sources of funding.  
Akhaya: “We’ve already finished our recommendation. At the same time GEN is doing recommendation with their network. In November we combined our recommendations because we want, we collected our voices.”  
DKT: ”So we don’t get any funding from the MoH.” “Funding our work are Gates, Packard and SIDA in Myanmar.” |
| Shape environment of resource dependence | Includes being a source of expertise that can influence the government, or linking the government with other agencies. This was illustrated by words like training, education, research, technical expertise or assistance, form a bridge, experience from other countries.  
DKT: “For the GP’s that’s a lot of education provision and training provision so with them we’re particularly interested in being able to provide better training around IUD insertions.”  
GEN: “We do a lot of research, researches are also participated by members. And we use evidence for advocacy.”  
PATH: “... we also work closely with the government, we’ve helped form a bridge to give more comfort level to the government to be able to work with and address and hear from key populations about their needs and how they’re different from other populations...” |
| Adapt to dependence | Here they often use less politically sensitive language. Several NGOs say they are in favour of abortion globally but they cannot work with it in Myanmar. Ipas often say they try to change things “bit by bit”.  
Akhaya: “…she’s speaking very directly about her issue but she’s not going “marital rape blablabla” but she’s going “my husband is like this.”... We’re not going to use law terms, but community, people terms you know?”  
MSI: “But even in that discussion for SRHR policy we cannot explicitly say about making abortion safe yet. We can only talk about consequences of unsafe abortion. That’s why FP should be available, PAC should be available.”  
Ipas: “If the law allows we work on safe abortion also but here safe abortion is illegal, restricted. So that’s why we are only working on post abortion care.” |
| Insider status | In this case they emphasise the leadership of the MoH, or talk about NGOs supporting the government. Some emphasise their NGO’s |
influence specifically. They say they have a close relation with the government or ministry, or that they are partners.

MSI: “I’m involved a lot and I’m one of the core members of the policy revision group.”

DKT: “Although maybe in the future, if the government decides “yes we want to provide women with safe access” then we as a provider can find ways to help the government and support the government to provide the medical provisions that allow for that to happen.”

GEN: “We’re writing the violence against women law with the government. So right now we don’t have any challenging issues, especially gender being very very sensitive in the past. But now we’re on board with the government on these issues.”

The most difficult distinction was between “adapt organisation” and “insider status”. They both avoid conflicts with the state but the former does not necessarily mean the NGO and state cooperate closely, or that NGOs have influence on policy. The latter means there is cooperation and the NGO aims to influence policy from the inside.

Some statements fit into more than one category. An example from MSI: “If you have talked to GEN they have some resources, publication you can look at. I was involved in that research as well.” This is a sign of expertise because she refers to their research publications. It is also a sign of using networks because the organisations worked together on it. In these cases I have used the same quote in two categories as it supports two strategies.

As explained at length above, Batley describes four different strategies NGOs can use to stay independent while still cooperating with the government. The strategies chosen by a given NGO is likely to depend on the institutional setting as well as the capacities and the culture of the organisation.

It is interesting that the local and international NGOs use similar strategies since they have different preconditions. For instance, INGOs can always withdraw from a country if they face restraints to their work that they deem unacceptable. In addition, it might be important for INGOs to keep a good reputation towards donors abroad. Adapting to local conditions could therefore come with higher costs than benefits for them. At the same time, INGOs often have strong technical capacities. Thus, one might expect that INGOs should choose the avoid and shape strategies to a large extent.
Local organisations, on the other hand, have a harder time leaving the country if circumstances change and they might risk persecution if they have a conflict with the government. Furthermore, local organisations may have stronger incentives for services being provided in a sustainable way. One might therefore expect that the adaptive strategy and obtaining insider status could be more important to them.

Regarding the culture of the organisation, an NGO with an activist self-image might find it extra important to stay independent even if it means greater challenges and less service provision and capacity building. For such an organisation the avoid strategy is likely to be dominant. A more pragmatic NGO which regards its long term work as more important than adhering strongly to ideals might instead choose the adaptive strategy. Small NGOs may depend more on the government, have less capacity and less policy influence which means they need to adapt. However, the empirical evidence from my study suggests that most NGOs use several or all of the strategies proposed by Batley. As the different strategies are connected to different levels of dependence, this would imply that all organisations I interviewed are simultaneously both highly dependent on and independent from the government. How is this possible? One explanation might be that dependence can come in several dimensions. The results from my study suggests that the NGOs I investigated are not financially dependent on funds from the Myanmar government. However, they are dependent on the government’s policy control. NGOs need to avoid conflict with the government so they can keep working effectively in the country in the future. This dependence means that they need to use the adaptive strategy. In other dimensions they might be more independent, e.g. regarding funding and expertise. In some dimensions dependence might even be reversed: the government needs the knowledge and resources of NGOs to provide adequate services. In this case the parties are more equal and the NGOs are able to use the other three strategies (avoid, shape and insider status). Therefore it could be possible to use several, seemingly opposed, strategies at the same time.

The strategy of one NGO could of course impact on other NGOs. A risk with the insider strategy is that it can become a competition of who can please the government most which may lead many organisations to adapt too much.
Through the insider status and shape strategies the NGO influences the government. They might become intertwined with it in a way that makes it difficult to withdraw later and the government might have a difficult time becoming independent on areas where NGOs have been active. If they use the adaptive strategy they could stay on as “part of” the government even if there is a democratic backlash for example. Especially local NGOs could have a harder time leaving so they could feel the need to keep working with the government even in this case. On the other hand, the avoid and adapt strategies might mean that the NGOs stay independent and are not intertwined with the government. In that case the state building-service provision dilemma might be partly avoided.

One limitation of this study is that the NGOs are quite homogenous in that they are well known and established, both the local and international ones. They are also working with sensitive issues which might lead them to act differently from other organisations. There is still a chance that they are representative of all big NGOs that work in developing countries, especially since all these NGOs rendered similar results. However the conclusions are primarily considering NGOs that work with sensitive issues since that is the focus of this thesis.

Another limitation is that I have not been able to evaluate to what extent the different NGOs employ the different strategies (just whether they use them or not). These limitations make it difficult for me to draw any general conclusions about NGOs’ strategy preferences or if some of the strategies are more suited for NGOs’ independence in the long run. To answer that, one would need to examine more organisations over a longer time span. The results of such a study could have implications for NGOs’ future strategy choices in other contexts as well.

From this study, I can draw conclusions about well-established urban NGOs working with sensitive issues in Myanmar. The findings are similar to Batley’s, Rose’s and others authors’ in other South Asian countries. Therefore the conclusions are likely to be transferable to other similar contexts of NGO and government interdependence. However, the extent to which the strategy choices are similar in other settings will strongly depend on the context.
6. Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to answer the question: *How do NGOs working with SRHR in Myanmar perceive their cooperation with the government in terms of closeness? Do they perceive the cooperation as positive or negative? What strategies do they use to stay independent?*

Earlier research has shown that there are good reasons for NGOs and government to cooperate on service provision. There are also challenges like mutual mistrust and a risk of harming each other’s activities. I interviewed six NGOs working with SRHR in Myanmar to see how they perceive the cooperation regarding how close and positive it is. All INGOs have a formal agreement with the government and a majority say they have a close relationship, especially with the MoH. They mean it was mostly social norms, and not the commitment of their partners in the MoH, that was challenging. The local organisations that did not have agreements with the government still worked together with it in some regards. Most organisations perceive the cooperation with the government as close and positive. Only one local organisation expressed that there had been conflicts between them and the government. As the NGO in question did not have a formal agreement with the government, their incentives to avoid conflict with the government may have been smaller than those of other NGOs.

The sitting government in Myanmar is vastly different from its predecessor. The ruling party National League for Democracy and its de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi have led the way to liberalisation. At least at the time of the elections in 2015 they had the confidence of a large part of the population as well as the international community and the NGO sector. This confidence in the new government is surely a reason why organisations seek to cooperate with it. Such changes in other countries could lead to similar engagements. But when a clear will for democratic change is lacking from politicians it is less likely that NGOs will be so eager to engage.

For the second part of the question, earlier research suggests four different strategies that NGOs use to stay independent when cooperating with government. What strategies they choose depends on their level of resource dependence. The findings indicate that the NGOs use all four kinds of strategies (adapt, avoid, shape and insider). There were no great differences in strategies between the NGOs, or between international and local ones, which could be a result of this being a group of big well-established NGOs. NGOs’ government dependence may be multi-dimensional (e.g.
resources and control of policy). This might explain why the same organisation chooses strategies that require different levels of independence. The choice of strategy could also depend on an organisation’s self-image. One possible consequence of NGOs using these strategies is that they become an inherent part of the politics in the country they work in. They might adapt so much it becomes more important to keep their influence than to provide their services.

The fairly quick liberalisation of Myanmar became a window of opportunity for different kinds of actors who have an interest in influencing policy. It would have been a suitable time to get established as a partner or even insider to the government in order to influence this new context in the future. This could become true in other contexts as well.

Aspects like the military, the view on ethnic minorities, and armed conflict were only mentioned briefly by some organisations. They could all be influencing the relationship between NGOs and the state. These are important questions that could be studied further.
7. References


7.1 Interviews
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Appendix 1

Example questions.

- Are some subjects particularly difficult for you to work with? Due to norms, government unwillingness etc? (Which ones?)
- Are there things you want to do, or are planning to do, that haven't been possible yet?
- Some say there is hardly any ‘Sexual’ in SRHR provision, what do you think?
- Do you have any strategies regarding men’s behaviour (e.g. regarding gender based violence, controlling partners’ contraceptives)?
- Can you cooperate openly with sex workers?
- Can you cooperate openly with LGBT groups?
- Do you advocate for safe abortion?
- Do you advocate for sexuality education in school?
- Homosexuality is getting more accepted in the cities. How does it work when LGBT people need help with sexual or reproductive health? How do medical workers see them? How does the state see them?
- If a couple would come to you and say that they need an abortion, or they might try to get an abortion somehow. What do you say to them?
- To what extent do you work with the Myanmar state and ministries (e.g. MoH)? Do you have any influence on official policies?
- How does the state influence your work?
- How do you think the state will take responsibility for SRHR and gender equality in the future?