Gendered Perspective:
Young Female University Students’ Agency between Traditional and Transitional Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar represents an interesting case to inspect women’s agency and prospects, given that the country has recently opened its borders to globalization, whilst remaining very attached to its traditions and culture, placing women in between potential enhanced opportunities and limiting traditional paradigms. Women attending University are moreover specifically going to be inspected, because of the peculiar role that education has had in the past and continues to have today as active tool to bring about change and inclusivity, although it often still enhances female segregation within the system. These circumstances cause colliding standpoints on women’s opportunities, rendering them both advocates of change and considerate of local traditions. Previous studies have been used as an asset to start to inspect women’s reality and their standpoint in such a complex environment, although they have been mostly conducted with a post-conflict approach and solely regarding primary and secondary education, using gender as a transversal theme, while the aim of this study is to inspect women’s agency specifically, to understand their controversial role and its possible development in Myanmar’s society.

Consequently, my research question explores how is young female Myanmar students’ perception of agency to follow their ambitions shaped by university education and traditional culture, in the rapidly changing reality of Myanmar. In order to obtain meaningful data regarding perceptions a qualitative methods design has been prioritized, collecting data through participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a focus group including participatory methods, which provided results showing a general dissatisfaction with the education system and a set of illusions built up by the modernization process, thus providing female students with poor practical skills and unrealistic standpoints. Moreover, their personal ambitions are usually overthrown by family obedience dictated by Myanmar culture, limiting their agency overall. A communal effort towards gender inclusivity is thus required, in order to allow girls to realistically profit from the empowerment they perceive after the country opened up. This study would be therefore meaningful to draft more inclusive education Reforms in Myanmar, alerting legislators that if they wish to observe progress in the country they need the population and its culture to include women in the process.
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# Table of Contents

*Abstract*

*Acknowledgements*

*List of acronyms and abbreviations*

*List of Figures*

1. **Introduction** ........................................................................................................................................... 7  
   1.1. Research Purpose, Background, Relevance .................................................................................. 7  
   1.2. Problem Statement ......................................................................................................................... 8  

2. **Research Context** .................................................................................................................................. 9  
   2.1. Traditional patterns of Myanmar society and women .................................................................. 9  
   2.2. Modernization Impact on Gender Issues ....................................................................................... 10  
   2.3. Education Gendered Patterns in Myanmar ................................................................................... 12  

3. **Theoretical Framework** ....................................................................................................................... 15  
   3.1. CCPEE Approach ............................................................................................................................ 15  
   3.2. Gender Agency ............................................................................................................................... 16  
   3.3. The Role of Culture vs. Globalization Patterns ............................................................................. 19  
   3.4. A Gendered Educational Framework ............................................................................................. 20  

4. **Methodology** ......................................................................................................................................... 23  
   4.1. Research Question and Sub-questions ......................................................................................... 23  
   4.2. Research Design ............................................................................................................................. 24  
      4.2.1. Ontology and Epistemology .................................................................................................. 24  
      4.2.2. Units of Analysis .................................................................................................................. 25  
      4.2.3. Sampling .................................................................................................................................. 26  
   4.3. Research Methods ........................................................................................................................... 26  
      4.3.1. Observations ............................................................................................................................ 26  
      4.3.2. Interviews ............................................................................................................................... 27  
      4.3.3. Focus Group ........................................................................................................................... 27  
      4.3.4. Participatory Methods ............................................................................................................ 27
4.4. Assessment of Quality Criteria ................................................................. 28
4.5. Data Analysis .......................................................................................... 29
4.6. Ethical Considerations ............................................................................ 29

5. Presentation and Analysis of Results, Empirical Findings.............................. 31
5.1. Perceptions around Higher Education in Myanmar .................................... 31
  5.1.1. Youth's Perspectives and Criticism on Myanmar Educational System .... 31
  5.1.2. Perspectives around University Education between Culture and Globalization Process ................................................................. 33
  5.1.3. Gendered Perspective around University Education ............................ 35
  5.1.4. Conclusive Remarks on First Findings Chapter ................................. 39
5.2. Female Agency Possibilities in the Myanmar Context .................................. 41
  5.2.1. Role of Family in influencing Young Students' Agency ...................... 41
  5.2.2. The Overall Influence of Myanmar Society on Girls’ Agency .............. 46
  5.2.3. Conclusive Remarks on Second Findings Chapter ............................ 48
5.3. Female Perspectives on Opportunities in Transitioning Myanmar ............. 50
  5.3.1. Direct perceived Impact and Impressions of Globalization on Young Myanmar Students ................................................................. 50
  5.3.2. The Position of Women in the Transitioning Reality of Myanmar ...... 53
  5.3.3. Conclusive Remarks on Third Findings Chapter ............................... 56

6. Conclusions and Reflections .......................................................................... 58
6.1. Significance of Findings ........................................................................... 58
6.2. Theoretical Reflections for further Research ........................................... 59
6.3. Policy and Practice Recommendations .................................................... 61

Annexes .......................................................................................................... 63

Annex 1.1.: Transparency Table of Interviewees ............................................. 63
Annex 1.2.: Observations table ......................................................................... 64
Annex 2.: Operationalization Table ................................................................. 65
Annex 3.: Conceptualization table pre-fieldwork ........................................... 67

References ...................................................................................................... 68
Table of acronyms and abbreviations

**ASEAN**: Association of Southeast Asian Nations  
**CCPEE**: Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education  
**CEO**: Chief Executive Officer  
**EFA**: Education For ALL  
**GDP**: Gross Domestic Production  
**KFC**: Kentucky Fried Chicken  
**KMD**: Knowledge, Management and Education  
**IR**: International Relations  
**MOE**: Ministry Of Education  
**TNI**: Transnational Institute  
**USDP**: Union Solidarity and Development Party

List of Figures

- **Fig. 1**: Visual representation of Yangon with additional information summarized  
- **Fig. 2**: Gigantic Statue of the Lying Buddha in Yangon, Myanmar  
- **Fig. 3**: Explicit globalization influence: KFC nearby a hindu temple.  
- **Fig. 4**: Conceptualization Table after fieldwork  
- **Fig. 5**: University of Rangoon, Yangon  
- **Fig. 6**: Result on perceptions and values of Participatory Methods used during a focus group
1. Introduction

1.1. Research Purpose, Background, Relevance

The focus of my research rests on the perceptions that young women in Myanmar have about their future, specifically on the degree of agency they express to acquire after having achieved a higher education level. The project has the scope of understanding what are the choices young Myanmar women perceive to have, among strong cultural identities and globalization patterns. Higher education might thus enhance their agency and capabilities, but diverse variables might instead orient young generations towards a different set of results.

The significance of this research derives from the specific context of the changing Myanmar reality, combined with the opportunities that education is deemed to produce for young women, simultaneously compounded with the level of agency both created and allowed by the circumstances. In fact, Myanmar represents a very interesting environment to inspect women’s agency, due to a historical legacy which is currently still influencing the country’s society and policies. That is the reason why, in this case specifically, the timing is essential, given that such peculiar conditions might change and evolve in the following years. Moreover, Myanmar youth are currently struggling between their rights, globalization and traditions, making this country a unique case study to delve in. Yangon has been subsequently chosen as the ideal location to conduct this study because of the substantial number of universities present locally, that could most effectively ease my access to diverse student scenes.

Existing knowledge around gender issues and the education system in the country has been used as a useful starting point to inspect women’s standpoint in such a complex different environment, reflexed in the diversity of the factors that have an impact on it. Precisely, the Research Consortium Education and Peacebuilding of the University of Amsterdam did conduct very relevant research on gender and education in Myanmar, however focusing their study more on primary and secondary education’s effects and outcomes in the country, taking a post-conflict approach, conducting an in depth analysis of the educational system, thus without placing their focal point on women’s agency precisely, but treating gender as a transversal theme. As it appears, the purposes and the aims of my research have not been previously studied yet, relating women agency to higher education, modernization and traditions simultaneously, to have a more precise picture of the variables that play a role in shaping women’s expectations.

The relevancy of my research lays in the relation with the universal rights for education and for gender equality, the former being fondly perceived in Myanmar as an essential asset, while the latter is becoming increasingly relevant after Aung Sang Suu Kyi came into office, representing a model to follow for many girls in Yangon. In fact, “the Lady” - as she is fondly called by young girls in Yangon - represents a role model inspiring leadership to young girls, a powerful image after more than 60 years of isolation and confinement under the military junta.

Initially, the context of the research will be assessed, therefore examining the environment where the project will take place, which will enhance the general understanding of the circumstances and the need for a more in depth analysis of the issue. Secondly, a theoretical framework will be provided, producing the outline of the discourses around education, traditions and globalization entrenched to gendered agency which, combined, will allow me to draw the pattern throughout the different stages of the project.
Consequently, a methodology section, entailing the process pursued in order to gather meaningful information for the project, will produce all the knowledge regarding the practical process and the most efficient way to examine the aforementioned subject of research. Finally, the analysis of my empirical findings will be presented in the fifth chapter, entailing the most relevant findings of the fieldwork period, which will produce the core of my research and expose the results of eleven weeks of research fieldwork in Yangon. Conclusive considerations and recommendations will shortly follow.

Fig. 1: Visual representation of Yangon with additional information summarized

1.2. Problem Statement

Myanmar is going through a crucial phase, the country opened up in 2011 and Reforms regarding the educational system are being drafted to the present day, trying to render universities more inclusive and improve the learning and teaching methods overall. However, even though the modernization process is ongoing, the culture and traditions are impacting the globalization process, causing unique and unexpected outcomes. Women are heavily subjected to the effects of this pattern, and in light of the fact that education has been the trigger for students to protest in the streets in 2015, asking for a more inclusive system, looking into the environment of women in the education process has been meaningful to grasp the reality of their everyday life. Following this lead, I hope to understand the dynamics behind their limited but interesting position in Myanmar society, both as advocates of change and considerate of local traditions.

Finally, the approach taken to conduct this thesis has been guided by the most meaningful variables considered to have an important role in shaping women’s agency, fundamentally modifying their ambitions, limiting them or enhancing their self-confidence regarding the future, rendering young women’s perspectives inherently inseparable from their education path, their families and the globalization process in place in their country.
2. Research Context: Myanmar

Myanmar has gone through a range of different phases in the past century, with a colonial heritage under the British, independence gained in 1948 and since 1962 a military regime which ruled until 2010, resulting in the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) taking office in the following year as the first civilian government since five decades, marking the start of Myanmar’s transition process towards democracy (Higgins et al., 2015:35; TNI, 2013).

The country has a heavy historical legacy, which still influences its policies and population, unfortunately rendering Myanmar an easy target for the proliferation of inequality patterns and abuse of power (Selth, 2012).

2.1. Traditional Patterns of Myanmar Society related to Women

The heritage of Myanmar’s military past still reflects itself on the young generations, limiting their potential agency and keeping the population in general from expressing itself, from having a voice on significant matters (Higgins et al., 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015). In fact, their capabilities have been prevented by the regime, causing youth to turn to alternative ways to pursue their scope through peer networking and youth forums, as a result of the general dissatisfaction around access to meaningful schooling (Higgins et al., 2015), which will however be analysed more in depth in the third section of this chapter.

Indeed, the issue is inherently reflected in the traditional gender roles that the education practice is fostering thus far, preventing young Myanmar women from taking on positions of leadership (Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016). These settings are obviously disadvantaging women that are now in the right position to contribute to society and endangering the agency power of future generations as well (Maber, 2014). In fact, Myanmar’s traditions usually place women as advocates of unimportant work and prevents them from reaching decision-making positions, and although their status in society has developed, allowing them access to labour mobility and formally recognizing equal rights between men and women, the gender empowerment pattern in the country is still very limited (Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016; Yi, 2016). The reason for such poor results regarding gender development date back to Myanmar’s historical background, fostering structural discrimination and patriarchal monopoly on power, thus limiting women’s possibilities overall (Fennessy, 2016). The Buddhist religion also plays a role in this gender segregation pattern, since its interpretation in Myanmar entails viewing men as naturally superior to women, moreover considering authority as a sole male prerogative (Fennessy, 2016). This frame is reflected in the social hostility some women experience as they obtain a university qualification, and they are very much discouraged to exercise it, based on defined social roles that have to be respected (Higgins et al., 2015; Green et al., 2006).

Accordingly, the exclusion and discrimination of women overall impacts their agency possibilities (Higgins et al., 2015). In fact, this pattern is confirmed by the fact that young female students are not being given the tools to challenge the inequalities they confront on a daily basis (Higgins et al., 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015). The system is therefore preventing them from speaking out for their rights, finally limiting their opportunities and freedom to promote positive inclusive models, sensitive to women’s situation and encouraging social cohesion, a concept which will be further analyzed in the next chapter (Maber, 2014; Pickett and Wilkinson, 2011).
The need for a more adequate representation and recognition of the role of women in the educational sector is stressed by the Consortium, as well as their participation in decision-making instances, but the legacy of a violent past appears to be deeply difficult to divert (Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015).

2.2. Modernization Impact on Gender Issues in Transitional Myanmar

The nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is currently - finally - leading the government of her country, after elections held in November 2015, causing high expectations among the population on her party’s future conduct (The Washington Post, 2016). She thence carries an enormous amount of responsibility and expectations, cautiously struggling for a satisfying compromise with the Myanmar mighty and unelected generals. Her seizure of power has been generally warmly welcomed in Yangon, but other regions of Myanmar never felt truly represented by her Burmese identity and military heritage, her father being a general, rendering Aung San Suu Kyi a positive international figure chasing a democratic future for her country, however still followed by controversies at the national level. However, the previous isolation in the confinement of her home has prevented any improvement in the country from the thorough hold on power of an illegitimate government, who has elaborately calculated her release after the new Constitution had already been formulated (Ghoshal, 2013).

In this setting of strain towards change another factor has to be held accountable for the current situation, having a strong impact on the policies the country is adopting: the modernization paradigm. In Myanmar, this transition from military regime to newborn democracy caused the adoption of new Reforms, that are currently being drafted (Higgins et al, 2015; Chalk, 2013).
However, many consider this process as a ‘guided democracy’, enforcing apparent progress in response to stringent sanctions and condemnations from the part of the international community, solely to maintain the disenchantment of the Myanmar population, while still perpetrating dictatorial and repressive ruling (Ghoshal, 2013). The actors of the transition might therefore be paying more attention to the rapidity of the process than its necessity for coherent and comprehensive dispositions, lingering on the surface (Fraser, 2005). Myanmar has a GDP growth of 6% annually since 2011, but 85% of its population still cannot access electricity on a daily basis (Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016). The focus of the Reforms could have been directed towards inclusivity and inequality, but instead it appears as if it is instead oriented towards enforcing the economic development paradigm out of context - directly ignoring the multiple causes of national conflict - whereas a human-centred kind of development would be required (Higgins et al, 2015; Fraser, 2005; Kuppuswamy, 2013; Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016).

Accordingly, many have doubts on the motivations driving these Reforms, debating on how the current democratic shift might just be a particularly well designed plan of the military to legitimise their authority in the eyes of the global community and be eligible for foreign investments (Kuppuswamy, 2013). This theory is validated by the fact that even though elections have been held, the military have their power on the parliament ensured, and the Reforms have been actually designed by a small group of military proponents, a pretty narrow representation of a country as diverse and multicultural as Myanmar is (Higgins et al, 2015). Once more, thence, the population has been prevented from having a voice in the Reform matter.

Not surprisingly, gender norms addressing inequality are also absent from the Reform projects, or encompass only the quantitative parity in enrolments and completion of school, avoiding discussion of a whole range of issues including structural and indirect violence, gendered bias and discrimination (Higgins et al, 2015). What would be inherently needed, instead, is the introduction of leadership and critical thinking skills, that would enable young female students to call into question the social and cultural hierarchical system they are
currently subjected to (Higgins et al, 2015; Lwin, 2000). It is thence essential to lead the country towards reconciliation and to consider the cultural and well-being paradigms as the ones to implement, despite the predominant economic and market-driven model (Higgins et al, 2015; Fraser, 2005). At the same time, however, the population is also asking for the modernization of its culture, entailing more freedom for women to pursue their dreams and ‘social permission’ to be free from traditional outdated practices.

2.3. The Challenge of Education and Gendered Patterns in Myanmar

The educational system of the country has followed various political leads, and women had to cope with a whole set of indirect consequences and restrictions. After 1948 access to education had been overall improved, but inequities regarding gender issues persisted (Higgins et al, 2015). With the advent of the military coup in 1962 circumstances changed, leading to economic modernization and subsequent nationalization of all schools, in order to homogenize the education system and create obedient and loyal citizens out of it (Higgins et al, 2015; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Lwin, 2000). The system was heavily controlled by the police and military forces, who helped the regime to detect political dissent and made sure to crush civil unrests, finally dominating every aspect of Myanmar’s society (Selth, 2012).

In 1988 student protests spread across the country, causing universities to be shut down in an attempt to disperse the network of tertiary students manifesting against their negative experience with schooling, which they felt as disempowering and empty of content and pedagogical practice (Martin, 2013). In fact, the premises of the National Education Law of 1973 merely pursued the restriction of the development of the higher education sector, taking decisions centrally following a top-down pattern (Hayden and Martin, 2013). Students thus protested for a more inclusive and representative education system, one that would take into account the resources, policies and practices to address existing inequalities to pursue reconciliation patterns. Education was therefore considered to be a powerful tool to give youth understanding and knowledge of political processes too, in order to contribute to the empowerment of young Myanmar generations. Students have been, consequently, often persecuted and jailed because of manifesting their discontent with the autocratic regime ruling in Myanmar through the military junta, stressing the need to move beyond the military and modernisation paradigm (Higgins et al, 2015; Martin, 2013; Maber 2014).

Subsequently, even though the system opened up with the parliamentary elections of 2011, promising a wide set of reforms in the educational sector, Myanmar still remained strongly military-oriented (Chalk, 2013). Although the country made remarkable improvements in the field of human rights, chasing a model of democracy that could be potentially accepted by international standards, its educational system is still weakened by the former dictatorial regime (Hayden and Martin, 2013). In fact, the defence budget is still much higher than the educational one, comprising only 4.4% in the national budget in 2013 (Htet, 2013), besides the national institutions are unluckily too weak to provide the population with welfare and effective measures to undermine inequality patterns (Lorch, 2007). Moreover, the still influential military paradigm is having effects on educational institutions and curriculum materials, perpetuating patriarchal traditions and traditional gender roles (Higgins et al, 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Sugiyama 2013). Additionally, there is little information on the relevancy and efficiency of curricula, program designs and methodologies
used, the qualification of teaching staff seems to be inadequate and links between university institutions and labour market demands also appears to be feeble (Hayden and Martin, 2013).

Accordingly, the system is dominated by the representation of military male figures as models to follow, obviously not taking into consideration potential leadership models for girls to aspire to, and further reinforcing associations of violence and masculinity for boys (Higgins et al, 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015; Kabeer, 2005; Unterhalter, 2005). Besides, female students on tertiary level consider formal education to be very academic, not encompassing the practical side of learning and therefore wishing for a more creative approach to knowledge (Maber, 2016).

Indeed, although the enrolment to school for students in primary and secondary levels is estimated to be equal between boys and girls in 2014 (EFA), local realities might reflect a different pattern on gender inequities (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Lwin, 2000). Often, it is the role of the families to take decisions on which of their children will be given an education, based on traditions and economic-based choices, obviously disadvantaging girls in the process, following the typical modernisation paradigm and the general idea that girls will get married and will not pursue a career in their future (Kabeer, 2005; Unterhalter, 2005). Moreover, the access to tertiary level of education is deliberately discriminating against girls, in that it requires higher entrance requirements through the Standard X examination for female students in certain faculties (Higgins et al, 2015; Lwin, 2000, 2007).

However, the number of women attending university is higher than the counterpart (Holliday, 2011) and they also comprise the majority of the employees in the education sector, but are regrettably underrepresented in education leadership and positions entailing decision-making power, reflecting the predominant gender hierarchy pattern overall and confirming how despite democratization the daily working practices did not mutate (CESR, 2013; Esson and Wang, 2016). Accordingly, female teachers’ salaries are very low and sometimes including high-risk circumstances, which are not taken seriously enough to act upon (Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015). The tendency of capable graduates not to choose the profession of teacher because of its unattractiveness also impacts on the quality of the educational system, clearly undermining its potential (Hayden and Martin, 2013).

It is self-evident how the patterns of the past are still reflecting on the contemporary reality of Myanmar, subjugating women to indirect violence through exclusion and discrimination, seemingly reproducing a cycle of inequality (Lwin, 2000). In fact, cultural barriers and expectations also build up on the difficulties that women face for parity, regrettably causing education to keep them chained to the traditional, military and modernised paradigms the country is forwarding (Higgins et al, 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015; Kabeer, 2005; Unterhalter, 2005; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). Accordingly, the traditions and customs of the country have been reinforced during the dictatorial domain by the police forces, through some sort of colonial continuity, reproducing the same gendered norms and inequality patterns of Myanmar’s historical past (Selth, 2012). In fact, the targets of education are confined in succeeding the examinations tests, a colonial heritage which incites elitism and poses boundaries to learning and teaching processes (Hayden and Martin, 2013), moreover reproducing social inequalities, since the majority of successful students in examination tests are coming from privileged social classes (Naing, 1992). A review on the educational sector conducted by the Myanmar Education Research Board in 1992 shows how "most Myanmar students cannot think critically, raise questions or solve problems. Classroom instruction focuses primarily on getting students to understand and memorize the facts in textbooks, which are often out of date" (MOE, 1992: 44). Efforts to address this issue have recently been made, by
promoting new and more student-centered methods of teaching, but challenges to capacity-building are still posed to an educational system where traditional methods are persisting and difficult to eradicate (Hayden and Martin, 2013; Arnhold et al, 1998; Esson and Wang, 2016).

These inequality-structures have been partially addressed trying to expand inclusion, however it appears as if issues around education still need to be more attentively confronted. Students protests against the National Education Law spread once again in 2015, but dissidents have been dispersed and their mobilization has been prevented (Higgins et al, 2015) to retain power and control over the Myanmar society (Martin, 2013; Tin, 2007; Feuer et al, 2013).

It can be thus concluded that Myanmar’s education system is currently still confronted with countless challenges, in relation to governance, pedagogy, management and quality of education overall, that need to be addressed in order to pursue an inclusive and efficient system (Hayden and Martin, 2013).
3. Theoretical Framework

The concepts drawing the line of the discourse in this section are the same ones that have been used to analyse the context of Myanmar and will be essential to conduct a meaningful methodology section. Overall, this study is concerned with gender issues in the country, specifically on how the educational, cultural and globalization aspects are strongly related to each other and how they impact the country and the agency of its young female generation. This is the main reason for the inclusion of the CCPEE (Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education) approach in the theoretical framework, which will constitute a critical stand to view education not as an independent entity, but rather as compounded and interwoven in cultural, political and economic dimensions (Robertson and Dale, 2015). The analysis will furthermore draw from the discourses of Connell (2001, 2010, 2014), Freire (1970), Sen (2000), Appadurai (2004) and Unterhalter et al (2001, 2012, 2011, 2013), in addition to many other personalities who have written on the above mentioned topics.

3.1. CCPEE Approach

It is extremely valuable to apply the CCPEE approach to this analysis, because of the very nature of education as being an entity closely connected with diverse dynamics of society, and simultaneously constituting a product of the latter. In fact, for the purpose of this research, it is fundamental to explore “new ways of understanding modern social formations, their social relations and subjectivities, by bringing political economy into a productive conversation with the cultural turn” (Robertson and Dale, 2015:149).

First of all, education will be considered as an ‘ensemble’, namely an entity entailing a broader discourse equally encompassing cultural norms and political economy coincidently (Robertson and Dale, 2015; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014). These dimensions within the ensemble are often moved by colliding interests, thus creating contradictions and rising tensions within the education entity. However, the education ensemble cannot be understood unless examined in the entirety of its components. Four elements are deemed to be essential to comprehend its collectivity, namely the cultural strings shaping education, the relation of education with national societies, the nature of the organisations that have shaped the educational system and the connection between education and the economic system, in this case dominated by the capitalist paradigm (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

Moreover, a relevant critical realist lense will be adopted, treating the social world as a layered construct that goes beyond our personal experience of it, thus assuming that a reality might exist which we are not aware of. Therefore, in order to understand the reality which we are confronted with, an extremely critical point of view has to prevail on the initial perceptions, directly interrogating how the knowledge gained through experience has been constituted. The explanations around education should thus encompass mechanisms that might not be visible in the initial phase of observation, but that are extremely valuable to illustrate the real impacts and influences they have on society (Robertson and Dale, 2015).

It is thus of fundamental importance to understand education through this specific but broader standpoint, also regarding the results of education based programs. In fact, often the outputs rather than the outcomes are considered to be indicators of successful education programs, such as the range of literacy in a determined society. Conversely, the outcomes of
such programs entail a more inclusive and broader perspective, comprising the long term consequences of the outputs reached. Higher literacy rates, or female access to education rates, can have an impact on levels of social cohesion, on feelings of exclusion rather than inclusion in the society, and on national identity, which cannot be ignored by a careful researcher dealing with education patterns (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014). Thus, once again, the outcomes should not be considered as being solely cultural, political or economic, but recognized as the result of multiple interactions among influential dimensions, therefore treating education as the catalyst of social reproduction and of social change overall (Robertson and Dale, 2015; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

This introductory framework approach will be adopted throughout my study as a useful tool to guide my inquiry around the role of education, intertwined with globalization and culture, in shaping women’s agency.

3.2. Gendered Agency

Agency is the center of this study, closely connected with patterns around education, culture and globalization, which have been previously mentioned and will be analysed closely in the next sections and in my final findings. Discourses around gender often entail very broad perspectives, but for the purpose of this research mainly relevant insights on Southern perspectives and empowerment visions will be taken into consideration. Definitions and perceptions on agency will be inspected through the capability lense and the cultural capacity feature, which combined to other authors insights and influences will provide the most complete vision of women’s agency as an entrenched concept. Moreover, empowerment as a concept will encompass the consciousness women can reach around the social construction of gender itself, moreover considering their ability or possibility to act upon it (Batliwala, 1994).

First of all, we need to conceive the notion of gender in a context-sensitive manner, in order to analyse it thoroughly and be able to apply it consciously to different environments and circumstances. It is thence warmly suggested to abandon the presupposition “that the North already has proprietary rights in the framing of knowledge” (Connell, 2011:106), to positively shift towards Southern perspectives of the issue, promoting the escape from the mainstream “gender analysis (…) involved in a global political economy of knowledge” (Connell, 2014: 553; Kirkwood, 1986). In fact, these premises are usually detrimental to women's situation, because they drive them to remain constrained into a fabricated reality which might not reflect their actual situation, damaging any opportunity for their empowerment once their environment begins to be entrenched with modernization processes. Consequently, the predominance of Northern theories on agency has to be taken into account, fostering mainly the individual capacity of people to modify their position, but in a structured society that they do not have the power to influence (Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986). Thence, this pattern truly undermines the capabilities of women to have an impact on their environments through collective action, weakening any chance to subvert inequality overall. In fact, girls’ ability to develop their own capabilities is highly dependent on their environment, thus the feasibility of fostering change specifically hinges on the context of their lives (Hart, 2010; Unterhalter, 2012). Thence, a more comprehensive surrounding could positively enhance chances for women to play a role in diminishing inequalities within their communities, subsequently empowering them to positively affect institutional change (Khader, 2009; Unterhalter, 2012; Maber 2014).

Originally, these patterns often derive from colonial and postcolonial customs, reproduced in common dynamics of colonization and later globalization. The former was
generally built around the image of constant use of force perpetuated by men, following a power structure based on establishing fixed colonial social boundaries around gender norms and masculinity paradigm, which were then embedded in the realities of the populations subjected to colonization (Connell, 2014; Mohanty 2003). The rejection of the liberal empowerment in favour of a 'liberating empowerment', in order to shift the direction of patriarchal predominance, through a 'decolonizing practice', is hence a preferable option to deal with the issue (Connell, 2014; Smith, 1999; Mohanty, 2003).

It is at this point almost natural to consider the broader picture, entailing the dispute between the pressure towards modernization and the preservation of traditions, although these concepts will be defined more in detail in the next section. There is an obvious need to protect and enhance participatory freedom and for choices not be taken by closed elites, detaining a level of authority and legitimacy that does not belong to them, finally considering a solution that involves the people that will be affected from these structural changes in deciding what they wish for and what they are willing to accept (Sen, 2000). Capabilities in this sense are closely entrenched with the notion of the freedoms that people should acquire, in order to lead the kind of life they have reason to value (Sen, 2000). Freedom in this sense entails both the process of deciding upon the future and the opportunities given by personal and social circumstances; while the notion of agency is deemed to be featured by the attribution of voice as empowerment, further acting and bringing about change, with achievements judged upon specific values and objectives (Sen, 2000; Hart, 2010).

Development should thence be directed towards enhancing the lives people live and the freedoms they enjoy, attainable only through free agency (Sen, 2000). A wider range of freedoms could therefore enable people to help themselves and simultaneously influence their surroundings, a concept that could be easily applied to the women empowerment discourse, if committed collectively (Unterhalter, 2012; Hart, 2010). This process consequently fosters a healthy progress and ensures fair social opportunities for individuals to substantially live better and effectively participate in economical and political activities. Furthermore, economic opportunities, political liberties and social power can actively influence the purposes people have, besides education having a significant role to gain the social opportunity to aim at living better (Sen, 2000).

In fact, if we assume that people depend on social associations - specifically on the formation of public perceptions and comprehension of problems and solutions through collective collaboration and interaction (Sen, 2000; Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986; Mohanty, 2003) - we can then conceive agency in a collective way (Connell, 2014), deeming change possible only through the creation of a social reality on multiple levels, from the agency in the household till the proliferation of social movements. This understanding of agency partly clashes with Sen’s (2000) capability approach previously mentioned, which is characterized by a more individualistic stance. However, as mentioned above, Sen (2000) understands freedom of opportunities as being given by social and personal circumstances both, I thus believe that the reality of powerful social circumstances can actively influence women’s possibilities and therefore agency overall, finally bringing about tolerance for a more communal perception around agency. In fact, equal recognition of the role of women in shaping gender identity is essential, in order to create cultural patterns that respect gender justice, going beyond sexism and segregation, through the collective agency of women eager to modify the structure of institutions, too (Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986; Mohanty, 2003). This typology of impact reflects Southern arguments in favour of the idea of a gender dynamic order at the societal scale to be influencing the broader gender analysis question, addressing diversity and gender forms.
collectively (Connell, 2014; Hagemann White, 2001). These concepts can be thus related to the notion of social cohesion, described by the UNICEF Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme (PBEA) as “the quality of coexistence between the multiple groups that operate within a society […] along the dimensions of mutual respect and trust, shared values and social participation, life satisfaction and happiness as well as structural equity and social justice” (UNICEF, 2014). It is here evident how the discourse is based around a communal concept, rather than an individual one, fostering solidarity, inclusion, collectivity, common purpose, and indirectly promoting even social justice and equity overall (Higgins et al, 2015). Thus, social cohesion in our case can be interpreted as the need of women for society’s support, because change will not occur only through individual actions (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2011).

Accordingly, the environment women have to deal with and adapt to is consistently framed around entrenched cultural and modernization patterns, which are often deemed to be poles apart, but can instead work together through the recognition of voice to enhance the possibility of a more inclusive system (Hirschman, 1970). Indeed, there is the possibility to approach development as a catalyzer of well-being, rather than solely oriented towards economic benefits, considering ‘the voice’ as a mean to positively modify the terms of recognition, maybe even the cultural framework itself, therefore potentially fostering inclusion and well-being overall (Appadurai, 2004). Consequently, to strengthen cultural capacity means to address the results of economic exclusion. However, the difficulty for such positive results to occur is widely acknowledged, because of the inequality present in society, which does not allow the population to exercise its voice in the societal arena, lowering the chances to obtain positive results from the combination of culture and globalization (Appadurai, 2004; Hannerz, 1996). Regrettably, only the powerful segment of the population has the ‘navigational capacity to aspire’, since the chance to be actually listened to is not evenly distributed among the population, but can be expanded through mobilization (Appadurai, 2004). In fact, despite the difficulties of the system, there is a high level of involvement of women in civil society, mobilizing and creating new links between women’s organizations to share knowledge and encourage leadership trainings, also through adapted feminist activism (Maber, 2016; Maber, 2014). As a result, enhanced capacities should be given to the global South, in order to let people decide upon their futures (Appadurai, 2004). The idea of aspiration should thus be conceived as a cultural capacity, considering culture as “a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions” (Appadurai, 2004:28).

Finally, it can be concluded that the gender dimension, although it might seem not to be directly related to the topics of education, agency and globalization, is instead deeply influenced by global patterns of exclusion and discrimination, endangering any opportunity for active agency and empowerment of women. Their capacity building is deeply entrenched with the support they can potentially receive from their communities, their families and their working place, through mentorship, moral, financial and emotional support (Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016). Regrettably, these very same entities are often the ones placing boundaries to gender development instead (Yi, 2016). These premises are irrevocably impacting the environment of women and seemingly chaining them to a vicious cycle of patriarchal roles and male authority, deriving from the colonial era, and gendered roles established by a society that let structures out of context to be detrimentally implemented (Unterhalter, 2011; Connell, 2010). What would be inherently needed, instead, is a deeper integration of feminist ideals and an overall liberating empowerment, to let women decide upon their choices, their community needs and their future, free from any constraint from society. It is thence self-evident how agency, for the purpose of this study, needs to be considered as the capability of a segment of society - in this case women -
to be collectively empowered. I therefore contemplate the totality of influences that women are subjected to, their society and their culture, to be an active variable in shaping their capabilities and their freedom to choose (Appadurai, 2004; Sen, 2000; Unterhalter, 2012; Connell, 2011, 2013; Hart, 2010; Kirkwood, 1986; Mohanty, 2003; Khader, 2009).

3.3. The Role of Culture vs. Globalization Patterns

Culture is nowadays often perceived as belonging to the past, while the economic sphere is deemed to be the driver towards the future (Appadurai, 2004). Culture can be considered as a leaky entity, meaning that its boundaries are not fixed, creating a space for it to evolve, interacting - for instance - with globalization patterns (Appadurai, 2004; Hannerz, 1996; Mbembe, 2001). Culture can be thus treated as a - spatially and temporally - flexible entity, therefore never static and with continuously changing boundaries in response to globalized features (Gentz, 2012).

This approach shows a significant recognition that has to be made in the course of this research, namely to identify the role of culture in the local context of this study, as the controversial connecter between human ambitions and globalization, to inspect the dimensions driving society towards inequality, taking into account power relations present in the national context (Appadurai, 2004; Hannerz, 1996; Mbembe, 2001; Barth, 1969). In fact, we ought to ask ourselves what role is culture actually playing in people's lives and if it is a factor strengthening or rather weakening them and their condition as human beings confronted with modern society (Barth, 1969). Inspecting ethnic group’s reality, Barth (1969) discovered how cultural boundaries still persist despite diverse modernity elements that have been incorporated or have been influencing the local context, thus confirming the strength of cultures and traditions when confronted with external influences. Moreover, even interdependence and inter-ethnic contact due to an increased level of connectivity are deemed not to be detrimental to the nature of a specific culture, because its nature and its boundaries, although being permeable, are still very resistant towards change (Barth, 1969; Tomlinson, 2006). We can thus consider the resilience of culture faced with external and global influences to be the most powerful feature of cultural patterns as opposed to Western ethnocentric visions of global homogenization (Tomlinson, 2006). This does not mean that cultures do not modify themselves as a result of globalized interconnectivity, but that we need to tackle cultural processes through the local context where the cultural impact of globalization manifests itself, in order to abandon a biased Western vision of the issue (Tomlinson, 2006).

Accordingly, in this scenario globalization is broadly understood as a connectivity process, entailing a global network of interconnections and interdependencies (Tomlinson, 2006). For the purpose of this research it will be however considered mainly in relation to gender issues around agency and empowerment, although a wider vision of globalization in national contexts is of fundamental importance to understand the results of my study.

In fact, one of the consequences of globalization within countries seems to be related to a rise of inequalities and a broader gap between rich and poor, surely undermining not only the economic field, but directly impacting the local population and finally influencing their future possibilities, too (Stewart and Berry, 2000). There is therefore reason to be concerned about external influences on national income distributions, because of their close connections with lower growth rates. Accordingly, if countries adopt globalization patterns including liberalizing policies they could potentially jeopardize the well-being and thus freedom of their populations, lower growth meaning less possibilities and thus limited agency of the population to enhance
their quality of life overall (Stewart and Berry, 2000). This general understanding of globalization as not applicable worldwide or as inherently dangerous for countries not belonging to the Western world has been analysed and studied in depth by many authors, but it is not the purpose of this study to focus primarily on globalization patterns and on the various theories around them. It is instead sufficient but necessary to understand globalization as an external powerful force, connected and mostly welcomed in developing countries, followed by a lot of expectations, but with rather unpredictable impacts. An example of such scepticism comes from the promises regarding women’s emancipation that were initially made by the economic globalization, resulting in a consequent distrust also in global power formations, deemed to be overall indifferent to the gender cause, not investing sufficient resources in it and being too detached from original local circumstances (Unterhalter et al, 2013; Gore, 2009).

In fact, the globalization process currently happening worldwide is following previous global power patterns, which changed and broadened but still neglected the inclusion of women in the process (Connell, 2014). Accordingly, even though women nowadays have more opportunities to pursue their objectives, the increasing reliance on the neoliberal model usually advantages men, leaving women with no representation at the top of the market-lead pyramid society (Connell, 2014; Kirkwood, 1986; Gore, 2009). However, this evolution of events does not come as a surprise for Connell (2010), who asserts that the new arenas of globalization are themselves gendered, implementing policies regarding gender inequities mainly driven and controlled by men. Unfortunately, the cycle of gender structures is constantly historically reproduced (Morrell, 2007) and the difficult access to the organizational power necessary to avoid the production of inequities - daily perpetuated by the neoliberal State - clearly exposes the lie of the gender-neutrality of the market ideology (Connell, 2010).

These premises are surely discouraging regarding the possibility of positive change, since it seems like even schooling for girls is promoted in order to gain an economic return (Unterhalter and North, 2011). These dynamics call for a change of direction, not only in the policies States are implementing, but also in the dominant attitudes and patriarchal customs present within society, challenging equality opportunities overall (Unterhalter et al, 2001, 2011).

3.4. A Gendered Educational Framework

Consequently, the notion of education is a consistently broad one, entailing different and interdisciplinary dimensions. For the purpose of this research, education will be circumscribed to higher education, namely the university level, consequently entailing the notion of empowerment through education and the inequalities that have to be addressed in order to have a healthy and productive education system, for the specific purpose of this research and its peculiar context.

Firstly, it has to be recalled that education has been used in the past to colonize and reshape economies, cultures and power relations around the world, reorganizing gender structures, too. Education is, thence, to be considered as shaped by society’s social structures, one of them being the gender structure, and therefore eligible for progress only through positive social practices (Connell, 2010). A different frame within education regarding gender issues is thence inherently needed to obtain a broader perspective, one that will entail the multiplicity of the gender dimension (Unterhalter, 2011, 2013; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; Maslak, 2008; Fennell & Arnot, 2008). Therefore, gendered exploitation and exclusion have to
be included in the bigger picture if one is to deal with gender and education, abandoning the idea that gender parity in school enrolment means gender equality overall (Unterhalter, 2011; Subrahmanian, 2005). Accordingly, high levels of literacy should not be considered as necessarily determining an increase in human development, as endorsed by the CCPEE approach (Robertson and Dale, 2015). A clear symptom of it is the fact that even though schooling rates of women in Western countries generally increased in the past thirty years, the level of violence against them did not lower, showing the inadequacy of current patterns regarding gender issues on the topic (Connell, 2010; Parkes & Chege, 2010). In fact, education is often used as an indicator in society for measuring inequality levels, however neglecting the pressure that society exercises on women outside schools. What if, instead, education is considered as an instrument, instead of the measurable variable? It could be used as a platform to empower young women to confront the outside-world, simultaneously promoting equality within the educational framework of universities and resulting in final social change (Connell, 2010; Unterhalter et al, 2011, 2013; Robertson and Dale, 2015). Education could then be envisioned as a profound human experience with consequent social effects, as the determiner of the future of individuals and of their society (Leonard and McLaren, 2002).

However, Connell (2010) deems the notion of education being the magical tool for solving gender issues to be obsolete, actively requiring a different framing of the matter, that will not automatically consider an increase in female schooling rates as an enhancement of women empowerment. In fact, schooling should not be considered gender neutral, since often the educational framework reflects the gender issues typically present in the adjacent corresponding society - confirming the righteousness of the CCPEE approach in this case too - reproducing patriarchal patterns (Connell, 2010; Stromquist, 1995; Robertson and Dale, 2015). Furthermore, the conditions of the broader educational framework are being questioned overall, since deemed to be irretrievably compromised to entail meaningful feminist ideals, given that even the access to school that girls achieved and school curricula are strongly undermined by the dynamics of global security plans, generally trying to protect global capitalism and neglecting to address essential local needs instead (Unterhalter, 2011; Mohanty, 2003; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Gore, 2009).

Thus, there is a strong need for a more inclusive and comprehensive educational model overall, that will face the need of young women and girls not only for an increased availability of schooling, but for a system that welcomes them equally, reflecting women's experiences in curricula and teacher relationship (Connell, 2010; Stromquist, 1995). These practices should be implemented taking into account the environment surrounding girls’ education and their necessities, addressing the school patterns and structures which mirror society's incompetencies on the matter, in order to honestly aim to use education as a platform to close the inequality gap (Connell, 2010). In fact, gender equality in education is to be seen as a set of factors entailing opportunity, agency, dignity and justice, that have to contribute together to reach efficient results (Subrahmanian, 2005). Thence, possibilities for change need to be understood in terms of actions constrained by gender norms, that young women always have to deal with (Unterhalter, 2013; National Research Council, 2005; Maslak, 2008). In fact, if “good education is education that is just; the quality of education is defined by the quality of social life generated by the capacities that education yields” (Connell, 2010:611), then clearly education is entrenched in a net of different dimensions, playing a role in developing - or not - capabilities and human capacities for a better future, in this manifest vicious cycle (Freire, 1970).

Consequently, the quality of education is a relevant variable to achieve an overall inclusive and fair system. The concept of critical pedagogy of Freire (1970) could be fruitfully
applied in order to access this kind of system, by offering a liberating education that will allow students to gain knowledge by looking at their subjects, the doctrines and their society critically. Following this approach students would actively learn without just being treated as empty shells to be filled with external fabricated knowledge, subjugating their ability to question authority and unconsciously adapting them into the established system (Leonard and McLaren, 2002; Freire, 1970). The process would consistently challenge teachers and students to “empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge” (Leonard and McLaren, 2002: 24). This procedure would consistently encourage students not to merely respond to questions, but rather to critically assess the answers, promoting a creative environment. The latter would thus empower students to question the system they live in, freeing them from general conformation and obedience patterns, bringing about social change and supporting an inclusive and equal system (Leonard and McLaren, 2002). In fact, in order to recognize oppression, the population should first identify its causes, so that they can create a new situation through transformative action, to finally pursue a 'fuller humanity' (Freire, 1970: 4).
4. Methodology

4.1. Research Question and Subquestions

As was just acknowledged, women face different obstacles in order to gain equality and exercise their agency between culture/traditions and globalization forces, in a country in constant transition. Education could play a relevant role in the process, becoming the factor tipping the scales in the future, but circumstantial features might also influence the outcome, thus representing a particular situation to analyse and study overall. It would thence be interesting to look into what women wish to do/be after higher education level, what are their hopes and prospects with the university education they obtained and how and if education plays a role in it, in the fast changing reality of a country as is Myanmar, between strong cultural identities and globalization. Therefore my research question is:

How is young female Myanmar students' agency to follow their ambitions shaped by perceptions around university education and traditional culture, in the rapidly changing reality of Myanmar?

Subquestions being:
● How does participation in higher education impact the capabilities/autonomy of young female students?
● How do women perceive their capabilities/opportunities to be influenced by their social environment?
● How does the country being in transition shape the expectations of young generations?

In the next page a table is displayed, representing my conceptualization table after the fieldwork, which can visually help to understand the reasoning around my study. Before the fieldwork this table had a different order, representing a vicious cycle (see Annex 3), with the variables continuously but equally influencing each other and women’s agency.

However, during my fieldwork research period, I noticed how one of the concepts had a much stronger impact on young female students, namely the one related to their culture and families. Subsequently, the black arrow related to this variable is considerably larger than the the other two, while the red arrows represent the inner circuit of influence. The latters are mostly pointed towards the University education variable, since it has been considered the platform used by the other concepts to exercise their influence (this insight will be further analysed and explained in section 5.1.). This perspective and the consequent modification is moreover connected to the CCPEE approach, considering education as both connected with society's dynamics and a product of the latter as well (Robertson and Dale, 2015). Finally, the small red arrow between globalization and culture is directed in both ways, showing a mutual but equilibrated level of entrenched influence exercised by these two variables.
4.2. Research Design

4.2.1. Ontology and Epistemology

The subject of this research entails multiple dimensions implicitly connected to each other, created and reproduced by the Myanmar society. The context of this study calls for awareness regarding the reflexivity of the researcher and the respective assumptions and decisions made, in order not to project biases and preconceptions on the female students researched, but simultaneously recognizing that the interaction between the respondents and the researcher might alter or influence on the findings (Bryman, 2012). In this regard, the relationship with the interviewees was always informal, in order to allow the creation of a safe environment where no judgement from the part of the researcher had place, and where young participants were often reminded that their knowledge was extremely valuable.

Therefore, the ontological stance of my research followed the critical realism model, considering reality as a socially constructed entity, existing despite people’s understanding of it, although dependent on experiences and individual interpretations (Ritchie et al, 2013). These features are particularly valuable for the purpose of my research, since diverse testimonies collected during the fieldwork period have been mapped, in order to draw a line that clarifies the reality of my unit of analysis and of data collection. In fact, the reality of Myanmar mainly runs around the social dimension previously mentioned, overturning other aspects that end up having a weak influence if compared with the broader social construct entity.

Subsequently, the epistemology of the study followed an interpretivist approach, placing more emphasis on the process, allowing me to uncover patterns related to sensitive perceptions around women’s capabilities (Bryman, 2012). This procedure allowed a more interactive understanding of the social entity analysed, which proved to be essential while exploring young people’s experiences in the context of Myanmar. The knowledge on the social world examined
has been built through an inductive process, therefore observing the world resorting to a bottom up approach, however keeping in mind that it is rare to start a study without preliminary assumptions already in place, which I obviously had but tried to repeal (Ritchie et al, 2013).

I believe these premises provided the most meaningful foundations to conduct this specific study, adapting to the context and to the conditions necessary for a complete analysis.

**4.2.2. Units of Analysis**

The units of analysis in my research were young women and men attending university in Yangon, Myanmar. Their age and experiences showed very meaningful results, given that they were already old enough to understand the reality of their country and they were aware of the process of transition when it started to occur. Simultaneously, they were young enough to cultivate expectations for their future, providing the best premises to study their tendencies and perceptions.

![Fig. 5: University of Rangoon, Yangon](image)

Although initially the variation between responses of female students who just enrolled and their older peers about to finish their studies have been considered as prospective useful relations, the study did not show relevant results in this regard, thus this type of comparison has been abandoned. By contrast, the introduction of male students’ perspective into the discourse helped to outline diverse perceptions and possibilities, allowing space for small but significant comparison of perspectives, adding useful informations to the bigger picture. Finally, dealing with university students considerably enhanced the chances to communicate in English, which facilitated interviews and focus groups since there was no need for a translator, direct information being more reliable and immediate communication increasing understanding and sympathy overall.
4.2.3. Sampling

Yangon is the former capital of Burma, comprised of almost 6 million inhabitants, therefore entailing a wide area to research in. However, the focus on female students attending university diminished the range of research, concentrating all my efforts around students association and student scenes. In fact, direct access to universities was unlikely a fruitful option, due to the alert situation against student protests overall and being the students inherently shy and reserved. Luckily, my local supervisor served as gatekeeper, putting me in contact with existing student associations, bringing me to university career days and introducing me to extremely collaborative and helpful teachers and activists in the field of education, so that I managed to get in touch with young female university students, very willing to be interviewed, and built further profitable contacts in the field.

Since the settings of my access were limited, the sampling option which gave me a higher degree of flexibility and feasibility in my analysis and procedure was snowball sampling, namely the process through which I asked initial respondents, obtained through gatekeepers, to recommend me to their peers to pursue an acceptable number of interviews and focus groups, following sort of a treeview model (Bryman, 2012). Unfortunately, this sampling method prevented randomization, thence not allowing me to successfully externalize my results and applying them to the broader population. However, since I focused solely on qualitative methods, the generalization of the results did not primarily concern the purpose of this research. In fact, the more I delved into the fieldwork research, the more I realized how the nature of my research question could not be caged into generalisable results. The focus on agency required an in depth analysis into a foreign culture which I did not master, thence I decided to focus on experiences, personal stories and tales, that young students were more than happy to share with me. Even though I mainly interviewed students ranging from middle to high social class, and predominantly from Yangon, I found qualitative methods to be the most appropriate tool to reach authentic and sensitive results, collecting data based on personal stories and tales, which allowed me to grasp the sense of women’s agency in Myanmar in a more sensible way.

4.3. Research Methods

Due to the lack of extensive quantitative informations on the subject, existing literature and social theory have been the starting point of my study, under which the ‘skeletal framework’ has been drawn upon (Boeije, 2010). The research has thence been conducted following an explanatory design, mainly through qualitative methods, due to the complexity and in this case low reliability that a survey could have entailed (Creswell, 2009). As explained above, for the purpose of this research a limited amount of individual experiences and perceptions have been deemed as more relevant than a larger and more generalizable, but possibly more superficial, amount of inquiries.

Research during fieldwork has been thus conducted mainly through:

- **i. Participant observation:** four large observation sessions have been conducted, namely of a career day at National Management Degree College, an English class, a women networking and mentoring meeting and a Youth Forum at the American Center in Yangon. These sessions enhanced my awareness on the environment where the units of analysis usually interact, mainly as silent observer and sometimes participating, once enough informations have been gathered. Moreover, I included as observations two
meetings I had with a teacher and an activist, who proved to be very precious resources to confirm or discharge previous observations.

- **ii. Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews have been used as one of the main collectors of meaningful data, given that they allowed a higher level of intimacy and sympathy with my young respondents, creating the ideal circumstances for them to feel comfortable and free to talk with me. Interviews generally had specific purposes and a well-defined direction, but further topics or interesting subjects mentioned by the interviewee have also been explored and taken into consideration. The semi-structured variation was initially chosen for its ability to provide reflective insights of the respondents, leaving enough leeway to the interviewee on how to reply, simultaneously giving me the possibility to drive the conversation through my interview guide, which proved to be the right method to use during fieldwork (Bryman, 2012). This method represented the best complementarity applicable to my study, providing a fair distribution of both structure and flexibility during interviews. A total amount of 19 interviews were conducted, hence reaching a reasonable number of respondents for the purpose of my qualitative inquiry. The interviewees included 14 female respondents and 5 male ones, aged between 18 and 24, coming from 11 different institutions (5 from National Management Degree College, 2 from Assumption University in Thailand, 2 from Yangon Technological University, 2 from Yangon University of Foreign Languages, 3 from University of Yangon, one from Dagon University, one from University of Computer Studies, one from Chindwin College, one from Yangon University of Education, one from KMD Institute, and one from Distance University).

- **iii. Focus groups:** it has been very interesting to be able to question and observe the collectivity of the dimensions I desire to study, in order to identify shared values or tensions in the respondent group. Focus groups are recognized as an ideal mean to make young women feel at ease, while talking about their perceptions and ideals among their peers, in a safe environment promoting dialogue and understanding. I was able to conduct one in depth focus group with 3 female participants coming from different backgrounds and different Universities, aged between 19 and 22.

- **iv. Participatory methods (used during the focus group):** it has been extremely valuable to use participatory methods with a very cooperative and promising group of women, who met during the focus group, in order to examine hidden perceptions. In fact, a range of participatory methods have been used to enhance the dependability of answers and to be able to have relevant material that required interpretation, being perceptions difficult to directly extract out of a question during interviews, taking advantage of mapping models or photography to generate themes and extract informations which would be otherwise taken for granted or neglected (Hargreaves, 2007; Bryman, 2012), but also to confirm consolidated themes. The first exercise I put in place was a set of cards placed covered on the table, where I previously wrote recurrent themes that came up during interviews. Subsequently, participants had to pick up a card and speak freely about the topic, while other participants could also intervene to add on the issue, agree or disagree, until the discussion was exhausted and the next person picked a new card. This approach allowed me to introduce my respondents to the focus group with a simple game, which all of them could relate to, and provided me with in depth reflection and the possibility to compare statements done during single interviews with the renewed collective conversations.
The second approach taken consisted in mapping their perceptions and values. I asked them to answer to 3 questions anonymously on a piece of paper (what is your biggest fear?, how do you see yourself in 10 years?, what is your last thought at night before bedtime?) and then collected their answers and put them into categories. Subsequently, I placed the categories on the wall as themes on cards, I provided them with colourful post-its and asked them to position - under each category - what they deemed to be important regarding that theme. For instance, if the category was family, the post-its would describe how they wished their family to be healthy, rich, or their living standards. Through this approach, I managed to map their values in an indirect way, exploring what they deem to be important in their lives, provided me with insights which did not frequently emerge from interviews, extracting the essence of perceptions and feelings, which might be difficult to express directly.

![Fig. 6: Result on perceptions and values of Participatory Methods used during a focus group](image)

The last exercise consisted in a visual method, therefore respondents have been asked to bring 2 pictures to the focus group, which represented where they saw themselves in 10 years and what they wanted to become in their future, mostly confirming and highlighting themes that emerged during previous inquiring sessions. This method thus helped me to understand their standpoint while using visuals as a means for communication.

### 4.4. Assessment of quality criteria

I believe the prerogatives of my research gave me the opportunity to delve into people’s lives and experiences, providing me with truthful conversations. I was welcomed and easy to be approached by young Burmese students, they have always been positively inclined to talk to me and share their experiences. I thus consider my results to be accurate, but because of the number of participants and their social background (mostly belonging to middle-upper class), I cannot pledge my findings to be transferable or applicable to the rest of the young Burmese population holding a university degree.

Employing triangulation (Sumner and Tribe, 2008) helped me strengthen my method of inquiry, using participatory observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.
Triangulation also allowed me to have a broader and more comprehensive vision of the data, widening opportunities for further analysis, too. It was especially valuable, in this case, because of the qualitative character of the analysis, which exhausted the chances for a generalizable result, but provided a more thorough image of the circumstances (Bryman, 2012).

However, I am aware that the level of transferability of my research might be considered controversial, because of the peculiar context of Myanmar and its still ongoing globalization process, which will render the circumstances hardly replicable to be researched with similar outcomes. However, this lack of transferability can be counterbalanced by a thick description of the context where my study took place, and culture being one of the main dimensions playing a fundamental role shaping the agency of young Burmese women, it will certainly be thoroughly investigated (Bryman, 2012).

Finally, on the authenticity criteria, I believe the different range of viewpoints explored represents the fairness of my inquiry, examining different life patterns and collecting sometimes even opposite opinions on matters concerning family, education and globalization. However, it cannot be considered as being fair to the larger population of young students coming from very diverse backgrounds outside Yangon, therefore the fairness of my study might be considered as geographically and socially biased.

4.5. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected through 19 interviews, 4 observation sessions and one in depth focus groups where participatory methods have been integrated has been conducted through coding methods. Data has been segmented into categories and coded, to be later reassembled and connected to build up “theoretical understanding of the social phenomenon under study in terms of the research question” (Boeije, 2010: 76). Segmenting and reassembling represented the main and most important procedure in order to extract valuable informations from the data collection process, given that the whole research was based on qualitative methods (Boeije, 2010). In order to facilitate the procedure of coding, Atlas.ti has been actively used as a tool to organize the analysis of data collected during fieldwork.

The starting point of this process was identified in constant comparison, measuring different variations within the phenomenon observed, which continued until no new insights were to be found, therefore reaching the data saturation level. The following phase entailed analytic induction, which matched the most effective theoretical structure to the research material gathered. Hypothesis have been constantly tested with new material to support or discharge existing theories, in order to efficiently build and modify the theoretical frame to render it adequate to the data collected. Finally, the theoretical sensitivity part of the analysis has been tackled, entailing the ability of the researcher to creatively use the data at his disposal to interpret and produce creative theoretical ideas (Boeije, 2010).

4.6. Ethical Considerations

There were many variables to take into account dealing with a research study in a foreign and unfamiliar environment, comprising sensitive dimensions, too. The general framework around ethical considerations has been drawn from Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004) work, envisioning reflexivity as part of the notion of ethics, mainly practical ethics, observing objectively and consequently reflecting on the objective reflection itself, therefore contemplating the whole research process with critical scrutiny and constant interpretation. Reflexivity was thence
applied to both microethics and ethically important moments, avoiding to encounter biases researchers often fall in.

The first dimension to consider was privacy. For instance, during interviews the position of the respondent was clarified, confidentiality ensured and authorization to record interviews asked, in order to preserve the privacy of the interviewee. Consent was essential to conduct interviews and focus groups, in the absence of it the process would have been interrupted (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, in the case of a confession with legal consequences, the recorder would have been stopped and, according to the gravity of the admission, a decision would have to be made on whether to report the issue or neglect it. I therefore pre-emptively assumed to measure my involvement considering both my human nature and my role as a researcher in the field (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Fortunately, extreme cases needing a thorough and sensitive ethical decision did not occur, but I encountered confessions of attempted suicides, which I treated as kindly as I could, choosing to be a caring human first, rather than a curious researcher.

Secondly, premises regarding the respect of multiculturality had to be addressed. During interviews or focus groups I tried to place myself as neutral, transparent and open as much as possible, trying to understand even controversial responses without reacting in a judgemental way (Bryman, 2012), and avoiding social or emotional harm (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In the case of this research the multiculturality of the respondents did not reveal any primary concern as playing a dividing role, students of Yangon not placing importance on ethnic conflicts. However, participants have been all treated with respect and listened equally and carefully whenever cultural perspectives would appear into their discourses, also because the traditional aspect of their livelihoods finally emerged as a strong variable in shaping their expectations, thus constituting valuable elements for the purpose of my research.

Thirdly, the context where the research took place limited certain specific approaches. In the case of Myanmar I foresaw the possible fear or perception of danger emerging if sensitive topics would have been discussed, therefore such themes have been avoided in the presence of fearful reactions or prevented overall, always reminding the participants of the confidentiality of the conversations initiated. If danger was perceived even before the interview took place, the researcher would have respected the will of the respondent and his autonomy, trying to understand the circumstances and to be empathetic (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). However, such circumstances did not occur, students mostly talked freely even about the military regime. Only some cases showed initial skepticism or denial to face the argument, in that instance I did reassure the interviewee that she/he should not talk about anything she/he did not feel comfortable with and remind her/him the anonymity of our conversation.
5. Presentation and Analysis of Results, Empirical Findings

5.1. Perceptions around Higher Education in Myanmar

University education has been continuously deemed to be the tool to reach a more inclusive society in Myanmar in the perspective of young generations (Higgins et al, 2015). I therefore found it of fundamental importance to investigate the dynamics around universities in Yangon, to observe if education actually encourages young women's self confidence and agency or if it plays a weaker role instead. The frame is slowly changing, universities reopened recently and obviously a lot has evolved since, protests unfolded in 2015 - as previously mentioned in chapter two - but traditional patterns and historical heritage still have the premises to play a controversial but decisive role in shaping youth's agency.

Firstly, criticism and common standpoints towards the education system among university students will be analysed, to further move on the influences of the country opening on its Universities, and finally ending up the analysis with insights regarding the position and condition of women in the education system.

5.1.1. Youth’s Perspective and Criticism on Myanmar Educational System

The approach that young Myanmar students have towards the education system and the respective universities mirrors a relevant segment of their lives. The research found that both young women and men are mostly highly opinionated about their universities and the system currently in place, providing interesting angles to understand their particular experience in the educational path of Myanmar.

I should initially recognize that the young generation of Myanmar students who participated in my study appreciate very much the possibility to attend university and usually like their courses overall, while being aware of the boundaries of the acquired knowledge. However, their position usually becomes increasingly critical when asked more in depth about their particular University education. The first strong stance usually taken is one of criticism towards the methods applied to university education, mentioning how, for instance, a different approach to the teaching method would have been preferred, through a more active use of practical teaching rather than merely following outdated textbooks, as endorsed by fourteen interviewees

“To be honest I don’t enjoy a lot the teaching method from our university. Some are not very qualified, they can’t really explain briefly and make us understand, they just go along with the book, just like a little translation, not more than that” (G., Int. 15).

However, this stance should not be considered as a surprise, seeing that the motives for the uprisings of 1988 were already connected to a deep dissatisfaction with an empty educational system (Martin, 2013). This standpoint is moreover closely related to the concepts around the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970) asking for a liberating education, thus entailing scepticism towards an educational system that does not enrich the knowledge of students but it rather feeds them with fabricated notions, with no further possibility for open discussions or critical questions. The general dissatisfaction of students is understandable, further complaints run
around the instability of universities where teachers do not show up to class often, where students do not have the chance to choose courses but are instead faced with fixed programs they previously had no information about, and where little or no provision of networks or connections are given to introduce them to the job market once graduated (Obs. with T.). General remarks are also concerned with the lack of scholarships, which are mostly extremely competitive to obtain and are rarely provided or given only if both parents work for the government.

Nevertheless, the majority of observations remains concerned with the need for more competent teachers, who will allow students to have their own opinions and develop them in class through a constructive critical discussion. I have often noticed seemingly passionate students expressing high levels of frustration, because aware of undergoing a biased educational system based on outdated pedagogical methods

“The teaching method here need to improve a little bit more, because some of the teachers are quite conservative and they don’t really accept open opinions of the students. (...) some teachers they don’t even like discussing in their lecture time, I don’t think is quite suitable as a university student” (J., Int. 14).

It is understandable how students can show dissatisfaction when confronted with such a limited approach, which seems to be furthermore connected to the general concept of obedience due to adults in the Myanmar society, restricting students’ possibility for active learning and open discussion. The exhibition of alternative standpoints are often considered to be disrespectful towards the teacher, and there seems to be no room for further arguments, reflecting once again Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy. This tendency is witnessed by T. (Int. 11), a young female former university student who dropped out in favour of culinary school

“...here is very hierarchical kind of teaching method, so if you’re a teacher whatever you say they have to listen to you, even if it’s wrong. (...) We’ve been under dictatorship for a long time, so it’s difficult to ask everyone to start asking questions because it’s ok, people are still learning now but it’s gonna take a while. To ask why do you do this or that.” (T., Int.11).

This tendency shows a general need for more qualified teachers, who will have the ability to introduce interactive methods and critical thinking, considered to be more adequate tools to the education level of young Myanmar students. This statement also highlights how young students still need time to adapt to the new conditions, since they are not used to being in the position to ask questions in the first place, confirming the still persisting power of the military junta (Chalk, 2013).

After the country opened up its young generation is longing for knowledge and high qualifications. Many universities have just reopened and prospects of wealthy and successful lives abroad have widened students’ horizons, showing them a more assorted range of options. Moreover, young students are currently in provision of the adequate means to judge their institutions and their level of proficiency, like they have never been before. However, Myanmar’s military past shows a different story, painting universities as centers where ideas could be gathered and youth could mobilize to claim civil rights (Obs. American Centre). To have an opinion and thus stand out from the crowd was often dangerous, dissidents among youth were considered to be enemies of the state, rebels to keep under control (Obs. American Centre). This tendency is still nowadays present in Myanmar’s educational system. A teacher I
have spoken with confirmed that the militaries still have the necessary amount of power to influence the national education system, keeping students from developing critical thinking, which is both still considered as a threat and consistent with the current teaching methods (Obs. with P.; Chalk, 2013; Hayden and Martin, 2013). Indeed, it seems like historical patterns are still keeping Myanmar chained to a biased educational system. Students with different backgrounds, from computer science to architecture and international relations, are aware that if they stay in Myanmar they will not be able to pursue their goals, because it will take some time for the country to adapt to the new circumstances and they are part of the transition, thus they will not be able to benefit of Myanmar’ opening right away

“..my university doesn’t meet my expectations..”
“..my country can’t provide what I wanna study or what I need, so I have to go.” (R., Int. 10).

“I want to study here, but better teaching methods and society it won’t be happening now in the present, after at least 10 years it will be so, (...) so I have to study that subject in a foreign country I suppose.” (Y., Int. 12).

This general dissatisfaction is thus not merely about students not particularly liking their majors or their Universities, it is rather the symptom of a wider discontent, which brings students to consider higher education as not preparing them for their future careers and rather representing an obstacle to achieve their goals instead. Moving to a foreign country seems to be a favorable option, one that will benefit their education and their career, because Myanmar’s society will take a longer time to include them in the job market or will not provide them with the desired working options. Additionally, the limited amount of majors available to choose after the matriculation test limits the access to entire working careers all together, increasing feelings of apprehension for the future and pushing them to consider going to study abroad instead. Consequently, if the system is to be changed, issues have to be visible in order to address them, involving a more open and inclusive environment (Obs. American Centre).

5.1.2. Perspectives around University Education between Culture and Globalization Process

The lack of guidance and mentoring is perceived overall by students (with few exceptions), consequently causing confusion about their future (Obs. with T.). The hole left by their education is often filled by external influences, as the globalizing reality of their country or their family suggesting the most adequate career to undertake. Consequently, young students undertake studies they are not truly interested in, choosing popular subjects, following friends or giving up to parents’ requests (Obs. with P.), as illustrated by the testimonies of these two young girls studying engineering and computer science, endorsed by six other students as well

“There are some doctors that graduated from medical school and then become business men, and I was like it’s funny they spend 8 years in med school and then want to become singers. I mean why did you try? Because mostly our parents don’t let us do anything.” (R., Int. 10).

“Many people they just get high marks and they want to make a good reputation, so they try to attend med university, they graduate it but they are not very interested in it.” (P., F.G.).
The tendency towards a different career can be explained with the lack of opportunities in one’s particular branch, but it often appears as if young generations are rather pushed towards predefined majors which are deemed to be adequate for them - as teaching and medicine are for girls - from the part of their families and depending on their marks. Subsequently, some realize that they are not really interested in their study, but aim at having a degree anyways, thus they persevere until graduation. At this point, however, a brand new job market is at their disposal, broader than it used to be, where opportunities are often linked to business. Majors related to business or economics started to become popular when true potential for jobs and careers in these fields appeared, thanks to the globalizing process the country is currently undertaking. This seems to be precisely the reason why after having a medicine degree many decide to undertake business related careers instead, riding the wave of the moment, as pointed out by S. (Int. 9), studying business management

“In the past (...) many people and parents liked to emphasize the doctor education, but in 2012 because of the development of the economics in Myanmar, most of the people also focus on the business sectors, that’s why as we are attending business management (...) our subject can be really competing with other subjects like doctors or engineers”. (S., Int. 9).

Accordingly, business is becoming the new popular major to choose after the matriculation exam. I have encountered an interesting tendency in nine of the students I interviewed, mostly studying business or being interested in it despite studying something different, mentioning the lucrative side of their career and talking about their goals in terms of high salaries, rather than wished careers in a field they were interested in. This tendency additionally proves the applicability of the CCPEE approach, treating education as a product of society itself, thus shaped by the globalization process that is currently mutating Myanmar society as well (Robertson and Dale, 2015; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014). This trend shows a focus on material well being from the part of young students, misguided by their universities and fuelled by the promises of globalization

“After I graduate this university I will have a job, but is not gonna be well paid, you have to get a masters degree if you want a lucrative job, you have to go especially to Japan and other countries, so that when you come there and get a masters degree and you will have a lucrative job, much more money.” (R., Int. 10).

Another student of computer science responded to the visual participatory methods exercise by indicating a billionaire as the response to the question: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?, confirming a previous insight I received while talking with a prominent Myanmar activist, stating that a lot of students want to gain a university degree just to have better salaries (Obs. with T.). The increased importance of material good and money is illustrated in the third chapter of my empirical findings, but is is necessary to keep in mind this new tendency at once, since it currently represents a thin line connecting various concepts around youth agency in Myanmar. This new prospect is moreover confirmed by the inclination of some girls to name rich successful entrepreneurs or celebrities as their role model, although the majority identify inspirational figures in particularly successful classmates or teachers in university or in their relevant field, and typically Aung Saan Suu Kyi is designated by girls to be the general main role model. This topic and related insights will be however discussed more in depth in the third chapter of my empirical findings, regarding the impact of globalization on girls’ agency.
Nevertheless, I also experienced simple appreciation for the fact that universities have been reopened after 2011, some students being aware that this is the only reason they could actually obtain a relevant degree.

“I’ve been very excited because Yangon Technology University has reopened again (...). When the government announced it (...) my dream came true. Since both my mom and dad are doctors I’ve been trained (with) many medical stuff, but I don’t like clinical things, I don’t want to be a doctor, I don’t want to attend medical school (...). Not to show my parents disappointment I began it, but when the technology school reopened (...) I have to attend that, I have to try very hard to attend this because the marking range is very high, we heard that, so I have to try very hard, and I tried it and somehow I succeeded.” (P., F.G.).

There is also an empowering factor around the attendance to higher education that could be perceived when talking with young girls, which could not be detected on the surface, but only going more deep into conversations with them. These perceptions are going to be further explored in the next sections.

5.1.3. Gendered Perspectives around University Education

The majority of teachers are reported to be female (not surprisingly, since it is considered to be a popular and adequate - but low paid - job for women). Some students do not have preferences based on gender, but generally girls seem prefer the teaching skills of the few male teachers they have, since six of my participants explicitly deemed them to be more direct and creative in their lectures.

“because of their ways of explaining problems, males are straight and clear, while females are complicated and just thinking about the things again and again, they will be good for the future but in fact sometimes overthinking definitely doesn’t help in certain problems.” (Y., Int. 12).

“(…) male teachers, they’re very good at teaching, very open minded and qualified. Compared with female teachers I really enjoy the male teaching.” (G., Int. 15).

This preference appeared to me as slightly surprising at first, because I observed high levels of solidarity among women in different circumstances, but it might actually be connected to the nature of Myanmar society itself. Male teachers are perceived as stronger characters and females as more indecisive and confusional (almost inferior, confirming the Buddhist influence), even though female students see themselves as potential strong business women in their future. The feeling I utterly had throughout all the time I was talking with young female students is related to a general paradox, given by the clash between their inner empowered selves and their disempowering surroundings. Accordingly, Connell (2010) states how often the educational framework unwillingly reproduces the inequality patterns present in society regarding gender issues, thus recreating similar patriarchal patterns in young female students’ surroundings. There is therefore a urgent need for a more inclusive system, one that will equally sustain and empower both men and women. Indeed, young girls have high ambitions and believe in themselves and in their capabilities, however being aware that their expectations are hard to achieve or that they can be pursued only abroad. Even male students recognize their female
counterparts to be more active and successful in their university careers. Higher education boosts their self-confidence and their social skills, making them feel empowered and in control.

"My university is increasing our confidence that I’m a girl and I can do anything." (K., F.G.).

"About my dream to be a diplomat, sometimes I have to believe that, when I think of my future is a little bit messy and I can’t see it clearly, but I study so that I can see my future more and more, so I accept that all I have to do is try my best and then not care about other opinions. That’s all." (Y., Int. 12).

These two young women feel empowered by their universities, they perceive their education as enhancing their possibilities, but they also mention that they will have to work hard to achieve their goals.

These obstacles are furthermore reflected in their relations with boys in the university environment. The majority of students is composed of women, in most of the cases having only few male classmates in their majors, as mentioned by this young female business management student

"They’re maybe 3 boys, for the whole final year students there are maybe 6 or 7 boys." (S., Int. 9).

The only exceptions are scientific majors, where females are largely outnumbered. The level of personal relation with male classmates encounters divided opinions among girls, because there is usually a decent or good level of integration in the class. However, the type of relation with the male counterparts is rarely a close one, as acknowledged by seven of my participants, girls usually staying among girls with limited interactions

"I don’t have any contact with boys since I was a child, no male friends. My choice but also because of my parents, they forbid me..like not really, more like they don’t allow me to be friend with boys. Because my parents are too conservative and they don’t like me talking to boys, they just prevented the relationship." (G., Int. 15).

The opposite seems to happen in classes where girls represent a minority but are instead very well integrated. However, it appears as if there is a tendency to “act like boys” to fit in in a male majority environment. In fact, boys are considered to be superior to girls in the Myanmar culture and in the Myanmar buddhist interpretation (Fennessy, 2016; Yi, 2016; Maber, 2014), driving girls to “act” in order to be taken seriously. The approach taken by this female engineering student indicates an unspoken general understanding, stating that in order to be deemed as strong they have to act like boys, because a traditional “girlish” behaviour does not encompass the qualities necessary to be successful in a male dominated environment

"Our major is very boyish, we have to do many boyish things, (...) we have to travel a lot and we have to stay in the minetown or whatever it is. (...). When we walk as a group, many people afraid of us. Because we walk like a boy, we laugh like a boy and we talk very loudly, we talk many boyish things". (P., F.G.).

Gendered roles are present in the daily lives of university students, but girls are often not completely aware of it. No case of open discrimination or harassment in university has been
reported, although during a conversation with a Myanmar activist I learned how often bullying and sexual harassment are present in the education environment, but girls think it is normal or rather that something is wrong with them (Obs. with T.). However, this female architecture student still perceives a different treatment based on gender from the part of teachers

“...teachers prefer males, female teachers, I don’t know why (...) sometimes you have some problem in class and then you go into the office and you want to ask the teacher, if the male student ask they explain but when the female student asks they’re not very much patient.” (R., Int. 10).

“Once, it was like 3 years ago, if there’s a group activity boys are always the leaders, they have to lead the group, the teachers prefer the male to lead the group.” (R., Int. 10).

Some cases show how girls are being segregated and boys are instead exercising more powers comparatively, having exclusive access to sports or being always nominated group leaders among a majority of female peers during group assignments. A male perspective has been given to me on this issue: a student of educational studies explained to me how girls themselves think they cannot lead boys in the first place, how they do not have any self-confidence because of Myanmar culture. This standpoint was in clear opposition with all the observations I had so far, but I got to the conclusion that the male angle was also driven by their culture, understanding female segregation in universities as a product of society, not connected to boys’ behaviour. This interpretation is consistent with the CCPEE approach, displaying once again the entrenched nature of education with dynamics related to the context of society itself, observable only with a critical realist lens in order to discover hidden reality patterns (Robertson and Dale, 2015). Accordingly, Connell (2010) deems society as being consistently shaped by social structures, thus if the social practice does not change, the gender structure entrenched with it will persist. Such change is difficult to accomplish because of the steady cultural structure present in Myanmar, resulting in a profound fusion of human behaviour with expected behaviour dictated by culture, which will be analysed more in depth in the next chapter. Indeed, these premises can sometimes lead boys to unconsciously act as superior or be disrespectful towards girls

“Sometimes most of the younger boys (...) at university, they seem a bit overpowering over women and the way they talk to them and the tone they use, they’re a little bit sexist...but girls just don’t they take it, they’re like whatever...it’s a weird weird environment.” (T., Int. 11).

This tendency is already reflected in the way girls get access to university in the first place, since their mark requirements after the matriculation test are biased and unequal from a gender perspective, as already observed in the second chapter (Higgins et al, 2015; Lwin, 2000, 2007). Indeed, for certain majors girls have to achieve higher points than boys to access the same faculty and university, or cannot access it at all, as recognized by this computer science major female student

“(...) is still unfair for choosing university, we need higher marks than men to get into university.” (R., F.G.).

Girls are therefore generally discouraged by the inequality of the system and pushed towards predetermined majors, as we mentioned above, like medicine and teaching
“Most of the people here want us to be doctor, if we get high .. parents don’t want their children to choose this, they all want them to go to medical school”. (C. & C., Int. 2).

This very particular direction that parents want their daughters to take is just the starting point of a series of limitations and obstacles they have to face when dealing with Myanmar society. Indeed, gendered roles imposed by society have deep roots into Myanmar culture, ranging from deeming girls not able to do rational choices, to men being superior than women, to a general broad underestimation of girls’ abilities and capabilities all together, ending up with highly gendered work roles. This pattern clearly undermines their agency and their empowerment overall, trying to confine them into predetermined roles and making them feel restrained by their peers and their society, as witnessed by this young female English major student

“After the matriculation exam I didn’t get enough to attend Medical University. Actually girls need higher marks to attend Medical University and at the time I think they underestimated us, guys didn’t get high marks, but our government education system still think that they can do well at the University, so boys didn’t need to get a high marks. (...) I feel very angry about it, I think this education system is not fair because I think we need to have the same opportunities, equality. I was so angry, (...) I couldn’t believe our education system.. it’s very bad.” (P., Int. 5).

Additionally, their ambitions to study abroad are also sometimes discouraged by their families, the reason behind it presumably being related to families tending to invest more in the education of the male components of the family, as experienced by K. (Int. 1)

“Sometimes they just (...) don’t want to invest in me. After I passed the exam I told them I want some money to attend university at the foreign country, in Singapore. I already prepared all but they don’t believe me.” (K., Int. 1).

This insight is confirmed by conversations I had with boys, one in particular moving to Thailand to study engineering because he did not reach the marks necessary to access the major in Myanmar, fully supported by his parents, who moreover helped him to get the scholarship (H., Int. 6).

Not all girls attending university with whom I spoke expressed the same concerns, but there is clearly some sort of unconscious awareness of the hostility of their surroundings. Different levels of support also influence their agency and capabilities, from the part of family or peers. Peer pressure is usually aimed at girls to choose the major most of her friends choose or to orient them towards the majors considered more prestigious or adequate, but for my interviewees it did not have the power to change their minds or the outcome of their choices. The majority of female students have instead witnessed different levels of peers support, like friends or boyfriends approving and motivating them to pursue their ambitions, thus providing an alternative source of guidance, even in cases where the major chosen was not a popular one, like in the case of this young woman studying international relations (IR)

“My best friend who I’m very fond of and know very well, she sort of reacted quite amazed when I said I’m doing a degree in this, she wasn’t against it, she kind of accepted it because it’s a great major, but she was strange. She always stands by my side anyways.” (J., Int. 14).
This tendency indicates a generational gap between the reaction peers have and the one of families, who can be more conservative or less understanding compared. Indeed, family pressure is utterly more present and incisive in girls’ choices, sometimes determining the direction of their studies and their careers all together. This phenomenon will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter, when the influence of family and Myanmar culture society will be inspected in depth as representing a crucial variable in young female students’ agency.

Finally, the young generation of female students currently attending university are generally feeling empowered by their studies, appreciating the circumstances given by the country opening up and longing for new opportunities and knowledge to become successful career women. They are however also very much aware of the limitations of their higher education and of the context in which it is put in place, despite not recognizing discriminative situations directly. They call for a change in the teaching methods and in the differentiated access to university unanimously, while particular aspects regarding their majors have a set of differential requests.

5.1.4. Conclusive Remarks on First Findings Chapter

First of all, regarding the educational system and the general criticism around it, there seems to be a clear line connecting students’ actions in the past and the current discontent, showing that issues around education have not been addressed or have been confronted only summarily in the past, seeing that influences of Myanmar's military past are still stalling effective reforms in the education field (Chalk, 2013; Hayden and Martin, 2013). The need for more inclusive and sensitive teaching methods is also one of the main requests I observed during my study, but the fact that the profession of teacher entails higher risks and lower salaries yields a scarce interest and the loss of potential, undermining prospects around positive change in the education system overall (Hayden and Martin, 2013).

Secondly, even though education has been already deemed to be an entity closely connected with society's dynamics (Robertson and Dale, 2015), external influences on the university system seem to have found a further and broader space - left empty by the scarce guidance and mentoring of Universities - to impact directly on students, reproducing false hopes or unwanted careers. In fact, families’ insistence towards specific career prospects or personal choices made solely on the basis of globalization’s granted opportunities results in confusion or delusion of students, because their goals cannot be met or because they have been guided towards a career they are not actually interested in, moreover proving insights around the colliding interests yielded by the concept of education as an ensemble according to the CCPEE approach (Robertson and Dale, 2015). These features of the current tendencies among students thus show a general lack of guidance from the part of universities, who should supposedly help orient students in finding their vocation.

Thirdly, these premises are furthermore keeping gender issues in a stalling position as well, because of the persistent feature of highly gendered roles in Myanmar society and considering the dissatisfaction girls still have today about their curricula and the teaching methods in universities (Higgins et al, 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al, 2015; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Sugiyama 2013; Maber, 2016; Lwin, 2000; Selth, 2012). The fact that male teachers are preferred because of the perceived stronger character in comparison with female teachers exposes once again the intertwined nature of patriarchal patterns in Myanmar society, supposedly very entrenched in social structures, at the point where it is almost not recognizable anymore as being an external influence.
Finally, it is precisely the lack of a liberating education that causes dissatisfaction among young students, both the military junta and the market ideology not having any interest in providing the means to be able to change the social structure in place in the country (Freire, 1970). The latter is deeply rooted in the human behaviours resulting out of it, restraining positive change directed to more equal and inclusive practices in the educational field (Hayden and Martin, 2013).
5.2. Female Agency Possibilities in the Myanmar Context

Myanmar’s culture and traditions are strongly embedded in everyday life, building a castle of norms and rules people are very much inclined to address and respect. In the case of young women, these customs are being put in place by their own families, making sure that they act accordingly to society's expectations and do not leave the path that has been chosen for them.

Consequently, this empirical chapter will encompass the pressure and limitations young female students experience, with an emphasis on their particular stories, therefore entailing a range of nuances dictated by different parental behaviours. Furthermore, the second section will entail the impact of Myanmar’s particular customs on female agency and freedom, to have a broader picture of what these girls have to go through in their society in order to achieve their goals and make their voices matter.

5.2.1. Role of Family in influencing Young Students’ Agency

In the course of my research I discovered various ways in which girls are limited by their surroundings, but family and culture represent by all means the main cause for pressure and inequities in their lives, often reproducing inequality patterns and patriarchal models (Fennessy, 2016).

Indeed, a large number of girls mentioned or showed that their families possess a strong voice in their decision making in different occasions (Obs. W.M.N.E.). The influence can be manifest or unconscious, but it clearly impacts on the decisional process these young girls go through. A clear example of this pattern has been shown to me by a young business administration student I interviewed, who perceived her parents to hustle into her choices

“(I chose my major) in consent with my mother, because she’s also doing business, she also has a hotel in Shan State, so like I think I’m gonna declare my major in hospitality and hotel management, actually is for my mom.” (M., Int. 3).

This tendency of trying to lure daughters (and to a certain extent, sons) into specific subjects is sometimes a symptom of their parents lost dreams of youth or the wish for daughters to choose the profession of the parent. In fact, these two girls initially felt pressured to undertake the career of doctor, while they instead finally chose to study engineering and international relations respectively

“So my mark is in the range of high technology university, which I’m glad of because my mom and my family wanted me to be a doctor, because they are both doctors too. But I don’t want to be a doctor…” (P., Int. 4).

“Because she (her mom) wanted to be a doctor when she was young but it didn’t happen, so she wants me to be a doctor because she couldn’t, because it was ’88 and she had to stop studying for about 2 years, so only after that she could try university again (...) she couldn’t do very well in her studies.” (G., Int. 15).
It is clear how girls have their own ideas but they are often pushed towards their parents’ desired careers. However, the biggest aim of parents in Myanmar seems to be directed towards the attendance of their daughters to Medical School. I have heard ten testimonies showing this particular tendency, although C. & C. (Int. 2) and S. (Int. 9) eventually managed to pursue the study they preferred instead (business and international relations)

“Most of the people here want us to be doctor, if we get high marks parents (...) they all want them to go to medical school.” (C. & C., Int. 2).

“Actually, both parents encourage the youngsters to be doctors, I once wanted to be a doctor. I don’t actually know if I really wanted to be a doctor or not, but everyone around encourage the youngsters to do doctor or engineer.” (S., Int. 9).

One of the reasons to direct daughters (and sometimes boys, but to a shorter extent) towards Medical School seems to be related to the pride parents take in having a potential doctor in the family, therefore the suitability of the medical career is not the sole reason for parents to guide their children towards this major, they actually yearn for society to praise them. The following voices, belonging to a female and a male engineering students, confirm this tendency

“My mom preferred Medical School, and then our country mothers are very proud of their children attending medical school, being a doctor and that kind of stuff.” (P., Int. 5).

“I think another reason is society, some parents care about society too much, so they want to say good things about their children. They want society to praise their children.” (W., Int. 7).

The latter voice is the one of W. (Int. 7), a male student attending the electronic engineering major, who shows a great deal of awareness of society’s biases related to young people’s agency. W. (Int. 7), together with the rest of the male students I interviewed, are all conscious of the pressure exercised on young students because they all experienced it themselves, proving that male students are also subjected to the imposition of boundaries to their goals from the part of family or society.

This awareness about their surroundings did not come as a complete surprise to me while doing research, but I found myself clearly underestimating its extent. However, even though they face a similar type of pressure in their lives, their background as males provides them with a broader range of options to choose from, and even if they are also limited and pressured, the extent of it is not comparable to what girls have to face to pursue their goals (Connell, 2014; Mohanty 2003).

The story of H. (Int. 6) is a clear example, he did not reach the marks necessary during his matriculation test to attend engineering school in Yangon, and therefore his parents allowed him to go to Thailand and do his Bachelor there, where he could apply and access university without further restrictions. Moreover, his parents helped him obtain a scholarship for his studies abroad. Thus, even though H. (Int. 6) also experienced pressure from his surroundings, his level of freedom and agency are clearly broader than the ones girls are entitled to. This case does not necessarily imply a generalizable rule, but clearly shows the possibility of a common tendency.

Consequently, girls have to fight a lot more with their families to obtain freedom of choice, but in some cases parents manage to force them into the major they prefer, without
having a clear idea of the consequences that might emerge in their future, like in the testimony offered by R. (Int. 10), regarding a friend of hers

“I have my best friends who have parents who forced her for a good medical school, a friend she got stuck in there, even if she cried and did whatever she could, (...) but her parents forced her to go to medical school.” (R., Int. 10).

Indeed, pursuing a career with no actual interest in the subject adds up on the confusion students are left in by their University system, recreating scenarios where medicine graduates do not actually exercise their profession, as discussed in the previous empirical chapter on University education. This tendency additionally demonstrates once again the colliding nature of dynamics influencing on the educational system stated by the CCPEE approach (Robertson and Dale, 2015).

Furthermore, the extent of the pressure that girls are experiencing often leads them to actively fight with their parents in order to obtain more freedom, as mentioned by eight of my participants

“I had to fight with my parents and I didn’t talk with them for 10 days. I just said nothing to them and did nothing, I just went against them.” (G., Int. 15).

In other cases discussing and repeatedly showing their determination in pursuing their ambitions actually gives them the opportunity to choose the major they long for. The testimony below is a case many other girls could identify with. R. (Int. 10) had to repeatedly insist to convince her mom that her life would not have entailed Medical School, and finally succeeded

“At first my mom filled out the application for medical school, so I was a med student actually, (...) I was like I can’t sleep, I can’t eat because I’m afraid of blood and I’m not into those medical stuff, you have to memorize lots of books and I was like omg, I’m gonna die. I told my mom "mom I don’t think I can do that" (...) so I had to tell her every day every day, so finally I think she understood me or she started to believe me, I had to promise "oh mom I will do very very well this engineering school" so finally she let me, I had to go to the medical university and dropout and change.”

(R., Int. 10).

The steadiness of these girls’ willpower is fierce and stubborn, they are clearly aware that if they cannot change their parents’ minds and have their consent they would not be able to attend the major and subsequently the career they wish for, thus convincing them can take a long period of time and involve unattackable arguments, but it is deemed to be worth the effort.

Regrettably, I also listened to the stories of two girls coming from very different backgrounds, who suffered the consequences of this ‘parental control’ - as they call it - feeling misunderstood, depressed or trapped in a reality they did not share or agree with, until the point where suicide was contemplated to be the only way out.

R. (Int. 18) just graduated from computer science major, she has a strong personality but a very traditional family, who would not let her have any freedom compared with her brothers. She was asked repeatedly by her dad to go work in the family business, but she never wished that for her future, until the point where she had to do something extreme to show her parents how much she was suffering, how much she desired to be free. Now she finally sees that her parents just let her be, with few restrictions, but only after she tried to take her own life.
"I'll tell you a secret, once I had a fight with my family, I'm a freedom loving, and they just want to dominate me, and I tried suicide once. (...) I really had a lot of fight but now I can do whatever I want. (...) I told them, if you want me, they don't need to dominate me. I'm not doing any wrong things, not drinking or coming home at 9-10 pm, I'm a good daughter and they shouldn't expect a lot about me. I tried suicide once and after that, they're fine. It's fine to live in my home.”

(R., Int. 18).

T. (Int. 11) on the other hand was studying in Thailand but did not feel comfortable in her surroundings, her family supported her, but in a very conservative way. She thus ended up studying something she had absolutely no interest in, and tried to commit suicide on different occasions out of depression and desperation. She eventually managed to take back control over her life and started to think about what she really enjoyed doing; not much time later she applied for culinary school back in Yangon. As of today, she is really happy she changed her path of studies, and considers herself to be fulfilled.

“So I always had this crazy parenting since I was young, my parents weren’t the normal supportive parents, they’re supportive in very conservative ways, they’re very ambitious in what they want their kids to do, and since I’m the oldest they always wanted me to be perfect, only in college I realized that I had a clinical depression, so I was..I committed 4 suicide attempts, not including the one in highschool, so yeah that was one of the main reasons I quit university as well (...) then I told my parents that I need to stop doing this, it's gonna kill me at the end of the day if I don't change my career. In culinary school I stopped thinking about these things, and they believed in me because I was at the vertex of doing something very stupid, I’m glad my parents made a different decision and made me pursue what I want.” (T., Int. 11).

These two extremely strong experiences show the downside of the issue, namely the girls who do not manage to change their parents’ minds and therefore commit unfortunate actions to get out of their control, pushed by an utter sense of desperation.

On one side, it is upsetting to see how girls are ready to do anything when they feel trapped in a situation they do not wish for and did not ask for; being willing to risk even their own lives to escape a suffocating environment and have power over their choices. On the other side, however, it is even more bitter to see parents realizing they are about to lose their daughters on the peak of their deepest despair, giving them the freedom they require only when it is about to be too late and having put them through very rough times in the meantime.

“At the end of the day what are you gonna risk, are you gonna risk your child doing something very stupid or you gonna risk your ego and fame that you’re gonna get, a paper that says your kid has graduated..I think a lot of problems originated with parents having this mindset of very limited choices in here.” (T., Int. 11).

Accordingly to T.'s (Int. 11) experience, one of the points that has been often raised by my participants is related to their families being very conservative, showing once again the generational gap mentioned in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, T. (Int. 11) mentions how her family was not understanding her and how it is time to move away from this limited mindset. Other girls experience similar situations, showing how 'parental control' is driven by this strong conservative feature their parents have,
not considering their daughters point of view or not accepting the careers they aim for because of traditional beliefs

“Sometimes we need to fight back, because our thought and their thoughts are not the same because of generation gap.” (K., F.G.)

This conservative tendency of Myanmar families brings another essential feature into the scenario of cultural influence on female agency. In fact, the reason why girls have to insist a lot to change their parents’ minds and why sometimes they are even pushed to attempt suicide is inherently connected to the utter rule of obedience that young generations have to show towards elders. The study shows how respect and obedience are fundamental pillars of Myanmar society

“Is hard, people are traditionally older, Yangon people pay their respect to older people, they need to obey what they say. Last time I had some struggle in my family I wanted to show my point of view but they think that I’m being ahead of them, teaching them, so they don’t really appreciate that. That’s the problem.” (Y., Int. 12).

These customs make it increasingly difficult for girls to be independent, also mirroring the pedagogical lacks of Myanmar education, as mentioned in the previous chapter, where teachers also have to be obeyed and respected, with few chances to build a constructive critical discussion around school subjects.

My study found that parents have different sets of approaches while dealing with their daughters’ aspirations. The majority of female students manage to obtain an initial trace of approval only after they start university, having already being subjected to high level of pressure beforehand. Other parents were instead supportive, but without embracing options entailing alternative studies, as in the case of T. (Int. 11) with her dreams about culinary school and W., who is very much into art and an excellent drawer himself. T. (Int. 11) pursued her ambitions going against the opinions of her family and friends, while W. (Int. 7) adapted to his parents’ desires. His case also brought up the importance of having a career that provides a good salary, to be able to take care of his family

“I have to take care of my family, so I have to get a job with a good salary, if I become an artist I can’t get a lot, so I decided to become an engineer.” (W., Int. 7).

“I think that, as a girl, my profession has to be stable and to be a doctor I had to struggle a lot. in my current university after I finish the Master’s degree I automatically get a job, is very safe for me and for my parents.” (P., Int. 5).

This mindset of looking primarily for a safe future job is understandable, if we consider the previous references about the fundamental role that families have in their children’s lives and the increasing importance of money in transitioning Myanmar, translated into good salaries. Sen (2000) clarifies this point by explaining how education is deemed to be the tool to obtain the social opportunity that will provide better lives overall. Additionally, it shows how the obstacles to free agency can include a wide range of approaches taken by families, therefore quite beyond the simple denial to attend a specific major. Another aspect of this pattern is shown by the approach taken by certain parents, allowing their daughters to choose the preferred major to
some extent, but denying the possibility to go abroad, although this option was given to older brothers

“For my masters, my father doesn’t want me to go abroad, but my brother studies his degree in Singapore, both my parents let him go abroad. (...) In my opinion there’s still a lot of social pressure on women, and if a man studies abroad is ok, but it’s never ok for women.”
(C. & C., Int. 2).

This approach is clearly preferable if compared to previous testimonies, but it still points out at the gender variable and at how male counterparts are much more supported in their choices compared to girls.

Indeed, young female students obviously have to fight more than boys to obtain what they want, but as mentioned above by G. (Int. 15), there is also a financial aspect to take into account. When asked about the feasibility of going against their parents and the conditions of their rebellion, a lot of girls have responded that they would still try to pursue their dreams, but without possessing a feasible and realistic plan. Some of them, however, actually confronted the issue with a realistic angle and an incredible degree of awareness regarding the consequences of such a standpoint

“If they’re completely disagreeing with my subject, I don’t really think I’ll get a chance to specialize in that subject. My parents are a little bit traditional and quite conservative, so if I do something against them they will always be noisy around me whenever I do slight mistakes, (...) I wouldn’t be able to stand that kind of pressure, so if they don’t really like it and are against it I wouldn’t choose it.” (J., Int. 14).

Although these voices appear to have surrendered to the broader power of families in Myanmar society, they still represent a realistic way of thinking about their possibilities, which will be extremely useful in their future and in the way they perceive themselves as part of Myanmar society. This insight will be further analysed at the end of next section, when awareness embedded in an empowered young girl will demonstrate what needs to be changed in Myanmar society.

5.2.2. The Overall Influence of Myanmar Society on Girls’ Agency

After families, Myanmar society is the second factor deeply influencing girls and their possibilities, although it can also be argued that Myanmar’s customs are embedded in the practices of most families. However, some boundaries are universal and do not depend on the goodwill of open minded parents, but rather on predetermined beliefs widely adopted by the Myanmar population (Fennessy, 2016). This section will therefore show the biases girls have to confront while trying to built up their future, the frustration they often feel towards their society and future prospects on the issue.

Female segregation is felt in various ways by my participants, starting from the basic inequality of treatment between girls and boys within families and local institutions, where boys are entitled to higher degrees of freedom just because of their gender, as witnessed by J. (Int. 14), studying international relations, and mentioned by five other female participants
“Some of my friends live in the hostel, and they said there are different rules for males and females. Females have to back at the hostel by 6pm, but males can stay out until 9pm, so there’s quite a difference. And some of the female students although they want to try evening classes they can’t, but males can.” (J., Int. 14).

This tendency is also reflected in choices related to education, as stated by R. (Int. 10), an architecture major student

“you know..if I were a boy and if I said that I wanna begin engineering, I would have no problems with my parents, I don’t have to cry in front of them every day, because if you are a boy you can go everywhere, you can do difficult jobs like engineering, because it is more suitable for boys, because sometimes you have to go to the field and you have to climb high or something.”
(R., Int. 10).

The testimonies shown above definitely express frustration regarding the possibilities that have been precluded to them, for the sole reason of being women. This tendency however expands in a very troublesome way, when the inequality of treatment includes a broader underestimation of girls’ abilities and assumptions based on traditional beliefs, undermining their empowerment and deliberately aiming at diminishing them (Higgins et al, 2015), as witnessed by these female students

“Women are still struggling to get higher positions in some cases, and most people still think men are superior to women, I think it’s really..we are still struggling.” (R., Int. 18).

“Especially my relatives don’t agree with me going abroad and they think that after I graduate I will be married with someone, and the money they invest on me is just like wasted money. They think that women can’t be very successful like men.” (K., Int. 1).

Young girls have to struggle a lot while dealing with the predetermined assumptions recreated by their society (Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016), which clearly encourages picturing women as not entitled to leadership positions, having to follow gendered roles instead, mostly envisioning them at home, with no independence or decisional power whatsoever. Even though it did not come up from the interviews, it appears as if the buddhist religion is also shaping these customs, considering men as naturally superior to women (Fennessy, 2016), as G. (Int. 15) recognizes below

“In our country is a very traditional one and everyone is by the culture, women and men are not equal, men have more opportunity and are more powerful and stronger to do the hard work, and also more intelligent than women, they always think like that. Women are very sensitive and not good at making decisions, they are just meant to do the house work, like babysitting and cooking soup, in Myanmar culture they think like that. Men should be at work and women should stay at home and do housework.” (G., Int. 15).

At this stage, the results of my study show a cutoff point, where the reality of the factors that are confining girls within gendered and sexist roles meets these incredibly independent and ambitious young women, full of expectations for their future well positioned to finally
contribute to their society (Maber, 2014), but truly aware that in order for them to make it, their surroundings have to change from within

“In here men do not trust women, and man look down to women...it's the main obstacle here and if I have to train men for (...) they wouldn't trust me, that's the main problem. (...) We need to trust people, and they need to trust me, they need to trust our entrepreneurship. (...) In our country trust is very essential part to be built. We don’t trust each other” (P., Int. 4).

A change in the way women are perceived in their capabilities and potentiality is strongly needed, because as of today, no matter how outstanding a girl can be, she will most likely not be given the chance or encouraged to achieve her goals. Girls need to be trusted as being more than housewives or mothers, they need to be envisioned as successful career women, as engineers and diplomats, as leaders. They need to feel equal to men in their abilities, but they cannot do it alone.

5.2.4. Conclusive Remarks on Second Findings Chapter

If Myanmar society repeatedly diminishes girls confining them into gendered roles, if families do not give their full support to their daughters and if pressure on designated careers are still persisting from the part of both family and Myanmar customs, not even a strong inspirational figure like Aung Saan Suu Kyi will manage to elevate girls beyond the segregated conditions they are currently confined in (Yi, 2016). Young female students are part of a structured society they do not have the means to influence on (Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986), leaving the development of their own capabilities chained to a hostile environment, which will not help them reach their goals (Hart, 2010; Unterhalter, 2012).

Accordingly, M. (Int. 3) denounces the population of her country demanding for change while not being ready to change themselves, while W. (Int. 7) continues by clarifying that if people do not change, the country itself will remain the same as well

“People (...) they need to want to change but they don’t change that much. (...) People are not changing. But they want the world to change.” (M., Int. 3).

“Is changing a little, slowly, you can’t change the country just with one man, we have to wait. (...) Only government can’t change it alone, all citizens have to change. If citizens can’t change country won’t be changed.” (W., Int. 7).

They thus need their families and their society to sustain them, as P. (Int. 4) rightfully pointed out in the previous section. The support of their community seems to be the only way out from this cycle of exclusion and inequality (Maber, 2014; Pickett and Wilkinson, 2011), bringing the concept of social cohesion into the discourse once again and contemplating its potential fundamental role as an advocate for women agency and finally empowerment overall (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2011; Higgins et al, 2015). This transformation would entail an equal recognition of the role of women, going beyond sexism and segregation, gaining gender justice and creating a collective agency of women (Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986; Mohanty, 2003). These outcomes can be achieved only through a shift towards Southern perspectives, addressing the recognition of gender identity in a collective way (Connell, 2014; Hagemann White, 2001).
In the following chapter girls’ independence and the source of their strength will be inspected from a different angle, entailing the current modernization of the country as playing an important role in building up their confidence.
5.3. Female Perspectives on Opportunities in Transitioning Myanmar

As extensively mentioned in previous chapters, Myanmar is going through a very interesting phase, where its economy is expanding and the country is experiencing modern foreign influence for the very first time. It is relevant for my study to investigate the extent of these influences, playing a role in shaping young people’s agency, because of the daily exposure they have to Western world dynamics, changing not only the reality of their country, but also their mindset and the way they think about their futures. Special attention will be given to girls’ agency from the second section of this chapter onwards.

5.3.1. Direct perceived Impact and Impressions of Globalization on Young Myanmar Students

It is essential to first delve into the lives of young men and women and inspect their personal experiences related to the country opening up, in order to grasp their angle in the first place. My research found that, when initially asked about it, many students feel no change or relatively small ones in their lives since 2011, even though they keep a positive attitude overall. The following testimonies are given by R. (Int. 10) studying architecture, and M. (Int. 3) studying hospitality and tourism management

“Is changing but I don’t feel much change. It’s just a small change.” (R., Int. 10).

“Is changing day by day, but it’s not changing very much, maybe it will be better in the future.” (M., Int. 3).

However, when more specific questions were being posed, girls naturally perceived the opening of the country as contributing to their lives and objectives.

First of all, the advent of globalization is perceived to broaden knowledge and connections because of the new facilities in travelling and networking (Obs. WMNE), very much appreciated after the long period of isolation from external realities that Myanmar youth went through, as mentioned by this IR female student

“I think these changes really impacted me because I have more opportunity to learn many things from other people all around the world. We have many visitors from foreign countries and we have also foreign professors here in our university, we can learn many things from her.” (G., Int. 15).

These opportunities related to increased interconnections are perceived to be enhanced also through new technologies and social media, allowing a higher degree of knowledge of the world outside Myanmar through the internet (Tomlinson, 2006), foreseeing possible fruitful partnerships, as this computer science major male student recognizes

“It feels like I can connect with the world, I can search everything, every information of stuff that I want to know, and I can also see foreign people here in Myanmar (...). 10 years ago there was lack of foreign speakers in the city, but now there’s so many overseas people here (...) (w) can get connected with foreigners, they can communicate and share knowledge, people can do so much when they are able to communicate with each other.” (A., Int. 13).
It is clear that youth’s mindset and ambitions can be easily framed around these new influences, after Myanmar’s population longed for positive change in society for such a long period of time, actively fighting for it and being caged in a reality constructed to control them instead.

Accordingly, as previously mentioned in the first chapter of my empirical findings, the fact that some universities reopened is welcomed and appreciated as a factor enhancing their livelihoods, as well as the possibility to access more meaningful knowledge and expertise in subjects like International Relations, which was not an option available before 2011.

“Somehow it feels great because we can read more books, that were restricted at our age, we can know about, if we have to take that subject (IR) we didn’t have much opportunity compared to now, now there are much teaching methods and also a little bit changing. (...) If we were in the same government (military) I wouldn’t have the opportunity to become a diplomat, even to go to the foreign country, they will let me study other subjects but not for IR or PS (political science).”

(Y., Int. 12).

In conformity with this general tendency, as we can observe through Y.’s (Int. 12) voice, there is awareness regarding the impossibility to study her major before 2011, when the subject was not considered to be adequate to be studied because of the military junta.

Strictly connected to this broadening range of opportunities at youth’s disposal, many girls mentioned the impossibility to conduct their desired career before 2011. The opening is widely believed to have brought about new opportunities and thus less unemployment, mainly because of foreign investments, as mentioned by S. (Int. 9), studying business management.

“Since the opening there are a lot of investors and foreign companies came and invest here, I think there are a lot of job opportunities and also education opportunities for the youth, that’s why I really like it.” (S., Int. 9).

Her hopes are fuelled by multiple international companies coming to Myanmar for their businesses. However, couple of other students have a still positive but more skeptical view on consequences that globalization might bring to the country.

“It’s a bit worrying at some point, but it’s good that we have a lot of foreign investors coming in and a lot of hotel chains coming in (...), on the other hand exploitation is the worst thing that we don’t want in our country, (...) exploitation is really bad, because for instance in the north there are a lot of forests but because of certain regulations they’ve been cut down and given to power plants, so yeah..good and bad sides. It has to happen I guess.” (T., Int. 11).

This awareness is however usually expressed in a positive sense, hoping that external dynamics will be conscious about internal logics and needs, which is unfortunately not always the case with large multinationals organizations based in developing countries. In fact, theories regarding the reasons behind the opening of the country display general economic interests instead of truthful wish for a transparent democratic system as the ultimate goals of the Reforms, giving credit to skeptical voices calling for a human-centred development, rather than a solely economic directed one (Stewart and Berry, 2000; Higgins et al, 2015; Fraser, 2005; Kuppuswamy, 2013; Rola-Rubzen and Burgess, 2016).
However, changes are still perceived as bringing about benefits for the Myanmar population, potential downsides are mostly neglected or not really taken into consideration. It is however understandable, considering the troublesome past of the country and the condition of isolation they experienced for the past 60 years, that they would consider whatever change as an upgrade from their previous situation, as confirmed by this IR student

“I’m happy about the changes, because looking back to history the country was controlled by the military and closed, there was not much contact with the international community and foreign countries. So (...) I think that we changed to very open country since the president Thein Sein’s regime, I think is a good thing, we have more opportunities and we can learn many things from other countries and look up to them to develop our country, this is the best way to imitate the other countries’ development, yeah I think it’s a good change”. (G., Int. 15).

Consequently, the study generally shows a positive attitude towards the prospects of the country opening up its borders, allowing foreign investments and Western influences to flow in. Therefore, even though initially students hardly felt impacted by the transitioning process, they are seemingly glad to be able to foresee benefits and opportunities coming their way, perceiving and actively hoping for an improvement in their lives.

However, the nature of their contentment changes when more in depth questions about the present conditions of their society are being asked. In fact, numerous young students do not perceive Myanmar population to be better off as of today, and actually come across the gap between rich and poor broadening instead, confirming insights around the need to address inequalities overall (Fraser, 2005; Stewart and Berry, 2000). Eight of my interviewees explicitly noticed this change, and these two young female student attending business administration and business management illustrate the situation in an extremely clear way

“The richer people become more rich and rich and the poor people become more poor and poor, as I can say. For the rich people, they have money to invest as there are a lot of foreign companies here, so they start to invest more. For the poor people, as they don’t have any investment, they become more poor and poor. If they don’t work harder it’s hard for them to become rich.”

(M., Int. 3).

“Only cronies are getting richer, there’s a lot of gap between rich and poor, rich people stay rich and poor people stay poor, high gap...there’s no change yet.” (S., Int. 19).

Their insights have been confirmed to me during a conversation I had with an expat working in the tourism industry in Yangon, who explained to me how the richest Myanmar people (also called cronies) were the ones investing in the tourism industry in the country at the moment, firstly because they are the only ones having the resources to actually do it, and secondly because they understood the profit load potential of the business after 2011. Consequently, she mentioned how they do not possess any sort of understanding about the tourism sector, but they took advantage of the opportunity and invested in it. The poorest segment of the population, however, does not have the same possibility, and therefore does not profit from this industry as much as the Kroni, displaying an increasingly alarming tendency towards a widening gap between rich and poor in the country (Stewart and Berry, 2000). This tendency is recognizable in the general dissatisfaction with the current system, who clearly lacks of context-
sensitive dispositions and participatory methods to reach a cohesive and fair society (Kuppuswamy, 2013; Fraser, 2005; Higgins et al, 2015).

Another tendency mirroring the latter is represented by the impression young people have of the actual changes in the quality of life of Myanmar population. In fact, they notice an increase in the living costs of Yangon, however deeming it the only place in the country that actually displays some sort of increase in the quality of life overall

“(…) the living cost is very higher now. Especially in Yangon.” (C. & C., Int. 2).

“(Quality of life) for Myanmar…some parts of Myanmar increased but some parts are still at the same point. In Yangon is increasing and increasing, some parts like Shan State is decreasing and decreasing.” (M., Int. 3).

Another reflection includes the new value gained by material goods and their way of modifying society. W. (Int. 7), an engineering major student, explained to me how he considers the happiness of Myanmar people as being jeopardized by the advent of a new approach towards material goods in the country (Stewart and Berry, 2000), belonging more to the Western ideal of consumerism - broadly speaking - and preventing true appreciation for what people already have

“The human being is a kind of born with greed, if they want a little then they want more and more opportunities, I think if they don’t greed that much they can be happier than earlier. Now they are happy but I don’t see that they can live as much happier than they would like to.” (W., Int. 7).

The study thus shows conflicting feelings about the country opening up, with students enjoying improvements in their lives while others do not seem to be impacted at all, or actually notice some negative influence instead, however remaining confident in a brighter future.

This insight can be further related to critics around the neoliberal model of development - and consequent multinational businesses resulting from it - which has the potential to deeply influence societies, recreating systemic inequalities, however remaining almost unnoticed (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014). This pattern is relevant for the purpose of this research because it impacts on the educational sphere as well, confirming the relevance of the CCPEE approach deeming education as closely connected with society's dynamics (Robertson and Dale, 2015).

5.3.2. The Position of Women in the Transitioning Reality of Myanmar

There is a broad consensus in understanding Myanmar's disclosure as bringing about opportunities, regarding the influence young students perceive the opening to have on their futures. Young girls feel empowered by the transitional process the country is currently going through, in one way or another. Globalization is often deemed to be offering new opportunities for women too, who are increasingly perceived to become more independent, as the testimony of this young girl studying international relations displays, following the thoughts of six other participants

“In the past, 5-6 years ago we didn’t really have female roles in the political area, there were more males than females in civil services, but now we can see even female diplomats in the political field and I think is a change in the scene for women, there will be more roles for women with Myanmar
opening. (...) Since women have better chances because of Myanmar being more democratic and opening, they will also get more job opportunities, I think that since feminism are popular in democratic countries women will have more workplaces options.” (J., Int. 14).

Young girls thus perceive the opening to actively encourage them and foreign companies to be more inclusive towards women, representing a viable option to pursue. The origin of this positive attitude ultimately derives from the perceived opportunities the country is supposed to be offering, mainly through foreign influence, as stated by this young girl who just graduated with her English major

“In most local companies there is discrimination between men and women according to their supervisors so to their managers and their boss. In foreign companies there's no discrimination between men and women.” (K., Int. 1).

Others are instead conscious that for having a concrete opportunity they would need experience or would have to move abroad to achieve their goals.

The awareness these girls raise on the feasibility of their objectives already shows high levels of commitment and self confidence in their own capabilities, which illustrates their perceptions on how globalization has impacted their lives and on their options. In fact, as previously stated, they seem to be very much empowered by their university (some girls explicitly mentioned their University education to represent the key to access the desired job) and by the new conditions in the country, which seem to elevate the acquaintance with their own potentialities.

Accordingly, R. (Int. 10) again thinks that she would not have had the opportunity to pursue her dream before 2011

“I might have difficulties to get a job before 2011, because architecture is not that famous and you don’t have many jobs or most jobs go to males and then you have to be at the top of your class to get the job. But now there’s companies from abroad coming in the country so they need local architects, so I think we’ll get more opportunities.” (R., Int. 10).

R. (Int. 10) seems to believe that the local reality of Myanmar will be elevated to a new and more inclusive system, well integrated and gender sensitive. However, she herself is also aware of different circumstances: together with other girls, while still believing in the power of foreign influence, they point out that the majority of jobs are still offered to men and that executive positions are still reserved for the male counterpart. In fact, Reforms are deemed to have ignored to address issues around biases related to gender and discrimination overall (Lwin, 2000), conforming to these girls’ perceptions

“(…) she [her sister] had to do a lot of work (…) and her job is not a well paid one (…). Her boss prefers male secretaries, because they can drive and speak English well and he can take their secretary, because in our cultures women are not well seen travelling with other men. That’s why many boss prefer male secretary nowadays. Especially foreigners.” (P., Int. 5).

“I think for the job opportunities men get better than women, because there are many men that work as white collar, so companies want more men than women, because if they want to go somewhere to Mandalay or elsewhere they will choose men to go there, not women.” (S., Int. 9).
Both P.’s (Int. 5) and S.’s (Int. 9) insights are consistent with the general tendency towards gendered roles imposed by society on girls mentioned in section 5.2., showing in this case how travelling with men colleagues is not seen as appropriate for a Myanmar woman, thus a man would be preferred for the job (Lwin, 2000; Unterhalter et al, 2001, 2011). R. (Int. 10) has a similar remark regarding limits or liabilities imposed by her gender

“They think a girl must stay in the building, secure environment. (...) There are still some jobs like police man (cops) I think women shouldn’t go for that kind of stuff, because they think is men’s job, I think there will be some women that want to be a cop, but is difficult for them because I have never seen female soldiers in my country.” (R., Int. 10).

It is thus clear how cultural limits imposed during girls’ education are still persistent in the job market, the next step they have to necessarily take in order to achieve their career goals. The discourse around gender roles imposed to young girls is therefore equally relevant as they start their careers, because the same pressures and discriminations are recreated in the work environment as well (Higgins et al, 2015; Connell, 2014; Kirkwood, 1986; Gore, 2009).

Accordingly, some girls have actively discussed the reasons behind the difficulties that women still have to undergo in order to be successful, often entailing a lack of support from the part of society (Higgins et al, 2015), a topic already touched at the end of the previous empirical chapter through the testimony of the very same female engineering student, which however needs to be repeated due to its relevance in the modernization paradigm discourse as well

“They (women) don’t have any courage, they don’t have any trusted help. (...) There are many women successful, but in our university if you have to train the workers, the labourers, you have to show our successfullness, our action first. This is my recent finding, it’s like, we have to make an action first, because many of the labours are men and they’re sexist, it’s just a man’s world!”

(P., Int. 4).

This is another revealing moment, where the expectations and ambitions of self confident young women clash with the reality of a non-inclusive and biased environment. The opening of the country is perceived as enhancing chances for better futures and prosperous careers, but the reality of Myanmar unfortunately remains chained to strong gender roles and female segregation patterns (Lwin, 2000; Higgins et al, 2015; Fraser, 2005).

A few words have to be spent on the incredible self confidence these girls show, which will surely help them build up the path towards their goals. However, I increasingly grew to be skeptical of their aptitude, because of the nature of their empowerment. I perceived the latter to be an abstract entity rather than a result of experience itself. In fact, when more specific questions were asked, general doubts and uncertainties would emerge, somehow clarifying that the origins of their empowerment did not lay in their hands, in their culture or in their surroundings, but was rather brought in by artificial circumstances, that did not belong to them still. This perception brings about the necessity to draw globalization’s direction away from the solely market-oriented development, diverting towards the well-being and cultural patterns as the ones to implement instead, moreover respecting local realities (Fraser, 2005; Higgins et al, 2015).

From another angle, the study recognizes that there is a common tendency to consider the opening of the country as bringing about opportunities, although different nuances suggest
that it is an empowering tool that unfortunately lacks a concrete basis, considering that students do not recognize any real change in their lives, as previously observed. Positive and negative impressions seem to balance themselves, but expectations are sometimes beyond realistic, posing a doubt in the actual potentialities of youth in their context, as this young girl expresses:

"I'd like to be rich. (...) I wanna be a famous business woman. (...) After graduating from this college I'm gonna find an MBA, from Australia. (...) I want to be the CEO of my big hotel. I want to produce a cosmetic brand and produce international. (...) After running the hotel I want to have a cosmetic brand." (C. & C., Int. 2).

Unrealistic or utopian goals are also common, displaying sort of a detachment from the real world they live in, to aim to run a hotel and then own a cosmetic brand without any ability to explain how to attain these results, or wanting to work for Disney, or becoming member of the Security Council in the United Nations. Although aiming to high positions and observing empowerment was surely gratifying to hear, I could not help but to feel slightly bewildered by the few testimonies who showed this tendency. This utopian approach to the future was also adopted during a Women Mentoring Event I took part in, where a young girl was also aiming at something impossible to achieve (Obs. WMNE). Looking more in depth into their backgrounds, however, I found out that the most unrealistic goals came from girls who witnessed high levels of boundaries and limits by their parents while choosing university. It is not a clear scientific pattern, but it is also not surprising, after reading the second chapter of my findings, to discover another level of influence that 'parental control' might entail. Therefore, although many girls are aware of processes and boundaries, not all of them are familiar with realistic goals overall.

Finally, it is clear how globalization is impacting young generations and what still has to be done in order to reach a more just system. A more context-sensitive set of dispositions is inherently needed, and girls should have the possibility to develop free from a constraining cultural and globalized framework, to follow their prospects and achieve their goals (Lwin, 2000; Higgins et al, 2015).

5.3.4. Conclusive Remarks on Third Findings Chapter

This chapter is another confirmation of the powers and limitations of globalization, closely entrenched with expectations and reality of a country willing to change and evolve, but unable to modify its popular behaviour in order to achieve positive results regarding gender inequality.

However, the general female segregation and inequality thriving in Myanmar are not only products of local customs, but the result of the application of economic globalization as well, which once again is proving to be inadequate when local circumstances are taken into account (Unterhalter et al, 2013; Gore, 2009). Accordingly, women are still neglected when it comes to globalization processes and thus global power patterns (Connell, 2004), rendering men the main beneficiaries of the new market-lead Myanmar society (Connell, 2014; Kirkwood, 1986; Gore, 2009). These feature also exposes the lie around the gender-neutrality of the market ideology, which gives the illusion of inclusivity and equality to young women, whereas it reproduces historical cycles of gender structures instead (Morrell, 2007; Connell, 2010), additionally displaying the need for actions to be taken in order to have broader long term outcomes, instead of direct but short term outputs (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

Women empowerment is widely perceived in young female university students, but its extent cannot go beyond the personal sphere, remaining blocked in a gender unfriendly
environment, not being able to reach the freedoms necessary to acquire free agency, and thus the empowerment and the capabilities to lead the lives they have reason to value (Sen, 2000).

There is thus the necessity for a change in direction, away from patriarchal attitudes undermining equality opportunities (Unterhalter et al, 2001, 2011) and going instead towards a system that will embrace inclusiveness, oriented towards the social aspects of society rather than just its economic component, giving a chance for Myanmar youth to gain free agency through context sensitive Reforms.
6. Conclusions and Reflections

6.1. Significance of Findings

This study clearly shows how different variables play a determining role in shaping young women’s agency in Myanmar, impacting in various ways the perceptions girls have around their ambitions and their prospects. In the next paragraphs the three sub-questions and following the main research question will be answered, according to the line of reasoning covered throughout all of my study.

How does participation in higher education impact on the capabilities/autonomy of young female students?

The first variable analysed, namely girls’ university education, appears to be enhancing their hopes for the future, deeming a degree a useful - and sometimes necessary - tool to undertake the chosen career. However, as mentioned in subsection 5.1.4., the boundaries of the educational system in Myanmar limit the opportunities for these girls to nurture their own thoughts, due to the scarce teaching methods they perceive to be subjected to. Consequently, developing their own ideas and participating in critical discussions results more difficult, since they remain chained to fabricated knowledge, a pattern closely connected to the military past of the country. Moreover, the general lack of guidance and mentoring often creates confusion around their own ambitions, reproducing a space for external influences to shape their agency instead. In fact, education is still closely connected with gendered roles, depriving girls of their autonomy and of their ability to choose. Therefore, the response to this first sub-question on education entails both a positive and a negative stance, considering girls surely more conscious about themselves and their possibilities, even empowered, but still limited by the social structures in place, rendering their studies just a platform for other variables to shape their ambitions instead.

How do women perceive their capabilities/opportunities to be influenced by their social environment?

The second variable analysed, and the one clearly having a deeper influence, is the impact of Myanmar culture and customs, specifically of families, in shaping girls’ opportunities and capabilities. The study shows how families can be either supportive or imposing boundaries instead, but the general tendency appears to be definitely more limiting than liberating. In subsection 5.2.4. insights on the matter have been already discussed, but it is fundamental to remember that if the inequality cycle in place does not weaken in favour of social cohesion and communal empowerment, young girls will remain chained to a society that does not trust them being equal to men. Accordingly, their opportunities are widely jeopardized and their capabilities are bounded to obedience customs and patriarchal patterns mainly related to gendered roles, thus unfortunately answering to this second sub-question with a negative inclination.
The third and last variable inspected is related to a relatively new feature, namely the ongoing globalization process in the country. The research shows how even though this process is usually welcomed by young generations and yielded to bring about new opportunities and positive practices, the reality around it shows an unfortunate different truth. In fact, as stated in subsection 5.3.4., the opening of the country seems to benefit only one segment of the population, since - additionally - gender issues have not been included in the solely economically oriented globalization process Myanmar is currently undertaking. Therefore, the response to this third sub-question entails very high expectations from the part of Myanmar youth, believing that the modernization of Myanmar will offer them better futures and more opportunities. However, I have to add that such anticipation entails an illusion they are not always aware of, an invisible entity driving them towards unrealistic stances and aspirations, which could possibly be counterproductive in the long term.

Therefore, the research question

*How is young female Myanmar students’ agency to follow their ambitions shaped by perceptions around University education and traditional culture, in the rapidly changing reality of Myanmar?*

Can be answered by tying up the individual responses of the variables observed above, deeming young girls’ perceptions around their agency

- partly shaped by university education, seemingly giving them the possibility to choose and to evolve as young professionals, but still entailing discriminations and patriarchal patterns which do not give girls the opportunity to have complete free agency;
- definitely limited by Myanmar culture and family obedience, due to extensive control over girls generally and to antiquated customs limiting girls’ capabilities and freedom all together, usually following customs related to obedience to the elderly and patriarchy all together;
- and finally disillusioned by globalization patterns, which give them the impression to have the opportunity to aspire to better lives whereas in reality it just mystifies them, reproducing once again inequality patterns and ignoring gender issues instead.

### 6.2. Theoretical Reflections for further Research

Women’s agency in Myanmar and its study can be controversial because of the numerous variables shaping it, which - as proved in the previous section - can play both positive and negative roles. Due to limited amount of time in the field it was not possible for me to analyse closely and in depth these three variables, but further research could analyse them separately at first and then observe the interconnections between them in a second moment, to investigate to what extent are they related to each other and identify how can they possibly transform in the future, seen the current pace of Myanmar’s development. Such further research should however keep similar methods to the ones used for this study, since they proved to be appropriate for the
purposes of this sensitive inquiry and could be developed more, but in the same qualitative and participative direction, essential to obtain meaningful and truthful informations. Indeed, snowball sampling proved to be effective to reach an acceptable number of participants, together with numerous interviews and observations, which helped me to attain the collection of meaningful, confidential information without resulting invasive to my interviewees. My only regret would be having conducted only one focus group, I believe they could represent a great asset to gain even more insights on girls’ agency overall.

Moving forward, this research and its results are unfortunately not applicable to different countries with similar circumstances, because of the peculiarity of this case study. However, this investigation produced a number of interesting outcomes, that can be potentially relevant for development studies overall.

First of all, this inquiry provides further proof of the permeability of education in relation with social adjacent dynamics, directly confirming insights around the CCPEE approach. Secondly, these dynamics and their eventual clash represent an interesting case, which - if analyzed in depth - can lead to positive results. In fact, if a mutual and beneficial balance of traditional customs and globalization factors was found, it could be effectively applied to make these two variables successfully coexist in the particular context. From a theoretical perspective solely, related to the CCPEE approach, further research could analyse the ‘multiple interactions among influential dimensions’ reproduced within the educational system and identify whether these dimensions can be maintained and supported within schools in case of positive results, or if they can instead be externalized in case they yield negative or counterproductive results, as in our case. Therefore it would be interesting to explore options related to the controllability of the multiplicity of the variables shaping young students mindset and agency, for the purpose of a better educational system and a positively oriented pedagogical model.

Thirdly, this field research provides insights around gender equality and the means to obtain it, which could be considered as a fundamental basis where to start building prospect solutions to the problem. Indeed, the role of the community has been detected as being the essential feature of women empowerment, thus not considering individual efforts as the ones bringing about change, but deeming both women as a community and the adjacent society as the necessary collective supportive entity to bring about equality overall. The theoretical debate related to this insight entails a deeper understanding of Southern perspectives, which could increase social cohesion overall (Connell, 2011; Kirkwood, 1986). However, even if collective action has been deemed to be the tool to raise awareness around gender issues and effectively empower women (Connell, 2014; Hagemann White, 2001), the resilience of strong cultures has to be considered in the broader contextual framework, as a variable consistently posing resistance to change. Further research could therefore be directed towards the limits and permeability of customs and cultures to the adoption of Southern perspectives, analyzing positive and negative practices to formulate a new, much more sensitive approach.

In conclusion, the relevancy of this field study lays in the outcomes reached, which could represent the starting point for the next social inquiry or could redirect existing theories in the most effective way. Myanmar is a unique case in its various peculiarities, but it could rightfully represent a paradigm displaying entrenched social factors needing community’s effort to be tackled.
6.3. Policy and Practice Recommendations

Following the lead of the previous section, I deem it of fundamental importance to understand the variables shaping agency in their single entity, in order to have a clearer idea of the extent of their influence on young female students. Even though such analysis has not been done in depth, this study proves culture and customs to be the most powerful features influencing many aspects of Myanmar youth. The opening of the country could bring about change but it reproduces inequality patterns instead, and education has limited powers, being mostly exploited as a catalyzer for the other two variables to exercise their influence.

Myanmar’s government could therefore adopt policies oriented towards a more equal educational system, promoting more inclusive teaching methods towards the ‘liberating education’ mentioned by Freire (1970), changing entry requirements for universities and addressing discrimination through programmes specifically oriented towards capacity building and awareness around gender issues, which would be attended by both girls and boys in collaboration with open minded teachers. However, since education is not an isolated concept they would have to address issues comprising the external spheres as well, not being able to grant that negative influences from the outside will not reach young students again.

Subsequently, a second option could entail a change in the direction globalization is taking in the country, but I highly doubt that such initiative would come from those who actually wish to benefit from it. In fact, there is some evidence suggesting that the purpose of the former government was primarily directed to modernize the education system to integrate the country into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the global economy (Higgins et al, 2015; Bhatia, 2013; Kuppuswamy, 2013). These insights are undoubtedly discouraging regarding the possibility for Myanmar nationals to achieve their ambitions all together, but mostly it concerns me that such an opportunity would be worn out and mutate in another catalyzer for inequality and exploitation to be spread instead. There is, therefore, a general need towards a modernization that encompasses participatory methods and context-sensitive dispositions, in addition to the recognition of minorities and inequalities (Fraser, 2005).

The same dispositions are applicable to the education system as well, seen its permeability towards external entities, rendering education both part of the problem and part of the solution. Besides, unless meaningful measures are taken regarding a more inclusive globalizing process and a more inclusive social context, Myanmar’s education paths will always entail the same problematics related to its adjacent social dynamics.

Following, a third alternative should address the problematics around social customs and traditions. This might be the most resilient entity to shape, because of its local rooted feature and the difficulty to influence an essentially intimate sphere of the Myanmar population. To shape a mindset is a long term project, and I am not sure is an ethically correct one either. Therefore, if a government is to modify its population’s values, it would need more time than they are actually willing to spend. However, an alternative could entail a redirection instead of a modification, which could protect traditions but shape them towards inclusivity and social cohesion instead. This option is optimistic, but unfortunately unrealistic, because Myanmar culture is undoubtedly the most powerful source of control over Myanmar’s population, thus in order to give young women a chance to live the life they have reason to value (Sen, 2000), change must come from the communal effort of Myanmar population, trusting women to be finally equal to men and empowered by their surroundings.

Finally, these recommendations could be taken into consideration by both the Myanmar government and international organizations working in the country, the latter in particular
should take into account the particular context and the dynamics shaping education and consequently young women's agency as their starting point to achieve effective and inclusive projects on the long term.
### Annexes

**Annex 1.1.: Transparency Table of Interviewees (see also next page)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of respondent/nick name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>From.</th>
<th>Methods used</th>
<th>Location of Interview</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. K.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>interview &amp; focus group</td>
<td>Yangon, Piy Road</td>
<td>25.06.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C. &amp; C.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Yaw Min Gyi</td>
<td>26.06.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. M.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Shan State, Yangon</td>
<td>interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Yaw Min Gyi</td>
<td>30.06.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. P.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>interview &amp; focus group</td>
<td>Yangon, Tamwe Township</td>
<td>03.07.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. P.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Nay Pyi Taw</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Downtown</td>
<td>05.07.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. H.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Yaw Min Gyi</td>
<td>11.07.16</td>
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<td>7. W.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Yaw Min Gyi</td>
<td>12.07.16</td>
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<td>8. D.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mandalay, Yangon</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Yangon, Tamwe Township</td>
<td>14.07.16</td>
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<td>9. S.</td>
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<td>15.07.16</td>
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<td>11. T.</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>interview</td>
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<td>13. A.</td>
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**Annex 1.2.: Observations table**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obs. with P.</th>
<th>Observations during meeting with Peter, english debate classes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obs. with T.</td>
<td>Observations during meeting with Thinzar, Myanmar activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obs. U.C.D.</td>
<td>Observations during a University Career Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obs. W.M.N.E.</td>
<td>Observations at Women Mentoring Network Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obs. K.E.C.</td>
<td>Observations in an english class at Kanthaw Education Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obs. American centre</td>
<td>Observation at Youth Forum at the American Centre</td>
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### Annex 2: Operationalization Table (see also next page)

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<th>CONCEPTS</th>
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<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>INDICATORS</th>
<th>METHODS</th>
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<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>1. Education System</td>
<td>• Policies and educational offers of Universities</td>
<td>• Do female students express satisfaction or delusion with the educational system?</td>
<td>Participatory Observation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Level of inclusiveness</td>
<td>• Do they feel equally integrated in university?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Knowledge</td>
<td>• Functionality</td>
<td>• Do female students perceive their education to serve their purposes?</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Curricula</td>
<td>• Do female students feel excluded or discriminated in University?</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
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<td>Agency</td>
<td>1. Free choice: family vs. career, and alternative open options</td>
<td>• Autonomy • Capabilities</td>
<td>• Do female students perceive their goals to be feasible/reachable?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
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<td>• Do they perceive to have free choices?</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Do they feel powerless or in control of their choices?</td>
<td>Participatory Methods</td>
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<td>2. Cultural Barriers</td>
<td>• Social response to ambition • Social expectations</td>
<td>• Do they perceive social hostility towards their goals?</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
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<td>• Do they feel that social pressure has a role?</td>
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<td>• If yes, to what extent does society influence their agency? (perception)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONCEPTS</td>
<td>DIMENSIONS</td>
<td>VARIABLES</td>
<td>INDICATORS</td>
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<td>Modernization</td>
<td>1. National vs.</td>
<td>• Context sensitive dispositions ?</td>
<td>• Are women satisfied with the policies the country is implementing?</td>
<td>Observations</td>
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<td>Paradigm</td>
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<td>• Do modernized measures cover the needs of young women?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
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<td>2. Inclusive Development</td>
<td>• Wellbeing over wealth?</td>
<td>• Relevant/meaningful job opportunities for women?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews</td>
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<td>vs. Economic Development</td>
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<td>• Is modernization perceived as helping the cause of women in the country?</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
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<td>• Trade-off between modernizing and living better?</td>
<td>Participatory Methods</td>
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<td>3. Military power</td>
<td>• Illusory freedom</td>
<td>• Are differential opinions or demands protected/encouraged?</td>
<td>Participatory Observations</td>
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<td>• Are constraints deriving from the military regime still perceived after the country opened up?</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
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