



# Raising the Curtain

Cultural Norms, Social Practices and  
Gender Equality in Myanmar

We, both women and men, hold equal opportunities and chances since we were born, as we all are, human beings. Most women think that these opportunities and favours are given by men. No, these are our own opportunities and chances to live equally and there is no need to thank men for what they are not doing.

Focus Group Discussion with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaung Nyunt Township



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Yangon, Myanmar  
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# Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CU	Coordination Unit
DVD	Digital Versatile Disc
ERC	Ethical Review Committee
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
CESR	Comprehensive Education Sector Review
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEN	Gender Equality Network
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MMCWA	Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association
MWAF	Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation
MRTV	Myanmar Radio and Television
MSWRR	Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NRC	National Registration Card
NSPAW	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
SCR WG	Social and Cultural Norms Research Working Group
SC	Steering Committee
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
VCD	Video Compact Disc
VOA	Voice of America



# Acknowledgements



Trying to discuss such complex issues as 'culture', 'gender' and 'gender equality' in Myanmar is an enormous challenge. Enormous because of the richness of cultural traditions and values that underpin the social fabric of this country, and the impossibility of doing justice to these. Enormous because this very social fabric is currently being stretched and tested as the country is rediscovering its social voice after decades of imposed doctrines. Enormous because the profound need for critical analysis of the issue of gender (in)equality is only paralleled by the need for social harmony, peace, tolerance and understanding. Enormous also because of the real risks of misinterpreting information as the nuances and layers can be ever so easily lost in translation, interpretation and differences of lived experiences. It is hoped that the value of this study stretches beyond these pages.



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# Executive Summary

Myanmar is giving increasing attention to gender inequality as an impediment to development and the attainment of human rights. In the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013 – 2022, the Government has signalled its commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of women. There is increasing momentum within civil society networks and organisations to promote programming and advocacy for women’s rights and gender equality. The emerging global recognition of the strong relationship between social norms and women’s and men’s opportunities and actions is also beginning to be discussed in Myanmar, particularly as media is opening up. However, little information is available on this topic.

This study was conceived by the Gender Equality Network with the objective of furthering the understanding of social and cultural norms in Myanmar and their impact for men and women in relation to family and community life, work, health and education. By generating an up-to-date mapping of the diverse social and cultural norms at a time of rapid political and economic transition, the study aims to inform programmes and policies about underlying norms that impact on the attainment of gender equality.

The study was implemented from September 2013 - May 2014. A total of 543 people participated in the study; 299 women (55%), and 244 men (45%) from seven States - Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan - and four Regions - Ayeyarwady, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon.<sup>1</sup> Using a qualitative approach with a diverse sample, in-depth information was sought through 78 Focus Group Discussions with 458 community members; 235 (51%) women and 223 (49%) men. Case stories were also collected from 10 women and 6 men, using semi-structured interviews, and community questionnaires with 10 women and 5 men generated contextual information. Semi-structured Key Informant Interviews were conducted with 54 informants (44 women and 10 men) who are sector specialists, gender practitioners, media professionals, and figures of authority. In addition, analysis of selected print media was carried out.

Gender inequality in Myanmar has historically not been acknowledged as an issue of concern. The idea of Myanmar as a country with equal opportunities for men and women emerged in colonial times and has remained the official rhetoric throughout military rule – a stance that is still reproduced today. Lack of data has held back the emergence of alternative discussions about gender relations. Adding to the available evidence base, this study shows how social and cultural norms carry ideas of different functions and worth for men and women, impacting on their life opportunities. Women, regarded as ‘bearers of culture’, are often blamed for what are seen as disappearing cultural values.

A central feature of cultural and religious narratives is male spiritual superiority, positioned in opposition to female worldly inferiority. Perceptions of women’s lesser value are linked to ideas that their bodily functions, notably menstruation and childbirth, are impure. Women’s sexuality is controlled through virginity and modesty norms and governed by connections to men. A ‘proper’ dress code largely represents this chaste ideal. Male sexuality, on the other hand, is assumed to be uncontrollable and potentially violent. Son preference, bride price and unequal opportunities to inherit are among the key issues that derive from norms of unequal worth and that impact negatively on the lives of women. There are many important socializing agents of gender norms - including the family, the education system, authorities, social services, the healthcare system, literature, mass media and religious leaders. These gender norms are deeply internalized. A gradual loosening up of norms that have restricted women’s space is noted, though not all approve of it.

Work and livelihood opportunities for men and women are strongly linked to gendered norms. A gendered division of labour was prominent in all of the study areas. The domains of work for men and women are typically positioned as: hard work as opposed to easy or light work; inside work as opposed to outside work; and productive work as opposed to reproductive work. The norms of the male breadwinner and

1. This report uses the Myanmar Information Management Unit standardised spelling for State, Division and Township Names.





household leader are central to understanding gender relations. Men's work is perceived to be more valuable than women's in relation to both status and income. Social and material practices, such as unequal wages and listing women as dependants on family registration cards, reflect the unequal valuing of men's and women's work.

While the value of education for girls is increasing, it is still measured against job opportunities and marriage prospects, rather than seen as a right in itself. In several study communities, girls' education was described as lagging behind boys. The education system emerged as a powerful socializing agent with regards to gender norms, with boys and men portrayed as: tough; externally-oriented; breadwinners; focused on production; intelligent and responsible for national affairs. Girls are portrayed as quiet and well behaved; focused on reproduction; and family-oriented and modest. Internalized gender norms related to family obligations impact on decisions as to whether girls drop out of school. Threats of harassment and violence against girls also impact on decisions about whether they should be kept in school. Improvements in infrastructure and perceived safety appear to have positive effects for girls' schooling. Educated men tend to have more career opportunities than educated women.

Cultural norms impact heavily on women's opportunities to a healthy life. Such norms include those that: hold women's menstruation to be dirty; place high value on women's virginity; see women foremost as reproductive beings; hold sex to be a taboo topic; promote childbearing; discourage family planning; encourage women to sacrifice themselves for their families; and position women as inferior to men in the household setting. Norms are socialized through peers, families, and health professionals, in some cases underpinned by laws and policies. The impact of these norms include: limited access to information about sexual and reproductive health and an inability to fully enjoy sexual and reproductive health rights, particularly among unmarried women but also among men; justification of men's violence against women; the reduction of women's health issues to maternal and child health concerns; women's inability to make decisions about their bodies; and the marginalization and discrimination of women who do not conform to gendered norms.

Media functions as an important bearer of norms.

Globalization of culture in Myanmar is generally met with scepticism, and women in the media are critiqued when they fail to conform to traditional gender norms. On the other hand there is appreciation among women for the slightly increased range of roles for women that globalized media has brought. Media largely perpetuates a victimized, objectified and sexualized view of women. Print media was found to be elite-oriented and highly male-biased. Women are less visible in print media as sources, spokespersons and experts. Politics and economics are heavily male dominated while women are more represented in arts and culture. Women's magazines are reinforcing the view of women as reproductive beings.

Cultural norms and related social practices impact men and women throughout their lifespan. Study participants differ in how they value these norms by class, locality, educational background, occupation, age and personal life experiences. More conservative sections of society speak of traditional norms as worthy of being maintained, while others question norms they find limiting. The reactivation of a cultural protectionist stance in which women are cast as 'protectors of a culture' can be seen as a barrier to the realization of women's rights.

Based on the findings of this study, awareness-raising of the impact of social and cultural norms on education, health, paid and unpaid work is needed. Systematic gender analyses of laws, policies and budgets that carry normative weight; empowering professional groups to address stereotypes and sexism within respective fields and budgeting for equality initiatives is urgently required, as is sex disaggregated data in all areas of the NSPAW. Beyond the need for law-makers and policy makers to address gender inequality as a national concern, civil society groups have an important role to play in terms of finding culturally appropriate strategies, through targeted campaigns, to begin addressing the perpetuation of inequality that takes place through cultural norms and social practices.

# 1 Introduction





## The current political and economic changes taking place in Myanmar carry the potential for alterations in ‘opportunity structures’ for men and women.

There is growing recognition of the power and reach of social and cultural norms in shaping the lives of individual men and women all over the world (see, for example, Mohanty 1991; Peterson and Runyan 1993; Hooper 2000). A recent World Bank study covering 20 disparate countries found ‘women’s and men’s opportunities and actions to be determined as much by social norms—including gender roles and beliefs about their abilities and capacities—as by the conditions of the communities and countries they live in’. The study found social and cultural norms prescribing the appropriate place and behaviour for women and men to permeate all aspects of community and individual life, and to intersect with the institutions of the state, civic life and the market in shaping and at times reinforcing unequal power relations and impacting on choices and freedoms (WB 2013).

In Myanmar, similarly, there has been growing attention to gender inequality as an impediment to development and the attainment of human rights (see, for example, GEN 2013 a). The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has acceded to the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). Through the development of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013 – 2022, the Government has signalled its commitment to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of women in Myanmar through the creation of enabling systems, structures and practices. Among the key objectives of the Plan, is ‘to ensure the protection and fulfilment of women’s and girls’ economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights’ (NSPAW 2012). The Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement chairs the Myanmar National Committee for Women’s Affairs, which will guide the implementation of the Plan. In addition, a sectoral working group on enhancing women’s empowerment and gender equality has recently been formed.

Civil society networks of women’s and gender organizations, formed over the past several years, are also increasingly directing their efforts to programming and advocacy for women’s rights and gender equality. In recent times, certain cultural norms around sexuality are beginning to be openly discussed (see, for example, Michaels 2013). At the same time harmful social practices such as violence against women are becoming the target of women’s action campaigns (see, for example, Thein 2012; GEN 2013 b). Women’s participation in decision-making in public and political life, including in peace-processes, has also received growing attention in recent years (see, for example, Lahtaw & Raw 2012; SBC, 2013).

With the gradual easing of censorship and the opening up of the media there has been increasing public discussion of cultural norms and social practices in relation to women’s status and gender equality. This is historically contested territory (see, for example, Ikeya 2005, 2010, 2012; Harriden 2012; Than 2014), evidenced by a special report on ‘The Modern Woman’ (MMR Times, June 2013) which lays bare some of the fault lines of the current debates around modesty, dress codes, marriage, and household gender roles. Other topical examples of public discourse around gendered social norms include Buddhist Women’s Marriage Special Law being debated among religious leaders, politicians and civil society groups (see, for example, Hindstrom 2013; Thein 2013; Weng 2014), which has brought renewed attention to women’s culturally ascribed roles as ‘protectors of culture’ (Belak 2000; Thin 2006). The debates surrounding the Bill have also exposed the patriarchal interpretation of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar, which is likely to impact on women’s room to manoeuvre in a time of change.

The current political and economic changes taking place in Myanmar carry the potential for alterations in ‘opportunity structures’<sup>2</sup> for men and women. However, in the past broader segments of women in Myanmar have not been able to take advantage of crucial turning points in history; social

2. ‘Opportunity structure’ is a sociological term that means the framework of rules that people are encouraged to follow in a society to be considered successful. Opportunity structures usually relate to acquisition of wealth or status and may include access to certain types of education or jobs.

norms still delineate the spaces available to men and women (Harriden 2012)<sup>3</sup>. Taken together these changes warrant increased understanding of social and cultural norms and the way that they impact on men's and women's opportunities in contemporary Myanmar.

## 1.1 Background and Rationale

This study was conceived by The Gender Equality Network (GEN), an active inter-agency network, comprising over 100 national and international non-government organisations, civil society organisations and networks, and technical resource persons. GEN works collaboratively with key stakeholders to promote gender equality and women's rights throughout Myanmar. The Network's Strategic Plan 2012 – 2015 has the following goal and objectives:

### Goal

Myanmar is a society in which there is gender equality at all levels – where all women are empowered, can fully realize their rights, are in positions where they can effectively lead, and are treated with dignity and respect.

### Overall Objective

To facilitate the development and implementation of enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realisation of women's rights in Myanmar.

### Strategic Objectives

1. **Laws, Policies, Rights and Governance:** Laws, policies, systems, structures, and practices are developed, enacted, and implemented to achieve women's civic, economic, political and social rights, and participation at every level
2. **Social Practices and Cultural Norms:** Social practices and cultural norms favouring gender equality are articulated and reinforced, and strategies for responding to those that discriminate against women are identified and implemented
3. **Women's Participation in Leadership and Public Life:** Women are enabled to be leaders and have the capacity and opportunity to effectively exercise their roles in all sectors
4. **Gender-Based Violence:** Awareness increased and support provided to stakeholders to implement effective evidence-based mechanisms and strategies to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence

5. **Gender Equality Network Strengthening:** The Gender Equality Network is a dynamic and cohesive network of skilled and confident members who are able to work effectively for women's rights and gender equality

The research findings from this study will support widespread efforts related to the implementation of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW), launched in October 2013, and will contribute to the Gender Equality Network's Strategic Plan - in particular, to objectives 1, 2 and 3 as outlined above. It is hoped that this study will provide essential information for future interventions on legal and policy reform, social and cultural norms, women's participation in leadership and public life, and other areas requiring targeted advocacy messages and awareness-raising.

As noted by Belak (2000), legislation, affirmative action programs, and other measures to enhance women's status often fail because they are not sufficiently anchored in popular conceptions of what women should or can do. It is particularly important to work towards ensuring a better understanding of the context in which the NSPAW, now launched, is set to be implemented. The research will build upon previous studies that have investigated some of the cultural norms and social practices related to gender, decision-making, and leadership in Myanmar (Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE 2011; Oxfam, Trocaire, CARE & ActionAid 2013; GEN 2013 c). However, apart from leadership and decision-making, most other areas of the Plan have received relatively little attention from a gender and norms perspective in recent years. It is therefore an opportune time to map and identify social and cultural norms that can be drawn on to advance a gender equality agenda that is contextually grounded and informed by evidence.

## 1.2 Objectives and Study Questions

### 1.2.1 Overall Objective

The overall objective of this study is to increase the understanding of the social and cultural norms in various socio-cultural settings across Myanmar and the impact they have for men and women in relation to family and community life, work, health and education. It aims to do so by generating an up-to-date mapping of the diverse social and cultural norms that exist in Myanmar at a time of rapid political and economic transition. It further aims to inform programmes and policies that seek to improve the lives of men and women, by highlighting the underlying norms that impact on the attainment of gender equality. Using a qualitative approach with a diverse sample, it is hoped that the study's findings

3. Although framed slightly differently depending on one's ethnic and religious belonging, as well as age and socio-economic class, gendered norms tend to stress the male prerogative of leadership in the family, community and society at large (Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE 2011).

will contribute to the knowledge about social and cultural norms as they relate to gender. The study also aims to provide recommendations about ways to work with and address social and cultural norms that study participants deem influential in their daily lives.

### 1.2.2 Study Objectives

- To identify and map key social and cultural norms which impact on the attainment of gender equality in 11 States and Regions in Myanmar.<sup>4</sup>
- To provide recommendations on key social and cultural norms and practices that can be more clearly articulated and reinforced for enhancing gender equality.
- To highlight discriminatory gender norms and practices which should be prioritized for developing and implementing response strategies in support of the NSPAW 2013-2022.

### 1.2.3 Study Questions

1. Which are the cultural norms that support the notion of gender equality and result in and/or influence gender inequality in Myanmar, including but not limited to the five selected NSPAW areas?<sup>5</sup>
2. What do the patterns of gender socialization in Myanmar look like, which are the main socializing agents, and how do they operate?
3. How are cultural norms perceived to change over time and the life cycles of men and women in the study areas, and how do participants feel about these changes?
4. To what extent and in what ways are cultural norms challenged or contested by men and women in Myanmar?
5. What are the perceptions and experiences of men and women who transgress from prescribed cultural norms in Myanmar?

### 1.2.4 Delimitations

While the NSPAW deals with all the 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, the present study will concentrate on five of the priority areas that are currently severely under-researched, and where it is believed that the qualitative research methodology will be most effective in generating new information and supplementing existing information.

These include:

- » Women, Livelihoods and the Economy<sup>6</sup>
- » Women, Education and Training
- » Women and Health
- » Women and the Media.

## 1.3 Methodology - In Brief

The study was conceptualized by the Gender Equality Network, and designed by an international researcher, working closely with a national researcher, the GEN Research and Training Coordinator, the GEN Steering Committee (SC) and Coordination Unit staff. An external translator and media analysis consultant were also engaged. The Social and Cultural Norms Research Working Group (SCR WG) made up of interested GEN members provided input, and the GEN Steering Committee guided the process. Data collection at field level was carried out by teams of four field researchers (2 women and 2 men) from GEN member organizations including a team leader. In total 35 field researchers, 17 women and 18 men were recruited and trained.

### 1.3.1 Key Concepts

**Gender Equality** is approached in this study as something that is intrinsically valuable, grounded in a rights-based approach that acknowledges women's right to live as equals with men, and to have equal opportunities with men - in all fields (CEDAW, 1979). The study also recognizes, as does CEDAW, that 'the full and complete development of a country ... and the cause of peace, [require] the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields'. From this perspective, gender equality can also be seen as a means to an end. At Myanmar's current crossroads, it is believed that addressing gender equality as a means, as well as an end in itself, is necessary.

### **Gender, Norms and Power**

How we understand what it is to be a man or a woman in a particular place, and time, is highly dependent on the social and cultural norms around us. The constant reinforcement of certain norms that define femininity and masculinity can be seen as limiting alternative ways of thinking about or being a woman or a man (see, for example, Butler 1993). Gendered norms also carry important power dimensions, and throughout history it is possible to see that there have

4. For details, please see section 1.3.2 on Study Design and Sampling.

5. The key priority areas of the NSPAW are: Women and Livelihoods; Women, Education and Training; Women and Health; Violence Against Women; Women and Emergencies; Women and the Economy; Women and Decision-making; Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women; Women and Human Rights; Women and the Media; Women and the Environment; and the Girl Child.

6. This combines two areas of the NSPAW: Priority Area 2 – Women and Livelihoods, and Priority Area 6 – Women and the Economy.

been numerous ways of justifying women's subordination by drawing upon different sets of social and cultural norms (see, for example, Peterson and Runyan 1993). At times, women have been described as physically strong and capable of back-breaking work, for example when they were required to take up work in US factories during the Second World War. At other times, such as when women's labour was required in export garment and other factories in India as the economy was liberalizing, women were described as suitable for this type of work due to their being patient (Blomqvist 2004). Translating gender differences into gender inequalities and constantly reinforcing these inequalities "normalizes" them. Moreover, as cautioned by recent studies (WB 2012, 2013) there is a risk that even when there are qualitative changes in women's living conditions, beliefs may not change or may change more slowly. Indeed beliefs may even adapt to new conditions. There is also a risk that material opportunities cannot be taken advantage of due to persistent norms and beliefs (Harriden 2012).

#### **Culture and Cultural Change**

This study, unless it is directly quoting study participants, uses the term 'culture' in a wide sense, as a sphere in which meaning is created (Tomlinson 1999). It does not explore different cultural expressions such as music, art, or dance. The traditional way of treating culture, or 'cultures' has been to regard them as more or less static, homogenous entities, sharing the same values and norms, and as being separable from each other. This view has slowly changed, and culture has come to be regarded as made up of dynamic processes, constantly undergoing changes. Whether cultures are becoming more similar (homogenization); more intertwined (hybridization); or whether processes of globalization are in fact reactivating what is seen as specific in the local culture is an ongoing debate (Hyland Eriksen 1994). This study will use these various frameworks of cultural change theory to make meaning of the findings around gender and social and cultural norms.

#### **1.3.2 Study Design and Sampling**

The overarching goal of this qualitative study's sampling strategy was to achieve variation across the study areas according to variables including: sex, ethnic and religious belonging, age, geographic location and GEN members' presence. A total of 543 people participated in the study; 299 women (55%), and 244 men (45%). Seven States (Chin; Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon and Rakhine and Shan) and four Regions (Ayeyarwady; Sagaing; Tanintharyi and Yangon) were included, covering seven wards and 19 villages in 18 village tracts, in 16 townships. Data was collected from

November 2013 - January 2014. The ethical conduct in all aspects of this research study was given utmost importance including ethical clearance, individual consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and safety of participants. For more information on each of these issues, see Annex 1 - Methodology.

In-depth information was sought using qualitative research tools, chiefly two sets of Focus Group Discussion Guides, designed to capture gender relations and social norms at a snapshot in time. Topics covered included family relations; household division of labour; marriage; social and cultural expression; dress codes; media representation; and gender norms in relation to livelihoods; education and health. Community questionnaires were also used to generate basic facts and contextual information. The study tools were developed in English; translated to Myanmar language; and re-translated to English. In cases where ethnic minority languages were used during data collection, oral translation was done by the facilitator. Focus Group Guides were piloted twice prior to the field research. All Focus Group Discussions were held separately with men and women according to age categories (18-25; 26-40; and >40), and were kept homogeneous with regards to ethnicity and religion. Random sampling was conducted at village level to recruit 4-6 participants. In total, 78 Focus Group Discussions were held with a total of 458 Focus Group Discussants; 235 (51%) women and 223 (49%) men.

Semi-structured Key Informant Interviews were conducted with informants identified as sector specialists; gender practitioners; media professionals; and authority figures who work to protect culture. Seventeen female and 9 male key informants were interviewed individually, and 27 women and 1 man were interviewed in three group interviews. Case stories were also collected from 10 women and 6 men, using semi-structured interviews. A print media analysis was carried out, based on the UNESCO Framework for Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media (UNESCO 2012).

Audio recording and verbatim transcription was used. Data was transcribed in the language used during the data collection event. Ethnic minority language transcripts were translated into Myanmar, others directly into English. The data was analysed using qualitative data coding methods, using a two layered coding framework. Transcripts were coded manually. No names were recorded in the process of obtaining consent, and safe storage practices were adhered to. This report has been produced in both English and Myanmar languages.

Study limitations included recruiting male and female field researchers fulfilling multiple criteria: experienced in gender and qualitative research and possessing particular language skills. The latter criterion at times had to take precedence. This meant the quality of data across areas was at times uneven. The security situation also impacted on the final selection of study areas, and northern Rakhine State was excluded for this reason.

### 1.3.3 Ethics and Safety Considerations

The ethical conduct in all aspects of this research study was given utmost importance. In particular, the following principles underscored the design and implementation of the study:

#### **Ethical Clearance**

The protocol for this study was submitted for ethical review and approval by the Ethical Review Committee (ERC) of the Department of Medical Research, Lower Myanmar, and modified according to the feedback given by the Committee prior to the implementation of the study.

#### **Individual Consent**

All study participants provided informed oral consent to participate in the study. Informed consent was given following comprehensive information by the field researchers about the purpose and method of the study and the requests of participants. For this purpose detailed written introduction sections providing the necessary information, as well as instructions for the field researcher how to handle the issue of obtaining informed consent were included in the field research tools. Oral rather than written consent was sought in order for participants to feel at ease and to encourage openness during the data collection event.

#### **Photo Consent**

Photos were not taken during or in connection with the data collection events, in order to ensure participants felt at ease to discuss all topics. Some photos of the general surroundings of the study areas were taken. If photos of community members were intended, informed consent was sought and the community members in question were asked to sign photo consent forms.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. All participants were free to choose whether or not to participate, without inducement. Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences.

#### **Confidentiality**

The strictest principles of confidentiality were upheld throughout the implementation and dissemination of this study. This was made clear to all the individuals and groups that the field research teams met with, at every separate occasion. No identifying details were recorded by the field research teams. A message about confidentiality was included in the introduction note in the FGD facilitation guide to remind facilitators to address this issue every time.

#### **Safety**

The safety of the participants was deemed to be of paramount importance to the quality and standards of this study. Mechanisms and measures were put in place to ensure that the safety of the participants was guaranteed to the greatest extent possible. No security incidents were reported as part of this study.

#### **Do No Harm**

The interviews included questions around issues that could be considered sensitive by the participants. Therefore the research teams stressed the need to conduct the study without judgment and with respect for all participants and interviewers. Every effort was made to phrase questions for interviews and focus group discussions in respectful and culturally-appropriate language.

#### **Permissions and Introductions**

At field level, the facilitating organizations were tasked with ensuring that all necessary permissions and authorizations needed to conduct the data collection had been secured prior to the roll-out of the study. Team leaders were responsible to liaise with the facilitating organizations to make sure necessary permissions were obtained prior to data collection.

For more detailed information about the methodology used for this study please refer to Annex 1.

## 2 Setting the Scene







If you have no job, you bathe your cat.  
Some people say we are working on gender,  
as we don't have other work to do.

Before we can begin the discussion of cultural norms and gender equality, it is necessary to examine how this issue has historically been framed from different positions within Myanmar society. Drawing on thoughts from this study's participants, in addition to relevant literature, this chapter explores some of the reasons as to why gender inequality has largely been seen as a 'non-issue' in Myanmar, and tries to briefly trace the historical roots for this position. This chapter also discusses some of the conceptual confusion that arises when discussing gender inequality and gender discrimination.

Viewing culture as closely linked to, or deriving from, religion, as the overarching moral framework for human conduct and interactions, means emphasizing historical tradition and continuity. In this view, the fact that something has been a certain way for a long time can be seen to give this something (beliefs, practices, etc.) legitimacy. This view of culture and cultural practices has been and continues to be influential in terms of how the 'rightful' place and conduct of men and women in Myanmar is understood.

A different picture emerges if we examine this cultural fabric through a gendered lens. This is what a growing number of women's rights and democratization activists are beginning to do and this is also the point of departure for this study. The use of a gender lens allows us to critically examine power dynamics within commonly held cultural values and beliefs. Such power dynamics involve not only gender, but also sexuality, class, geographic location, functionality, ethnicity, and religion, among other attributes. This perspective does not reject the potential for shared cultural values to function positively and cohesively among communities. However, it allows for reflection on how cultural values have been and are interpreted, by whom, and the effect that a certain interpretation has on different segments of society.

## 2.1 The Problem is that the Problem is not Seen as a Problem

The quote below summarizes a complex set of factors, which will be touched upon in this chapter. These factors have

had the combined effect of silencing a discussion of gender inequality in Myanmar.

Whenever we talk about gender inequality, people say that we have no problem with gender issues. In my opinion, the problem is there because people are not seeing the problem as a problem. This is the most difficult problem, because they are not seeing issues or problems as a problem. So how can we solve this problem? This is of most concern for me. And another thing is even if people are seeing inequality between women and men within society, they usually use culture and religion as excuses, 'It is not inequality, this is about our culture. This is our religious practice or this is our social practice.'

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 1]

The problem appears to be twofold. There is, on the one hand, a failure to notice gender inequality. On the other hand, there is a tendency to justify gender-based differences with cultural and religious arguments and references. Below is a typical example of this reasoning:

There are some restrictions of religious people, because of women's attitudes that they themselves don't want to approach to holy places or persons. But there is no gender discrimination in Myanmar. Women can vote in elections, and culturally and socially there is no discrimination.

[KII with Representative of Women's Mass Organisation 1]

The strength of cultural and religious values in Myanmar, as in many other societies, can make gender inequality difficult to spot. As we have seen in the quotes above, the fact that gender relations are embedded within the culture or wear a religious 'coat' have made it difficult to put gender inequality onto the public agenda. Deeply held views passed on over generations also mean that hierarchical gender relations have become internalized among both men and women, making them not only hard to see but also very hard to question. The result, according to gender practitioners and women's rights activists interviewed, has been that gender inequality claims are often brushed aside, denied, or belittled.

It is a great social pressure that we have had. I was over thirty [when I was exposed to gender studies]. I mean, I felt all the time that the division of labour wasn't fair. But I didn't feel like this is a kind of inequality, it was not a very suitable word for using in the family. Also at that time there was no women's movement in Myanmar fighting for their rights and also pointing out, 'Here is inequality between woman and man, girl and boy'.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

## 2.2 Historical Narratives: Women's High Status and Comparisons with Other Countries

As a small, but growing, number of scholars (Andaya 2000; Ikeya 2005; Harriden 2012; Than 2014) have convincingly demonstrated the notion of the 'traditional' high status of women in Myanmar, and in Southeast Asia more broadly, has been pervasive. Historically, Burmese women's participation in the economic sphere and the absence of certain practices such as 'purdah'<sup>7</sup> or 'sati'<sup>8</sup>, which were prevalent in India - and therefore on the radar of British colonial observers - came to serve as proof of women's high status in Burma (Ikeya 2005). The notion of Burmese women's 'high status' has also proved flexible and has been used to serve a range of political interests over time. On the one hand it was used in efforts by international women's associations in the 1930's working for equality of women in British Commonwealth nations, to lobby for Burmese women's right to vote with the argument that they already had property rights. On the other hand, nationalists in India used the notion of Burmese women's high status to point out political double standards. They argued that the continuation of British colonial rule in Burma, despite women's professed high status, proved that the British refusal to grant political reform to India on the basis of its oppressive treatment of women was merely a smokescreen. The same comparison was made by Burmese nationalists arguing for the illegitimacy of colonial rule in the country (Ikeya 2005).

A little discussed aspect of the professed 'high status' of women, which was often based on observations of women's participation in the economic sphere, is that their participation in the worldly sphere of commerce was seen as spiritually polluting (Spiro 1997). The fact that this purported high status did not encompass or legitimize leadership roles for women has received little attention from colonial observers or modern scholars (Ikeya 2005). In her book *The Authority of Influence*, Harriden (2012) illustrates the contemporary challenges for women's empowerment in the shadow of this notion:

Burmese women have been told that they do not need to be empowered, that they already have the same rights as men. But they have also been socialized to accept that men are leaders and they should be followers. Women have been taught to prioritise their families and their nation over the development of their own talents and potential. They have been encouraged to accept ideas, practices and institutions that deny them the same opportunities as men to exercise power and influence in their own society.

Tharapi Than (2014), in her book *Women in Modern Burma*, has enriched the debate around how gender norms continue to be socialized in Myanmar society. She highlights the ways in which elite women until today are amongst the strongest proponents of the idea that women in Myanmar do not need to demand their rights. She also speaks of commonly used terms like 'content' and 'secure', that have traditionally been used to describe women's appreciation of their gender roles, as euphemisms, as women historically have had little space to redefine gender relations. Importantly she addresses the discussions around the historical absence of a feminist movement in Burma. This absence, Tharapi Than argues, has traditionally been explained by referring to women being 'content' and asserting that therefore no women's movement had been needed.

It is these very arguments that women's rights advocates of today are still facing as they mobilize and advocate for gender equality. A recent report on women's leadership found that the sense that gender equity is not regarded as critical for Myanmar to become a modern, developed, and democratic nation, presents a major barrier for women to take up leadership roles (Oxfam, Trocaire, CARE, ActionAid 2013).

Do you know, why we don't have any job? In our "Sakapon - ah loak mashi kyaung yay choh" စကားပုံ အလုပ်မရှိကြောင်းရေချိုး။ proverb, if you have no job, you bathe your cat. Some people say we are working on gender, as we don't have other work to do.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

There are many factors that contribute to gender issues being placed in the back seat. As one example, development reports have glossed over or fail to probe into findings that indicate gender discrimination. The following statement is such an example: 'Women participated little in decision-making about village affairs. There was, however, little complaint about this: the interests of village leaders and ordinary villagers appeared not to diverge substantially' (WB & MDR 2012).

In discussions with participants of this study, if we are to simplify the positions somewhat, there are two aspects of

7. The physical seclusion of women.

8. The expectations that a widowed woman would voluntarily follow her late husband into death by lying down on the funeral pyre.



People need to look into this issue in a much deeper way ... I think if we are going to look into gender issues, it has to be a comprehensive study or review to access it. You can't just look at legislation or stereotyping as an issue. But why it is an issue? If you look into it deeper, then you come up with all these elements which are quite complex. And to change all this needs a lot of thought. But unless you can do that, it's not going to change in this country. This is my view. It's so ingrained. ... The problem that exists is so complex that in order to change it will require a lot of effort, understanding and commitment.

Key Informant Interview with Education Specialist



the historical descriptions of gender relations that shape respondents' opinions. The first aspect has to do with the extent to which one accepts that women in Myanmar historically and until today hold a high status, particularly in comparison to other countries. The second relates to whether, and in what ways, this information holds relevance for women in contemporary Myanmar society. Examples of these different positions are shared below. In the first quote, we can see how the conditions of women in Myanmar are elevated, only by comparison to other countries:

Myanmar culture is derived from India. In Indian culture, men are superior to women. Women are very repressed by men there. In China, men are superior to women and women are more repressed than in India. Myanmar is in the middle of these two countries, but women have had it better from a historical perspective. Myanmar had queens, not like in India and China where they were queens by the king and just in charge of the future king. Our queens were strong by their own will and own right. The queens who were the wives of kings were strong too. During the Konbaung period, the queen of King Sagaing Natmadaw Mani, the chief queen, was very powerful. King Mindon's middle queen, Sin Phyu Ma Shin, was very powerful. And King Thibaw's chief queen, Supayalat, was very powerful. Women fare far better in Myanmar than in India or China, by their own right. They are not looked at as inferior in the culture. The husband is superior to the wife, but the wife does not rely on her husband. She can make business and she can control the family. There are now lady doctors, teachers and women are there in every aspect of life. In the Far East, Myanmar women are very much superior to other Asian countries.

[KII with Male Culture Official]

In the quote below, we can see how while the reference to other countries is made, the analysis does not end there, and this opens up exploration of the dimensions of inequality that are seen to exist in Myanmar:

When we talked about gender equality in our country, a lot of people will say there is equality, there is no discrimination. Perhaps compared to some of our neighbouring country in terms of legislation, there is quite high level of equality. On the other hands, although it seems to look like there is equality and non-discrimination, my view is that there is... Our country situation may not be as bad as those in some of our neighbouring countries. But because that's the case it seems like we don't really need to do much about it. That's the problem. That in itself is a problem. We are just looking at the situation from the point of view that maybe we are a lot

better off than some others. But we shouldn't be content with this. That's the way I see it ... In terms of legislation, we are better off than some of our neighbouring countries because women and men have equal rights to inheritance. We can have businesses. In some countries, a woman doesn't have the right to get inheritance even if her husband died. These are some of the things where we may be better off. But culturally if you look at the household, the men are decision-makers, but within the household, they would say the women are Home Minister. You do have the rights, also responsibility to see to that everything all the domestic aspects are run smoothly that you can make your own decision. But beyond that, it becomes another matter. That's where we don't have equal rights.

[KII with Female Education Specialist, Yangon]

### 2.2.1 Politicization of Culture and Gender Equality

While it remains disputed what the alleged 'autonomy' or 'high status' has actually implied in the everyday lives of women, it has no doubt had a profound influence on official discourse around gender relations in Myanmar. During the preceding decades of military rule, it served to ward off criticism of gender inequality from, for example, human rights treaty bodies such as the CEDAW Committee. The quote below from the Government's 1999 report to the CEDAW Committee illustrates this:

The status of Myanmar women is very unique as equality with men has been bestowed upon them as an inherent right. As historical evidence has shown, Myanmar women have enjoyed equal rights with men ever since the inception of Myanmar civilization 2,000 years ago. [GoUM 1999]

The official reliance on the argument of women's traditionally high status continues until today. Most recently it was used by H.E. U Kyaw Tin, speaking at the 57th session<sup>9</sup> of the Commission of the Status of Women, where he stated: 'In my own country, Myanmar, women enjoy equal rights with men by both tradition and by law'. Another example can be taken from a recent parliamentary session where the Union Minister at the President Office, U Soe Maung, said, 'There is no discrimination against women in Burmese society according to Burmese custom, tradition, and culture, and they have better opportunities compared to women in other Asian countries.'

From an historical point of view, the pervasiveness of the notion of women's traditionally high status, coupled with strict censorship laws, lack of nationwide sex disaggregated data (discussed below), and limitations on civil society organizing, have left little room for public discussion, mobilization and action around issues negatively impacting on women's lives.

9. 9th Regular Session of the First Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) on 24 February 2014.

### 2.2.2 The Mainstreaming of the Gender Equality Discourse

There are many avenues through which the Myanmar gender equality discourse continues to be repeated and socialized. The notion that Myanmar culture in and of itself should stand as a guarantor against gender inequality has also found its way into the present day development community, where it is used to argue that other seemingly more pressing issues should take precedence over efforts to address gender inequalities. As noted in a programmatic gender review, generalizations such as ‘Myanmar culture generally does not manifest gender discrimination ...’<sup>10</sup> are still found in public documents of development organizations. These ideas are also socialized through the higher education system. An analysis of a number of Master Theses at the Yangon Institute of Economics, dealing with different aspects of gender relations, found that these would almost unfailingly be prefaced with similar sounding statements confirming the historical roots of gender equality in the country. Oftentimes, such statements would not be referenced, suggesting that they are seen as common and undisputed knowledge. Two such examples are referenced below:

Myanmar women have always enjoyed equal status with men since time immemorial ... Myanmar has remained relatively free from the influence of Hinduism and Confucianism and this has been the main reason for women’s relative freedom. [Nu Nu Tin, 2006]

The status of women in Myanmar has therefore a favourable condition since historical times. This continues to be held to the today women in Myanmar. The distinguished queens like King Nayathihapatay’s queen consort Phwa Saw who was famous for her administrative management in Bagan dynasty and Queen Shin Saw Pu in the Mon Kingdom who ruled well leaving behind so many gracious memory have been occurred throughout Myanmar history [sic]. [Khin Soe Kyi, 2012]

The lack of data and research in the area of gender has likely contributed to the longevity and vitality of the view that culture stands as a guarantor for gender equality. Although there are an increasing number of interesting and relevant scholarly contributions available (see, for example: Harriden 2012; Ikeya 2005, 2010, 2012; Kawanami 1991, 2000, 2001; Lwyn 1994; Khaing 1984; Nwe 2003; Spiro 1977; 1993; 1997; Than 2014), overall, gender issues in Myanmar remain profoundly under-researched and relatively poorly understood. This holds particularly true for the present time and the recent social, economic and political developments (Harriden 2012).

The enduring idea that gender equality is an inherent feature of Myanmar society, coupled with scarce data and information about the realities on the ground, creates challenges for those working for evidence-informed change. Taking the example of men’s violence against women, the lack of robust data, combined with the idea that culture protects women, continues to make it difficult to convincingly demonstrate violations of women’s rights and to work towards social and institutional change. Here, another excerpt from the Government’s 1999 report to the CEDAW Committee, on domestic violence, is a case in point:

Although the findings of a study in two Townships reveal that marital violence exists, the magnitude is not very great. The Myanmar culture and religion strongly influence the mentality and behaviour of men and women alike. The teachings of Lord Buddha that crimes like rape and sexual violence are great sins serve as protection for women and children. Therefore, there are few reported cases of rape or sexual assault in Myanmar. [GoUM 1999]<sup>11</sup>

The history of the state’s appeals to Buddhist traditional values as guaranteeing ‘high status’, ‘equality’ or ‘protection’ for women, is also problematic because it adopts the majority religion and its moral teachings for political purposes. This discourse also fails to address either the situation for non-Buddhist women in the country or on what basis they would appeal for their rights. In recent official speeches, a seemingly more inclusive approach to culture/religion is taken, although the principle of viewing culture as a guarantor for women’s safety remains intact:

Myanmar’s traditional values, which abhor and prohibit sexual exploitation of women, strongly contribute to the Government’s efforts to protect women and girls from human rights abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence. [Statement by H.E U Kyaw Tin, 57th session on the Commission on the Status of Women]

## 2.3 Gender Inequality and Gender Discrimination: Where is the Problem?

A likely reason for the oftentimes polarized views about gender, inequality, and discrimination in Myanmar has to do with differences in understanding of where the problem lies.<sup>12</sup> This has consequences for how to address the issues. How broadly should issues of gender inequality and gender discrimination be understood? Should one be concerned

10. UNDP (2008) Outcome and Impact of the UNDP Human Development Initiative in Myanmar, referenced in GDI (2011).

11. This quotation also demonstrates a common misconception that if only a small number of complaints are made, only a small number of violent incidents are occurring. There are many reasons why violence may not be reported, among them the fact that it is not recognized and acknowledged by society.

12. Part of this problem may have to do with a lack of conceptual clarity. In this text, and following the definitions in the Oxford dictionary, inequality means ‘difference in size, degree, circumstances, etc.’ and discrimination means ‘the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex’.



Myanmar people have been keeping their culture influenced by Buddha's teachings and precepts. I think there is not much discrimination based on sex in Buddha's teachings and precepts when we apply it in our tradition and culture. Some Western people comment that women are getting fewer chances and opportunities than men in Myanmar. Both Japanese and Chinese criticize women's position in Myanmar. Japanese women say that women are being treated as inferiors and always losing their rights in Myanmar. They also remark that men in Myanmar always try to overwhelm and influence women by using the ideology of masculinity. They even give some examples that women are not allowed to go to some religious places in temples or pagodas, and they encourage the eradication of this kind of discrimination. Another example was one of my experiences in [an overseas university] as a visiting professor, I had used a book 'Burmese Family' written by Daw Mi Mi Khaing as one of my references for my thesis paper. In this book, the author explained that women are as equally valued as men in Myanmar. But the people from the university, including the professors, did not agree with it, because women in Myanmar are working in the kitchen.

A woman has to treat her husband as God and her son as a master throughout her life, according to one traditional proverb. Men are always trying to take control over women. They also pointed out the story of restrictions on the pagodas for women. I had to explain to them that Myanmar women have equal rights with men in our country. They built their concepts based on equality. In our country, men pay respect to women and it is one aspect of Buddhist culture. In terms of going to some religious places at the pagodas, women have been accepting it for years, because they believe that they should pray to be a man become a Buddha instead of feeling that there are restrictions imposed on them against their will. This is not a state of losing their rights.

Key Informant Interview with male Author



only with equality in a legal sense (de jure equality)? Or should the degree of implementation of various laws and policies and their practical outcomes (de facto equality or substantive equality) also be counted? It is in the latter sense that differential treatment of men and women with reference to culture comes to the fore. Here it should be noted that Myanmar is a signatory to CEDAW, which takes the rights to substantive equality as its point of departure.<sup>13</sup>

Among the participants in this study, there are those that see gender equality primarily in a legal sense and those that take the broader view of substantive equality into account. There are also different views on the extent to which legal documents, including the 2008 Constitution, meet gender equality standards.<sup>14</sup> In addition, views diverge about the extent to which laws and policies are consistent with the constitution's provisions of gender equality. The quote below highlights the complexities around assessing gender equality from a legal perspective:

I mean our problem is that it's not spelled out in legislation like that. It is more in the practices. We have the legislation, which will last for a long time. And then, we have bylaws. And then we have regulations and instructions that are based on the legislation which may sometimes contravene what is in the main legislation, like not recruiting women for certain positions. It's not stated in the Constitution... Now we are talking a lot about the Constitution. We are asking for amendment of the current constitution because there are many elements that are not democratized in principle. There is also inconsistency. If you look at it, there is not supposed to be any discrimination. But then the person who can become a president in the country, one of the requirements is that he/she needs to have military experience. In this country, there isn't any woman who has that experience. Basically they are now recruiting women for the military. Even if those are eligible, it will take long time. I am giving these examples from the point of view of legislation.

[KII with Education Specialist]

Looking at equality in terms of outcomes for men and women in everyday life, study participants gave a multitude

of examples of how cultural interpretations of equality can produce unfavourable outcomes for women:

My sister-in-law is always telling me that even though my husband is the only and youngest son in their family, they never give any favour or priority to him. [They say], 'We always treat him equally'. And I found out what they mean by 'equally'. For example, when they have cooked a whole chicken, their equality is half will be eaten by my husband, and half will be eaten by the whole family. This is their equality. Okay! Seriously, they see this as equal! The way we see and we think 'equal' is man and woman should receive equal opportunities, equal chances and equal result, everything. But the society the way they see 'equal' is very much different based on culture and religion, based on ethnicity. That's why, for me, the problem is people's perception on equality. This isn't about - like - gender inequality issues do not exist in Myanmar, because people do not see those inequalities as inequalities.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 1]

According to gender equality promoters interviewed, structural discrimination against women is made invisible by lack of data, including sex-disaggregated data. As a result, many of the internationally used gender equality indicators remain unknown for Myanmar. This has further contributed to the sidelining of gender concerns in their view.

Whenever we talk about inequality, what I find is that almost all people think at the level of individual and family, not in terms of society or organization and state. They only think gender equality within the range of individual and family matters, not beyond of that... And we talked about inequality between woman and man in Myanmar, they said women are those who are very powerful in the family managing the family and income and everything... They never talked about international indicators like women's participation in decision-making in the politic and economic spheres like that, and they never talked about why there were no local indicators for Myanmar.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

13. Myanmar's legal framework is drawn from a mix of colonial and traditional sources. Many of its laws are not compatible with CEDAW, as they incorporate restrictive gender stereotypes and do not promote and protect women's rights to substantive equality. While the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008, guarantees women's equality, it does not satisfy CEDAW requirements to also define and prohibit direct and indirect discrimination against women. Some constitutional provisions also reinforce notions that women are incapable of doing the same work as men or are in need of protection because they are weaker than men, rather than ensuring that they have the same opportunities for choice. There are no specific definitions of gender discrimination or penalties for such acts of discrimination as violence against women. (GEN, 2013).
14. GEN members, in its December 2013 recommendations for constitutional amendments, highlighted a number of areas in need of improvement in order for the current constitution to live up to the standards of CEDAW. Recommendations include, among others, the need for taking a substantive view of equality, defining and explicitly prohibiting gender discrimination, removal of discriminatory clauses related to work and a call for the adoption of temporary special measures in order to increase women's participation in decision-making.



## 2.4 Gender Equality as a ‘Western’ Concept

While there remain a host of other factors that have hindered an informed public discussion about gender and gender inequality in Myanmar, one other central feature warrants attention here. This concerns the claim that gender equality is a Western concept and that, as such, it holds little or no relevance to the Myanmar context. This claim ties in with the discussion of women’s traditional high status, but links to a more long standing debate about Asian values versus Western values originating in the 1990’s. This debated has focused particularly on the Asian emphasis on collective welfare and socio economic wellbeing as opposed to the Western emphasis on individual liberties and rights.

Writer and translator Ma Thanegi has written herself into this tradition. In her article, ‘Our brand of feminism’ (Ma Thanegi 2013), she paints a picture of a multilayered Asian culture, obscure to outside - particularly Western - observers, containing the face-saving wife, who happily places her husbands’ needs before her own; readily sacrifices herself for her children; and keeps her dignity at all costs. Part and parcel of this view is an emphasis on cultural critique as something that is carried out only by outsiders, who fail to understand the intricacies of the Myanmar culture.

While this last claim may well be true, it serves to undermine the emerging critique by women in Myanmar who feel that cultural norms and social practices are narrowing their room to manoeuvre in society. Moreover, among the many gender equality practitioners who participated in this study, there was a distinct sense that ideas of categorizing values as distinctly Eastern or Western were losing ground in a globalizing world. They also pointed out that the selective critique against certain principles such as gender equality - by labelling it a Western construct - undermined the myriad of women’s rights movements globally. Moreover there was a perception of double standards, as other principles such as democracy were not typically dismissed as ‘Western’ constructs:

If we emphasis the nation, we accept democracy. Democracy is about equality, too. Democracy is not coming from Myanmar culture. We can say this, but we all want democracy. And it is coming from other countries. It is coming from the West, too. So, there are many things that come from the West. And we are searching [for] it. Because it is not about the West. When it comes to gender equality, we are talking about man and woman, and this is very much a concern [but] we don’t want to accept gender equality. Actually, gender equality is not coming from the west, not only from the West.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]



### 3 Cultural, Religious Norms and Practices





‘Culture’ is defined as ‘yin kyae hmu’ meaning ‘politeness or gentleness’.

### 3.1 Culture in Myanmar, and Myanmar Culture

When discussing culture and cultural norms and values for women and men, boys and girls, with study participants in communities across the country, there appeared to be well defined sets of rules for conduct and behaviour, often derived from religious sources. Common terms used in descriptions of the varied cultural traditions included in the study were those indicating politeness and respect.

We have terms like ‘rude’ and ‘polite’. Culture should be based upon the term ‘polite’. But this politeness will vary according to the country and people. Our politeness is copied from the ‘five precepts by Buddha’ as we are Buddhists. But it can be different for the monks. And we also have many ethical codes for teachers, for pupils, and for parents. Based on these factors, society as a whole including dress code, behavior, speech, art pieces, and technology is regarded as a culture.

[KII with Magazine Editor]

In Myanmar, this view of culture may be due to the construction of the term ‘culture’ based on the notion of politeness. Speaking with people who work in the arts and cultural sectors, a broader and more fluid understanding of culture was evident:

I think defining the term ‘culture’ is a bit difficult and complicated. Since ‘culture’ is defined as ‘yin kyae hmu’ meaning ‘politeness or gentleness’, it is rather inconvenient. The result is people don’t get the real concept of culture. Instead, they think of culture as politeness and being respectful. I can’t accept this concept... I like the culture of self-discipline, but I despise the culture of forcing people to be respectful. This is the kind of culture which will make people lose their self-confidence ... people should be encouraged to preserve culture but should not be oppressed.

[KII with Female Author]

When Myanmar culture is discussed, every activity from birth to death, from womb to tomb is closely associated with

culture. For a new born baby, there is the hair washing ceremony. Some shave their baby’s hair within a week of the baby’s birth. Later parents shave the baby’s hair, keeping the baby’s forelock. These are the rituals from womb to tomb. When a person dies, what should we do to the body? How to tie the toes of a dead body is also concerned with culture. Eating meals with five fingers is also culture. All these day-to-day activities reveal our culture.

[KII with Education Official]

Myanmar is a multicultural society with extensive cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. While population figures are subject to dispute, some two thirds of the population are assumed to be Bamar Buddhists (Steinberg 2014). Estimations of religious affiliation have found approximately 89% of the population to be Theravada Buddhist (Steinberg 2010), 4% practicing Christianity (mainly Roman Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans, and several Protestant denominations), 4% following Islam (mostly Sunni), 1% belonging to traditional animistic beliefs, and 2% other religions such as Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, East Asian religions and the Baha’i Faith. Official statistics, however, are assumed to underestimate the non-Buddhist population (Wikipedia 2011; U.S. State Department 2010).

Study participants consider religion to yield strong influence over beliefs and practices related to human conduct, including gender relations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the influence of Buddhism on culture is often described by Buddhists as a protective force. Representing stability, Buddhism is seen to counter the perceived negative influences of globalization:

I feel that, especially in Myanmar, there is a great influence of Buddhism. Even globalization does not have much effect on our country. It’s because we have many ‘yin kyae lein mar’ classes (classes on Buddhist culture) conducted by Sayadaws (chief monks). If we can keep opening up these classes, it will be good. There may be some effects of globalization, but compared with other countries, there may be fewer negative effects.

[KII with Education Official]

In official texts, the need for preserving culture and traditions is often highlighted. An example can be found in the Ministry of Culture's policy declaration that reads: 'to love and cherish the country and the people by taking pride on own good traditions as well as by preserving, exposing and propagating Myanmar Cultural Heritage'.<sup>15</sup> Such statements need to be seen in an historical and pro-nationalist light. The roots of constructing a Bamar Buddhist national culture run deep and are found for example in the media's post-independence campaigns to 'resurrect' the country's 'lost' culture. These campaigns argued that the construction of a new nation must be based upon indigenous customs, religion, and traditions, while discarding cultures seen as foreign to the country (Than 2012).

The term 'Myanmar culture' widely used today has had a chequered history and was highly politicized during the times that censorship was still in effect. The practice of referencing 'Myanmar culture' as a whole, some claim, had also contributed to the rather static perception of culture they see as widely held in the country today.

The word 'culture' was the most popular word for the generals when they ruled our country. They used it as an electoral word. Actually, they never understood the meaning of culture throughout their lives. Culture is always changing, not static. It is also communicating between countries, groups, and people. And it is evolving. Dress codes have changed. Art pieces and styles have changed. The terms used and the behaviour of the people have changed. All these changes are cultural change. We used to refer to 'Bagan culture' when we experienced these things related to Bagan. It is the same for the current age. They used the word 'Myanmar culture' to cover and restrict our rights. In addition, our people also accepted the old traditions and cultures which finally made the people themselves confused about the meaning of culture. ... It is also very obvious in the community of artists. Restrictions due to 'inappropriateness with Myanmar culture' are very common in the censor's office when they checked movies and books, but they do not have a clear definition of culture.

[KII with Magazine Editor]

In this study when most respondents talk about 'Myanmar culture' it is often the Bamar, Buddhist cultural influences that are referred to, unless a specific ethnic group or religion is mentioned. Similarly, in discussions with Government Officials, preservation of culture was often talked about as synonymous to Buddhist Bamar culture. There was little discussion from official perspectives of the need for the Central Government to preserve traditions from non-Bamar/Buddhist origins, or to adopt diversity policies with regards to dissemination of information related to valuing culture.

Examples of equating 'Myanmar culture' with a Buddhist school of thought can be seen in distribution of documents such as the booklet 'Myanmar Culture and Traditions' published by the Ministry of Education, which promotes a set of values and practices including gender norms<sup>16</sup> that are strongly linked to a Buddhist tradition (MoE 2004). In a similar vein, the recent civic education booklet, drafted in response to the perceived depletion of cultural values (Thitsar 2013), commissioned by the Ministry of Culture for dissemination among school children across the country, is based on a Buddhist value foundation (MoC 2013).

The role and dominance of Buddhist Bamar culture is a politically sensitive issue for a number of reasons. As Steinberg notes, there is a growing sense that Myanmar culture is under threat from both internal and external forces - cultural, economic, political as well as generational. Such fear, Steinberg argues, can be understood in light of the country's colonial history and experiences. The perceived vulnerability of the culture stresses traditional Bamar values and customs and carries a strong element of anti-foreign sentiments, amid fears of the destruction of traditional (Burman) values (Steinberg 2014). The words of a former government official interviewed illustrate such sentiments:

The best defence is pre-emptive strike. It is the philosophy of Israel. If you don't want your culture influenced by foreign cultures, you have to try to make your culture influence others, make your customs and dress acceptable to foreigners. Yelling against foreign culture alone will not do. Take a look at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi going abroad wearing Myanmar dress. How nice and graceful she is! It is a cultural offensive on foreigners.

[KII with former Health Official]

Moreover, because of the association of gender equality with a Bamar Buddhist historical narrative, there appeared to be a tendency among the participants in this study to locate practices of gender inequality among minority ethnic groups. This report argues, particularly in sections 3.2 and 3.3 below, that gender discriminatory practices exist in every ethnic and religious group. It also argues that the expectations placed on women to uphold cultural values put women who see the need for cultural change in order to achieve gender equality in a compromised position.

### 3.2 The Inseparability of Culture and Religion

There is widespread belief across the country and among different religious and ethnic groups that differential treatment

15. <http://www.modins.net/myanmarinfo/ministry/culture.htm>.

16. For example, 'A polite and gentle man acts and walks in a masculine and energetic manner as polite women behave with modesty and shyness'.

of men and women originates in religious texts and is therefore justified. The quote below is an example of such a view:

Men ruled the world while women played assistant roles. There are only a few percent women in politics and administrative roles. Do you know why women are treated as inferior? Because women were made by the ribs of Adam, who was the first administrator in the world. It was also described in the Bible that women had to be dependent upon men.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

During discussions about the connections between culture, religion and gender equality, a common perception, particularly among those working for gender equality, was the way in which religion would sometimes be used to justify the differential treatment of men and women. This would be the case, participants argued, even though they could find little or no evidence in religious texts for such interpretations. Rather, a patriarchal culture, where men hold official positions of decision-making, was seen to contribute to what would often be termed 'religious restrictions' for women.<sup>17</sup>

Seven years ago, there was a village near Pyin Ma Nar. In that place, there was a Buddha statue. In the past both men and woman could enter and come close to the Buddha statue without any problem. Then at one point, lightning struck near the Buddha statue. The pagoda management committee members, who were all men, made up rules that women should not enter and get near the Buddha statue. This is recent practice... Since men's space is outside the house, they have more access and opportunity to form groups and make up rules and practices. Generation after generation we can see how men made the rules.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 3]

According to any religion there are no restrictions for a man. He is originally noble, tough and strong. It's proper for him to go anywhere or enter any place. It's not proper for women. However, I think these rules are set by humans, because I have studied the books and I didn't find any written restrictions for women. We were just drawn in by them.

[FGD with Muslim women, 40 years and above Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Once a practice is seen as derived from religion it becomes more difficult to challenge. Claiming that a practice is derived from religion can be seen to 'wash' the practice of its worldly origins in, for example, patriarchy, and give it legitimacy. In this way, even though the practical circumstances that may have given rise to the idea of inequality have changed, the stigma can live on and take new forms:<sup>18</sup>

Just think of it. We dare not hang our longyis to dry in places where they can be seen. According to cultures in Myanmar, women are regarded as very low and our undergarments are things not fit to be seen in front of the house like other clothes. We can't mix our underwear, especially panties, with our father's clothes. Actually, we know whether our panties are clean or not. As far as I'm concerned, I use adhesive pads and when I peel them off, my panties are as clean as ever without any stain. What can happen if we wash this underwear with others? Scientifically, nothing can happen, but the norms of our culture are imbalanced, and religion was drawn in.

[FGD with Muslim women, 26-40 years old Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Those respondents who had had a chance to travel and explore different traditions and practices, especially in countries with similar religious denominations, stressed the cultural element of religious practice:

'In Buddhism, the woman can't go up to the pagoda or statue'. Actually in the Buddha's teaching, Buddha didn't teach like this. This is a practice.... Interpretation and practice, it becomes culture. The culture said: 'This is religion'. In Sri Lanka, there is the tree where Buddha became enlightened - women can go up there, it is no problem. It is where Buddha was enlightened! Here? Buddha didn't even visit here!

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

Conversely the study found that religious leaders may prefer to highlight 'culture' rather than religion when there is talk of gender inequality. In this way, religion is distanced from practices that appear to be inconsistent with moral teachings. This applies both to holy books and practices among the followers of a religion. The example below refers to Christianity, but similar examples were found among the participants from the four religions included in the study (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity):

We, Christians, accept that there is no discrimination between men and women according to the Bible's teaching. However, Israel and the Hebrew culture mostly influenced the Christian Bible as it was brought from them. Women were not taken into account throughout the whole history of Israel.... 600,000 men were recorded in the Bible, but no women and children names' were in the lists when Moses, the leader of Israel, took them out from Egypt. From this point, we believe that men were given priority rather than women and children. Although one or two sharp women were documented in the Bible, their role and history were dimmed.

[KII with Christian Religious Leader]

17. This line of thought can also be found in Belak (2002).

18. This problem is discussed in WB (2013).

### 3.3 Women as Bearers of Culture

Women should be religious and should be the ones who maintain their ancestral and national pride.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

In Myanmar as in many other countries, women are widely considered to be ‘bearers’ or ‘protectors’ of culture (see, for example, Belak 2002; Thin 2006). Going back to the literal interpretation of the term ‘culture’, discussed in section 3.1, centring on politeness and respect, we can see a strong correlation between the definition of culture and the norms that describe desirable behaviour for women. This makes it seem that women have a particular responsibility in upholding cultural values. Cultural norms for women are centred on politeness, tenderness and modesty. When discussing gendered cultural norms with community members, the lists of cultural norms and codes for behaviour related to women are significantly longer and more frequently discussed compared to those for men.

The rhetoric around the disappearance and protection of cultural values has historically held women to a higher standard. Women are often found to be targets of criticism for behaviour that is regarded as unpatriotic, such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s marriage to a foreigner (Steinberg 2014). The Myanmar National Committee for Women’s Affairs (MNCWA) wrote in 2001:

As Myanmar opens its doors to the world, foreign influences have entered, and to a certain extent, Myanmar cultural norms have come under pressure, and this is now a concern to society. Therefore the cultural sub-committee, through video and radio plays, has made concerted efforts to preserve and safeguard the cultural heritage and national characters of Myanmar society. The sub-committee encourages young Myanmar women to uphold Myanmar cultural norms, to love and respect the country and its people, to honour and value parents, teachers and elders, to cherish family and society and safeguard their honour and dignity.

Today, official ‘mass’ women’s organizations in Myanmar such as the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF) devote themselves to, among other things, promoting women’s roles in preserving culture. Among MWAF’s objectives is: ‘to instil and foster in women a greater appreciation of their cultural heritage, traditions and customs’<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) seeks to ‘assist in activities for safeguarding cultural heritage.’<sup>20</sup>

Men and women in Myanmar are taught to show respect for their culture by adhering to commonly held cultural values. Preservation of culture (usually Bamar Buddhist culture) is an identifiable project of the Government, through a number of its ministries. While all do not agree with the principles that prescribe behaviour, the importance of social acceptance and the perceived responsibility of women to uphold culture and traditions mean that individuals would sometimes conform to norms that they may not personally value.

All Myanmar people have a duty to admire Myanmar culture and traditions. There are some characteristics of Myanmar culture from a religious aspect and also Myanmar traditions.

[KII with Information Official]

The manifestations and impacts on men’s and women’s lives, stemming from the notion of women as bearers of culture and religion are discussed in the following section. In the quote below we see how women’s responsibility to uphold culture/ religion leads to restrictions in terms of mobility, marriage and divorce:

A woman is not just a single woman. She is the mother. She is the sister and she is the future of the family. Parents take care that a girl does not get married to someone from another religion – that she does not become thwe hnaw!<sup>21</sup> If a Hindu woman gets married, the husband is the caretaker. She is not free. Wherever she goes, her husband has to accompany her. When she is getting old, her children will accompany her. Women are given the chance to move around with someone’s protection because we are worried. A lot of Hindus converted to Christianity or Islam these days if I have to comment from the religious point of view.... We don’t let anybody touch our purity of blood. Also it is a tradition that women are seen as the weaker sex. We cannot be free from this traditional ideology. In Western countries, they are free, they marry and after two or three years they can divorce, but not in Hinduism. Once a woman is married it must be for life. Whether a husband is alcoholic or poor or whatever, she has to stay with him forever. In this way, we are careful about our purity of Hindu people. Living together [without marrying] is not seen among Hindu women. Only after the marriage, they can be intimate. In Western countries, people will have one or two kids before they get married but we don’t have that culture in Hinduism. I dare to say that I accepted 969<sup>22</sup> for keeping the generation and religion. For security’s sake we must keep it. Everyone has a right to look after the country. Women should keep the lineage ... You must keep your tradition and culture otherwise the whole nation will be destroyed.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

19. <http://www.humantrafficking.org/organizations/29>

20. <http://www.mmcwa.org.mm/index.php/working-committees/9-social-activities>.

21. Literally ‘not to be of mixed blood.’

22. The 969 Movement is a nationalist movement boycotting Muslim businesses and refusing service to Muslim customers in Buddhist businesses.

The Movement is opposed to what they view as Islam’s expansion in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar.



Among Chin participants, there were many examples of the ways that women are expected to behave in order to conform to religious norms, mostly centring on the need for women to respect men as their God-given superior; not to sit at higher places when praying; to be quiet in the church; and to convert to the man's religion when marrying. While men reported no negative impacts in their lives due to the religious principles, women reported feeling angry at men for not listening to them and feeling heavy and sad under the burden of their imposed silence and inferior place accorded by religion. Some also reported that they felt 'taken advantage of' in the current socio-religious arrangements.



The perceived need to preserve race, ethnicity, religion and culture was strongly expressed among study communities. Interfaith or interethnic marriages were generally frowned upon. Women's choices of marriage partners were the focus in such discussions. Women marrying 'outside' their own ethnic group and particularly across religious groups drew the strongest criticism. The reason given for the focus on women was the expectation that the woman would convert to her husband's religion. As maintaining and spreading one's own religion was understood as an important duty, women marrying outside the group were seen as 'lost' members of the religious community. During the past year the issue of interfaith marriages - through the proposed legislation to ban interfaith marriages for Buddhist women unless the husband to be converts to Buddhism - has become an explosive issue. The bill and the debate surrounding it illustrates a politicization of religion where appeals to the protection of women are publicly made, yet responsibility for upholding culture is placed on women, thereby limiting their life choices.<sup>23</sup>

The notion that women are the bearers of culture is strongly linked to the gendered norms that cast women foremost as reproductive beings. It is a foundational principle in understanding the mechanisms that subordinate women. The alleged responsibility for women to uphold the culture is used to: justify men's influence over women; restrict women's mobility and thereby their social, cultural, religious, educational and occupational opportunities; control women's sexuality and marriage choices by discouraging interethnic or interfaith marriages; and warrant the need for 'protection' from men. The threat of possible violence, particularly sexualized violence and rape, underpins the conformity to these norms of behaviour. Women who do not conform to normative dress and behaviour patterns may be blamed for not paying sufficient attention to these threats if they encounter abuse, therefore reinforcing a culture of victim-blaming.

### 3.4 The Role of Nuns in Buddhism

Hiroko Kawanami (Kawanami 2001) has written about the role and status of Buddhist nuns, thilashin, who occupy an ambiguous position in Myanmar society, poised between the worldly and the other worldly realms. There are few opportunities for thilashin to pursue advanced scriptural education. Since the 13th century thilashin have remained outside the Sangha, which endows monks with institutional authority. Instead thilashin must rely on their individual

spiritual achievement and the reputation of their nunneries in order to secure enough donations for their daily needs. Because they do not conform to the feminine ideals centring on women's domestic roles of wives and mothers, thilashin are looked down upon and pitied, while monk's celibacy is seen as a sign of spiritual superiority.

Discussing the status of nuns with study participants, a picture emerged of a gendered hierarchy where nuns face many of the same restrictions that lay-women do. Even in nun-hood, thilashin cannot escape the gender norms of femininity:

According to religion, children owe more to women. No matter how much men try, they are only equal to one breast. This shows women's superiority in terms of child rearing. Now changes are happening in the world. If you ask men, they will say they accept equal rights, but they don't in their minds. They believe they are superior. Men are okay with this state of affairs, but if you ask women, they probably won't accept it. Men can enter monkhood. Women [at that time] demanded monkhood from Buddha and he accepted. Monks have many regulations, but nuns have only eight precepts. Even though the Buddha accepted nuns, he didn't give them equal rights. He only accepted women to become nuns as it was demanded by his stepmother who fed him. Otherwise he wouldn't have accepted.

[KII with Culture Official]

At the nunnery school, in the past, they didn't allow young nuns outside. They were afraid that something bad would happen to the nuns. Last Thadingyut<sup>24</sup> young nuns were allowed to go outside, and they came back to the school very late. They went outside without any guardian. The headmaster scolded them for being late and warned that they would get pregnant. It is our culture that we are very much worried that something bad can happen to girls if they go out at night. The young nuns said that they did nothing bad, and it was not possible that they could have become pregnant. They had gone to pray. In our culture, there are many restrictions that restrict women, so they don't dare to try new things. These norms are meant for girls. If you come back home late, somebody can make you pregnant while you are outside. So they see a nun as a girl as well.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

While some find justification for the unequal status of thilashin compared to monks in interpretations of religious texts, others tend to emphasize the role of society in which religions are embedded:

23. Case Story 1 in Annex 2 discusses this case from a gender perspective.

24. The annual Buddhist Light Festival marking the end of the Buddhist lent.



Men have the right to be monks and can serve by doing religious work. Men who can serve religious works and women who cannot are not at the same level. Men are noble as they have such chances. It is not taught in religion. It comes automatically in society. Humans accept and practice it depending on religion.

[KII with Buddhist Monk]

Lack of encouragement and respect from monks and strict gender hierarchies between monks and nuns were described among study participants. In addition, harassment and abuse, especially of younger nuns by lay men, were reported. A picture was painted in which nuns themselves have internalized a subordinate status both within and outside the religious realm.

It's not equal. There are different practices for men and women. It is obvious for example in our state. Mon nuns are not allowed to enter the sacred building in the monastery (their). This restriction is from the culture not the Buddha's teachings. There was no evidence of written restriction for women entering the Thein. [There is] no precise information and explanation regarding men or women, or anything suggesting that women are not clean (due to menstruation). Another fact is that most of the pagodas have restriction for females. In Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, both sexes have access, there are no restrictions. But, exceptionally, in Myanmar it doesn't apply. It is quite obvious that the restriction is not by the Buddha but by culture. From the traditional point of view it is the demarcation between men and women which is quite clear. In Myanmar the statement of equal status between men and women is hard to point out. It means that in Buddha's era men could enter monk hood as well women could become Bhikkhu.<sup>25</sup> At the station where Buddha resided, women could be seated at the same level, meaning that in that era there was equal opportunity. In the religious literature, the monks sat on the right side of Buddha and nuns on the left, meaning they were accessing equal rights at that time. As written in the scripts it is clear that the Buddha dealt equally with men and women.

[KII with Buddhist Nun]

Myanmar Buddhist women, who aspire to be very pious, were described as favouring monks rather than nuns in terms of donations, including study grants. Difficulties for nuns to pursue higher scriptural studies were mentioned as contributing to the lesser value placed on them compared to monks. However, when a monk was interviewed about

unequal opportunities for advanced scriptural studies, he dismissed these concerns as procedural and of little consequence, not to be understood as discrimination. This belittling of women's claims of discrimination mirror those that take place among lay men and women:

Before there were no nuns and nuns were not in front lines, they were ordained as nuns and lived in public rest house peacefully, without knowing how to do pariyatti.<sup>26</sup> They were doing the chores of monks. It was the beginning. So, as the monks were the main leaders, with the appearances of exams, these exams were intended for monks. The rules for the exams were also for monks. Later, these nuns did not do the chores of monks anymore and started living according to the doctrine. When they came to study pariyatti literatures themselves, learnt it and came to teach it, they came to consider about these exams. By the time they wanted to participate in the exams, the rules and regulations surrounding the exams had already been set. As both men and women can practice to get path-consciousness and also practice it, then why not be able to sit these exams. Are these exams nobler than the path-consciousness? Why don't they have the right to take the exams, as they can practice to get path-consciousness? Nuns cannot sit in these exams because of the rules set by the examination department. If nuns want to sit such kinds of exams, can't they hold the exam with their own group by forming a committee? Do they think it is better only if monks can sit for these exams?

[KII with Buddhist Monk]

As is often the case, norms become visible when one steps outside them. This was experienced by a group of lay people trying to move beyond the gender norms of religious tributes and pay greater respect to nuns. The resistance they encountered from the surrounding society shows the strength with which the boundaries between men and women are upheld, also in the religious realm:

In the last three months, which is the period for Myanmar people to donate robes to the monks, I had a team of rickshaw drivers near my house ask for donations. One of my ideas was to donate to the nuns at the same time, robes - the nuns' clothes. People were very willing to donate, and we collected more than one hundred and twenty four pieces for nuns at Mye Ni Gone. On the donation day, we had music and good decorations and things like that. But, we were told by the head monk in the compound of that ward not to make that kind

25. Ordained monks.

26. In Theravada Buddhism pariyatti is the learning of the theory of buddhadharma contained within the suttas of the standard collection of scriptures, the Pali Canon.

of parade in the street with the nuns' robes. So we had three monks' robes there, and two kinds of nun's dresses. But then, we faced strong objections by the monks, you know, not to display these at all and not to go around in the surroundings. So we left the nuns' things at home and sent the other items to the monastery. At that time, the monk got angry, 'Why you are doing this?' And then he blamed us using very strong words in front of all the other people. Later I contacted the sasana university.<sup>27</sup> I had the number of one of the lecturers, so I contacted that lecturer and I asked, you know, 'Now we would like to donate to the monks and the nuns, at the same time, we would like to decorate like this and like that, and what is the real Buddha teaching on that?' We were told by the head lecturer: 'Yes, yes, you can donate to whomever you want. And you can decorate with whatever you like and it depends on your desire'. So this is some kind of discrimination and they misinterpret the Buddha's teachings.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

### 3.5 Hpon, Respect and Male Superiority

Fundamental to the idea of male superiority is the concept of hpon. Hpon is assumed to be a natural and abstract quality that gives higher authority and status to men. In Theravada Buddhist societies like Myanmar's, this determines that women are inferior to men in religious status. This is then reinforced and reflected in society and cultural practices (Than Than Nwe 2003).

'Only men can become a Buddha; not women'. Women cannot become a Buddha directly and it implies that women are the secondary sex in religious point of view and also from a social perspective. These are the traditional principles and sayings that have existed since a long time ago.

[KII with Kayin Woman Leader]

I think when men are ordained to monkhood, wearing their robes, they have become sons of Buddha. Then I think whatever they do will become appropriate.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

Linked to the concept of hpon are long-standing cultural and religious assumptions, particularly about men's innate leadership and decision-making authority, which prevent women from holding positions of authority in religious, social and political institutions (Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE 2011). Proverbs such as 'A cat must be killed when we have a new wife' are referred to when discussing the need for men to show their authority and power early on in a marriage. Many other sayings, beliefs and social practices deal with the need to uphold men's hpon in both religious and worldly realms.

If you go to Shwedagon Pagoda and climb up, women are not allowed onto the platform as they are inferior to men. At Ye Lay Pagoda men can go straight to the temple but women cannot, same at Kyaik Htee Yoe Pagoda. This is the religious aspect. This thinking goes way back. There was a saying that men wear a longyi which is 3.5 yards and women's longyis are only 2 yards. This shows inferiority. There is another saying that a woman should sleep on the left side of her husband. Men should never let women sleep on their arms. As men are strong their glory [hpoun] will be lower if women sleep on their arms. Only men can become God. Women – never! Men can become celestial kings, while women can become nats<sup>28</sup> but not gods.

[KII with Culture Official]

At the root of the perception of men's and women's differential status is the belief that women are unable to gain merit the way men can, by becoming monks, which can eventually lead to spiritual enlightenment. For a woman, the first step on the path to enlightenment is to be reborn as a man in her next life.

There was a big debate in the historical literature between one very popular monk, Ban Maw Sayadaw and a nun, May Git. They were debating, and then, finally, the monk won the debate with only one sentence. What he said was: 'If you would like to compete, have my penis replace your vagina! Try to have a penis first!' This has become a very popular saying in Myanmar, you know, which people refer to a lot.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

As Belak (2002) has shown, the notion of hpon has become a mainstreamed part of culture in Myanmar. Beliefs associated with hpon require that 'parts of the body of socially inferior people should never be above the correlative parts of their superiors'. This has profound impact on the organization of everyday life as it influences how men and women walk, sleep, sit, wash and work. Belak's findings that many of the practices and rituals associated with this notion are practiced equally by non-Bamar and non-Buddhist ethnic communities was also confirmed by this study:

Women and men are different. Women are like leaves. Women are not higher than men.

[FGD with Kayan Takundaing women, 26-40 years old, Demoso Township]

Men's longyis can hang up high, but not women's longyis, which can be allowed only at the back of the house. It is a tradition.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

27. Sasana means religious teaching.

28. Spirit beings who are believed to have been adopted into Myanmar Buddhist tradition from previous animist traditions.

I think in our society, this culture is handed down from generation to generation. Boys, don't do this, don't do that; girls, don't do this, don't do that. There is one thing that I've been going against since my school days. It is that when boys or men touch women's longyi, this is regarded as something improper. How I wish I could tell them off that they were born from under the longyi. This might seem rude but it's the actual truth. If one thinks it is rude, to put it in a softer tone would be that Buddha also was born from the labour room. Some agree to this and some don't. Traditionally and normally in our social environment, boys come first; they are given priority. This is like a habit.

[FGD with Muslim women aged 26-40, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

For Myanmar Buddhists, key guiding principles often referred to are the 'five precepts'. These apply to men and women alike and prohibit killing, lying, stealing, drinking and committing adultery. Another common reference to moral behaviour is the 38 Buddhist beatitudes, including rules of conduct such as 'don't associate with bad people'. Religious and cultural norms are typically framed as duties and specific sets of duties are elaborated for husbands, wives, parents, pupils, children and teachers and so on.

According to Buddha's teachings, women and men are valued equally. For example, in the 'Singa-Lawkarra' discourse delivered by Lord Buddha, men and women are guided to follow the respective duties of husband and wife. A husband must pay respect to his wife and vice versa. The wife has to take care of household duties as well as to keep her family peaceful and happy. At the same time, the husband has to avoid intimidating his wife and he must give all the money he makes to his wife and follow the budget management by the wife. This teaching is adhered to by Myanmar women since their childhood. We used to refer to the women in Myanmar as 'a wife who looks like a mom' and 'a wife who looks like a sister'. This proves how we value women in Myanmar.

[KII with Male Author]

The fact that cultural duties are prescribed for both men and women is sometimes taken to imply that cultural values are not gender biased. However, if we look at where and how men and women are supposed to be and act, we see that the space accorded to women is typically narrowly defined. If we take a closer look at the quote above, we see that the reference to different types of wives originates in the Buddhist story of Sujatta where seven types of wives are described. Among these 'types', three are described as leading to unhappy lives (the thievish wife, the destructive wife and the mistress wife) and four as leading to happiness (the sisterly wife, the motherly wife, the friend wife and the slave wife!).<sup>29</sup> No corresponding classifications of husbands exist according to study participants.

Another key tenet of Buddhist Myanmar culture is the notion of respect, which is well defined with gotna-woteti, meaning honouring elders, and wara-woteti, meaning honouring reputation and property.

[KII with Male Author]

Respect for elders, particularly parents, was also referenced among other religious communities. Included in the cultural prescriptions around respect is also a duty for women to honour male family members. Sayings such as 'Treat your son as a lord and your husband as a god', commonly referred to among study participants, are indicative of how cultural norms elevate men.

Gentlemen are leaders of the family and household. The father is the leader of the family. This father may work or not. But family members give respect to their father. It's our tradition that father is the leader of family. But nowadays it's a little bit changed. In the old days, Myanmar women stayed at home and did the household work, not going outside. But nowadays, because of the economic situation, women can't stay at home; they go outside and find money for the household expenditure. But most Myanmar women give respect to their husband as the leader of the family. That is a significant tradition culture of Myanmar. Father or grandfather sits at the top of the table and we have to give the food to him first. We call this 'oo kya' in Myanmar.

[KII with Information Official]

A husband is important as he is the guardian of the family. He needs to be favoured by other family members. A man is the guardian of a household and he is the one that can be relied on. Such a person needs to be respected.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

There are also sayings that draw parallels between age and sex, where younger and female are positioned as inferior to older and male.

A son is not as smart as his father. A wife is not as smart as her husband.

[FGD with Kayan Takundaing women, aged 40 years old and above, Demoso Township]

There is a clear tension between culturally defined norms and values of how to behave, and ideas of equal rights and gender equality. While there is agreement among study participants about the existence of the cultural norms that emphasize respect for men, there are differences in terms of how far one is willing to apply the concept of equality:

29. For further descriptions see for example <http://www.dhammasara.webs.com/SujataSutta.html>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sujata\\_and\\_seven\\_types\\_of\\_wives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sujata_and_seven_types_of_wives).



As Baptist Christians ... we are offering ordination to women a lot more compared to the past. Statistically, one ordained woman out of 974 ordained ministers in Karen, zero out of 569 in Kachin, 11 out of over 300 in Chin, two out of over 100 in Po Karen, three out of 116 in Burmese, three out of 90 in Lahu, four out of 138 in Lisu, four out of 71 in northern Shan (Lashio), one out of 15 in Shweli Shan ( Muse, Nanhkan), zero in Wa, Mon, Rakhin and Naga, one in Titing Chin, four in Asho Chin are recorded. Totally, it is 41 out of 2747, a 1.5 percentage, which is quite less and weak ... According to the statistics, it is clear that we still have lot of gaps to fill, even if we are talking about equality from time to time.

Key Informant Interview with Christian Religious Leader



Culturally we respect men a lot, for example, we respect our fathers, and husbands. Men shouldn't take advantage of this cultural respect we give to them. Giving respect to them is fine but we need to have equal sharing on decision-making.

[KII with Livelihoods specialist]

In cultural and religious fields we can't use a rights based approach. Also not in the family. The mindset is to give priority to fathers, husband, and sons. This is in every family. It cannot be refused. All Myanmar women believe this. Interms of religion, in Buddhism – 80% are Buddhists - we cannot use a rights based framework. But in professional life, we can compete with men, and women in leading roles are acceptable.

[KII with Representative of Women's Mass Organisation 2]

The traditional saying 'The bun of a woman follows the top knot of a man', refers to hair styles from historical times where men's hair would commonly be collected in a knot on the top of the head while women's hair would typically be collected in a bun at the back of her head. This saying is heard among community members when discussing men's perceived natural leadership qualities, and functions to cement the differential status between men and women. Some argue that differences in men's and women's roles are simply a reflection of their different spheres of influence, but there is general agreement that men's sphere of influence is regarded as more important:

A lot of men will say, 'My wife is the home-minister, I consider her to be home-minister'. It seems on the one hand that they are giving a place for women. But I don't see it that way. It's more or less an expression from the point of view of men. He is putting a woman in her place, like her domain is only at her home, not anywhere else. As long as she is in the home, she can make whatever decision relating to domestic matters. Beyond that, it's the men's stuff. This is the way I see it. A lot of men say this. Especially when you ask them, 'Is there any discrimination?' they will say, 'No, I consider my wife as home minister'. Why can't she be prime minister? That's what I like to say. Men think that they are giving a compliment.... It is like they are giving some privileges and opportunity for decision making to their wives.

[KII with Education Specialist]

### 3.6 Purity, Female Inferiority and Exclusion

Since the time of our ancestors, as generation after generation has grown up in these preserved traditions, men from the bottom of their hearts believe that women are inferior to them.

[KII with Mon Woman Leader]

Gender discrimination comes from our culture. For example, parents and ancestors set the rules for us. Traditionally, it is a culture that women cannot enter places where only men are allowed. This is like our traditional law.

[FGD with Kayan Takundaing men, aged 26-40 years old, Demoso Township]

Women's lower status in cultural and religious areas is based in dichotomies that connect women to nature, the body, and the worldly sphere - and men to culture, the intellect and the spiritual sphere. These beliefs are common across study communities. For example, spatial restrictions prohibit women from entering the inner/upper/holiest places in various religious traditions. Women are also generally restricted from holding higher religious office. Moreover, the concept that women's menstruation is dirty, and that since women are menstruating their connection with the divine needs to be limited, was present in all religions described in this study, as they are practiced in Myanmar.

Religiously, women and men can go to the religious place. However, in the most holy place, women are not allowed to go in. The reason is women have the period and at that time she is not pure. Every woman has the same experience. We don't know who has their period and when. So, we restricted women not to go into the holy place for these reasons. Women cannot enter the holy place. This is the same as in Buddhism. Women are said to be not clean during menstruating, once a month.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

When a woman is having her periods, she has to stop praying, and after birth she has to stop praying for 40 days. During these days, she has to take great care of her health. She is regarded as physically weak. This is not taken as a misfortune.

[KII with Muslim Religious Leader]

Our religion (Takhundaing) is very conservative. In our holy place, only men are allowed to enter. Women cannot enter because they have menstrual periods. The holy place must be pure. This is our tradition.

[FGD with with Kayan Takundaing women, 26-40 years old, Demoso Township]

There is a pervasive notion that separate spheres for men and women must be maintained, and especially for women and men of holy status such as monks. While it takes both a man and a woman to conceive a baby it is typically women who have to represent 'nature', 'the physical' and 'reproduction'. The statement by the monk below sets out the reasoning for why women's bodies and their bodily functions are thought to be spiritually polluting, and how the perceived need for restricting access for women to holy sites is necessary so that they may not prevent monks from reaching nibbana:

All the Buddhist ordination halls are limited. A woman has certain duties to be kept, for her nature not to be destroyed and her dignity not to be degraded. It is natural, and everyone must keep their duties and dignity according to nature, you see. In keeping with nature, a girl grows up and has to take the duty of settling down and raising a family. To take this duty, a woman cannot live together with every man like animals. It is to live within limitation of a private home. She is only for her husband and family. If there is no such kind of limitation and control, our human society will be the same as animals. Therefore, limitation is necessary according to nature and dignity. In the same way, if the precepts for the worldly and the ones for the otherworldly are mixed due to the lack of limitation, our value cannot be seen by humans. So, how can our value be shown? We make limits so that the value of the otherworldly is not compromised. The Buddhist ordination hall is a specific area only for men who want to be ordained as monks. This area is not for everyone. So, it does not concern women at all. Women will not be affected whether they enter it or not. It is from the worldly point of view. From the otherworldly point of view, the danger for the monks is women. Women are the danger that obstructs the path-consciousness for the monks. Women can also cause the monks to lose their life. Woman is just a term, in fact it is a sense object. Because of the obstruction of the sense objects, the monks miss the path-consciousness and have to live in a cycle of rebirths. As there are such kinds of thoughts, it concerns only with doctrine and monks. So, the elderly people limit women and prohibit them from entering the ordination halls. It is not discrimination. As it does not concern women's activities, it is only for the purpose of making them respect and value the otherworldly. So what will happen if women enter? Nothing will happen. But the role of respect and value will be affected. As we do not want such a result, we limit it. Who will be valued? A woman who lives together with every man or a woman who lives together with her husband?

[KII with Buddhist Monk]

Cultural norms that prescribe decency, modesty and chastity (eindrāy) for women are amongst those that are most strongly expressed by study participants, both male and female. A woman's virtue is gauged in no small part by her ability to live up to these norms. In practice, conforming to these norms would mean practicing sexual abstinence and refraining from co-habitation with a man unless one is married. Moreover, modest behaviour is supposedly manifested through one's dress. The appearance and dress code, especially for women, is an absolutely central pre-occupation of study participants in any discussion on cultural norms and values. Typical statements from communities around the country are shared below:

Women had to wear hats when they go to the church. They also need to get dressed in a formal style. Women can arouse the men by wearing attractive dresses. Women are prohibited from doing unclean things.

[FGD with Kachin Christian men aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

A polite woman must be gentle and tender in words; she should not speak with a loud voice ... A woman is also expected to dress modestly and safely. In the villages, people think it is not acceptable and appropriate for a woman to wear pants.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

If I see women wearing the traditional dress I feel happy. It looks good because it appears that they love our country. If they wear modern dress, they destroy our country.

[FGD with Kayin Buddhist men 26-40 years old, Hpa-an Township]

There is a saying for women's politeness: 'Polite women did not look back even if they had been bitten by a dog'. It is impolite to see women wearing skirts in the public. In our grandmother's age, women even wore the longyi to cover their ankles. Women in the past were very polite. They would be beaten by their fathers if they wore a longyi which exposed their inner parts.

This is a dress code for a nice woman in our culture.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above]

The norms around women's dress are defined to a large extent in relation to how men are expected to react when they look at women. The idea of the male gaze as a judge of a woman's appearance and worth was a common theme in discussions with study participants:

It should be that women have long hair. My wife is 67-68, she has hair down to her waist. I don't accept it when my eldest daughter who is a professor wants to cut it.

[KII with Government Official]

Another consideration related to women's dress is the idea that a woman's marital status should be visible through the way she dresses. Such codes in dress and appearance signifying marital status were found among different ethnic and religious groups:

### 3.7 Modesty, Male Sexuality and the Importance of Women's Dress

- » 'A decent woman wears a single flower in her hair'
- » 'Women's propriety cannot be bought with gold'
- » 'A footstep of a woman is worth millions'
- » 'The power of women lies at their hairnet while the power of men lies at their arms'

All women and men should be modest. Modesty is shame and fear of sinning ... you should be dressed and covered modestly without revealing your body parts that should not be seen. ... Girls are lectured by their aunts and mother that girls should not stomp or shuffle while walking.

[KII with Education Official]

Some girls want to get dressed with modern clothes before they got married because they think that they should not wear modern dresses after marriage. Some think that modern dresses are for young girls and not for women, so they try to wear modern clothes as much as possible before they marry. Old women who got dressed with modern clothes are supposed to be condemned by the community.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Keep tradition and dressing properly is required for women. For men short pants is good enough but not for women. T shirt wearing by women is good for covering up, but the body curve is seen so it is not good for going to the Pagoda. Wearing a sari and long pants is good for keeping culture. 99% of women in India wear sari so they are keeping tradition. If you want to know a woman is single or married, you can know that a married woman is someone who has colored her hair red and has a red spot in the middle of forehead. Women who have foot rings are also married. So a man can know who is single and married. If the men see married women, they see them as mothers. If they see single women, they can look and imagine as women.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

As can be seen from the previous quote there is widespread acknowledgement and acceptance of the male gaze that views women as sexual objects. In this line of reasoning we also find assumptions of male sexuality as insatiable and uncontrollable. Women, it is argued, need to respond to this by regulating their dress and appearance. It is assumed that women, through wearing modest clothes, are protecting themselves from sexual harassment and abuse:

The extent of change is too wide. Young women now have got the nerve to wear sexually [attractive outfits] even in journals and magazines. And have a look at TV, some movies are really shameful even for the viewers. It's humiliating. To speak on I don't know about the city but in our village, they are criticized, so they rarely wear modern dresses. It is safe for them to wear traditional dress, so men will not have sexual desire to see them. If the girls wear very short dresses, some men can come and harass her when her family members are not around.

[FGD with Kayin Buddhist women aged 18-25, Hpa-an Township]



There is a saying for women's politeness: 'Polite women did not look back even if they had been bitten by a dog'.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above]

They must cover their body parts which could attract men. Any fashion is ok provided that they are modest. It is to protect oneself from having sinned by letting strangers (men) be attracted by looking at them. So as to keep the strangers at bay, in Islam, women must cover their heads, necks, hands and up to the feet. The face can be seen. There is no special Islamic outfit, and they can cover themselves in any traditional dress; Myanmar, Shan or anything ... For a girl to cover her face is not an Islamic rule. It is the custom. But in Myanmar, there are some who thought it is religion. Besides, wearing strong perfumes is also attracting others. Attracting others by wearing things such as anklets that make sounds is also not accepted. Wearing very tight and thin dresses are not accepted also. You might ask about women wearing black robes. No, it is not instructed. This is taken from Arab tradition.

[KII with Muslim Religious Leader]

As I love Myanmar tradition, I would like to see Myanmar women wearing our traditional dresses. Some women get dressed with modern and sexy dresses which can pose a threat to their lives. Men become aroused by seeing these women and they tend to commit the crime that we call rape. Boys will comment on the woman with traditional dress as a good woman while they are talking about the woman with modern dress saying, 'Look, this one is so sexy.'

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 26-40 years old, Bogale Township]

Women themselves are often quick to condemn the dress and behaviour of other women and girls as indecent. The emphasis on women's responsibility to dress in a way that doesn't arouse men risks placing blame on women who experience sexual violence for their failure to 'uphold their culture' or conform to gender norms.

Girls should wear traditional costumes in some occasions, especially national events, religious ceremonies and formal meetings with the elderly. Myanmar dress is very modest attire by covering fully all sexy parts of the body. Some modern dresses reveal girls' bodies. This would arouse men to commit sexual violence, especially in this hot weather. We don't want to give those men a chance.

[KII with Representative of Women's Mass Organisation 2]

In the following quote, like the one above, we see a typical statement of how women are responsible for upholding culture, with the threat of sexual violence as a sanction for not doing so. Statements like these reference culturally valued principles such as not committing 'adultery' - used broadly among respondents to cover both pre-marital as well as extramarital sexual relations - that are made the responsibility of women alone based on her dress.

There is a need to fight back against what and how girls say and wear in their daily life, for example, wearing short skirts and talking back to adults using slang instead of talking in a polite manner... [This is also] intended for girls to protect themselves from crimes which we often read in the newspapers and journals. Also, rape cases... Dressing indecently can lead to these cases. I have read a cartoon. An old man said to a young man, 'You are very lucky in this age. In our days, we had to peep. Now you can see everything for free.' Girls used to dress decently, covering up their bodies so men had to peep. ... The very indecently dressed women shown in the internet journal or car magazine made even a woman like me feel very ashamed and uncomfortable. The women were dressed so immodestly. That should be restricted. This should be censored and prohibited by the Board of Censors that used to be in place. This kind of dressing style should be controlled. Men can also get tempted by that kind of dress and the style. As a Buddhist, I find that this is committing adultery. Though unintentional on the woman's part, it may be a temptation for a man. Girls should think about whether exposing parts of their body is to show their beauty. According to me, I believe that girls should value themselves by dressing modestly, covering the body parts which should not be exposed. In our time, we didn't want to wear low-neck, sleeveless blouses. We wore longyis down to our ankles. We were ashamed to expose the ankles.

[KII with Education Official]

There is a clear conflict between norms that glorify men's sexual prowess and those that value chastity for women. Scratching the surface of chastity norms that prescribe pre-

marital abstinence and marital monogamy, it is evident that different standards apply to men and women.

They say, 'An able man deserves a thousand maids'. And they want to degrade and suppress women. They imply it doesn't matter for an able man to have many wives.

[KII with Karen Woman Leader]

This double standard regarding sexuality, coupled with norms that require women to be ignorant about sex and their bodies (discussed further in the Chapter 13 - Health), risk creating unequal opportunities for safe and consensual sexual relations, especially among youth. For men, it is common and expected, though not officially sanctioned, that they have their first sexual experience with a sex worker (Roberts 2009).

Cultural norms of what constitutes a 'good' or 'decent' woman are incredibly forceful, and they are imposed in many different ways. Examples from this study include practices such as forcing female rape survivors to marry their rapists in order to preserve their honour and dignity (Mon State), or requiring couples who have engaged in premarital sex or men who have raped women to pay compensation money to village elders (Kayah State). The practice of expelling women who got pregnant outside of marriage from the village, traditionally used in northern Shan State, was described as a vanishing practice in a recent workshop there. A woman who gets pregnant outside of marriage reportedly has to bow down to elders and ask for forgiveness for her sins. Forced marriages arranged by village elders in such cases are still reportedly practiced (CARE 2013).

Some other examples of how men's actions are seen to make women 'honourable' according to social and cultural norms follow below. It is believed that by marrying a woman who was previously a mistress or a sex worker, her honour is increased as she gains the social status of a wife:

Girl sex workers are totally not accepted. For a Muslim, if you want to help a girl who is in trouble and in need of social security, men can announce to his society and marry her. In that way Muslim men can help these kinds of girls, and one man can marry up to four, to take care of them and be responsible. It is just to help and take responsibility of such girls. At the same time, men are not to have 'mistresses' and destroying girls' lives is not allowed. If two want to be together, they must legally go into marriage and make it known to public.

[KII with Muslim Religious Leader]



The culture will change slowly, it can't move beyond old traditions. In Buddhist law, a man can marry as many women as he likes as long as he can feed them. In Muslim law the men are restricted to four wives. Society does not accept more than one wife and looks down on lesser wives. Women don't want to become a lesser wife. In Dawei culture, rich men have many wives whom he got unofficially married to before marriage and whom he had to marry by consent of the main wife. If I have lesser wives, they will accept a new one whom I get officially married to as a main or first wife, if she is a decent woman. In Myanmar culture, this is different, as lesser wives don't accept to take a step back. A friend of mine from Paletwa says that they still have many wives in Chin state. Some ethnics are still practicing [polygamy], but not Myanmar.

[KII with Culture Official]

Some girls may have very weak willpower. Men should help reform and take care of the girls. Moreover, they should also give support to the girls working at indecent places to be on the right track. Men are not to ruin the girls' lives. I think they should help correct the girls.

[KII with Education Official]

### 3.8 The Construction of Ideal Masculinity

Compared to women, there is much less concern with the cultural significance of men's dress, which is often simply described as preferably neat and tidy. While tit-pon (a collarless shirt) and longyi is preferred for formal occasions, and long hair is frowned upon, men are generally free to choose their style of dress, as most of the male outfits are seen as appropriate. Discussions of men's dress codes appear less value laden and lack the sexual and modesty references that characterize discussions of women's dress. Men's dress also generally receives less criticism even where it is seen to have changed in a more modernized direction:

There is no organization for men to preserve traditional dress. A man wearing Western styles like jeans and t-shirt is OK. There is no problem for that.

[KII with Representative of Women's mass organisation 2]

Korean movies have influenced [us], so that fewer women are now wearing longyi, especially out of country. Men have to wear European style when they are abroad; they have to go with the majority. Men don't accept that ladies' wear changes, but ladies accept that men's dressing style changes.

[KII with Culture Official]

Below is a rare quote in that it invokes a 'decency dimension' to men's clothing:

Men should avoid spreading out their garment (paso<sup>30</sup>) to wear or wrap it around their waist in front of a girl. Some men know this ethic and follow it. Some don't care. Some even put their paso between their legs while talking. It's very ugly.

[KII with Education Official]

There are a couple of exceptions to the general indifference to men's clothing. Both of these exceptions have to do with the cultural norms for men to behave in a 'masculine' manner in order to conform to the idea of a 'real man'. Men's potent sexuality, discussed earlier, is also one component of the 'ideal' man. This construction also includes the idea of someone who is muscular, strong and able to protect (his woman, the country, and so on). As discussed by Connell (1995), the 'ideal' man in a given society represents the dominant form of masculinity which exists in a hierarchy of masculinities. While masculinities need to be analysed and understood contextually, those that are regarded as feminized are typically found in the lower rungs of masculinity hierarchies. Among participants in the study, critique against men's changing sense of beauty and fashion ideals were linked to such masculinity norms and ways of construction:

[Men] try to get thinner and thinner like celebrities. Gentlemen should have a strong build, so that they can protect in case of emergency, they can protect their own country. If they are very thin, like a model, how to protect their country? We had a poem when I was in middle school. 'Strong man with brown complexion'... In this poem, a mother has only one boy child. When he grows up, he has a brown complexion, and a strong build with very big muscles. He is also brave. For that, his mother is very proud of him. Because her son has a very strong build and is very brave. So he is ready to protect his country. ... Myanmar people value that their men should have strong build and be brave, so that they can perform their duties for development of the country.

[KII with Information Official]

Men who are perceived to have a feminine appearance are criticized for failing to live up to the ideal masculine norms. For example, men wearing high fashion, jewellery, or other adornments have to face ridicule from community members.

As I am a simple lady, my impression on the boys wearing modern dress is zero. Sometimes, I cannot even differentiate those boys from girls because of their unpleasant dress code. I feel very irritated to see them.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 26-40, Kalaw Township]

30. 'Paso' is a sarong sewn as a wide tube, and in order to fasten it around the waist, the wearer holds it out taut to each side and then quickly brings the sides together and twists the cloth together to make it tight.

Nowadays, men dress so badly that they can be mistaken as a gay [man] or a girl. They use earrings and bracelets to dress themselves. A man who got dressed simply is good-looking. We want to see men dressed as men. Some men wore tight shirts and some wore tight trousers that can reveal their balls. I don't know how they feel but I feel so ashamed to see them. They can give a poor impression of our traditions and culture.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist, women over 40, Bogale Township]

Through the description of certain dress styles as feminine or 'gay,' we can see how the norm of masculinity is also strongly built on the idea of heterosexuality. This norm is further underpinned through cultural or religious references. Among Buddhist study participants, being born gay is regarded as a 'punishment' for sins committed in a previous life. These beliefs are deeply stigmatizing for people from the LGBT<sup>31</sup> community. Critiques are also directed at heterosexual men who are seen as failing to live up to the standard hetero-normative masculinity.

Gays already existed since the age of Buddha. It is not a new trend in our age. There was a story in Buddha's age that one man changed to a woman because he committed a sin on the noble monk. The existence of the gays is part of nature.

[KII with Movie Director]

I think that we are still poor in that area. Even to recognize and accept as an equal, there is always a sense of ridicule, or they say that men who are effeminate raped a woman in their previous life. ... I guess it is all about making sense of the current, you know, the previous life and the next life, making sense of why there is this difference, not being able to explain it ... creating a difference ... it is all about the image of man as being king like Anawrathar or King Ah Laung Pha Yar, powerful individuals, muscular men.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

The norm of heterosexuality was also expressed in other religious traditions with references to the 'true nature' of men and women:

In Islam, a boy is never encouraged to wear earrings or gold ornaments and be gentle like girls, and girls are to be gentle and not to be tom-boys. This is against nature. It is not good for their security as well as socially.

[KII with Muslim Religious Leader]

### 3.9 Letting the Birds Rest on the Pagoda: Controlling the Self, Enduring Hardship and Sacrificing

The institution of marriage in Myanmar is much honoured and heralded as an important and stable foundation upon which people are to organize their lives. Positive changes in life brought about by marriage that respondents reported included improved economic circumstances, mostly mentioned by women, and a feeling of a more active and dutiful life, mentioned more often by men. Having children was seen by both men and women as a positive aspect of marriage and as something that would guarantee survival in their old age. Negative changes included increased restrictions for both men and women, especially with regards to time use and mobility. Several proverbs and sayings commonly in use among study participants bear testament to the idea that marriage is for life.

- » Building a pagoda, getting married and having a tattoo are similar in that they are difficult to undo.
- » If you have the wrong style of cultivation, you will suffer for one year. If you get the wrong wife, you will suffer all your life.
- » A naughty cow can be traded, but a naughty husband will always stay.

Having agreement from the family of one's choice of spouse is generally preferred, although it is not considered a must. Men expressed a desire to choose their own partner more strongly than women, for whom family support was important, especially if the marriage did not turn out well.

One has to pretend and act positively against her own desire. No matter if you like it or not, just pretend and wear a smile in your face. That's the tradition of the village.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men 26-40 years old, Monywa Township]

Women experiencing domestic violence were frequently referred to among the study participants, although no direct questions on this topic were asked. Proverbs and sayings such as, 'A husband and wife are like tongue and teeth,' 'A cat must be killed when you have a new wife,' and 'Have no mercy on a wife and a cow; the more they are hit, the more they become fond of you', were discussed in the context of expectations, as were actual experiences of men's domination, control and violence within marriage. For women who experience domestic violence, few avenues are open if they need to escape an abusive relationship other than returning to their parents. It was seen as more likely that parents would support their daughter if the marriage had been approved of by the family.

31. LGBT - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

Most men treat women differently before and after marriage. They think that women became their property after getting married and they beat and torture the woman later. Her parents also neglect her by pointing out that the marriage was her choice. At that time, women dare not go back to the parents' home, while they had been tortured by the husband. It is like a hell for them.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above]

While cultural norms prescribe life-long marriages, there are different expectations of how men and women handle difficulties and frustrations within marriage and life in general. According to study participants, there are expectations that men will find outlets for whatever frustration they may have in daily life by turning to alcohol, engaging in extra-marital sex, or even through the use of violence. Women on the other hand are expected to silently endure hardship and to present a brave front to the outside world. This is exemplified in the saying, 'A wife can maintain control even though she gets a bad husband', which implies that women should be able to cover up for any negative actions by her husband, so that these will not be noticed by others.

They say, 'Once you have built a pagoda, let any crow or vulture rest on it'. It implies that once a woman has got married to a man, no matter how bad or good he may be, all she has to do is to endure her husband's action and behaviour.

[KII with Mon Woman Leader]

There were so many unpleasant changes after marriage. At first they were not obvious but gradually, I sometimes feel that it would better if I had not married. I think that there is no woman who declared that she was right to have married. No woman could ever say out loud or didn't have a chance or they dare not say they were wrong to have married but at least that thought was with them.

[FGD with Muslim women, 26-40 years old Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

According to the Burmese saying, 'The husband is god, the son is master', men or boys are given a lot of preference at home. Even in terms of food, when we eat, the best is always offered to the head of the household who is always a man. It is the wife who is sacrificing and she is the one who usually has less especially in low income households. I think also culturally women often have responsibility in the home to see that whatever is earned by husband she sees to it that there is enough to make ends meet. It's a woman who has to manage

the income of family, expenditure. And if there's frustration or if there're problems in the home, the woman has to bear everything and she even sometimes has to bear the responsibility. For a lot of men, if you look at low income social communities, the men will turn to drinking. The women have no outlet.

[KII with Education Specialist]

The Lokaniti or 'Guide to Life', a 14th century Burmese text that casts women as domesticated and servile, still carries significant influence among study participants. The quote below discusses favourable cultural traits for women. Here we can see how emphasis on contentedness, control and sacrifice are key elements of how to be a 'good woman', ideas that are socialized in women since a young age.

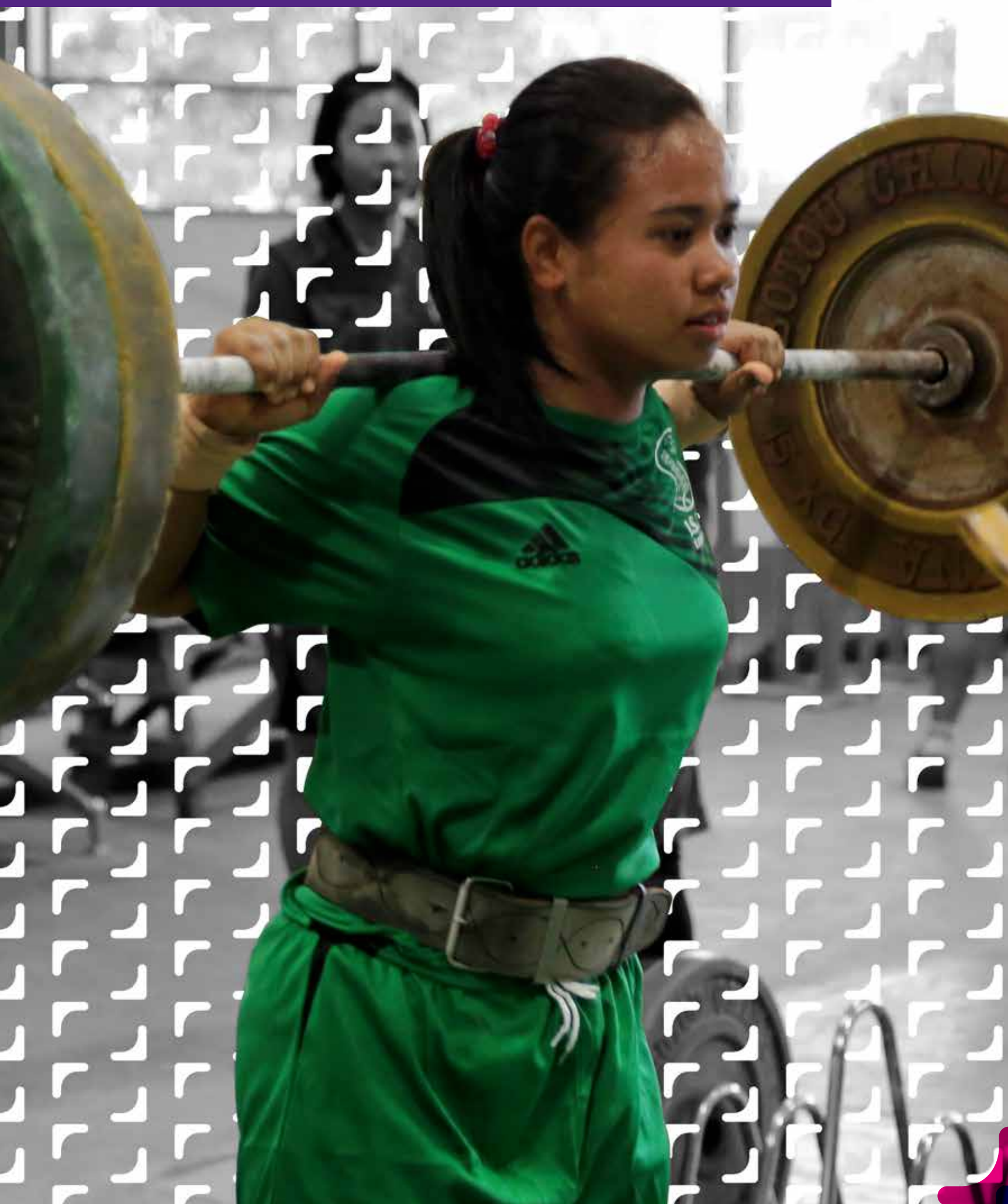
For girls, what culture we wish to preserve is since they are young, their mothers should teach and train their daughters to value themselves, to dress modestly, not revealing what should not be exposed. In addition, girls should keep learning to become valuable, for example, learning languages and other skills. That is what we want to preserve. Another thing is maternal instinct. ... Maternal instinct means sacrifice. If needed, she can even give up her own life for her children. That is a maternal instinct. ... You don't have to be a mother to have maternal instincts. For virgins, maternal instinct means great love, great compassion, generosity, sacrifice, etc. These are maternal instincts. Next one is a moral standard. Even if you cannot eat as others, you must make sure your meals are nutritious. Be contented with what you have. We must not be greedy. We must have a sense of self-control.

[KII with Education Official]

Related to the idea of self control and coupled with the high value placed on respecting others is the notion of 'arh nah dei'. Arh nah dei is manifested in things men and women do and say, or perhaps more commonly in the way that they refrain from asserting themselves, because they feel obliged to maintain the other person's dignity or 'face', or to show respect or politeness.<sup>32</sup> This notion, Roberts (2009) argues, has significant gender dimensions. She claims that while arh nah dei is a social custom, it pervades all aspects of Myanmar life. While its practice is expected of both men and women, collectively, it results in women having less power, as they are conditioned not to ask for anything for themselves and not to question those with higher status.

32. For an in-depth, if rather dated, discussion on the concept of 'arh nah dei' see Bekker (1981).

## 4 Transgression of Norms





A good lady wears only one flower.

Among those who closely observe the impact of norms, the difficulties of breaking out of harmful social patterns is becoming apparent. This shows the strong influence that traditional beliefs about gendered behaviour have on people's lives. In this chapter, we explore some of the commonly discussed instances where people break with cultural norms. A woman can break norms unintentionally, by becoming a widow, or by choosing a non-traditional occupation. In both cases there are social sanctions or punishments. Moreover sanctions for norm breaking are different for men and women.

The most commonly discussed instances of norm breaking have to do with what are seen as deviations in a woman's relationship to a man, which is supposed to be regulated through lifelong marriage. Here we can see the strength of the norms around heterosexuality and the institution of marriage. This includes the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children wed (MoE 2004).

In the previous chapter, alternative masculinities and male sexual identities were discussed in the context of men's dress codes. To be sure, these statements were unfailingly critical and disempowering. However, for women, there was no discussion of sexuality outside of the heterosexual norm. There is little or no recognition that women may wish to experience gender differently, or that some women are lesbians. Women who were seen to deviate from norms around femininity were simply said to be 'aspiring to become the better sex', i.e., to be more like men.

## 4.1 The Train Without a Flag: A Woman's Individual Worth

### 4.1.1 Virgins, Spinsters and Bachelors

Proverbs and sayings that imply that a woman without a man is somehow lacking or incomplete existed among all communities included in the study. Such sayings were typically used when describing women who had been married and who through reasons of divorce or widowhood were no longer. At times such sayings would also be used to describe 'virgins'

or spinsters (as unmarried women are usually referred to in Myanmar).

'A good lady wears only one flower' implies that a woman of good character would get wedded only once in life. Well, it's good to be as in that saying. But when a woman is destined to become a divorcee or a widow, people blame and criticize her too much. A woman's life and future is considered over once she gets married.

[KII with Bamar Woman Leader ]

There is a saying, 'As a chariot without a flag lacks its splendour, a woman without a husband does the same'. But, there is no reflective proverb for a man who doesn't have a wife. The proverbs talk only about women.

[KII with Mon/Bamar Woman Leader ]

We need reproduction and to carry our lineage forward is also one of the human duties. We have been guided by our religion too. A female cow is likely to be killed for meat when she cannot breed a baby cow. For one who is unmarried, they can be said to be selfish people.

[FGD with Kachin Christian, men aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Among women study participants, the choice not to marry had both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, the high value placed on virginity means that women who are virgins are in a spiritual sense considered 'purer' than married women. The wish for maintaining this purity was among the reasons given by women for not marrying, when asked about pros and cons of marriage:

Mostly, things aren't good anymore after getting married. A woman cannot be a virgin anymore. There are many more bad things.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 18-25, Kalaw Township]

The sayings promoting the status of a married woman were also referred to when describing the socially vulnerable position that an unmarried woman could find herself in:

Women can be paid respect only if they have a husband.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Bogale Township]



### **Gender Equality Work as Norm Transgression**

Through their work, female women's rights advocates break with many cultural norms. As a woman, the act of voicing public dissent challenges gender norms that interpret assertiveness in women as aggression, which is deemed a masculine quality. Moreover, since the dominant discourse in Myanmar holds that there is gender equality, gender equality work is frequently seen as superfluous and therefore belittled and ridiculed. Since gender equality activism and reform work by necessity engages with deeply held cultural values and beliefs, which women are supposed to protect and uphold, activists are cast as traitors to their culture by virtue of their activism, as well as the content of their advocacy, and often accused of operating under foreign influences. A clear example is found in the experience of those who have spoken out in opposition to the Buddhist Women's Marriage Special Law, a piece of legislation that seeks to regulate opportunities for Burmese Buddhist women to choose their spouse.



'A train without a flag and a woman without a husband are equally unsuitable'. As the proverb said, some men want to take advantage of women without husbands.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Other reasons mentioned by study participants for choosing a single life included: having an income of one's own and therefore not marrying for economic security; wishing to remain at home or working in order to look after one's parents; and having observed other people's violent marriages and being dissuaded from marrying for the fear of ending up in an abusive relationship.

Choosing not to marry draws societal condemnation in many instances. Unmarried women were described as fussy, angry, and mean, amongst other things. These attributes reflect the norm and social practice that men are the ones who propose to women, and that a denial from a woman is considered rude. Several women spoke of having taken pity on proposing men or being worn down by proposals of marriage before agreeing to marry.

For men, who are expected to initiate relationships as well as lead and provide for the family, living up to gendered norms was reported by some as stifling and stressful:

Unmarried men can marry if they want, while spinsters are waiting for men to propose. I know this, because I have a brother who is unmarried even though he was liked by the girls. He was reluctant to get married because he was not sure that he could be a good leader for the family. Women get married with a man to depend on him. Unmarried women are being discouraged by the community, but unmarried men are not criticized like that.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Seeking a more socially acceptable status as a nun was for some women a preferable third option to the choices of remaining single in the community or marrying.

My mom left her 13 children including me because she could not take care of us anymore. I do not want to have a same tragedy in my life. But I am not afraid to get married because unmarried women will be seen as useless in the community. Most of the spinsters have experienced being treated inferiorly or teased. We do not need to worry for it though because we can be a nun under the teachings of Buddha.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Economic status also plays a part in terms of how communities will react upon a woman's choice of lifestyle, with wealthier people described as having more social space:

The community may say something about unmarried women if they are also poor. But, for a rich unmarried woman it is different - nobody dares to say anything to her without respect.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist men, aged 40 and above, Thanbyuzayat Township]

#### 4.1.2 Divorce

Divorce was condemned from every religious and cultural standpoint, as can be seen from the sample of quotes below. Study participants had strong negative feelings about divorce, even though they spoke of increasing divorce rates in their communities.

Single marriage should not be changed. Divorce is not a good tradition. We are not animals.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

Divorce is strongly prohibited in my religion. There is a saying in the Bible that no one can be separated except by dying. For divorcees, we do not celebrate holy weddings in church [for remarriage], but we do pray for them in their home because they are still members of the church.

[KII with Christian Religious Leader]

There was a saying, 'Monogamy is a medicine', because those who divorce or have two or three wives or husbands cannot carry boys who want to become monks especially during the time of ceremony.<sup>33</sup> In addition a person who has divorced cannot cook food for monks and cannot carry offerings to the monastery. One who cooks for monks has to be someone with one husband or one wife. Those who eloped with someone also cannot cook food for monks.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above]

On the one hand, divorce was considered to be a selfish act. On the other hand, there was recognition that serious problems would have to exist in marriage to make one party break with the strongly held norms of staying together. In the accounts of study participants, there were certain commonly mentioned instances that made divorce more acceptable, including: adultery by either party; men failing their income earning responsibilities or women not living up to their responsibilities of managing the family income; men's alcohol and drug abuse; and men's violence against women. Proverbs such as 'beating someone till their bones crush makes them love you more', referring to commonly expressed experiences of men's violence against women, were discussed in the context of legitimate causes for divorce.

33. Carrying young novices who ordain as monks during the traditional New Year's period is an honour and a sign of status in the community.

As a man, I am ready to get divorced if my wife is treating my parents badly. And it is the same for my relatives. It can also lead to divorce if women use the family's money privately. Some men used to beat women if they had hidden something.  
[FGD with Kachin Christian men aged 40 and above, Myitkyina Township]

In Bamar Buddhist areas, study participants discussed the need for the husband's agreement to divorce as a barrier for women who felt the need to initiate divorce. In this context, participants reported that organizations like the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation would typically counsel the couple to remain together. Women participants in several areas, amongst them, Kachin State and Yangon Region, said there was a sense that divorce was becoming a more accepted answer to severe marital problems, particularly men's violence against women:

For the couples, a husband should not make his wife to do as he wants. There is a divorce in our village today because the husband tortured his wife and she couldn't stand it anymore. Women of this age will certainly go to divorce if they are being treated unfairly and being beaten.  
[FGD with Kachin Christian men aged 40 and above, Myitkyina Township]

Now getting a divorce is quite common. If you look at men, including my brothers and uncles, they are becoming more disloyal to their wives. But they did not divorce the first wife and instead made her suffer. In the past women would keep on being together with her husband even if she was beaten often. Today women are getting more intelligent and they will insist on getting a divorce when they came to realize that it is not love but suffering to continue to be together.  
[FGD with Muslim women, 26-40 years old Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

In other areas, such as Shan State economic factors were highlighted as underlying causes for tension in families. Study participants reported that economic strain would lead to both drinking and violence, all contributing to the increased likelihood of divorce:

The main problem is that our wives do not like us to drink. As for my wife, she dislikes it when I come back home drunk. Another factor that causes cracks in a marriage is the economic situation. Some are not doing fine in their businesses, and not earning enough. Some cannot manage to make ends meet, which provokes their wives to get angry. They then start fighting. They argue. There are some women who are very bossy and restrictive; no matter how hard their husbands work to earn enough money, they complain and attack their husbands. A man should also act and behave as a good leader in a household. Couples could not have a good

relationship for those reasons. After that, after some time has flown away, they start to think about divorce. And for those economic reasons, some couples get divorced eventually. They can't generate a good income and part of the cause is their education level. In most cases, employers demand at least high school graduation level from the applicants. There are always high demands and requirements in almost every job today.  
[FGD with Danu Buddhist men aged 26-40, Kalaw Township]

Study participants also pointed to unequal gender norms with regards to divorce that were found in the legal framework. Burmese Buddhist law, which is generally claimed to provide equal rights for women, was described to contain gaps when it comes to women's rights around divorce:

According to Burmese Buddhist Law, women have fewer rights than men do. For instance, if the wife commits adultery, her husband has the right to take criminal action against the adulterer, whereas the wife does not have such a right if her husband has an affair with another woman. But according to current ruling, if the husband commits adultery repeatedly, his wife has the right to seek divorce with the equal partition of joint property. But in the case of the wife committing adultery, her husband has the right to divorce her and she has to relinquish all the properties. If the husband deserts his wife for three years without contributing to her maintenance and has no communication with her, the marriage is automatically dissolved. Burmese Buddhist Law adopts the system of polygamy. So, a man can marry as many wives as he can afford. If a woman marries a married man she does not have any rights to claim whatsoever as long as she is living together with him. But the first wife can claim divorce against her husband if he marries another wife.  
[Personal communication with Myanmar Lawyer]

In communities that practice a system of dowry or bride price,<sup>34</sup> such as among Chin communities, gender inequality is similarly manifested in the unequal opportunities for divorce settlements:

There are endowments offered from the man's side at the time of marriage. Then, if the wife would like to divorce later, she would have to give back all the endowments to her husband. That would not be cheap and would not be an easy issue to deal with, as endowments usually are costly. Besides, people's views on the male divorcee and female divorcee are quite different. So, women have to tolerate the problems just to save their dignity and reputation. ... If the divorce is started from the woman's side, she will have to return all the endowments. But, if a man starts the divorce, all he has to do is to say only one word, 'Get out', and give a cane basket and a spade to his wife. That's it.  
[KII with Chin Woman Leader]

34. For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see section 5.2.





Why we not gotten married is because the men we love did not fall in love with us or we did not fall in love with the men who love us. And we might also have had bitter experiences with men through seeing couples near us who are fighting with each other, especially men who beat women. Parents usually worry about their daughters not getting married because they know that women will face a lot of difficulties in their old age if they are single. Unmarried men have to face many more difficulties than spinsters, because spinsters can stay in any relatives' house as they welcome them without hesitation. But for a bachelor, it is not appropriate to accommodate them in any relatives' house because it is culturally not suitable. Unmarried men are more pitiful than spinsters when they get old. No woman wants to take care of an unmarried man, because they just want to take care of their children and husband.

Focus Group Discussion with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above



A common factor among the many stories and local practices surrounding accepted grounds for, and effects of, divorce, was the double standard from a gender perspective where women would typically have to take more blame for the situation:

It's not good. She will be left with a bad reputation. Even if it was because of her husband that they divorced, only she would be bad-mouthed and criticized by the community. And if she decided to marry another one, she alone will be blamed. A divorcee is just destined to be devalued and looked down on.  
[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 18-25, Kalaw Township]

They look down more on females, whether she is a spinster or a divorcee. The mindset of people has been like that since the beginning of the world. Compared to males, females are regarded to be lower and in our language it's termed 'cheez', meaning that she is just an item, thing, and not even regarded as human; wife, mom or daughter etc. Generally, in every religion, girls are regarded only as little more than a 'thing.'  
[FGD with Muslim women, 40 years and above Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

#### 4.1.3 Widows

In all of the study communities, widows were singled out as a particularly vulnerable group. Community members described a situation in which widows are pitied, ridiculed, and harassed, indeed often blamed for their situation. To a large extent this vulnerability is linked to the norms of appropriate behaviour for a woman whose husband dies, norms she may no longer be able to live up to. Her social status diminishes, as does her economic status in many cases. On top of this, widows are reportedly regarded as shameful and their bodily integrity is endangered. This section explores how the status of widowhood appears to be the 'perfect storm' (the coincidence of a number of factors that create a severely negative situation) in terms of unintentional norm breaking, which can and often does lead to severe discrimination against women.

Taking a closer look at what happens to the social status of a woman when her husband passes away, we can see that many of the sexuality-related norms such as the value of chastity and modesty discussed earlier are highlighted. Widows are not supposed to have a sex life or to be seen to want to remarry. Their dress, appearance and actions are placed under close community scrutiny, and the degree to which they can look to fellow community members for support is highly conditional on their ability to live up to these modesty-related norms.

The neighbours may devalue a widow. It's important for a widow to know how to behave. It's up to her way of behaving. If one is really of good character and behaviour, no one can touch her or criticize her. A widow should be careful and cautious in choosing a lifestyle.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

Widows are looked down on in the society. People will tease the widows who apply make-up on their faces. Widows who go outside a lot; they are seen as though they want to remarry.  
[FGD with Kayan Takundaing women, aged 40 years old and above, Demoso Township]

Widows are very vulnerable, because when a widow talks to a married man, the wife of this man will accuse her of trying to seduce her husband. It is very different between a wife and a widow. A widow has to hire labour because she cannot do what her husband did in the past. And widows are spoken about by the neighbours, [implying] that they having relationship with handymen when they work for a few days closely together.

[FGD with Kachin Christian, women aged 26-40, Myitkyina Township]

If a widow lived on her own, the community would not say anything or bad-mouth her. But if she was socializing closely with strange men, no matter how much her relationship with them was pure, the community would criticize her. They would say 'what a whore'. But they don't criticize a widower too much. He can do it if he wants. It's a difference of people's attitudes towards the different sexes.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

The economic situation for widows was described as problematic as they would have lost their husband's income. However, remarrying appeared not to be a socially accepted option, something which contributes to the economic vulnerability of widows, unless they have income generating work. Other studies have shown that widows have a difficult time accessing loans and credit (AAM 2011) which can further complicate economic survival. There are, however, contextual variations. Widows in Northern Rakhine State, for example, are reported to have more room to manoeuvre in public, including engaging in income generating work, compared to married women (Perera 2012).

Among study participants, widows were also described as vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, as they were seen to lack male protection:

Widows are being abused by men because men want to take advantage of them, as they don't have husbands who can protect them. They are treated as inferiors. Men want to try them because they think that they can get them easily. There are proverbs describing this: 'A train without a flag and a woman without a husband are equally unsuitable'; 'A pagoda without gold and a woman without a husband are equally unsuitable'. They have so many weaknesses and need protection.

[Interview with Bamar Buddhist men, aged 40 and above, Bogale Township]

Widows are very weak and depressed. People have pity on them. When a young woman becomes a widow, there is a proverb, 'A hungry cat and a bird whose legs are broken.'

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Although people say they pity widows, actually they want to humiliate them and tend to ill-treat them, concerning sex or in other ways. There are some men who take widows seriously, value them and marry them. But mostly people don't have respect on widows. They will just say, 'Poor her, she doesn't have a husband, no one to depend on'. However, widowers are quite okay.

[FGD with Muslim women, 40 years and above Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Widows would typically experience social isolation as 'nobody would want to talk to her since her husband is dead already'. They would be largely left to fend for themselves without community support. The support offered to widows and widowers appeared to differ depending on gender norms and division of labour since 'widows can cook and prepare food for themselves', while widowers are described as pitiful and deserving of sympathy. Social isolation of widows was reportedly exacerbated in many cases by superstitious ideas that hold widows to be shameful and carriers of bad luck. As a result widows were reportedly excluded from many community events:

Concerning discrimination against widows, in our Mon custom, a man and a woman would become husband and wife after cheroots and tealeaf are distributed to the community at the wedding ceremony. This practice is to ensure a successful marriage. The couple sponsor it. They buy costumes for the married women who have been able to build up successful marriages and let them spread the tealeaf and cheroots. ... In such ceremonies, widows feel so belittled and down-hearted. ... A woman is almost going to be in a situation in which she has to commit suicide if her husband died.

[KII with Mon Woman Leader]

It's too superstitious in the Shan ethnic group. At a traditional wedding ceremony, only the already married couples are allowed to prepare the bed for the newly wedded couple. A widow or a divorced woman cannot even think about it. There's no way for them to have that right. And they know it. They know those customs very well. They would not forcibly request to the marrying couple to give them the right to prepare the bed for them. They already have been belittled. There's no legal or official law depriving widows and divorced women of that right. It's the culture. It's just like that. In Shan tradition, people avoid eating food from a widow's house, as they believe eating food from such a place can cause them misfortune and discredit them. The widows are kept away whenever there are special food festivals or events. But, people don't mind widowers. ... If a widow touches any foods, people would cleanse anything that the widow has touched with some kinds of traditional soap and shampoo. In the rural villages, people are still treating widows in that way.

[KII with Shan Woman Leader]

The prejudice and discrimination against widows described above was not mirrored in the reported treatment of widowers. According to study participants widowers were not put under the same lens of community control, and were generally supported by community members rather than condemned. Economically they were not a major concern for community members, as they were seen to be able to continue their income generating activities. Neither were there reports of widowers being socially excluded the way that widows were described to be.

One major difference in terms of the perception of widows and widowers concerned sexuality. Widowers were described as highly sexual and wanting, indeed needing, to remarry quickly, according to study participants. The social norms that feed expectations on widower's sexuality also contribute to a portrayal of it as uncontrollable and potentially violent:

People usually encouraged the widowers that they can even get a virgin in next marriage. It depends on their ability and qualifications.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 40 and above]

Widowers may be accused as being a bad guy who will rape the girls if the conditions are favourable. Some think that the widowers are very willing to get a woman.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men, aged 40 and above, Bogale Township]



If a man becomes a widower, he can remarry. The family also allows that. ...This is for lineage. A second marriage is not possible for Hindu women. Although women are important for purity, it is not so for lineage. Generation comes from the father's side. Hinduism takes the paternal generation. Single marriage is good. If a woman becomes widowed, no one will marry her again. The widow also believes it is her fate. The man also hesitates to get married with a widow because he is afraid that he will die like the former husband. This was the traditional belief in the past. No matter with widowers. If a woman becomes a widow, she had to wear white clothing in olden days. But now, widows can marry again for their betterment in life. Aged 33 or 35 seems good for remarriage. If the woman has children, nobody will marry her. If there is an arranged marriage with the brother of her husband she has to accept. It is usually arranged by the parents. Nobody says anything to [the widower]. Hinduism has this weakness.

I admit that. There are some restrictions for widows. She could not remarry. She had to wear white for the rest of her life. It is contradictory. In the present, it has changed. Widows can remarry now. It also depends with the age of widow, if she is around 30. It is fine for second marriage. If the widow is old and has children, what kind of men would want them?

Key Informant Interview with Hindu Religious Leader



5 Men, More Valuable than Women?





If a mother gives birth to a baby girl, people believe that she has no hpon.

In this chapter, we focus on a number of cultural norms and social practices that contribute to the unequal valuing of men and women. These are a few examples only and should not be seen as an exhaustive list.

## 5.1 Son Preference

The preference of sons over daughters was evident in the accounts of study participants from a number of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Among study participants in Mon state, being able to bear a son whom one could send to the monastery was mentioned as an important reason for women to marry. In the patriarchal and patrilineal cultural traditions among Kachin and Chin populations, the preference for having sons rather than daughters was apparent. Such preference could be seen for example in descriptions of rituals to celebrate childbirth:

If a son is born it is tradition that we kill a chicken. For a daughter nobody does anything.

[FGD with women over 40 years old, Madupi Township]

According to study participants, the impact of son preference can be seen in differential treatment of sons and daughters during their upbringing. There was a reported risk of unequal opportunities for girls in the family, as they are regarded as belonging to the family of a future husband.

We, Kachin, have a lot of inequality issues and gender issues, but they usually are not seeing this as inequality. They see this as culture. This is our culture or practices. For example, in Kachin society practices, it is a very male-preference culture because they think that if you have a daughter, you have to give your daughter to another family. That's why it isn't worth to invest in her because even if you invest in her for education or whatever, she will be married to another family, she will give birth for another family name. Only a son can carry on their own family name and that's why to invest in a son is for them, to invest in a daughter is for another family. They always think this way. They didn't see this as inequality issues. This is culture. This is culture that we practiced for so long.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 1]

In Buddhist tradition, it is often said that son preference does not exist. Despite such claims, traditional sayings were cited by study participants, such as: 'A mother of a son is superior. A mother of a daughter is inferior'. This refers to the merit and high social status that a woman can gain by having a son who can become a novice. In Dawei culture, the sons of a man's sons were reportedly regarded as more noble from a spiritual perspective rather than the sons of a man's daughters.

In Myanmar, we believe that it is an honour to give birth to a son. If the mother gives birth to a baby girl, people believe that she has no hpon, compared to the mother who gives birth to a son, who has hpon. We can see how much sons are preferred in our society. The family themselves think that it is true.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

Among Hindu and Muslim respondents, son preference was clearly expressed and linked to the idea of male spiritual superiority. In the quote below, a circular argument is used to justify son preference: as men have traditionally been given more value and freedom, they are regarded as more useful to the family, hence they are preferred. And conversely, because women face mobility restrictions based on modesty norms, girls are less desirable:

In Hinduism men have privileges. Men have the leading role. It is not a rule that we have to favour sons. If you ask any Hindu family in the past, they would want a boy rather than girl child. I am not sure about the current situation. However, to understand the present situation, we need to look at the past. A son has to do good things for parents. Men can do religious deeds in Hindu families. Religious things cannot be performed from home and sometimes, it is necessary to go to the temple. In the past, only men could fulfil this responsibility because men had permission to go around and women hadn't. Women were not allowed to go outside in the past.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

## 5.2 Bride Price/Dowry

In the patriarchal family structures and patrilocal marriage patterns of, for example, Kachin, Chin and Shan communities,

women follow men into their family households and men pay a bride-price to the wife's parents. In this way when women marry they are 'passed' from the hands of the parents to the hands of the husband.

We should breed a pig if we want to let our sons get married while we do not need to do so for our daughters.

[FGD with Kachin Christian, women aged 26-40, Myitkyina Township]

If a couple is going to marry, the fiancé has to offer his girl's mother a kind of endowment that is regarded as an appreciation for the mother having fed the fiancée with breast milk. Endowment for the permission of marriage is one thing and this endowment for breast milk is another thing to fulfil.

[KII with Shan Woman Leader]

You know what they say – just save enough money if you want to marry a Kachin woman. The price for the endowment will be too costly. Any fiancé who can afford for the full set of endowments becomes very popular in the community. People would be saying how many rolls or containers of Kachin sticky rice the fiancé has offered as endowment.

[KII with Kachin Woman Leader]

We, Madupi Chin people from Southern Chin state, give a ten hand-spans big pot to the bride's parents as a dowry. Northern Chin people are different and they do not use a pot for dowry. Some just use tea and local snacks. Even if different ways are practiced, the same thing is that the bridegroom must ask for the bride wherever we live, whether in urban or rural areas.

[KII with Christian Religious Leader]

Male elders play mediating roles between families where there are disagreements and discord. Their function would typically be to mediate in cases where a woman has fled the house of her husband and in-laws due to domestic violence. The social practices that allow men to bargain and negotiate with other men over the heads of their wives point to the treatment of women as objects to be owned or traded and sold. Such practices also expose the potential vulnerability of women due to norms that hold them to be lesser valued:<sup>35</sup>

If your wife runs away from home because you beat her, you have to compensate your in-laws double if you want to get your wife back.

[FGD with men 18-25 Madupi Township]

The husband took the wife from the hand of the village head and elderly persons by their agreement. If a husband wants to try to get back his wife after she has gone back to her parents' home because she was annoyed, he will have to pay respect and homage to the elderly persons and the head of the village again in the same way as he did on the wedding day. He can

take her back only with the approval from all the respected elderly persons of the village.

[KII with Kachin Woman Leader]

### 5.3 'Cleansing the Village'

From Kayah State, there were reports that survivors of gender based violence and rape are socially pressured into accepting traditional offerings to the community on their behalf as a ritual compensation practice referred to as 'cleansing the village'. The practice of killing pigs and hens and distributing the meat to community members, rather than officially reporting the case to the police, was reportedly believed to spare the community from losing its dignity. Lack of legal awareness is believed to be a major barrier for women to access justice in such cases. According to women's groups in the area, traditional compensation practices fail to act as a deterrent against future acts of gender based violence (Htet 2013).

A recent workshop, 'Engaging men to end violence against women' organized by CARE Myanmar in Kayah State, found that traditional compensation practices are used broadly, in cases of gender based violence and when a girl becomes pregnant as a result of premarital sex. The workshop reported that in such a case, the man and the woman had to contribute to the cost of a pig and rice wine offered to elders. Having undergone the ritual of confession and offering compensation, the man has no further responsibility in relation to the woman or the baby. The picture (Figure 1) illustrates workshop participants' expression of the issue (CARE 2013).

### 5.4 Inheritance

Unequal inheritance patterns for men and women were discussed by study participants from Kachin and Chin States. In Chin State, inheritance was reported to be among the most pressing issues of culturally based gender discrimination. While there was some indication of practices beginning to change towards greater equality, it appeared that there is a long way to go before women are able to inherit from their parents.<sup>36</sup> Women's unequal opportunities to inherit have both material and non-material consequences. The economic effects of these practices influence decision-making around marriage and child bearing. Similarly a woman's economic status as a divorcee and a widow are influenced by their lesser opportunities for inheritance. From a gender perspective, several participants spoke of women having conditional access to family property, but said that they would never be in control of fixed assets (such as a house) or productive assets (such as a farm or business).

35. The issue of male control over women in case of divorce is the subject of Case Story 2, in Annex 2.

36. Case Story 3 in Annex 2 details the circumstances surrounding an ongoing court case of a woman seeking to inherit from her mother.





6 Socialization and Internalization





We women eat only bones.

## 6.1 Socializing Agents

The norms around what is seen as appropriate behaviour for girls and boys, and women and men, are taught and reinforced by the surrounding society. There are many important agents of socializing gender norms, including the family, the education system, authorities, social services, the healthcare system, literature and mass media, and religious leaders. In this chapter, study participants reflect on how, in their experience, gender norms of behaviour became a part of their worlds.

One of the most important reproducers of cultural norms is the family, where we spend our formative years. As some study participants aptly reflected, norms are not something we are born with but something that we are taught. They become so normal to us that often we do not notice them:

A lot of social norms and culturally related attitudes about gender, I think, have a lot to do with how young children are exposed to life within the home, as well as within the community when they were young. And that leads to an impression which is sort of life-long despite the education once gets later. These norms remain and become habitual, the way you're socialized.

- [KII with Education Specialist]

Parent, siblings, grandparents and in-laws were mentioned as some of the most influential socializing agents in the lives of study participants.

When we cook chicken, for example, after cooking, we let them [men] have the best part of the chicken that has the most meat and we women eat only bones – maybe chicken wings or legs. That's our habit. That's our way of treating them. ... We have seen how our parents and grandparents treat each other. Those images have always imposed some reflection on us thus we felt we were responsible to do so.

- [KII with Mon Woman Leader]

Several female study participants spoke of the role that women in their lives had had in terms of socializing gender appropriate behaviour. Through their accounts we can see the roles that both men and women play in upholding patriarchal structures.

When I look back, it was my parents when I was living with them at home and my parents-in-law after marriage. When I look back, I found out that it was not my husband but my mother-in-law that shaped me. It was like two women who couldn't sympathize with each other. My husband didn't tell me not to go out at night time or not to be late. But my mother-in-law; she ordered me where to go and where not to go. She would say to me, 'It's too late at night. Is it the appropriate time for a girl to go out?' It was a woman but not a man who could not have any sympathy or understanding over another woman. My mother would restrain me. Or it would be my mother-in-law who would like to prevent me from doing things.

- [KII with Shan Woman Leader]

Women participants also discussed the perceived tendency among women to defend what they referred to as a 'men's culture'. This could be, for example, excusing certain behaviour among boys such as sexual harassment with comments that belittle the issues such as, 'Boys will be boys', or 'They are only teasing'. Gender equality practitioners in particular saw women's participation in socializing girls and boys in stereotypical ways as a major problem. They highlighted the responsibility that women currently have in raising children, which makes women influential in terms of instilling values in future generations, discussed in detail below.

Gender specific norms and the separation of girls and boys were described to become more pronounced as children near puberty. The consequences for their future lives were said to include self-confidence, assertiveness, and sense of worth. Findings from a girl-led survey on gender attitudes found



I have grown up in an environment where parents would say, generally, that daughters are the ones who should remain at home to look after the parents when the sons have gone off with their wives, with their own families. So the daughter would make their family with their parents. And so there is this idea that investing in the daughter emotionally, and also in skills to manage the household, and to have those skills that would not only manage the household but also relationships surrounding the families would be important. And that would mean basic literacy as well. And also knowing how to relate to people and being a good girl would be to go to the monastery or to offer alms to monks and nuns. And more care is taken in the way that she would behave in the general environment ... appropriate clothing, appropriate work, appropriate gestures, going to the appropriate places. ... Particularly, a girl shouldn't sit at the tea shop for example. A tea shop is like a no go area. And having to take care while walking by a karaoke bar or a beer garden or beer shop on the street or where there are young men who just gather around the corners of the street, a girl has to avoid walking alone, or to dress appropriately. ... I think it is just the

perception that they are inviting trouble in the sense like inviting verbal abuse, inviting teasing, maybe in isolated cases it is also physical abuse. ... I think it is also a perception that a person at a tea shop is wasting time and a person doesn't have time to waste especially if a young lady is responsible for household duties, duties for the parents and the family, and if she is also going to school. I guess there is also the perception if the parents allow their daughters to sit at the tea shop on a regular basis then it is like she is 'easy' - not very traditional or conservative in terms of the cultural environment. I think it is what we hear growing up like any young girl - what she is allowed to do, what she isn't allowed to do, without really knowing why. At first, don't sit at the tea shop, for example. Or don't go out after 8 pm. No questions asked. Instinctively she knows that she isn't allowed, so she doesn't do it.

Key Informant Interview with Education Practitioner, Yangon



strong evidence of internalization of gender norms. Over two thirds of study participants agreed to statements that restricted freedom of action, mobility, and free time for girls compared to boys; 71% of participants agreed to statements that the property of a girl is her appearance and property of boys is his education, and that women should focus only on being good housewives (Girl Determined/Colourful Girls 2013).

Religion and religious education were described as playing a large part in the daily lives of study participants. For this reason, religious texts as well as religious leaders were said to be important socializing influences in their lives, not just during formative years, but continuing into adult life. The power of this socialization would typically become apparent as one starts to question society's gender norms:



Women themselves do not want to take the position and lead willingly.

I practice gender equality, at home... and my husband wanted the Father [at our church] to convince me that women's rights are against God's will. So they said 'You are working for women's rights, it is totally against God, what God said in the Bible'. So I said 'God loves equality, God does not like someone to suffer, some getting hardship, this is what I believe'. And all the internalization and values are created and constructed since we are young when we start to learn about religion. Only if we are able to advocate or try to approach religious leaders to see all this inequality and discrimination ... it will be really difficult to change because the religious leaders are the ones who are creating all this internalization generation by generation.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 5]

Proverbs, literature, and media<sup>37</sup> are other important socializing agents with regards to gendered norms and stereotypes. Study participants discussed a range of sources from ancient literature to films, poems, and advertising that combined to form social views of women and men. Study

participants who felt that they did not conform to socially prescribed norms were able to comment on these norms from a certain distance:

I have never thought of myself as a girl; I do whatever I like to do, go wherever I like to go. But some can't. They live according to how their environment shapes them. So they are lost to the world. They think that girls just need to know how to read. I have read in novels that girls in the past needed a lot of preparation to get a husband. Girls must behave with decorum; when pounding chilli, try not to spill any. You can see such kind of scenes even in famous novels. It was an individual struggle. I can't stand the idea and have never wanted to read them. Women just don't want to escape from this concept but accept it. Women are regarded as goods for sale. Take a look at magazines! Beauty of girls is on the cover of every magazine.

[KII with Female Author]

For example, in Myanmar literature, the old, the ancient literature that was written by monks, there are so many articles and poems that highlighted the role of woman as someone tricky. The monks made so many poems, sometimes using very rude words, you know, teaching that women are cruel; women are not sincere, not trustworthy. These are still quoted until today.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

## 6.2 Women's Internalized Subordination

This internalization can sometimes mean that we don't see practices of inequality as a peculiar thing. We don't look on it as unusual.

[KII with Chin Woman Leader]

Women themselves do not realize that certain practices are discriminatory acts against them.

[KII with Shan Woman Leader]

37. The role of media as a socializing agent is discussed in more detail in Chapter 12.

Having discussed the multitude of ways in which cultural norms for men and women are socialized, we turn now briefly to the impact of this socialization. At the most basic level we can see that world views are formed by experiences since a very young age and that over time our worldviews are so 'normal' to us that they become invisible to us. This is not unique to Myanmar. However, limited access to information and official discouragement of critical thinking, coupled with a forceful official discourse of women's traditionally high status, have all contributed to a lack of debate around gender norms and inequality in the country. Whilst women do have agency, and position themselves strategically in their social environments, the impact of socialization is nevertheless that norms around appropriate behaviour, speech, and actions become internalized deep within a person. The discovery of just how deep-seated these norms are was expressed by many of the women participating in this study, who have spent much time reflecting on gender issues in their personal and professional lives:

It's more in terms of the cultural and social norms, that there is disparity in this country. It's so ingrained. One doesn't really see the problem because even women don't see the problem. Women themselves need to have more confidence because it's not just the men. And it's also a lot of women who feel that ... it's the men who should make the decisions. It's not so much about the right but the responsibility to bear the burden and to make sacrifices. They do feel that they are the weaker sex, weaker in terms of a number of aspects, not just physically.

[KII with Education Specialist]

The power structure is constant in the country, year in and year out. Yes, the outer aspects change, but the acceptance, the norms and beliefs, and the behaviours, are all the same. But whenever I'm faced with 'women's issues', I always quarrel with my friends. [They say] 'Why would you try? Whatever we try to work out, we have no chance, because we are women. As a woman, we are originally in the back role. It is our lives.' They accept like that. They are structurally framed. Because you know, in Myanmar, culturally, we are not allowed to have many experiences and creative skills, because all of our education system, all our livelihoods and all our experiences of daily life are framed. We are not allowed to be creative.

[KII with Female Journalist]

With regards to gender inequality in society, many of the study participants spoke of women's self-imposed subordination. This was sometimes framed as a critical observation and a comment on the difficulty of change as evidenced in the quotes above. Others pointed to internalized gender norms as evidence that women are comfortable with the status quo and that they would not be interested in, or in need of, change. Mostly this appeared to be a view held by various societal elites.

They told me that women themselves were not willing to being ordained when I questioned why there were no ordained women. Women themselves do not want to take the position and lead willingly because the traditional background still affects them; and another reason is that men are also unaware of women's advancement and empowerment.

[KII with Christian Religious Leader]

7 Observations of Cultural Changes







The proverb, 'A woman cannot be dignified without a husband despite her having a lot of brothers', is not valid in this age anymore.

Many changes in social practices were observed in study communities across the country. These included changes in dress codes, social interaction, communication, information, openness, eating habits, technology, work, and mobility patterns, as well as participation in public life. In a time of profound social and political change, it is perhaps not surprising that the response to change among communities is mixed and that changes are often met with caution or even resistance. In this chapter, we explore some of the important social changes in women's and men's lives discussed by study participants, and also touch on the relation between changing practices and changing norms.

## 7.1 Relaxing Social Restrictions for Women

While the norms that guard women's dress, behaviour and actions are firmly in place, study participants noted a loosening up of certain social restrictions in women's lives. Increased mobility and social space were amongst the changes that women tended to highlight as positive. The extent of these changes, as well as the reactions to them, however, differed between communities. Changing work patterns were often referred to as a factor contributing to change, and as something that was opening up social space for women.<sup>38</sup> While cultural gender norms still hold strong sway over communities, some participants reflected on certain beliefs fading over time:

The proverb, 'A woman cannot be dignified without a husband despite her having a lot of brothers', is not valid in this age anymore. Because women today are surviving on their own. [FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

In the past, women didn't go outside at night, they had to stay at home. Nowadays, they go out at night. [FGD with Kayin Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Hpa-an Township]

Women participants, particularly in Ayeyarwady Region, reflected positively on the fact that women were increasingly taking part in community affairs. They attributed this change largely to organizations actively involving women in their initiatives.

Women are less criticized for their habits and patterns of going outside. People seem to understand such cases more than before. Previously, the husband controlled and tended to restrict his wife from going out. A husband would tend to determine where his wife could go and whom she could speak to. But there are no more such restrictions now. It is mostly women who usually go out. ... In the past, when we went to attend a meeting or training, most of the attendants were men. There were only very few woman participants. But now, women are also selected and sent to the meetings and trainings. The training providers themselves want women to attend so that they could make themselves clear when they share their knowledge in their villages. Both young women and adult women are being sent to those occasions. It was quite different in the past when only men were going to such events. Women have been in leading roles in business. Now, you can see a woman leading her family. In the past it was only a man who controlled and led a family. It was they who went to the community events or social events in the villages. Now both men and women have started to participate in such events and gatherings.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

## 7.2 Slow and Partial Change

The changes observed were mostly described as tentative, slow, and incremental, with bigger cities leading the way and smaller towns and rural communities lagging behind. Communities where awareness raising activities related to gender had taken place were described as beginning to warm to the idea of greater physical and social space for women.

38. For a more in depth discussion on gender norms related to work, see Chapter 8.



It is not necessary to hide that some norms and cultural practices are deviating from the original ones. We can easily see in our community. Our people have been influenced by the media like television and movies to move away from the original cultural norms and make them impure. For women and girls, the norms, and practices that they keep to be a good woman in the community have also been chased away by the influence of media. Older people feel uncomfortable and irritated to see such kind of changes. It also greatly affects relationships between young and old people. Nowadays, every cultural norm including behaviour, manner, speech, and dress code has been changing and deviating from the standard norms. This is the norm for women to keep their behaviour and manner. Nowadays, women have become more social, they go to clubs and drink beer. According to Myanmar culture, women must keep their pride knowing to be afraid and shy when they are doing immoral things. Especially, they should dress safely enough to cover their

private parts. Men should treat women as their own moms and sisters, with respect. But nowadays it has changed. They are treating women rudely with impure thoughts. It makes men treat women with no respect and Myanmar society has become spoiled due to it. They are deviating from our cultural and social norms.

- Key Informant Interview with Male Author



Muslim women are now seen to be coming out gradually. For the next generation there can be two groups. Some women will still be forced to stay indoors and some will be working actively outside.

[FGD with Muslim women, 26-40 years old Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

I think men's attitudes have become wider and more flexible. They have come to realize that they need to give women the space and opportunity to perform and that they should welcome women with supportive hands. They know it but they couldn't fulfil this practically. ... There isn't a single political party in which a woman is working as a chair person, except NLD. Woman leaders are too rare to be found in political parties.

[KII with Mon Woman Leader]

Increased openness in the country providing space for discussing inequality was perceived to be an important contributing factor for beginning to reflect upon, if not yet change, cultural norms and social practices.

I read in a book, some article about challenging culture. I liked it, before I read it! Challenging culture, wow! That is the first time that it came into my mind. Culture can be challenged! We never thought like this about culture. Culture is 'the truth' for us, we have to practice it. The same thing about changing religion. It is very difficult, but many cultural practices are combined and put into religion and if we can challenge culture - we have to challenge culture - culture will change. So, they want to say, 'Oh! This is our culture!' But, if culture is harmful practices, we need to see that culture can change. Culture is made by man, made by people, made by women, not only men.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 1]

Now that we have democracy, we can have a chance to tell. We women can depend on ourselves. When I was young, I was not allowed to go out. If I walked alone, people would blame me. These kinds of norm changes can be seen in the city, but in the town, the norms are still very strong.

[KII with Beauty Queen]

Both at the ethnic level and countrywide, women are still one step left behind. They are always discriminated against and devalued. It's the same. However, things have become more transparent today. But in our country, people still do not have a clue about how to treat women equally.

[KII with Kayin Woman Leader]

Women's space to have a say in matters concerning their lives was reportedly increasing. One such example given by study participants was decision-making about entering and leaving a relationship. Still, it appears that there is a long way to go before communities accept men's and women's choices as equally valued.

In the past, women were tied and sent to the man's house even though she didn't want to get married. Nowadays women and men choose their spouse.

[FGD with women 26-40 years old, Madupi Township]

I think it becomes easier to get divorced. Women have also become more decisive. If they could not take it anymore, they will end the marriage. Women from the past would instead try to endure it and to cope with it. But now getting more knowledge about their own rights, women do not tolerate it anymore.

[KII with Kayin Woman Leader]

The changes in social practices discussed among study participants focused on changes in women's lives rather than men's lives. However, some groups observed men's behaviour changing towards a less authoritarian style, particularly in urban areas. Among the cultural norms that women wish most to see change is the cultural prohibition on women's leadership.

When the father came back from work he just threw his bag down and asked the wife to bring a glass of water without considering whether she was busy or not. But now, I found out that the husbands of my friends are helping their wives to a certain degree.

[FGD with Muslim women aged 26-40, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

I think a woman's opportunities and leadership capabilities are blocked by cultural values. Her potential will be lowered if she cannot pass the boundary of community norms. I think that women's abilities will be blocked and country development will be slowed if a woman lives in an environment where social norms don't favour them to be the leaders of the community. ... Men also need to think outside of the norms, he has to realize that his wife has potential to lead apart from cooking and household activities. Women also need to be educated formally and informally in order to think out of the norm box.

[KII with Livelihoods Specialist]

### 7.3 Resistance to Change

Cultural and religious traditions, emphasizing politeness, language, and dress, are amongst traditions that the vast majority of study participants say that they want to preserve. Both male and female participants strongly rejected what they see as the influence of ‘foreign cultures’, Western or Korean, on cultural habits, particularly dress codes. As has been discussed earlier, this critique is overwhelmingly directed at women.

I’ve found it to have changed. In the past, women had to ask for their parents’ permission if they wanted to go out. But now, they don’t ask for any permission but are going out as they wish. Now, young women do not know how to pay respect to their senior relatives such as uncles and brother-in-laws. The age has been changed. Everything in this age has been changed.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

People were more religious and dressed more safely and modestly in the past. Now, they have changed in every aspect; behaviours, manners, life styles and fashion. They have become too Western. Even in Thingyan water festival, they tend to seek much wilder fun.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 18-25, Kalaw Township]

In the quote below, we hear a group of older male participants lamenting the vanishing of certain norms and traditions related with religious beliefs and calling for a reinstatement of those values:

50% of women only know our traditions and culture. The young women do not know the traditional values of a man. Previously, even mothers told their sons to go away from them because they are wearing a longyi that can diminish a son’s power. No women of this age know about it and accept it. They need to be taught by religious monks.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Bogale Township]



8 Economy, Work and Livelihoods





Here, we are not broad-minded. Our responsibility is washing clothes and cooking.

## 8.1 Gendered Division of Labour

Work and livelihood opportunities for men and women are strongly linked to gendered norms that guide perceptions of where women and men can be, what they can do, and when they can do it, in order to be seen as 'good' and 'appropriate'. A clear gendered division of labour was prominent in all of the study areas. The domains of work for men and women are typically positioned in opposition to one another. Generally, men are seen as responsible for hard work as opposed to easy or light work, which is regarded as women's work. Work taking place inside and linked to reproduction was seen as women's work, whereas outside and productive work is seen as appropriate for men.

The role is different for women and men. Women's responsibility is to manage children: to reproduce. Mothers do household chores whereas breadwinners are fathers. Financial management is done by mothers, as well as the household management in the family. ... Men are allowed to do anything in our religion except commit crimes. Women are more restricted than men. Men have the opportunity to do everything. ... Physically, it's different. Men have muscles and are suitable to do muscular outdoor jobs and do business. As for women, they have to bearing the baby according to the nature. As for women, they have a uterus and they must work according to the nature of having a uterus. They must work in area of the human resources.

[KII with Hindu Religious Leader]

Hard work is done by men because they have to. Hard work is not for women. Easy work is for women. Women stay at home, take care of the family members, feed the animals.

[FGD with men 18-25, Madupi Township]

I think that it is my responsibility to serve my husband by doing household chores like cooking and washing his clothes. In a way, we have replaced their moms to take care of them.

[FGD with Mon, Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

The belief that men and women are very different and therefore suited to do different kinds of work is common thread through the accounts of community members. When study participants describe how they divide the work in their families, a man's perceived strength, bravery and tenacity is held up against the perception that a woman lacks these qualities. The idea that women should focus on reproductive work is so much taken for granted that it does not seem to even warrant an explanation, much of the time. When women are caretakers of family members, this is described as a natural consequence of the fact that women give birth. Household work for women is often simply described as a duty and a consequence of men's work in the opposite sphere (productive; outside).

Men had to work in risky and dangerous fields such as on the mountains, in the trees collecting honey from the bees, on the river, and in the forest. But they work for their family. Women also had to do so many tasks to take care of her children and her husband.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

My father will do farming. Here, we are not broad-minded. Our responsibility is washing clothes and cooking. We have division of labour. My husband doesn't work a lot here. Men work only a little in the house.

[FGD with Kayan Takundaing women, 26-40 years old, Demoso Township]

The norms that brand certain tasks as male and others as female have long-standing roots. Across communities, the gender division of labour is discussed as historically linked to ways of ensuring survival. With regards to domestic work, women's value on the 'marriage market' is gauged by how well they perform housework.

In the past, when a man is going to formally propose to a Kachin lady, he would ask his girl to grind chilli and to sweep. The lady would be regarded as a dutiful and good woman only if she could do the chilli-grinding job perfectly until the chilli seeds become powder. A man would decide whether to take that woman as his wife by checking the way she did the sweeping and cooking. It means that women were investigated and checked just for their skills in housework.

[KII with Kachin Woman Leader]

There were also different expectations of women's workload depending on whether they lived with their parents or in-laws. Among women living with in-laws, there were reports of having to work significantly harder in order to gain acceptance in the new household. Arrangements around workload and division of labour were often described as fraught with friction and compromise, as daughters-in-law worked to maintain harmony:

A daughter-in-law cannot be compared to real daughters. We had a saying, 'Daughters will sleep while the daughter-in-law is working.' They will surely treat us badly.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Asked about proverbs and sayings that describe the division of labour, men and women from all the study areas would readily refer to the saying, 'When men carry a big load on their shoulders, women carry a smaller load on their heads'. A saying with similar connotations is, 'The teak relies on smaller trees, and the smaller plants live on the bigger teak in return'. Amongst some participants, these sayings denote the sharing of responsibilities between men and women. Others see these sayings as a reflection of men's and women's different abilities. Others again interpret such sayings as pointing to the differential value given to men's and women's work, with men and their work as the norm. The strongest trend from the discussions with study participants around these sayings had to do with the existence of a hierarchy of work. In this hierarchy, tasks that are seen as male are given more value than tasks seen as female.

A woman is considered a good woman only if she is skilful at doing housework. This notion nowadays is becoming less serious. In the tradition of Chin ethnicity, household leaders are men. However, Chin women usually support the family by doing traditional weaving. But such jobs are not considered by

men as real jobs. Only the income generated by husbands is recognized as the main income and wives' are regarded as dependents. Only the husbands are considered as bread winners, while both husbands and wives have to earn money.

[KII with Chin Woman Leader]

### 8.1.1 The Male Breadwinner and Household Leader

One of the most central gender norms in relation to work is that of the male breadwinner. According to gender norms, women are responsible for managing the household finances - traditionally seen as earned by the male breadwinner.<sup>39</sup> These norms are often discussed using the saying: 'When the water flows, the embankment saves and controls'. In discussions with community members, there was a sense that while men were able to concentrate primarily on income earning, other responsibilities would fall on the women's shoulders, even though women would often also be engaged in paid work.

It is said that a good wife gets up early before her husband. And they have to finish all the household chores. Women cannot rely on men for their daily chores. They have to save money and manage to feed the family.

- [FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

The norm of the male breadwinner is closely linked to the norm of the male household leader. This strong norm was most often exemplified through the proverb: 'The sun doesn't rise with the hen's crowing; only when the cock crows the sun will rise'.<sup>40</sup> Men's elevated position in the household was justified from social, cultural, religious, and economic points of view. Other similar sayings discussed by community members included: 'Man is the head of woman; God is the head of man,' and 'Treat your son like a lord and your husband like a God'.

The norm of the male household leader was found to be widely accepted. However, there were also voices questioning the existing social order as outdated and unfair.

The carts should not be in front of the cows, and a wife should not be in front of husband.' As the saying goes, women should not lead a family, otherwise the family's business will go down. That is how we have been taught by our ancestors. And we all agreed with it.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist men, aged 40 and above, Thanbyuzayat Township]

39. Women's management of smaller household finances (although they appear to have limited decision-making power in terms of larger financial decisions) was discussed among Buddhist families in particular. Among Muslim and Chin respondents, there was more stress on the role of the husband in all financial decision-making, although practices appeared to differ substantially between families.

40. The impact of this norm on women's opportunities to participate in public decision-making and to exercise leadership is discussed extensively in Oxfam, ActionAid, and CARE 2011.



They say, 'The crow of a hen would not bring the dawn, but a cock's would'. It implies that men are of greater importance than women and therefore should be in leading positions, when women should be in the kitchen cooking, doing dishes, washing and taking care of the children. Men refer to that saying when they get into an argument with women to gain an advantage. It's very traditional.

[KII with Mon woman leader]

In our Chin ethnic group, there are many different tribes. In the Sum Thu tribe from Paletwa area...they get married, they grow a local kind of orchid, and women have to take responsibility until the products are marketed. What are the men doing? They are just sitting and having tea and gambling. Women have to work in every process – growing plants, harvesting, packaging and marketing – and they have to give all the income to their husbands. Their husbands then manage the income as they wish.

[KII with Chin Woman Leader]

From primary school to the time a person starts their own household, social norms have marked the husband as house spirit. Why? If women are taking responsibility for everything, they are also house spirits and must be recognized thus.

[FGD with Muslim women aged 40 and above, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

As heads of households, men are also expected to handle social communications and generally represent the family in community matters.

A wife has to manage financial income of the family, plus work in the kitchen and do household chores, while a man is responsible for social communication and working out of the house to make money.

[FGD with Kachin Christian, men aged 40 and above, Myitkyina Township]

In several areas, for example, Monywa Township and Demoso Township, study participants justified men's leadership responsibilities with arguments that men are 'stronger, more intelligent and have more earning capability'. Men's imperative to lead was also discussed among communities in Rakhine State.

Assume that a man and a woman have just gotten married. It could be a problem if the woman was more bright and sharp than the man. But women can be useful in some conditions, although men are more intelligent and bright than women. Women should work as a servant or a follower for the men.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

### 8.1.2 Unequal Value of Men's and women's Work

Despite discussions of the need for, and complementarity of, both men's and women's work, there is no mistaking that men's work is perceived to be more valuable than women's work. The physical strength required to do men's jobs is often cited as the reason for this perception.

Men's jobs are more valuable than those of women as men have to work more and harder than women.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 40 and above Thanbyuzayat Township]

Work done by three men can compare to the work done by ten women, because women have less perseverance than men and also they are weaker than us. Women do not have an idea of how to finish a job where men are very good at it.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Minbya Township]

In some areas like Kachin state, traditional sayings referring to women as 'big logs in the fire' pointed to certain recognition of women's load in doing reproductive work. However, when discussing the value of work, women in communities would typically link the lesser value placed on women's work to the fact that housework does not bring either status or income.

Some think a woman does not have any special job to do. Some women do weaving. But that's not my kind of job. Most of the girls know how to weave somewhat. Another job is roofing a house with thatch. High income jobs are valued. We can't earn money from domestic work.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Harder and more difficult jobs are more valued and are thought as superior. Farming is a difficult job. Daily casual labouring jobs are easy. Teaching is also a difficult job, but I think plantation work is more valuable as it is more difficult than teaching. A job that necessitates much more labour and strength bears much higher value. I think office jobs are more valuable than those. They are of high standard.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 40 and above Thanbyuzayat Township]

### 8.1.3 Testing the Strength of Gender Norms on Work

Women are said to be lazy and stupid if her husband did her duties. And it is the same for men.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist men aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

When asked about their own experiences and feelings on taking on jobs normally considered to be the task of the opposite sex, community members reported that families and communities would react with criticism, pity, and ridicule. Their statements suggest that gendered division of labour still carries much weight. The kind of criticism community members report when they move outside of the gendered division of labour underlines that 'masculine' qualities and tasks are valued and that those considered feminine are devalued.

Men who do not fulfil what are considered to be their roles will be criticised by the community. Similarly, women who have to do heavy work or work that is considered to be men's responsibility are pitied, as these are seen as testaments to having a 'bad' husband. Role reversal was found to occur more commonly among poor families, and therefore out of necessity:

Some people would say ‘Oh, she has to do her husband’s work. How unlucky she is! A wife of a naughty husband would never be shining’. In the community, only about 20% of its members see such role reversal in a positive way; the rest see it negatively.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women, aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

I have to climb trees to get firewood. I feel sad because my husband is bad and I have to do all of this. My family sympathizes with me. Some will appreciate and some will criticize me.

[FGD with Kayan Takundaing women, aged 40 years old and above, Demoso Township]

They put the blame on men in a household. People would stay silent if both men and women are working united and unanimously. But if only women have to do all the works when there are some men in the household, people from the community will criticize them.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 18-25, Kalaw Township]

The lessening of men’s hpon is also cited as an important reason for men not to engage in what is seen as ‘women’s work’, i.e., reproductive work.

We should not change the roles. Men should not wash the clothes as women do. It lowers men’s glory (hpon).

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

The community gets very irritated to see me doing my wife’s jobs. ... They might even accuse me that I am gay, possessing a woman’s character.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Oftentimes the ridicule that men describe as a result of taking on what is considered ‘women’s work’ has to do with the questioning of their masculinity (see Chapter 3). Being teased as ‘gay’ for performing ‘women’s’ tasks is often mentioned by men as a reason for avoiding them.



## The community gets very irritated to see me doing my wife’s jobs.

While taking on work that is traditionally considered male can be acceptable for women under some circumstances, even though they may be pitied, there are certain cultural limits that cannot be crossed. This happens where the work interferes with the restrictions associated with hpon among Buddhist communities. As such, tasks such as roofing or climbing trees are strongly discouraged for women because of the belief that such practices lower men’s hpon.<sup>41</sup> A study on women’s participation in agricultural and fishing markets also found fewer women working in rice-mills, because of the perceptions that it is inappropriate for women to climb onto the machinery in the mills (Oxfam 2012, internal document).

The neighbours will say that it was not appropriate for a woman to climb up on the roof and repair it.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

We don’t want to lose our dignity and we don’t want to be teased like that. Men can be said to be mentally weak when they are doing women’s chores.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Minbya Township]

There are times when role reversals are unavoidable and therefore more acceptable, such as when the wife is sick or in conjunction with the delivery of a baby.<sup>42</sup>

Women discussed refraining from role reversals unless unavoidable. An important reason for this is the wish to promote harmony and avoid domestic conflict.

Most men do not want to do women’s jobs. It is good to be patient with this kind of discrimination. Otherwise, it will lead to quarrelling.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

41. See also Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE 2011.

42. These findings echo those found in Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE (2011) and CARE (2013).

## 8.2 Old Norms in a Changing Context - What Does it Mean?

### 8.2.1 Women's Increased Income Earning

According to available labour force data, women's share in paid non-agricultural employment has gradually increased but remains relatively low – reflecting the importance of the agricultural sector for women and their limited access to work in the industrial and services sector (ADB 2012; ILO 2008) However, one of the strongest findings from the community data was the perceived increase in women's paid work. This was seen as a necessity for families to make ends meet in the face of what was overwhelmingly described as a deteriorating economic situation. There was little overt resistance to women's income earning as a contribution to the family income. However, not all men saw the increased blurring of men's and women's fields of work as a positive development. Some male participants expressed worries over women's entry into traditional 'male' fields of work:

There are differences because there have to be. Women had their specialized jobs and men also had their specialization. We must accept it. Women should not try to work in men's specialized jobs even if they know how to do it.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

Men tended to cite examples of women's increased income earning as a sign of enhanced gender equality. Women's reflections around their increased participation in the labour market were more complex. According to their statements there is a long way to go before there can be talk of gender equality in terms of work.

Only men are considered suitable for the position of pilot. But now there are some female pilots. It's the same for serving in the army. I want to change the stereotype that says women should just do housework while men earn money for the family. I want such limitations to be changed.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 18-25, Kalaw Township]

We desire to move forwards, to move ahead. It will not be alright to keep us in the kitchen forever. We women have duties to carry out for our children as mothers. We must have the ability and competencies. Only when we ourselves are able to step forward, we'll become able persons in nurturing our children and making their lives better. Women must have their own abilities. Men think like we are going to lead them ahead when we think we are just in an equal position.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women, aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

Across the country, the local contexts and the availability of jobs impact on how the gendered division of labour is defined

and organized. Among a group of women in Kachin, State for example, the lack of jobs was strongly associated with norms that present female characteristics as the opposite of male:

There are not too many jobs for women. They work as sellers in cosmetic shops, grocery shops, and sewing because women are weak, lacking physical power and courage. I feel depressed, sad, regretful, and not pleased to be a woman.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

In other areas, like for example the study communities in Mon State, there was evidence of some norms changing in order to accommodate the need for women's income earning:

Previously, women were not allowed to go out at night. But, now it has changed so that women can work together with men in the rubber fields until 11 pm.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

### 8.2.2 Women's Dependent Status

Practices such as listing married women as dependents on family registration cards - regardless of whether they hold professional positions - reinforce the stereotype of the male breadwinner. Such practices also contribute to women's continued subordination within the family. This practice was criticized by women from all walks of life:

Households from every ethnic group have a family list. Checking any of those family lists, you will see that husbands are listed as breadwinners of the families whereas every wife is listed as dependent. To promote women, that system should be changed first and foremost. Women's position at work should be described in the family list as they are – be it director or a school teacher. See me as an example; I'm a lawyer, a prosecutor at a court. But I'm recorded and listed as a dependent in my family list when my husband is described as a major. He's got that chance to be splendidly mentioned as a major. It hurts me. And it's not easy to change the family list.

[KII with Mon Woman Leader]

In my case, my father was a government officer for more than thirty years. My mother is a so-called housewife, but my father's salary was not sufficient for my family. We had seven brothers and sisters. My mother had to work outside selling clothes and things like this, and at the same time she also had to do house work. We had a kind of card at school. Father's name and mother's name, and also occupation we had to fill. Even though my mother was busier than my father - she worked in both productive and reproductive work - my mother's status was always 'dependent'. Actually my father depends on my mother. All the family depends on my mom. Why was she labelled as a dependent?

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

As women who are engaging in paid work depart from the norm, they typically justify their work, for example, as required by unprecedented economic hardship or the fact that the husband's salary is insufficient. Such justifications serve to uphold the ideal of the breadwinning male by describing women who work as secondary or complementary income earners regardless of the size of their contribution to the family income. The actual economic contribution of women to the family income, however, appeared to somewhat mitigate the negative aspect of norm-breaking.

### 8.2.3 Unequal Wages and Access to Economic Resources

Norms around work have important material effects, including lower wages for women. This in turn perpetuates of the norm of the male breadwinner and economic agent.<sup>43</sup> Unequal wages for men's and women's work were recorded in all study areas, although differently justified in different areas. The issue was prominent in Monywa, where poverty issues for women were described as particularly pressing:

It is true that a female chicken cannot make the sun rise, because some jobs are only for men. Men can get 4000 to 5000 Kyat per day while women only get about 2000 Kyat. That is why I am stating this saying is true.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

Men work in the fields farming and women work in the fields growing onions. Women are paid 1500 Kyat while men are paid 2500-3000 Kyat. Men can get 3500-4000 Kyat if they work as a painter.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

While the impact of gendered norms around division of labour - which build on separation and hierarchy of work - is clearly linked to livelihood opportunities and outcomes for men and women, not everyone sees this as discriminatory. Men's strength and leadership roles are often to justify why they should earn more.

Related to income, men get 3000 Kyat, women get 2500 Kyat. It doesn't depend on status. It depends on strength. It is not discrimination.

[FGD with Kayan Takhundaing, men aged 26-40, Demoso Township]

Equal pay for equal work is guaranteed in the 2008 Constitution, however the reality of wage inequality among men and women continues:

There is no discrimination in the Constitution. There is same pay for men and women. In some jobs, for example those that require physical strength, women cannot compete with men

- in some businesses such as physical labor and construction. Managers prefer men. So pay may depend on qualifications. If men and women have the same qualifications, the pay is the same.

[KII with Representative of Women's mass organisation 2]

Gender norms around economy and work also impact on access to and control over material resources. Opportunities for loans and credits, especially for unmarried or widowed women are mentioned as discriminatory economic practices. In some communities, particularly in Chin State (see Case Story 3 in Annex 2), the lack of women's rights to inheritance poses serious problems for women's livelihood opportunities. Another consequence of gendered economic norms is that programs directed to women's economic empowerment are typically limited to small scale financing. According to women's rights activists, such efforts may provide some immediate relief, but are seen in the long term to contribute to the marginalization of women as economic beings.

And if a man lost his business or company, or whatever, economic activities, people would not blame that man. But if it is a woman, oh! people will blame, you know: 'Women, they don't know how to handle business'. ... All these norms and beliefs [imply] that woman are not able to lead. Women are not able to decide, woman are not able to be strong or clever enough to do business. It is impacting woman's livelihood opportunities a lot.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

### 8.2.4 Women's Double Burden

The data clearly shows that the reported increase in women who engage in income-earning activities has not been accompanied by men taking increasing responsibility for household work. These findings are echoed by other recent reports on gender issues in Myanmar (for example UN Women 2013, draft; Oxfam, Trocaire, CARE, ActionAid 2013).

Our traditions and customs have trained us in that way. Some systems limit us, both men and women. Some men say a man should help his wife in her housework if he really loves her. Actually, in my point of view, it's not that a man should help. He's just responsible – responsible for the house work. Our traditional beliefs and ways of thinking have been just like that. [KII with Bamar/Mon Woman Leader]

The double burden of productive and reproductive work may be one reason why women did not typically regard their income-earning activities as a sign of gender equality. Rather, they tended to describe a situation of increased overall workload:

43. For more on this topic see Oxfam (2012).

As our main way of earning money is scraping rubber trees, both men and women need to participate in this job. But women had to put in more effort to work in the kitchen and take care of children after they come back from the rubber fields. Men usually go to bed after they come back from the rubber fields.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women aged 26-40, Thanbyuzayat Township]

People think men have to work harder. In fact, it's the women who have to work harder. Mothers have to take care of their children when men's duty is only to earn money and support the family.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

It's been a traditional practice since before I was born. It's easy for men to shirk. We have to do the cooking ourselves, and we also earn most of the family income. I've seen in many communities men mostly work in plantations. Apart from that job, other tasks are usually carried out by women. Men usually stay away from such work knowing that those tasks can be done by women alone. They only give us a hand when we are really in need.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women, aged 26-40, Bogale Township]

Male community members more often described being pleased with the current division of labour compared to female study participants, because even when women are taking up paid work outside, they are still taking responsibility for the housework. Women on the other hand more often tended to describe their situations as being overburdened.

In my family, I don't have to get involved in the housework as there are more women in my household. If I do housework, they feel that they are useless in the household. And another reason why we don't get involved in their housework is we don't want them to become uninterested in their duties. That's why we do not do their work. We worry that our women will become lazy.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 26-40 Monywa Township]

One group of young men predicted that women's greater opportunities or needs to work outside would not result in men taking on a greater share of the household work. They foresaw a situation where the gendered division of labour would continue, even as household services would be purchased:

There will be no discrimination on gender in the new generation. People will be more educated then. So women can work at what they want to and men can work as they want, possibly having a housemaid in the house for the chores.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Women's double burden was also described as being exacerbated by men's use of drugs and alcohol. Communities

in Kachin, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and Chin States particularly highlighted these problems.

Now women need to work a lot, getting up early and working in the farms. After women get up, we have to wake the men up. We advised and managed everything for the men although we are lacking physical strength. We often get depressed as the men are lazy and not making money. We even sometimes feel like leaving them. The men in this village nowadays are using narcotics and we are getting angry with them very often. It is nonsense [to use drugs], although I understand that the men want to be rich like others. If they failed to get rich, they usually chose the wrong way for their lives, which eventually leads to a broken family.

[FGD with Kachin Christian, women aged 26-40, Myitkyina Township]

It's not the same as what the proverb once meant, 'When a man shoulders a heavy load, the wife must carry a smaller one'. Now, in these days, if a man can lift a heavy load, a woman must also be able to lift the same measure. Of course, some women work harder and much more than men. Men are just drinking alcohol all the time. They don't actually work.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 40 and above Thanbyuzayat Township]

For example, in the fishery business, women work very hard, but they get very little benefits. Men go to the sea and catch fish; women sell the fish at the market. Men spend all the money for the alcohol. It makes them poorer. If the women have the power to manage money, they will not be poor. The decision-making power is in the hands of men. Women also cannot resist men and cannot take the decision-making power. In Shan State, half of the villages are female-headed. Those households are found to be poorer than male-led households. Another thing is the man is the leader, but he is addicted to drugs, so wives have to earn money and their household is the poorest in the village. When we provide food, we prioritize women-led households. We also lobby for getting ration cards with the name of women in the village. If the card is with the women's name, the food goes to the family members. If it is with men's names, they exchange the food for drugs.

[KII with Livelihoods Specialist]

### 8.2.5 Masculinity Crisis

Conversations with community members reveal that the pressure for men to conform to the expectations of being breadwinners and leaders of families is strong. Frustration over not being able to live up to the norm of the breadwinner can at times find expression in the drug and alcohol abuse described above, as well as domestic violence. This confirms findings from recent civil society consultations in preparation for the development of Anti-Violence Against Women legislation (GEN 2013 d).

Here, when a baby boy is born, the father, mother and the whole society, are putting the burden on him as head of the household who is responsible for the wife, for the whole family. 'You are the responsible person' - the written rules and regulations and that expectation. ... Nowadays, as you see that only the men alone cannot feed the whole family. In this situation, men also cannot meet the expectations of what he is assigned to do. So, in this sense, this is not their fault. In this sense, when they cannot fulfill this expectation, they are also get furious or release [this pressure] as violence. This also is not good for the man.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 5]

An idea that was commonly expressed was that mutual respect within the family depends on each member living up to specific gender norms. As the material conditions and circumstances change, the old 'scripts' of how to divide labour within the family do not work anymore, which can lead to strained situations within the family.<sup>44</sup>

Normally Myanmar women respect their husbands. But during this age, there are changes. So some women don't respect their husband because they have now got an income. Sometimes women have higher incomes than their husband. At that time, there may be clashes in the family. Because the husband's income is low and the wife's income is high. ... In that kind of situation, there is a quarrel between husband and wife. Naturally men should have strong build and higher income than women. They imagine like that. I think it's [a point of] pride of men. But in practice, he has to stay at home, has no income. At that time, he feels inferior. Inferiority complex. Sometimes his wife says something, but the husband thinks she orders him. He thinks like that. It becomes a quarrel between the man and woman. Finally, sometimes they divorce.

[KII with Information Official]

### 8.2.6 The Challenges of Combining Productive and Reproductive Work

How do I feel? Well, since I was young, I was eager to learn and I had aims, but when I got married, my aims were not fulfilled. My husband wanted me to put the children first, so I had to forfeit all the aims I've had. In my mind I'm always thinking that I could have been a lecturer, an MSc qualified candidate. I could be someone important outside, but all those chances are lost, doing chores at home; I always have

that feeling. However, my friends encouraged me for having such beautiful children and that was that. I'm also pleased and happy. We have no choice, so I have to do my best accepting both good and bad consequences.

[FGD with Muslim women aged 40 and above, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Gendered norms of appropriate behaviour and the material realities that they produce combine to create constraints for women's livelihood options. Among study participants from urban areas and women working in professional roles, discussions concerned women's unfulfilled dreams and potentials, as the gender division of labour had directed women to focus on reproductive work.

I have a friend who was engaged. She was going to get married. She is also a career woman. I think, for her, it was about finding balance with what she wanted to become and the expectation of the fiancé. I think being a doctor and working towards her goal of being a real professional, highly educated woman - not to say that she had any other restrictions because she had all the opportunities before - it was just that personally, relationally it was a difficult balance. Not to say that things worked out, because in the end they didn't get married. I think that it was a choice that she consciously made, not to prioritize her personal relationship and get married at the age when she was expected to get married by her family and social environment. Because she wanted to pursue her study and also she found that being married she would have to compromise a lot more, because whatever we say about balancing family life and work, women always find that they work 200% because it isn't like the husband takes on 50%. They still need to take on fully the home responsibility. That balance, she knew that it wasn't going to happen.

[KII with Education Practitioner, Yangon]

An example of the challenges for women doing paid work is that it must be possible to combine the work with parenting, for which women play the major role. Additionally, the perceptions of employers about expected performance of mothers or even married women impact on women's opportunities when it comes to paid work. Gendered discrimination was found to diminish professional career opportunities for women with children, whose performance was doubted:

44. These findings are echoed in Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE (2011) and Oxfam, Trocaire, CARE, ActionAid (2013).

Actually my husband and I, we applied for the same job in the same organization. They chose my husband. He had an eight month old daughter, and I also had eight month old daughter. They didn't choose me and the reason is I was married having an eight month baby so [they thought] that I may not work as effectively as others who are single or men. There is this kind of presumption toward married woman who are having children.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 1]

Speaking with and about economically well off and highly educated women, including those belonging to the country's very elite, a more conservative view of women's roles became apparent, revealing rigid gender norms also in the upper classes.

The majority of women are home-makers and they would like to keep their role. ... (T)here are barriers for women to work, as they need to take care of babies. If men earn enough, women don't want to do outside jobs.

[KII with Representatives of Women's Mass Organisation 1]

Most of the time, educated women don't return to the workplace after they have children. They have PhDs, but they have to give up their career for the sake of their children. It is a tremendous loss for the country. They go abroad and study very good subjects. ... They study with World Bank support. In practice, they are doing transportation arrangements for their children's nursery school. ... This is a waste for community development. I feel so discouraged. They study big topics impressively. When they come back, they cannot get out of family life and cannot work for the benefit of the community. Women need to change their mindsets as well. They have to get out of the traditional box. This is a real loss. When a woman gets married, it is okay if she lives and depends on her husband. 'She is a lucky one.' This is what people believe. If a wife has to work, everybody pities her.

[KII with Livelihoods Specialist]

### 8.2.7 Navigating Gender Norms in Occupational Choices

Both women and men are steered in their occupational choices by what is regarded by society as gender appropriate. These findings mirror those found in a multi-country study on norms and agency which stated that 'the choices that women and men make regarding work are informed as much by their definitions of masculinity, femininity, and their views of care responsibilities at home as by market opportunities' (WB 2013).

It's just having the opportunity to have equal opportunity. It's up to the woman to decide whether she wants to become a pilot or not, for instance. But we shouldn't be discriminated

because the society thinks that this is a job more suitable for men. It shouldn't be the case. I think it should be left to the women to decide whether they want to take certain jobs or not. And that's not happening today.

[KII with Education Specialist]

For men, conforming to gender norms that hold them to be bread winners means aiming for jobs that can generate high incomes. Some study participants noted that this could become a hindrance for men when trying to find a job that would earn them social recognition.

Men have more difficulty finding a job than women once they are graduated. They are pickier about salary, they want a higher salary. And there would be more difficulties in terms of what job they are seen as more suited for or they will be willing to do, and how much money they get as well. They would rather be a broker getting a lot of money in two or three months, rather than having a career that will take a year to invest in and go slowly up the ladder. This is because of the focus on economic influence of power or money: who earns more holds more influence in the family. And I think the men, they need to be higher earners as well.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

Other masculinity norms that can impact on occupational choices for men have to do with the norm that favours heterosexuality - 'hetero-normativity' - and places higher value on activities that are considered masculine from this perspective.

One of my friends he wanted to be a make-up artist. He wanted to cut hair and design clothes. That was a no-go area for his family. ... Probably they were seeing make-up as either a woman's job or something that homosexuals will do. And a man isn't supposed to know how to apply make-up. ... It is really interesting because a man cutting another man's hair is fine. Thinking about perception, why isn't a man cutting a woman's hair okay? One is seen as professional and okay and a male appropriate format. The other is seen as inappropriate.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

For women, most of the norms restricting their occupational choices can be traced back to the value placed on virginity and modesty. In addition women have difficulties in getting into leadership positions as this challenges norms of the male leader. Jobs that require working late, especially alongside men or travelling alone, or that involve remote postings are seen to (potentially) challenge gender norms; and women are socialized to avoid those occupations.

In my case, my eldest daughter is a professor. She got offered the job as a DG [Director General]. But I don't want her to work in a man's job - DG is not fit for a woman, as a DG needs to work overtime. And she herself does not want to do it. Most women, in their mind, are afraid to work at the same level with men. Changes will happen only slowly.

[KII with Culture Official]

When I work very late there are always questions about 'Why does she work so late?' and 'What does she do?' and it isn't just the neighbours, it is also family members. Appropriate hours that girls should work, women should work, are like 9 to 5, or maybe earlier in the morning, not later towards the evening. And a woman travelling alone for work, it is also [problematic]. It isn't just in Yangon, in the district as well. 'Why alone? Why not with someone?' And there is also this treatment that a lady is ignorant of the risks that could happen. Assuming that there is always a risk and somehow the blame is on the woman because she is travelling alone, ... [the risk is there] ... whether she is travelling alone or not.... Perhaps, it is because of the male dominant society. ... [T]here is a Burmese saying<sup>45</sup> that when you compare a man with a woman, whatever happened, it would be the women's loss or the woman will be the one to suffer whatever... And I think socially as well, this is the view. For men, that isn't the big deal. They can protect themselves or they can just go about without much thought. Whereas for women there is more risk. And they could be socially ostracized even when it isn't their fault. Say something does happen, like she is raped or she gets married early, she gets pregnant unexpectedly. It is [seen to be] because she didn't know how to behave appropriately.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

The most stigmatized occupations are those where the woman's chastity and modesty are compromised. Among study participants, it was mostly those belonging to the societal elite in various ways who most strongly expressed distaste at what they considered culturally inappropriate work for women.

We have heard of people working at Karaoke bars for their living. It's not quite right for young girls to work in those places. ... I would rather eat two meals instead of three. It would be better if we could try not to affect our dignity and morals, but to keep such cultural values individually. We Bamar are a very contented people. We also maintain our culture. We used to value virginity very much. ... This should be controlled as it was before. In my opinion, we should value our virginity and it is far better to leave sex until the wedding night.

[KII with Education Official]

As in literature and movies, there is a recurrent 'script' for talking about what happens, particularly to women, who somehow break cultural norms. According to this script, women who fail to conform to norms are punished. This is also the case when it comes to livelihood options. In the quote below we see an example of how such a script is used for expressing disapproval of women as drivers:

I myself would be afraid to get into a taxi with a woman driver as we think they are inferior. I would prefer men drivers, but the public is ready for accepting. We can see some women driving their own cars. There was one woman taxi driver I spoke to who was filling in for her husband who was the taxi driver, when he was not well. There was trouble when men hired the car and she was abused, verbally. So she doesn't want to do it anymore. Such cases happen because men believe women are inferior.

[KII with Culture Official]

It was common to hear stories of women who more or less consciously restrict their occupational choices to conform to cultural norms and social values.

I think for women, they self-regulate and they self-restrict, choosing work or making choices that are culturally and socially appropriate. Let's put it that way. And acceptable to the family and relatives and also something that wouldn't invite questions or even strange looks ... There are women who have overcome that, whatever religion or culture they have. There are examples. But then the process of it, the impact, the stress and the work that has to be done to get there. I think that will be quite a hard process.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

Such self-restrictions can also be understood in the context of a valued female behaviour pattern especially when it involves sacrificing oneself for one's family, (discussed in Chapter 5).

My mother, she is a doctor. When we were in grade five, my mother was promoted as the Head of Township Officer to another Township. ... She had to move to another Township as a Head of this Township. She decided to move with the higher promotion for six months. After that my mother decided to resign from her job in order to take care of her family and take care of the children. So she felt guilty herself going to another place for her career development. Finally my mother quit her job.... Finally, the position of my mother and my father ... my father became the Head [in his professional role] because he could continue his career.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

45. When the thorn falls on the leaf, the leaf is broken. When the leaf falls on a thorn, the leaf is broken.



### 8.2.8 The Glass Ceiling

One of the most forceful gender norms in Myanmar - that of the male leader and the female follower - is strongly manifested in restrictions on advancement at work. It is visible in terms of the limitations that exist for women to advance professionally and to reach leadership and management positions. Women have been formally barred from certain occupations and positions, for example, pilots and most military positions until recently. In addition there are many areas where women continue to struggle for opportunities even though there are no formal constraints on their promotion. This inability to advance to higher positions is sometimes known as the 'glass ceiling'. This effect was discussed by study participants in relation to the political field and the public sector, as well as in private companies and civil society organizations.

To tell the truth, it's still difficult for women to reach a decision-maker level at work and it's more difficult in society. The impact of society is bigger than that of law. In regard to laws, I have some examples. Women are not prevented by law from becoming a member of parliament. But the social impact on women is worse than a law, for example, a saying says: 'It's a woman who can ruin her own country'. When legal discrimination is compared with social discrimination, the latter one is worse...

[KII with Female Author]

You know what they always say to us? They welcome us to come and take the place that deserves our ability. Yet, there are so many inefficient male representatives at the Parliament. Nobody questions them or their abilities. I mean we will not take that seat if we do not have deserving competency.

[KII with Mon/Bamar Woman Leader]

With regards to the glass ceiling in the private sector, norms such as the male breadwinner and women's perceived physical and mental weaknesses are said to pose barriers for women's leadership. Even though women often have very relevant experience, gender norms are so forceful that women's opportunities remain limited.

People think that women are weak. Our mind is not strong enough. Even women who have a lot of experience are not given equal chances to lead the company. Men are always in the leading position. If we look at the companies, men are the highest. Women are found only in the secondary positions.

[KII with Beauty Queen]

One thing I want to know is why, in most of the country, in every high level position in the business sector, the executives are men? The women are experts in doing transactions, in buying and selling, in negotiation skills - you can see that the women are small merchants at the market. They know very well about money exchange and money value and how to sustain it. She sells the goods to the customer. She has to buy it wholesale and sell it as retail again. Small and big [transactions] are different. Because of cultural discrimination and traditional culture they thought that men are the bread winners. ... That's why they have to play the lead role. That's why in this way [there] will be a lot of excuses about this.

[KII with Female Journalist]

With regards to public sector positions that often entail postings in locations away from one's hometown, norms restricting mobility for women (in turn linked to norms of decency, chastity, virginity and so on) play a role. Such norms are often referred to as reasons why women are not represented at higher levels in government offices to the extent that men are.

A lot of work has very much a gender bias. There are a lot of women in the education sector. But most of them are only in teaching positions, not in management and administrative positions. I think it was only maybe about 10 years ago, women started to have positions in the education sector probably up to director level. And that's very few. ... The position of Assistant Township Education Officer for basic education, I think there are nearly 700 of them. There is no woman at this position... not one single woman! The reason they give is that these people have to travel a lot and it is difficult for women to travel a lot. This is not an acceptable answer, because in big towns, Yangon or Mandalay, travelling is not that difficult. There are a lot of women with experience. But they never consider women. ... I believe there is only one time, maybe over 20 years ago, there was a woman who applied for that position. There was one Assistant Township Education Officer who was woman. Since then, they have not really offered the position to women. ... In government positions it's mainly men who take up the positions that have influence and power. I think it's only because there has been a lot international pressure that there is now a woman minister and some deputy ministers. If you look at parliament, there are only 30 women in over 600 members.

[KII with Education Specialist]



I would like people to change their traditional views. For example, an educated woman should work for the development of herself, and what she has learnt will be useful for the development of the environment. But the fact is, if a girl is equipped with education and job, so as 'not to be too late for a daughter', she is married off. If she has a boyfriend she can marry him, and if not, they'll find a suitable man for her. When she marries her own boyfriend, maybe it's because he loves her or she's given favour, she's allowed to continue with her job and doesn't need to stop work immediately. If she is with child, she has to take leave or to stay without going to work for some time; and if the employer doesn't grant any leave, she has to quit her job. Her husband might allow her to work later and his control sets in. Women were given few chances to decide. It's up to the husband. Once you're with child, you're not allowed to work anymore. In that way, women stopped coming back to work. When she got married to someone other than her boyfriend, the man would not allow her to work. If he has a shop of his own, he will let her

come along with him and work together, but make her leave her job if she's working somewhere. That's the husband's wish. However, when the wife actually leaves her job, it's only for a while that he took her along. Later, he will give excuses and tell her that he'll go alone and for her to stay home. In this way all her education is wasted and all her time is spent going from kitchen to living room or garden or supermarket. I want to see these traditional ways changed. There is no reason for a husband to stop his wife from working and he needs not do it at all. We women are not under anyone's authority. I want things to change so women can decide for ourselves what we want to do. That's what I greatly wish for.

Focus Group Discussion with Muslim women aged 26-40, Mingalartaungnyunt Township



Even women who have made it into positions of authority are acutely aware of the importance of norms around gender and leadership. They described how they continuously work to navigate these norms so as not to upset gender relations too much in their workplaces:

The practice of appreciating women's leadership is needed both in the community level and the educated level. Men also have to recognize women's weakness and strengths. ... Awareness raising about women's leadership needs to be promoted among the men, even at the educated level ... men don't want to work under women's leadership. As a woman leader, I have to consider a lot how not to make the men feel inferior because of female leadership.

[KII with Livelihoods specialist]

Resistance to women's leadership is hard to miss. Several strategies to avoid selecting woman leaders or selecting women leaders who are considered to not have much actual authority were observed by study participants.

In some organizations, women members are selected not so much because they have leadership qualities or leadership skills. Women who are good followers are more or less selected for high positions by men because in an indirect way I think that's how they try to get support for what they would like to push forward. ... Sometimes I feel that there are a lot of women who have leadership qualities and women with abilities, but if they are among a majority of men they can be silenced. This is a challenge in this country.

[KII with Education Specialist]

In discussions with study participants working in professional roles about the opportunities for women to reach leading positions, the negative impact that social and cultural norms had on women's opportunities was the main theme. However, there was also a tendency to hold women to higher standards than men in such discussions. Women's behaviour had to be irreproachable, while men's morality and qualifications were much more rarely called into question.

Although men do not desire to work with women on equal terms, they have no choice but to work together with women. Men used to take the leading role in their family as they are considered to be more authoritative and spiritually superior. However, at some workplaces when women are at a higher position in rank, men have to accept the situation, believing it as their fate. It's true. They should. If the woman is qualified, morally respectable and faultless, men must accept the situation. Without segregating, men and women should work together on equal terms. That should be the standing rule.

[KII with Education Official]

## 8.2.9 Women's Work Opportunities as Emancipatory?

There is an assumed relationship between access to waged work and women's emancipation (Kabeer 2000; Pearson 2007). Sen (1999) has forcefully argued that access to work and income outside the home has a clear impact upon the social standing of women both within the household and in society. While most scholars would agree that women's exclusion from the work sphere has limited women's freedom, several scholars also warn about assuming that work leads to emancipation (Elson 1999; Ghosh 1999; Koggel 2003; Pearson 2007). Instead, these scholars suggest that we need to critically evaluate the way in which, and under which conditions, women are entering employment in different places. Therefore, the effects of employment must be approached contextually (Franck 2012).<sup>46</sup>

There are several indications that Myanmar will embark upon an export-oriented development path through the promotion of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). The recent removal of economic and trade sanctions, coupled with the passing of the Foreign Investment Law (2012), is bringing substantial investment to the country. Given the experiences from other countries in the Southeast Asian region, it can be expected that the primary stages of export-orientation will involve a feminization of the workforce (Caraway 2007). Whether this is beneficial for women's agency, bargaining power, and broader gender equality struggles is, however, much debated.

Several key areas of legislation pertaining to women and the labour market are still pending, including minimum conditions of work, occupational safety and health, and gender equality. The ILO in Myanmar have set up programs to work with the government to address employment, and the challenges to establishing decent work conditions, in relation to increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in two of the following three growth sectors: tourism, the garment industry, and fisheries (ILO 2012). In addition, with regards to collective bargaining and trade union organizing, two important developments have occurred in recent years. The first is the passing of the Labour Organization Law (2011) – making it legal to form trade unions; the second is the passing of the Settlement of Labour Disputes Law (2012). While these developments mark major steps in the normalization of labour market relations in Myanmar, significant weaknesses with regards to the laws and their implementation have been identified. Concerns include insufficient protection for workers, low interest on behalf of employers, punishment and arrests of workers who attempt to exercise their rights (under the Law relating to the Right of Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession), and insufficient capacity and funds of trade unions (ILO 2013; Forum Asia 2013).

46. Case Story 4 in the Annex 2 discusses female factory workers on the outskirts of Yangon, and Case Story 5 retells the story of a self-made female entrepreneur.

Gender norms around appropriate work for women and men are even more powerful interlinked with the age hierarchies that are a strong feature of Myanmar society. Many young girls drop out of school as they feel responsible to contribute to the family income (further discussed in the following chapter). For girls and young women, the most common work opportunities discussed among study participants were factory work, domestic work, and work at karaoke bars. In all of these settings, being young and being female puts girls at increased risk of exploitation. While the contribution towards the family income is a very important aspect of work in these settings, it comes at a high price. Lack of work contracts, withholding of salaries, unsafe working environments, and sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment are among the issues discussed by study participants who have insight into these areas. The findings mirror those found in a study of factory workers in the outskirts of Yangon in 2003, indicating that conditions have improved little. The same study, however, also pointed to the importance of understanding the non-economic reasons for rural to urban labour migration, including experiencing new things and expanding one's knowledge, fleeing from tiresome agriculture work, gaining a good reputation by working in the city, escaping the control of parents and elders, and attaining personal freedom (Chaw 2003).

Some [girls who drop out of school] work at the factory. If they are not accepted, they use other people's identity cards and work at the factories like shoe making, and the textile industry. They get connections from their elder sisters and use those connections to work. They also work at small-scale food production. ... Most of the factory workers are girls. They work for daily wages. ... They are not given full pay for their work because they are girl children. ... Other jobs are working at karaoke. There are also problems around child prostitution. Some children, they don't want to do it. Some girls don't even know that they are being exploited. They are also discriminated against if the community members know that they are working as prostitutes. Actually, brokers always look for virgin girls. If [the broker] knows that a family is very poor, she frequently visits and persuades the mom to push her daughter to work as a prostitute. But the girl doesn't get the full amount of money.

[KII with girl child specialist]

With regards to domestic work, gender and age hierarchies combine to create a preference for girl children, who also earn less than older domestic workers. The interaction between cultural norms, economic necessity, and weak legal protection for girls creates situations that are troubling from the perspectives of labour rights, education, and psychological and social welfare.

People appoint mostly young girls for household work. Older women are also not eligible to be hired as housemaids. Young girls can be hired for 30,000 Kyat per month. ... Elderly women

and young women slightly over 18 are considered unsuitable to be used as housemaids. ... And Myanmar people do not feel comfortable ordering elderly persons to work as servants. They don't want to appoint women who are getting on to 30 or 40 as their housemaid.

[KII with Labour Rights Activist]

Domestic workers are only 4 or 5th graders and they are no longer in school. Parents take 6 months or 1 year's deposit, so they cannot go back to their home even though they want to. We can get them [child domestic workers] from our own connections. For example, I will ask my relatives from Magway to look for a housemaid. They will find someone who they know and who is poor and who is willing to work. ... Some get 30,000 Kyat, some 20,000 Kyat.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

Around our area, we have girls as young as maybe eight or nine. I think the question is whether or not their families can afford to feed them; whether or not the child's income is needed in the family, I think. It is the first thought rather than safety. One line that is usually heard is 'everyone else is doing it'... They come from rural to urban areas, most of the time... Irrawaddy Division, the Dry Zone...[they would earn] about 10,000, 20,000 a month. But then they wouldn't get it, it goes to the parent. And there is always a broker involved. I think it is not only the physical risk, it is also the mental anxiety, being away so young from the family, as well as emotional stress because you never know when the broker is going to come and change [your workplace]. They say [to the employer] that the parents want her back, but it is because [the broker] wants to change house and get her commission. So it won't do any good to connect or develop any type emotional attachment or otherwise to the family that you are working for.

[KII with Education practitioner, Yangon]

## Implications of Findings

In the area of work, livelihoods, and the economy, we see some of the clearest examples of the material implications of cultural norms, namely those that award men and women different wages, as labour inputs are differently valued. It is important to address such practices through regulation of laws and policies, with monitoring for compliance and sanctions if employers continue to discriminate. While the labour market remains precarious for both men and women in Myanmar, women are often found in work that is both unregulated and isolated, which makes women workers particularly vulnerable to abuse. Greater equality of opportunity and remuneration are both needed to change this. This is in keeping with the spirit of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, which aims to address gender equality holistically in terms of systems, structure and practices.

9 Education





The man has short hair, and glasses sometimes, with a dignified air ... probably he reads a lot. And he is educated. He is a thoughtful person.

## 9.1 Framing the Issue

Oftentimes when gender equality and education is discussed, issues around gender parity - the ratio of boy to girl students – take centre stage. In Myanmar, official aggregate figures – linked to reporting on Millennium Development Goal 3 - hold that relative gender parity in primary education has been achieved. Little is known, however, of gender parity and a range of other equity issues in specific local contexts, as detailed studies are lacking (ADB 2012). This in turn affects the potential scope of public debate about gender and education and the understanding of how gender influences educational opportunities and experiences.

Taking a closer look at the education statistics that are available, we find consistent reports of high enrolment of both boys and girls in primary education; with net enrolment ratio estimates reaching roughly 90% in the school year 2009/2010.<sup>47</sup> However, only around 75% of students enrolling in Grade 1 complete Grade 5. Moreover, enrolment dramatically drops after primary education, with net enrolment ratio estimates in secondary education estimated in the range of only 53.0% to 58.3%. Among 10-15 year olds, 29.8% are estimated to be out of school (29.8%). This aggregate figure hides extreme disparities in school attendance linked to income. Among the richest 20% only 9.5% of 10-15 year olds are out of school. Among the poorest 20% this figure is 52.4% (ADB 2012). As the data is not disaggregated by sex in combination with income levels, a detailed gender analysis cannot be done across different social strata and locations. However, it is believed that girls in poor families, remote rural areas, and some ethnic groups may be particularly disadvantaged. With regards to higher education enrolments, women constitute at least 60%, according to official data, but appear to be underrepresented in technical and vocational education and training. It is likely that there remains sizeable disparities in access between socioeconomic

and ethnic groups. Among the key issues of concern linked to pursuit of education, we find 'language and other cultural factors' (ADB 2012).

This chapter sets out to explore cultural norms and social practices surrounding education, including how parents value education for boys and girls. It discusses how the value placed on education is, on the one hand, linked to norms, and on the other hand, to social realities. In particular, the links between education, the labour market, and the institution of marriage are explored. The chapter also emphasizes the role of educational institutions, including teachers, as socializing agents, and unpacks the norms embedded in teaching and learning materials. The principal norms dealt with in this chapter include those that separate boys and girls according to the logic 'what one is, the other is not'. In concrete terms – including in educational materials used in the public system - boys and men are portrayed as: tough; externally oriented; breadwinners; focused on production; intelligent; and responsible for national affairs. Girls, are held up as the opposite of those characteristics: quiet and well-behaved; focused on reproduction; family oriented; and modest.

## 9.2 Gender Norms, Socialization and Education

### 9.2.1 Gender Stereotypes in Educational Materials

A review of text books from Grades 1-7, including the subjects of Myanmar, English, History and Geography, revealed very clear and consistent patterns of the different societal expectations placed on boys, girls, men and women. Boys are seen in active roles, playing sports, climbing trees, and so on. Girl children are typically depicted helping their mothers and studying.

47. Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey (IHLCS) in Myanmar: Poverty Profile (2009-10). Yangon; and (ii) MNPED, MoH, UNICEF. 2011. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2009-2010. IHLCS and MICS estimates for primary NER (88% and 90.2%) are higher than MOE estimates (84.6%). Figures quoted from ADB (2012).



Figure 2: Illustration from Grade 5, English Language Textbook

If you look at the illustrations, there is clear division between the kind of chores that a girl does and a boy does. ... Doing domestic chores is the responsibility of a girl.

[KII with Education Specialist]

The separation in school textbooks of the roles of parents is equally distinctive. Men are shown sitting at the head of the table, reading books, and listening to news, while women are typically shown doing housework. Women/mothers are depicted as caretakers and homemakers, while men/fathers are cast as income earners. A telling example of this pattern is found in two poems in Myanmar language text books for Grade 3 students. The poem titled 'My Mother' describes a mother's responsibilities for her children from the time of their birth; admonishing them and teaching them to behave in a disciplined way. Her responsibilities also include sending the children to school when they reach the appropriate age, feeding them healthy food, and providing them with appropriate clothing. Her love and kindness towards her children are highlighted throughout the text. The poem 'My Father' presents a role that is set as the complete opposite to the inward, family-oriented description of the 'ideal' mother. Expectations placed on the father include making money for his family, skilfully solving problems and managing bigger household affairs. The poem's father is externally oriented, gives advice due to his great wisdom and careful thinking, and

contributes to the nation's welfare. Throughout the textbooks reviewed, events of national importance such as May Day, Independence Day, and so on, are portrayed as largely male affairs.

There were obvious and consistent patterns of gender stereotypes in school textbooks related to future occupational choices and opportunities, such as external orientation and more lucrative types of work available to men.

If you talk about ambition, often in school, children are asked to write an essay on what you want to be when you grow up, like that. For boys, it's an engineer, you become a General, or whatever. And for a woman, the most would be a doctor, a teacher, or you become a nurse. It's very stereotyped.

[KII with Education Specialist]

Not only were men's occupational roles more prestigious and lucrative, they also showed greater variety, while the choices available to women were extremely few.<sup>48</sup> By far the most commonly depicted occupational role for women was that of a teacher. To some extent women, were also depicted as vendors and nurses. In an extensive exercise in Grade 4 English language textbooks on occupational choices, no less than 16 different occupational roles were associated with men (soldier, doctor, sailor, shopkeeper, tailor, gardener, farmer, engine

48. Related findings from a study on Women and Leadership (Oxfam, Trocaire, CARE and ActionAid, 2013) highlight gender differences in career aspirations and perceptions of fewer female role models in leadership roles.





Figure 3: Poems 'My Father' and 'My Mother' in Grade 3 Myanmar Language Text Book



Figure 4: (above, left) Poem 'Our responsibilities', in Grade 2 Myanmar Language Textbook



Figure 5: (above, right): Illustration for Poem 'Smart people', in Grade 7 English Language Textbook



Figure 6: Paying Tribute to the Pillar of Independence,  
Grade 3 Myanmar Language Textbook

driver, fisherman, workman, baker, fireman, postman, bus-driver and policeman) while only two were associated with women (nurse and policewoman), in addition to one girl, who was described as a pupil.

Another example is a poem on professions in Grade 2 textbooks in Myanmar language titled 'Our Responsibilities'. The poem lists 10 occupations represented by men, and only two occupations represented by women. The poem's character and format resemble the Buddhist-derived precepts for behaviour (for example, for parents, children, husbands, wives, and so on), where normative behaviour tends to be framed around 'duties' and 'responsibilities'. In this way we can see how norms around 'appropriate' gendered behaviour (through

occupational choices) are established in an authoritative way.

Norms around appearance can also be found in educational materials, where traits linked to modesty for women and intelligence for men were distinctive features:

Girls are always seen as with long hair and flowers. The man has short hair, and glasses sometimes, with a dignified air ... probably he reads a lot. And he is educated. He is a thoughtful person. Women have long hair and flowers, and with traditional dresses, longyi. ... For men too, but it is a shirt like any other shirt. Their clothes aren't so distinctive I guess.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

### 9.2.2 The Teacher as a Socializing Agent

The teaching profession is among the few available professional opportunities for women, especially outside of bigger cities. Being a teacher is a respected position, and one that allows women to have a professional career without having to risk breaking with gender norms.

Teaching is not so much out of passion or because they like the job of teaching. For a lot of women, this is the only kind of job they can get into. And often teachers are respected in the community. It's a respected position. It's something decent you can do. So a lot of women enter into teaching.

[KII with Education Specialist]

Education Specialists described how teachers, who may not have had many opportunities to question and explore gender norms, play an important part in the socialization of often stereotypical gender norms among the future generation.

I think the teachers, their own relationship with other women and men, influences how they expect the students to behave... Going back to teacher training, I am not really sure whether they are trained in how to handle, you know, boys and girls in the same class room.... There is also this general perception that girls are quiet. When the girls are noisy, the teacher will say, 'Girls are supposed to be quiet. Why you are noisy?' or, 'Boys aren't supposed to cry, why you are crying?' Things like that. They reinforce these [stereotypes] and so [need] to be aware themselves that these perceptions and stereotypes exist. Any individual who becomes a teacher is brought up with these stereotypes and prejudices. She can't help or transform them because she doesn't know any different... Because if she isn't trained or is not aware, then we can't expect her to show something different, to engage differently. So I think that would be really important.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

Moving from the family sphere into the school system was described as an important socialization process, where the children get exposed to norms through interaction with their peers. If attending school in a different location, children also have the opportunity to explore differences in styles and patterns of living and working. However, education practitioners spoke of the risk of the education system reinforcing or even introducing gender norms that the children may or may not carry strongly with them from their homes.

One of our friends' young daughters...the teacher told her in class not to talk to the boys in the class [when] she was about four or five ... in the outskirts of Yangon. And so she repeated that to her mother, 'I am not allowed to talk to the boys. Would I be able to talk to my father?' And I think that is what we hear and what we are allowed or aren't allowed to do which instinctively becomes a habit, ingrained and then we perhaps don't start to question until we see others doing differently.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

A study on community attitudes towards adolescent girls' leadership found that teachers perceive a difference in intelligence between girls and boys. Girls were perceived by teachers to be dutiful and skilled in memorizing their lessons, while boys were seen as stronger in critical thinking skills. Teachers reported seeing girls as shy and timid by nature. The tasks given to girl and boys students in the class also reinforced traditional gender norms. Girls were tasked with clearing the flowers at the Buddha shrine and cleaning the classroom; boys were tasked with carrying rubbish to the bin. A majority of teachers would also choose boys as classroom leaders. They justified their decisions with the fact that since there were novice monks in the class, it would be inappropriate for a girl to lead them. (Girl Determined/Colourful Girls 2013)

Among education professionals interviewed, there was a perception that with increased attention to gender relations, including in teacher training, teachers could potentially become change agents with regards to gender equality. Individual empowerment, however, was seen as a necessary first step.

Especially a teacher teaching at primary level, because children are still at a formative stage here, that's why a lot of cultural and social practices can become ingrained in a child. If teachers who are teaching at that level themselves have confidence and believe in equality of gender, I think it can have a lot of positive impacts. But I am not sure to what extent the education authorities are keen to do this or even see this as an issue that should be addressed. It should!

[KII with Education Specialist]

There is potential for teacher training to play a greater part in promoting values of gender equality, however, a number of barriers exist. While progress has been made in expanding pre-service teacher training, current teachers lack any systematic provision of in-service teacher education and training (ADB 2012). Moreover, while internalized gender norms on the part of teachers appear to play an important part, many other realities of the education system contribute to the difficulties of effecting change in the classroom setting. These include large classes of 50-70 children, lack of teaching manuals and teaching aids, and low quality textbooks. Moreover, low incomes for teachers and the need for second jobs - which in turn reduces the time available for lesson planning - impacts heavily on the quality of education and the potential for changing practices. The needs discussed by education professionals centred on: reformed teacher training to change the culture of education institutions; a massive increase of resources; and greater opportunities for non-state actors to contribute to the education sector.

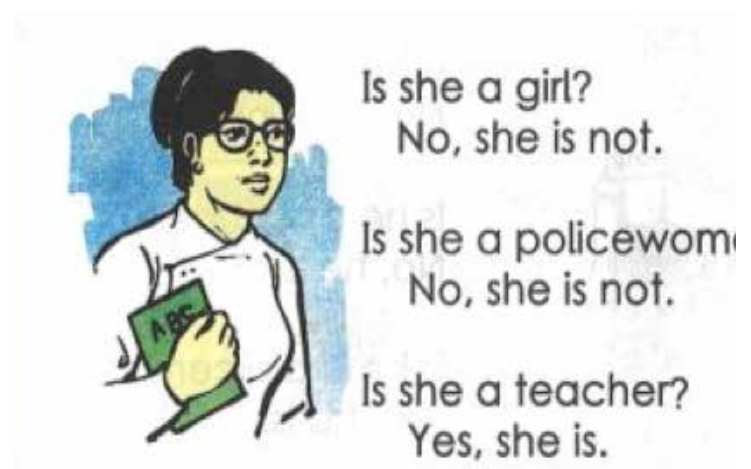
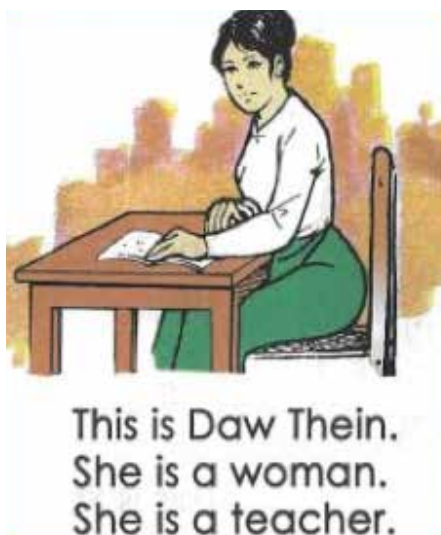


Figure 7: Illustrations of Teachers, Grade 2, English Language Textbook

When we have cultural events at school, more often the girls perform dances and the boys will be singing, and [norms can be challenged] even through little things, where it can be the boys dancing. Boys have been shy to dance because dancing is seen as something feminine. Things like that. It could be a small step working around what already exists in school to say, 'The roles had been assigned but you can take on any role you want'.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

### 9.3 Gender Norms, School Attendance, Retention and Performance

The relationship between gender norms and the retention of girls and boys in school was found to be complex and contextually specific among communities included in the study. Decisions about children's schooling are strongly linked to the economic situation of the family, but also to prevailing gender norms. In most study areas, FGD participants described a situation where the value placed on educating girls was increasing, compared to previous generations. However, while the current day picture was rather mixed, participants in many areas described a situation where girls' schooling was still lagging behind that of boys:

Women can read and write their names. That's it for them. Women in the past were not given chances for education. Nowadays, women have more chances for education. Boys normally stay until 9th grade, girls to 5th grade.

[FGD with Kayan, Takhundaing women aged 18-25, Demoso Township]

Decision-making about school retention is strongly linked to behaviour norms which become internalized at an early age for both girls and boys. One girl child specialist discussed a pattern observed with regards to girls' desire to support the family, which would often mean sacrificing their opportunities for education:

[The girls we work with] are from poor families and they didn't finish their school. ... The families rely more on girls. It is good that they want to depend on girls.... but the bad result is it becomes a burden for the girls. They have to drop out from school early because they are needed. We also found that girls who are working for the family are proud of themselves. But it is a loss that most of the girls don't want to stay at school anymore and they want to earn money for their poor family. So, they willingly stop going to the school. They know their family's real situation. They see how their mothers struggle. Some girls don't have fathers. Some girls don't have parents and they stay with the relatives. So, they know the real situation and they

feel uncomfortable. One thing is they work at the factory in the summer. They get some money from the summer job. So, they know if they work at the factory, they will get money. ... They believe that it is their responsibility to assure that their family is not starving. Their family is prioritized and they accepted that way. ... They don't know that they are being discriminated against. In Myanmar, it is not acceptable to challenge elderly people. Young people are regarded as small people and not knowledgeable like elderly people. So, young people are always silent.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

Families' reliance on girls also manifests in the common practice whereby the eldest daughter remains unmarried and stays with the parents,<sup>49</sup> and continues to care for them in their old age. Depending on the economic status and situation of the family, this reliance may or may not provide an incentive for educating the daughter. Sons, on the other hand, are reportedly not expected to give back to the family in a material way.

A daughter assures them a plate of curry. ... It means if you have a daughter, you need not worry for the future, if you have a son, you get nothing from them... The sons follow their wives after they get married. Most of the parents accept that ... when a son gets married, all of his properties and feelings go to the wife. He is not for the family anymore. We have a proverb for this: 'It takes one month for a mother to convince [her son], it takes the wife one night'.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

Parents' expectations that younger people should look after them was reported to be one reason for limiting girls' education opportunities:

I am thinking back about the past days. They said that children are to be used at work. Children's duty is to take care of them. They don't want them to go [to school] because if they let them go, they can't use them at their work. If it is a girl, they won't send her. They just want their girl to be at home.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

In the rural areas, bright girl children have to stop schooling because of the financial situation. They have to help with the cooking and farming. Parents also have to be aware about the benefits of education. If their girl is bright, they have to let her study until she finishes her school. If not, her life will end up with her marrying someone to rely on. When a girl's life ends up in the kitchen, it is meaningless.

[KII with Livelihoods Specialist]

49. The overall percentage of never married in Myanmar is high, with 54.1% recorded in 2006. (UNFPA 2010).

Another commonly cited reason for discontinuing girls' education was the danger – real or perceived - involved in sending them to schools located at a distance from the home. This also meant that as education becomes more accessible, parents have fewer concerns about keeping their daughters in school. This was evident in some areas, with reports of expanding numbers of schools or improved infrastructure allowing girls safer passage to schools.

Girls are being sent to school up to Grade 5. But the families are reluctant to send them to other villages for high school.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine men aged 18-25, Minbya Township]

Now, women usually continue their education until they finish university. Before, they had to walk to the school on foot, walking across the farms and fields. But now there are some bicycle routes to schools in other places. They had to go there on foot before for the round trip and we worried that children would be endangered in the bushy places.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

For boys on the other hand, disinterest in education and boredom were more commonly used as explanations for their dropping out. Boys were also seen to be more involved in making decisions about whether or not to continue their education:

Boys rarely go to school. Boys are not interested in schooling. When they had to walk to the school until they were 6 or 8 Grade, they would drop out.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

It is clear that the drop-out rate is significant for both boys and girls and that trends point in multiple directions depending on context. However, viewing local patterns with a gendered lens allows us to see how early work patterns among out-of-school children and youth clearly influence retention and drop out for girls and boys at different stages of the education system.

There is a huge dropout rate after primary, between primary and secondary [for] both girl and boy! But it depends. With girls, most of the time if the family needs help, they take a girl out of school, because it is easier for a girl to get a job. Whereas for the boy, it isn't until they reach higher secondary or passed lower secondary that they can get a better job. ... [Girls can work as] domestic workers, selling flowers -things that a boy wouldn't want to do or that aren't manly enough. [Boys] would look for work on construction site, for example, construction sites or anything to do with infrastructure, and also maybe tea shops. They are younger in tea shops. They prefer boys to be younger than lower secondary.

[KII with Education Practitioners]

One study reported that teachers find it unremarkable that more girls would leave school compared to boys, in order to take up work in factories. The teachers interviewed attributed this pattern to their perception of girls' lesser intelligence or the desires of girls to be able to afford clothes and expensive things (Girl Determined/Colourful Girls 2013). According to one Education Specialist, the socialization of boys (active, outgoing, courageous) and girls (passive, modest, obedient) impacts strongly on the extent to which they are able to partake in, and benefit from their studies. This links to the problems with retention and performance of boys:

Because in a sense, for boys, they have more opportunity to explore things beyond the home, and they have an opportunity to socialize with other boys or to play, there are more recreational activities or sport activities. For young girls, they have fewer opportunities than boys. So their place is in the home or in the market. You just go to the market to buy things or to do chores. I think they study more. Also in the home, girls are expected to listen to parents and behave better than boys. That includes studying. I think sometimes boys tend to be more adventurous than girls and they like to explore more. And those elements are not there in the curriculum or in the study. So it's very boring. Girls can put up with all boring steps whereas boys cannot. That's why I think it's not just the boy to be blamed, a lot is to do with the education system where it doesn't allow children to be creative or to explore, to experience things. I mean there is very little experiential learning.

[KII with Education Specialist]

## 9.4 Gender and the Value of Education

Two main reference points were used by study participants when discussing the relative value of education for boys and girls in terms of their future lives. On the one hand, marriage and the expectations of household division of labour that would follow were taken into account. On the other hand, the gendered structures and opportunities linked to the labour market were shown to play a role in decision-making around education.

### 9.4.1 Marriage

With regards to marriage, the idea that women will depend on their husbands after marriage and that education therefore is of little importance to them was found to be prevalent in diverse settings in the country - across ethnic and religious groups, as well as across age groups. The perpetuation of inequality in education from one generation to the next was highlighted in the account of a senior woman leader speaking about the Kachin context:

Among my father's generation, two brothers and one sister, the two brothers graduated and my aunty, she is illiterate. If you see the next generation, us, the generation from my father's and his brother's sides, they all graduated again. We are somehow all educated. But if you compare with my aunt's [children], none of them graduated. They are living with low income work. ... Generation by generation, the opportunities between the girls and the boys are totally different.... Actually she was born in the same family, but she was considered for her whole life as a member of another family, so that's why they didn't want to make any investment for education and for her skills and every other matter. So that creates imbalances in the social status also for the future generations.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

The norms that hold men to be husbands and breadwinners and women to be wives, home-makers, and followers were used in diverse contexts as the study participants reasoned about the greater value of educating boys:

My mother said that it would be enough if one knew how to write a love letter.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Men should seek more education because they have to be the leaders of their families.

[FGD with Kayin Buddhist men 26-40 years old, Hpa-an Township]

While education for women appears to become more acceptable over time, traditional norms of becoming housewives after marriage still live on. This may create a struggle between generations, for women who seek employment following their education. These difficulties were highlighted among the urban Muslim communities:

I heard that girls are being instructed not to continue their studies after they had learnt how to read and write, because they have to work in the kitchen after they have married a guy. All of us sisters are educated and my mom always tells us that we will never get a good husband because we are not skilful in doing household chores. She did not care about our education status. She just measured the value of a girl with the skill of doing chores. Previously, education for girls ended after they passed the matriculation exam. Nowadays, they can continue to study in university, but the family will encourage them to get married. Girls will also be forced to get married when they apply for a job.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

In communities where resistance to women's education has been particularly prevalent, there were voices calling for at least basic education for women:

It is very depressing unless we are educated, if we don't even know what is left or right. We should be educated at least to Grade 5 or 6.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

It was said that women did not need to be educated as they will become the wives when they grow up. That is why our women are not educated now. So we should try to make sure wives can get educated. We have only very little power and abilities when we are uneducated.

[FGD with Kachin Christian men aged 26-40, Myitkyina Township]

#### 9.4.2 Labour Market

When the value of educating girls is discussed in relation to the labour market, it is typically linked to gender norms that divide men's and women's capabilities in binary pairs such as strong/weak, leader/follower, and so on. As women's contribution to the family income gains importance in instances of deteriorating economic situations,<sup>50</sup> one line of reasoning holds that education is something girls need to make themselves competitive in the labour market, and to make up for their perceived physical weakness. Participants in such diverse contexts as Chin State and Ayeyarwady Region said that it was easier for uneducated men to find jobs compared to uneducated women, especially in heavy work such as construction. The opposite side of this argument holds that men can find work where they make use of their physical strength and hence education is not as crucial for them.

Even though a man is not educated he can still earn money from his strength.

[FGD with women, 18-25 years old, Madupi Township]

Women might have to pass through difficult times if they are not well educated, because they cannot do the physical work like men. We need to have formal education as well as informal education.

[FGD with Kachin, Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

As noted in previous chapters, women who must do physical work are generally pitied and seen as transgressing gendered norms of behaviour. Increased education is perceived as giving women a better chance in the labour market. It is also regarded as giving women more respect in their communities:

50. This is further discussed in the section on the economy and livelihoods.



Women do not necessarily need to be educated because they will marry a man one day. They only have to do household activities. It is enough for girls if they are able to read and write. This kind of belief is still prevalent in some areas of Myanmar. However, there are some families that favour girls in education. But if we speak generally, girls are not favoured for education. There is also a belief that a man needs to be educated because he will be the breadwinner and leader of the family.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]



Isn't it better to be educated? A woman will have to be working in a rubber plantation like me if she is not educated. If one is educated, she can get ahead of others even if she doesn't have anything to eat. If one is not educated, she will have to stay behind other people when getting older. If one is educated, she'll be praised by other people despite her age.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 40 and above Thanbyuzayat Township]

Many of the focus group discussions pointed to a cultural shift in terms of upgrading the value of girls' education. Educating women (and men) is still largely calculated in terms of its instrumental value – i.e., what can be achieved by having an education. It was rarer to see education as an inherently valuable good or as a right.

While the standard of education is often criticized, the symbolic value of education is important. In the words of an education practitioner interviewed:



There is a joke among us where we say that [the education certificate] is for the wedding invitation and for the death certificate.

There is a joke among us where we say that [the education certificate] is for the wedding invitation and for the death certificate – the announcement in the papers of the degree with your name, on the wedding invitation or when you die... it's just a piece of paper. There isn't much worth in it. But it is important because dignity and status in this country is not really about valuing experience; it's valuing a piece of paper. And everyone knows that education doesn't connect us with the work we are going to do. But we still want it.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

As education for women becomes more acceptable over time, it was observed that it is also creating imbalances in the 'marriage market':

Once in Myanmar traditions, women were thought to be good enough with just literacy education. Only men could advance into higher education in monasteries by becoming monks. But today it is not like that. Most women advance into higher education while most men drop out early and find work away from home. ... Though women can pursue higher education in Myanmar, their certificates and degrees are of little use in getting a decent job.... An educated woman can hardly find an appropriate partner to support her life since competent men are so scarce now in Myanmar.

[KII with retired Health Official]

## 9.5 Gender Norms and Occupational Opportunity Structures

A commonly discussed aspect of the structural gender discrimination within the education system is the different entry requirements for men and women into competitive

educational programs such as medicine or engineering. An argument sometimes used to defend this policy is that girls' grades are generally higher and that without such differentiated entry marks, women would be overrepresented in certain fields. However, it is likely that occupational gender norms also play a part, as the vocational subjects in question are those generally considered to be appropriate for men. In the case of medical education, an argument often heard is that women would face difficulties being posted in remote locations, as would be required of doctors, and that it would not be safe for them – regardless of the fact that midwives, who are exclusively women, are also posted in remote locations. This suggests the real issue is the ingrained gender hierarchy in occupational opportunities.



In the case of the Institute of Technology, it has been about I think 40 years now ... it's more or less like a quota system, because the entrance level is according to the scores that you made in the high school exam and because young girls get higher marks than boys. There is a quota for men because they want to fill that quota and they go down in terms of education qualification or scores you get. For instance, at one time there were hardly any women who were allowed to study for mechanical engineering. For civil engineering, I think there may be more women who are accepted, like chemical engineering; I am not too sure about electrical engineering. There are different subjects, now it's changed in the case of some subjects, just about 20% women, but in mechanical engineering is almost none at all.

[KII with Education Specialist]

Men get more favours if they are educated. Like recruitment of school teachers recently. Another example is if 350 marks is the cut off point for applying to a university, girls had to have exactly 350 marks while for boys there is a compromise on this.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Other areas of the education system where gender norms clearly influence opportunity are Non-Formal Education (NFE) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The stereotypes around vocational training are based on perceptions of what women should be doing and where they should be. In discussions with organizations offering vocational training, courses such as sewing, flower arranging, cooking, knitting and handicrafts were typically offered to women with the intention they would provide small scale income to supplement the main (breadwinner's) salary. Another feature of the courses targeting women was that they would enable women to work from home, as women are assumed to take the reproductive responsibility in the household. For Education Specialists involved in the design and planning of such courses, going beyond gendered expectations is challenging from both internal and external perspectives.

There is cooking class or carpentry. The general perception is that carpentry would be for boys and cooking would be for girls. As all these subjects have been made available, how do we ensure that the girl would feel as confident to choose a subject that the boy traditionally chooses? And the boys will feel comfortable in choosing a subject that traditionally, culturally would be for the girl?... That would be a challenge.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

Jobs that are low paying and/or low ranking were mentioned as the likely destinations for women after having gone through vocational training, as the programs are designed in accordance with the current gendered labour market.

Vocational skills training at township level includes cooking and sewing, so women can move into the garment industry or food industry. Included is also language and computers, so that women can become secretaries and do office work.

[KII with representative of women's mass organisation 2]

However, some study participants saw Technical and Vocational Education and Training as an opportunity to move beyond the technical aspects and to seriously address the social factors that they feel are responsible for holding women back in the labour market:

Women themselves don't have enough confidence. Even if they become educated, they still think that it's not their domain to make decisions or that important matters should be left to the men-folk. ...When I talk about Technical and Vocational Education and Training, I think it's not just vocational, you can add aspects that are related to gender discrimination or even just in practical terms, like why there is less opportunity for women. When people want to talk about protection for women, what does protection really mean? It means empowerment, to me. If women are more empowered, they are protected. You don't need men to protect you. ... That's the way I see it. So I think trainings and types of vocational programs that I am thinking about should include social issues as well to bring about better awareness. It's not just having job opportunity, it's not just a skill, but to be able to apply those skills in life.

[KII with Education Specialist]

## 9.6 Redefining and Rediscovering Traditional Values in Education

In discussions about social and cultural norms related to education, a number of key informants from religious, literary and educational fields lamented the rote learning that has become the standard in the Myanmar education system. These study participants spoke out in favour of revaluing older traditions and methods of learning, including those that promote critical thinking.

There was a Burmese scholar, Shin Ma Har Ya Hta Thar Ya. You may have heard of this very famous sort of rhyme or poem where he talks about the steps to proper learning. It's called 'Thu, Si, Pu, Bar, Wi, Li, Thi, Dar'.<sup>51</sup> There are 8 steps of the responsibility of learners, of young learners. He said first you must listen, Thu (Thu Nay Ya) means to listen. Si (Sein Nay Ya) means to think about it. That was in the 15th century. Pu means Poat Say Ya. It means to ask what you are not clear about. First you listen, then you think, then you ask, which means discuss. Bar means Bar Thay Ya. It is actually to discuss. Wi means Wait Sa Ya, is to think again, to reflect again. Li (Laik Kay Ya) means to write. After you discuss things, not even to memorize it, but write about it or to note it down. Thi means Thait Kay Ya. It means application, to practice, to apply whatever you have learnt. If you look at these steps they take place only after you have thought about it, after you have asked what you did not understand, after you have discussed what you have thought about it, and think again to reflect to take note of it. Dar means to commit that memory to make it internal. I think we have been misinterpreting that as just to listen and to commit to memory. We missed out on all these steps. Actually this is tradition in our country. We take too many short-cuts. That's why a lot of people now think that our teaching-learning strategies are so weak and so undeveloped. So we don't think about critical thinking. We were talking about critical thinking since in 15th century.

[KII with Education Specialist]

During the decades of military rule, critical thinking and questioning of authority were not tolerated. Some study participants saw this as one factor contributing to the current weakness in the education system. Participants also discussed a gender dimension to this practice, as women are to a greater degree socialized to conformity and submissiveness. Accordingly, revaluing the education norms that promote critical thinking would be welcome also for women's empowerment.

I'm now retired from teaching and I admit that there is something that I have been reluctant to discuss for years. Now, we are experiencing change. Education policies and curricula might be changed too. We have been familiar with the education system in which students were forced to learn by heart and memorize the lessons to pass the respective exams. They had few chances to discuss freely in the schools.

We should organize more seminars and discussion sessions for the students, and the education system should be student-orientated. I also introduced about the terms 'gotna-woteti' and 'wara-woteti'. It is not a teaching to follow and listen to whatever older people said, but we had been practicing it wrongly for ages. We had no chance to discuss against the seniors and older people. Most of the young people are used to it. They had grown up among those restrictions and poor practices. It is wrong that it is rude to complain or for young people to express an idea to the older people. Nowadays, younger people are getting more chances and opportunities to express their feelings and opinions bravely. They can even deal with foreign countries and it is a positive sign of change.

[KII with Male Author]

## Implications of Findings

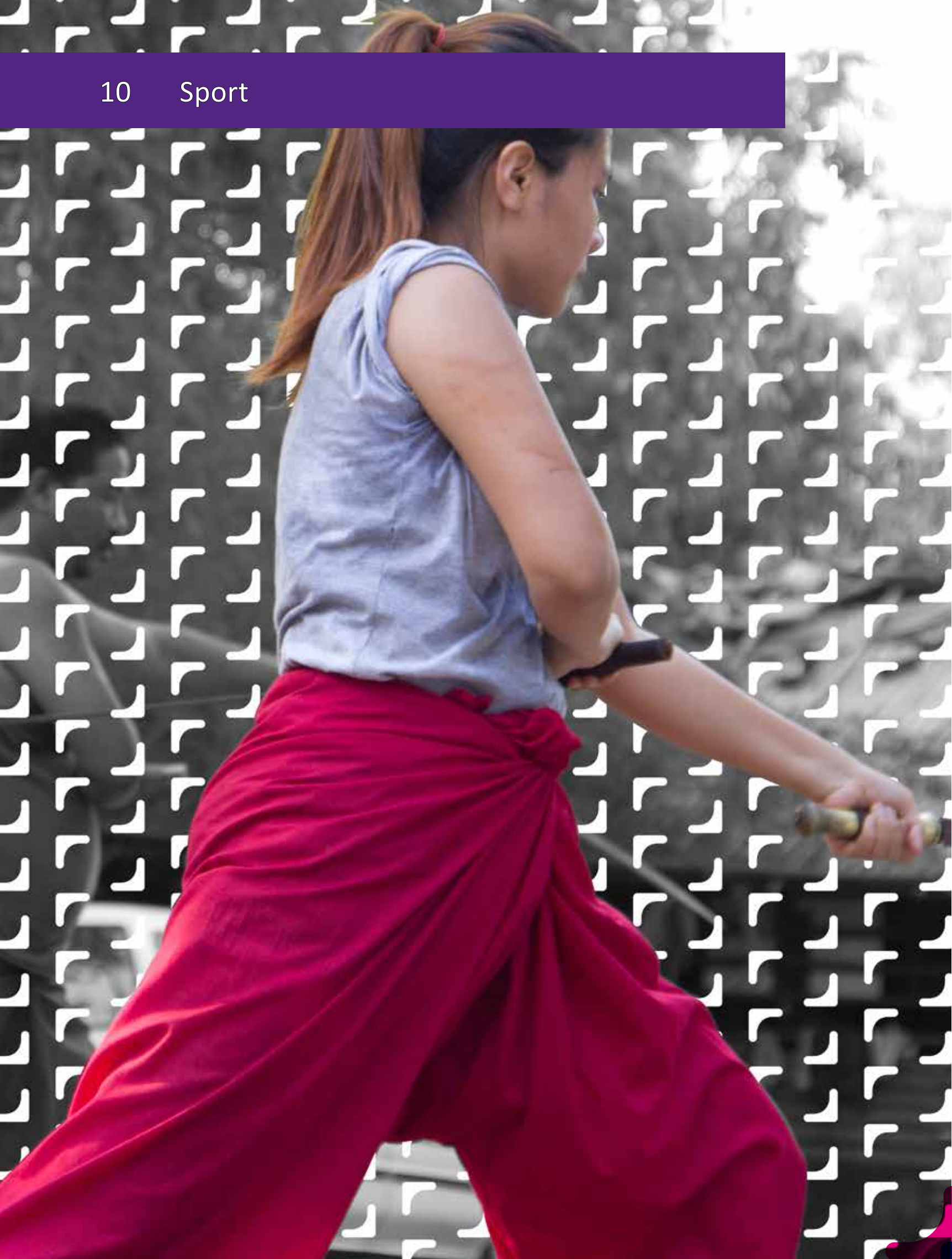
The Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) calls for the development of education laws and policies to address gender inequalities, and the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW) acknowledges that research, policy, implementation and budgets are all important to ensure the right to quality formal and non-formal education for girls and women. NSPAW also stresses the need for the elimination of customs, superstitions and beliefs that are obstacles to education for women. As this study shows, such obstacles are found in relation to access, retention, and career opportunities. Current gender stereotypes, while not the only barrier, play a large part in this, and much work is needed to realize the full potential of the role of the education system as a carrier of values of gender equality.

This study recommends<sup>52</sup> increasing engagement with teachers to break down gender norms and stereotypes. Ensuring that gender awareness is included in teacher training in both formal and non-formal education is an important step in this regard. Such initiatives need to be practical and take into consideration that social and cultural norms and values are deeply embedded within a person. Therefore efforts directed at changing norms need to go hand-in-hand with opportunities for girls and boys to have different study/occupational choices in the everyday school environment. This impacts upon both students and teachers.

51. This poem is included in the Collection of Myanmar Poems for Grade 10 students. The title is 'Everyday ornament like flowers' by Shin Ma Har Ra Hta Thar Ya, a famous Myanmar poet monk during Innwa (Ava) period (15th century).

52. Detailed thematic recommendations can be found in Chapter 13.







To do sports is very good if we look from the view of health. But, it is inappropriate for girls to do sports from the view of culture in the village.

In most communities included in the study, playing sport was not seen as appropriate for women, while it was seen as good and healthy for boys to engage in different sports. Men are encouraged to do sport as it is seen as enhancing their masculinity and is in keeping with the norms that hold men to be active, strong, muscular, and physical. Sports seen as appropriate for boys include playing cane ball (chinlone), watching cock-fighting and bull fighting, playing football, running and boxing, to name a few. The few appropriate sporting options mentioned for women were bar aerobics, badminton, jumping rope, and dancing. Football was seen as particularly unsuitable for women. The notion of women running and playing was seen as going against the norms of modest, quiet and composed behaviour referenced earlier in this study, with sayings such as: 'A woman's step is worth a million coins', reinforcing the perceived value of a woman's gentleness, grace and modesty. These norms reinforce gendered stereotypes and create limiting boundaries around opportunities for boys and girls, and men and women, to engage in play and physical activities.

To do sports is very good if we look from the view of health. But, it is inappropriate for girls to do sports from the view of culture in the village.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Monywa Township]

[Sport] is more appropriate for men, because it is not appropriate to see girls doing sport moving their legs and arms. It is not good to be seen by the public.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

Sport for women was discouraged by both men and women with the argument that it leads to difficulties for women during pregnancy and delivery. These arguments were more strongly expressed in overtly patriarchal communities, such as in Chin and Kachin State. However, with few exceptions, similar arguments were heard throughout the study areas.

It is not appropriate [for women to engage in sport]. In Myanmar, women athletes don't get married. If they are married, they can't give birth. They also have trouble during the delivery.

[FGD with men aged 26-40, Madupi Township]

Previously it was mainly aerobic, but now women are used to doing a lot of sports like weight-lifting. One girl next to my house used to dance. She had experienced a difficult delivery and is unlikely to have another child in the future.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Another reason for the resistance to sport among women has to do with the view that it is inappropriate for boys and girls to mix in team sports, particularly after puberty. A girl involved in mixed sporting teams would risk having her modesty questioned. Public spaces available for sport and recreation activities are reportedly marked as male spaces:

Think about what other people may say about a girl who plays football together with boys. There are some girls who play football. But it should only be with other girls. Boys should play football only with boys. It must be separated.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Women are not expected to be interested in sport. This is reflected and reinforced through both print and broadcasting media, as sporting content is overwhelmingly directed to boys and men.<sup>53</sup> It was also widely assumed that women do not have time to engage in sport and implied that if they did so, they would somehow neglect their primary household duties. No such restrictions are placed on men's sporting interests and time use.

Women of this generation aren't very interested in sport. There are barely ten women in a school who are deeply enthusiastic about it. Their minds are busy with fashion and beauty rather than playing a sport.

[Ma Thet Su Htwe, female basketballer of the Yangon Region basketball team quoted in Myanmar Times special feature 'Modern Women,' June 2013]

53. The strong association between masculinity and sport is a global phenomenon. For example, it is only within the last 10- 15 years that there has a marked increase in the number of female sport presenters or commentators, and that coverage given to women's sport in the media in Europe is beginning to increase. Moreover sport editors are overwhelmingly male. The 2012 Associated Press Racial and Gender Report Card (Lapchick et al 2013), showed that women make up less than 10% of sports editors in the US.



In my family, I am only one who is going to the football field watching football ... because it is not seen as appropriate for women until today.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

There were also voices expressing support for sport among women. However, these appeared to be individually held views rather than accepted community norms, perhaps with the exception of Ayeeyarwady Division, where sport appeared to be slightly more acceptable for both boys and girls:

[Sport] is appropriate for both female and male. I myself am very interested in sport. For women as well, doing exercise is important. It is helpful for the health and for the beauty.

[FGD with Kayan Takhundaing, men aged 40 and above, Demoso Township]

I want to play football. But my father doesn't let me.

[FGD with Kayan Takhundaing women aged 18-25, Demoso Township]

My daughters had to go to the town to represent our village for a sports competition. Women can do sports as well. They are not so bad. Sports and education are related. And it is also good for one's health.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

There appeared to be a cautious move towards greater acceptance of sport for girls and women, although cultural

resistance remains firmly in place. When sport is seen as an issue of national pride, women's performance appears to be more acceptable, as their participation can be seen as a patriotic duty. As the study was carried out in the lead up to the South East Asian (SEA) games held in Myanmar in 2013, these sentiments may have been more prevalent than usual. All the same, media reports of the athletic results during the games tended to give male athletes greater coverage and space.

As this is a global age, both women and men should do sports as we can see in the SEA games. We should not leave the women. We must go together with them by accompanying them. Anyway, men are stronger than women in doing sports.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

Ma Thet Su Htwe, a female basketballer with the Yangon Region Basketball Team, has referred to the difficulties of living off a sporting career, and how it is a barrier for many women wanting to engage with sport at a professional level. She sees fewer 'friendlies' and competitions for women than for men as another reason that women's sport is likely to continue to struggle in Myanmar [Aung Si Hein 2014]

The struggle for women athletes to engage in sport were highlighted with reference to the Myanmar women football team, which was given some media visibility during the



SEA games. Almost all the players have cropped hair, which deviates from the norms of beauty for women. In a media interview, female football players reported that they refer to each other as 'A ko' (brother) on the pitch (Verbruggen, 2014). This suggests a need for creating alternative gender 'scripts' in order to create more space for women. This pattern is similar to the practice of using the term 'tomboy' to women who are generally more active than their peers, and who fail to conform to 'feminine' gender norms:

I have a twin brother, and I fought to do everything together, at the same level with my twin brother, in playing or going out and everything. So I always had fights with [my parents]. I played soccer together with a group of boys and my longyi hung there together with theirs. ... So my mother first, and my grandparents, you know, warned me a lot and they hit me, but I said 'No, I want to play and I want to climb trees'. Finally, they accepted me. Somehow with one step, I was like a tomboy; somehow, my family gave me a different category. And then, I was allowed.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

Moe Moe War from the Myanmar Women's Football Team, described herself and her sister having had to pay a high price for following their dream to play football, including being chased and beaten up by their brothers while they were younger (Verbruggen, 2014).

## Implications of Findings

The UN General Assembly Resolution 67/17 of 11 December 2012 emphasises sport as a means to, among other things, promote education and health, and empower girls and women. The fact that women are discouraged from engaging in sports means that their opportunities for health promoting physical activity, recreation, team work, and fun are limited. Women have much to gain in terms of quality of life from being able to participate in sports on an equal footing with men. Media as well as other socializing agents such as families, communities, and the education system play a part in the reproduction of these norms. While women and sport were getting more attention than normal during the SEA games,<sup>54</sup> it is important that the recognition of women in sport goes beyond competitive concerns, where results are valued as a sense of national pride, and that the individual's right to participate in sports is not limited based on gender.

54. See Chapter 12 for more on this.







## People mistake women's health care with maternal and child health care [only].

There are clear links between cultural norms, social practices, and equal opportunities for quality health care. This includes, but is not limited to, enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health rights and care for men and women. A number of gender norms are influential in relation to health. These include the norms that: hold women's menstruation to be dirty; place high value of women's virginity; and see women foremost as reproductive beings. Norms that hold sex to be a taboo topic; promote childbearing/discourage family planning; and encourage women to sacrifice themselves for their families can negatively impact upon women's health. Norms that position women as inferior in the household setting, and position men as heads of households and principal decision-makers, also have a bearing on health. While these norms can be listed separately for the purpose of clarity, in reality, they interact with and reinforce each other.

Moreover, the norms listed above do not operate in isolation. In some cases norms are also underpinned by laws and policies related to health. Social and cultural norms of relevance for people's health and wellbeing are socialized through peers, families, health educators and health care providers. They are integrated and interpreted in a context where: marriages happen later and where many people remain unmarried for the duration of their lives; (sexual and reproductive) health information and consequently knowledge is inadequate, and superstition is rife; and there is unequal and limited access to health care. In the contemporary Myanmar context, the legal system is still failing to guarantee women's sexual and reproductive health rights and bodily integrity. Information about HIV prevention is opening up culturally closed doors by introducing sex as a topic of public discussion. Additionally, there is reportedly increased access to pornography.

In this context, these norms operate to limit sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly among unmarried women but also among men.<sup>55</sup> Women's health tends to be reduced to maternal and child health concerns, and women's decision-making in relation to their own bodies is limited. Another impact is that men's violence against women

including sexual violence – is rationalized with reference to women's failure to conform to cultural and social norms. Lastly, women who do not conform to gendered norms, notably sex workers, are marginalized and discriminated against. This chapter sets out to explore and discuss these norms and their impact on the lives of women (and men) in different contexts of the country and from different perspectives.

### 11.1 Women as Reproductive Beings

Norms that cast women as reproductive beings - in opposition to men as productive beings - impact in a number of ways on women's health and wellbeing. With regards to the perceived health needs of women, the focus and attention tends to be placed on maternal and child health. Among health professionals interviewed, there was concern that an exclusive focus on maternal and child health risks marginalizing other health needs of women. At the same time, men's sexual and reproductive health needs may be overlooked.

People mistake women's health care with maternal and child health care [only]. But women's health is more than that. So, we should more precisely understand what is needed in detail. ... For instance, [cervical cancer] screening is available only in town where we are running projects. Prophylaxis is also too scarcely taken. We need to do more, as preventive medicines are available only for the rich. Projects on breast cancer and other cancers related to women should be done on a large nationwide scale. Women's health is conveniently regarded [to be] the same as maternal and child health. Various types of healthcare are necessary throughout the life cycle of women. Maternal and child health care is also of importance. But health for girls who are not yet mothers, and health for other vulnerable women like sex workers as well, are of the same significance. Service providers should not neglect the role of men while they are giving all their attention to become women friendly. Health for men should also be given attention. Providers should give messages explaining that men's health is also vital for women and their families.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

55. For more on the impact of socio-cultural norms on men's access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, see CARE (2013).

### 11.1.1 The Value of Virginity

Among the strictest gender norms in Myanmar society are those that value the virginity of an unmarried woman, as a part of overall norms of modest and demure behaviour. Sayings such as ‘a good woman wears only one flower’ embody these values. Conforming to modesty norms is important, and women’s mass organisations give clear messages around acceptable living arrangements. A typical example is the following statement made by a representative of such a mass organization: ‘According to our culture, we can’t accept living together before marriage nor can we accept single mothers’.

There was a sense from interviewees that globalization and the influence of other cultural traditions are eroding modesty as a value. Some linked the perceived erosion of virginity/modesty norms to sexually transmitted diseases as well as HIV. From the perspective of health, there was largely agreement on the need to respond to changing patterns of social and sexual relations so that those who require information and services may receive them. At the same time, there appeared to be strong cultural resistance and fear of further erosion of cultural norms of modesty.

Before we marry, we don’t live together. For Myanmar women and men, we accept this value. Virginity is a valuable thing. But nowadays, because of globalization, they watch TV, Korean programs where women and men live together but they don’t marry. They hear about Western traditions. Myanmar young people want to imitate this tradition. Because of this, HIV/AIDS can easily transfer. For that matter, health staff from the Ministry of Health have to educate. ... If we maintain Myanmar traditional values, appearance of this disease can be reduced.

[KII with Information Official]

There has been a slight change in social practices amongst unmarried young couples. Due to the current increasing transparency and freedom, economic pressure and the desire for professional development amongst the younger people, there is a trend that people are marrying later. But this doesn’t mean people are not sexually active anymore. As our country has been somehow open to modern trends, the duration of premarital-sexual relations between young couples has been stretched out. Though the age of marriage is rising, it doesn’t mean there is no sexual exposure and risk. Now, preventive education programs to avoid undesirable consequences and to have protection are more importantly needed.

[KII with Sexual and Reproductive Health Specialist]

Virginity norms have immense impact on women’s health and wellbeing with regards to acknowledging, naming and discussing health issues. These norms also impact strongly on

opportunities for seeking and receiving health information and services, particularly with regards to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

To consider from the cultural point of view ... it’s still difficult for the unmarried people and young people even to get information concerning reproductive health services when they need them. ... People from the cultural perspective and social norms could not accept it as appropriate when a young person has something to do with such issues. Particularly for the young unmarried women, it is still very difficult for them to get the information or to receive the services when they need them. ... Many young boyfriends and girlfriends face problems of unwanted and unexpected pregnancies and it’s because they don’t have clear understanding and necessary knowledge about that issue. Social norms prevent them from getting the necessary knowledge by making them fear to ask for it anywhere. When they feel afraid and shy to come and get the necessary information, they are likely to abort the unwanted pregnancy when it happens to them.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

Norms that uphold and value virginity are closely linked to taboos prohibiting young and unmarried women from speaking about or having access to information about sex (see 13.2). This makes it difficult for unmarried people, both men and women, to get sexual and reproductive health information and services:

We normally think that reproductive health is more related with married people. This is a common belief. Even married people, people think it is more related with older people ... many people believe that single people have nothing to do with this.

[KII with community health worker]

Usually, [sexual and reproductive health] is discussed among the married persons. I don’t know much about it as I am single.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine men aged 18-25, Minbya Township]

While men are also to a certain extent said to be shy about discussing sexual health issues with service providers, many respondents spoke of a double standard that imposes the virginity norms more strictly on women. It was reported that women have to be more cautious in to managing community perceptions of their reputations:

Men dare to come in and out of the clinic. They don’t worry about people’s opinion. It is different from women. ... Single women are shy. Single women consult with us on a one-to-one basis. Sometimes, it is difficult for them to discuss with us. Even though we ask them, they said everything is fine with

them. If somebody is sitting next to them, they will not share their problems with us. ... A lot of single women are afraid of being looked down upon by the community. If they come, they choose the quiet time. ... We also have to encourage the clients that we welcome everybody both married and single to the clinic.

[KII with Community Health Worker]

There are several barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health rights and services, including accessibility and affordability.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the strength of norms about sexual abstinence and ignorance among unmarried women mean that in order to access sexual and reproductive health services, they may have to pretend that they are married and therefore norm conforming. Service providers may also be reluctant to speak openly about sexual and reproductive health due to their own cultural inhibitions. Taken together, these barriers were said to create a limited range of options for adolescents with regards to sexual and reproductive health. A focus on messages of abstinence only makes it more difficult for adolescents to receive useful advice that meet their needs.

There's still the notion of a double standard between men and women basically. While it is still considered suitable for single men to have sexual experiences, a single woman is expected to be a virgin who has had no sexual intercourse. From that perspective, it's still difficult for unmarried couples to seek reproductive health services. Some of the single clients pretend to be married. Single female clients may come pretending to be married women because they fear criticism for receiving such marital health services, being single. Single women who carry an unwanted pregnancy may lie that they are married when they come to receive such health services.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

At the extreme end of the spectrum are attempts by the communities to uphold norm conformity in order to save face of the people involved. Such actions involve forced marriages in case an unmarried couple get pregnant; paying compensation money to the community as a cleansing ritual; and forcing women to marry men who have raped them (see Chapter 3). Some of these actions are forms of violence against women.

### 11.1.2 The Virtue of Having Many Children

The norm of having many children was prevalent among the study participants. Participants' discussions suggested an increasing acceptance of family planning - at least among women - (discussed further below) as a way of managing the family's financial situation. At the same time, participants referred to the notion that pregnancies should always be welcomed, linked to Buddhist principles prohibiting killing.

The Myanmar culture very much cares about the five precepts. Based on the culture, that kind of high traditional morality not to kill, the women are those who are fully blamed in case of abortion. So based on the norm, the norm is a woman has to give birth, whenever she got pregnant. First, if you don't want to pregnant, you know, protect [yourself]. ... But whenever you get pregnant, the woman has to give birth to the child. So it is the norm. But very contradictory ... if she gives birth to the child very bravely, you know, according to that norm, the society welcome her as a hero. But the one who gives birth to the child, without having a husband ... she was totally rejected and put as a woman with very bad character. And also the children are treated as lowest status. So, these kinds of norms ... even though abortion is illegal, so many abortions happen on the ground, you know, whether rich or poor. But these two norms trap the woman and give her no choice. Either if she got pregnant, without a husband, or if she got pregnant and her husband or her lover died. In so many cases, she is the one who was killed by the elder brothers or father, the family, you know, so the society, as well as the society's perceptions or ideals create inequality. The nation never considered the abortion case as a big matter, you know. It never comes up, that it is a problem. They need to be solved urgently or they need to have some support, you know, services and law and like that. So, these are silent under the surface problems that many women have been facing.


[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

The norm of having many children needs to be seen in the context of the country's pro-natalist (pro-birth) population policy stance. This standpoint is manifested, for example, in legal restrictions for abortion and sterilization (GEN 2013 a). Sexual and reproductive health professionals recommend informing clients that legal and safe abortions are available in other countries. They also stressed the need for increased access to family planning in the absence of other alternatives at the present time. The unmet need for family planning in Myanmar is estimated at 19%, compared with 3% percent in neighbouring Thailand (UNFPA 2010). The limited choices for sexual and reproductive health care and rights to decide on matters concerning one's own body were raised as concerns.<sup>57</sup>

There are many acts limiting and barring women's individual decisions and women's choices. For example, if a woman wants to have a sterilization, she will have to go through many administrative processes. It would be necessary for a woman to seek various letters of permission. Recommendation letters, deciding that it is necessary for a particular woman to receive sterilization, from the physicians is also needed. When a woman would like to decide to stop having more children and to receive sterilization health services because of the


56. This has been established by numerous studies, for example CARE (2013); MSI (2008; 2013).

57. Case Story 6 illustrates a male-led community initiative for improved access for women to reproductive health services.



They were getting ready to marry in three days. The man, who was from another town, came to Yangon to stay with the family of the bride. The bride's parents didn't arrange separate rooms for the bride and groom. Since they were going to get married in three days they let them stay in the same room. Then in the morning, the groom came and complained to the parents of the bride and said, 'Your daughter is not a virgin. Her vagina is too loose'. He said he could not marry her. They did not ask him, 'How do you know she is not a virgin? Do you have experience then?' In Myanmar culture, if you have pleasure with your boyfriend, you are already 'lost'. So because of these norms they put pressure on their daughter and forced her to marry him. All the family members begged him to marry her. And he married her. Her whole life she was abused and beaten and finally, she could not stand it anymore and she filed for a legal divorce. But he told her, 'If you proceed with this I will kill you'. So she stopped. He violated her daily. So this culture puts a lot of women in this situation and they can't speak out. A lot of women are suffering because of these virginity norms.

Key Informant Interview with Senior Woman Leader 3



economic condition or social problems, she has no right to decide or do it on her own. She would not be allowed to decide it with her own desire alone.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

The high value placed on child bearing also needs to be understood in light of the history of ethnic tension and controversies around population figures; the relative size and definition of ethnic groups; and the official registration of ethnic belonging on National Registration Cards (NRC) (see , for example, TNI/BCN 2014).

The issue of high birth rates was discussed particularly in the context of rural communities. This is where sexual and reproductive health information and services remain the most inaccessible (MSI 2008) and where an estimated 87% of maternal deaths occur (UNFPA 2010). Couples marrying at a young age and the prevalence of large families in communities were seen as reinforcing norms for women to have many children. In addition, health professionals spoke of limitations in the health system design and the impact on service availability for sexual and reproductive health care in rural areas. There was a belief that such limitations contributed to the perpetuation of fertility norms in rural areas.

Speaking of contraception issues, there are some concerning social norms. There are limitations advising which level of contraception can be done by which level of health officer. Particularly midwives who are the closest health staff to the public have limitations in terms of what kind of reproductive health care they can provide. As a consequence, choices for women in rural areas are limited. Some issues relate to laws. Some limitations are based on the protocols and guidelines from the relevant government departments. In our country, doctors have a wider range of services that they can provide while midwives are limited to fewer options in providing contraceptive health care. When there are for example 4 or 5 possible ways for contraception, women from the community who only have access to midwives would be limited to only one or two options of contraception services.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

Most of the time, we find that a mother who has many children cannot take care of herself, she is always busy with housework. If we can build trust with her, she shares her feelings and experiences. We explain the health consequences of having many children and advise her to use contraception. If she can't afford it, we give her for free.

[KII with Community Health Worker]

If a young woman is pregnant, she needs to understand that she needs to eat more than the others in the family. That's her right. She is not being selfish or anything like that and doesn't need to feel guilty about it. I think these things are related to empowerment.

[KII with Education Specialist]

One of the concrete manifestations of the pattern where women sacrifice their own needs for those of their families is insufficient intake of nutrition, particularly in situations of scarcity. This is an example of norms that can have serious health implications for women as well as children.

It is very common that mothers sacrifice and give priority good food for the father and children. It is a very serious problem for lactating mothers. Since she gives good food to other family members, she gets malnourished and is prone to diseases when she is pregnant.

[KII with Livelihoods Specialist]

The mother [is seen to] do good when sacrificing herself for the family. These are also kind of norms and beliefs. So, whenever we talk about the woman's health status, you know, we talk about taking care of themselves, taking regular medicines, and having good food. Pregnant woman, on the other hand, the norms teach them, you know, to sacrifice. So they never care about their own health, as well as the health of the baby. So when we give medicine, iron medicine, to pregnant woman, they sell it in the shop, and they buy some food for the family. ... So, these are the norms that directly impact on their health.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 3]

### 11.1.3 The Norm of the Sacrificing Woman

The norm of the sacrificing woman is another longstanding cultural trait linked to norms of female modesty and the casting of women as reproductive beings (Than, 2014). The norms that value women's sacrifice and socialize women to put the needs of their families before their own, were described as leading women to neglect their own health needs and wellbeing. Health and livelihoods professionals spoke of the difficulties for women to manage their own health needs while working for the benefit of their families.

## 11.2 The Sex Taboo

There are strong normative taboos of speaking openly about sex in Myanmar. The notion of sex as something dirty and as private matter, both play a part in constructing this taboo.

The word 'sex' was translated as lein in Myanmar language. But, actually this is not a Burmese word; it is a Pali word. What lein means in Myanmar language is a changing or alteration. We used to call the changing of a junior monk to an ordinary male Shin-Lein-Pyan. It is just an alteration, but most of our people think of the word lein as a dirty word.

[KII with Magazine Editor]

Both men and women reported feeling restricted in terms of which health problems they could share with other people and seek care for if necessary. They directly or indirectly referenced taboos on discussing sexually related matters publicly as barriers to sexual and reproductive health treatment. Economic factors also hugely influence whether or not to seek healthcare when ill; however, norms concerning modesty, (im)purity, virginity, and monogamy appeared to have equally serious impacts on the health-seeking behaviour of men and women.

There are cancer cases like cervical cancer and breast cancer. They hide the diseases because they feel shy to let others know. People come to know about their disease only after they had died.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Monywa Township]

the community (see 11.1.2). Sometimes women would make exceptions to confide in female family members or female health care providers.

The issues that appeared the most difficult to discuss publicly were the same issues that women saw as their biggest health problems. Women's shyness was described as partly due to lacking the terminology to describe their own bodies and symptoms. Moreover, women worried about their reputations if they were seen to be engaging in behaviour that is not culturally sanctioned.

Women would discuss these issues among women. Like breast lumps, women never talked about it with men. They discuss with their parents, certainly with their mothers. We use some herbal medicine if the condition is not too bad.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]



A lot of young girls who enter puberty, they think that speaking to boy will make them pregnant.

[We don't discuss] health problems that seem to be bad from society's point of view. Before I have menstruation my breasts hurt. I daren't share with anybody. It is a taboo.

[FGD with women aged 18-25, Madupi Township]

Because we are village women we feel shy to discuss uterus problems.

[FGD with Chin Christian women over 40 years old, Madupi Township]

The patterns described were similar across the study areas, although Ayeyarwady stood out as an area where there was more sexual and reproductive health information available. Among women, issues related to sexual and reproductive health, particularly menstruation (see section 11.3), were described as difficult to discuss with others. The same was true in relation to body parts that have sexual and reproductive connotations, such as the breasts. Issues around miscarriage were also reportedly avoided for fear of invoking blame from

Usually HIV/AIDS [is not talked about]. Some women dare not to discuss when they suffered from ulcers in the breasts or genitals.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 26-40, Kalaw Township]

Even if it is not HIV, they can't reveal it to others. I don't know how to say. I also dare not talk about it. ...Sorry if I'm rude - for example, a woman got pregnant. She would not dare to tell about it to others, even though she wasn't suffering from any STDs. There are some conditions like that. A woman will not have the heart to share it to anyone else because she's afraid that people would say that she has done something inappropriate.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

Some girls might feel shy even to discuss problems about their genitals with a female doctor.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Men also reported hesitation in discussing health issues related to the sexual and reproductive organs. In most cases, their concerns related to STIs and HIV and the stigma from potential association with what is considered immoral behaviour, such as adultery or sex with sex workers. Men's sex with other men would also likely fall under the same category, although this was not discussed explicitly by the study participants. Other health issues related to the sexual and reproductive organs such as urinary tract infections were also seen as shameful by men and therefore not readily discussed with others.

For example, if other people knew about his disease, they would look down on him. They might come to an easy conclusion that he might have been to prostitutes.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25, Thanbyuzayat Township]

While there was a certain amount of hesitation and shyness with regards to men discussing their sexual and reproductive related issues, there was more openness and acceptance among men to discuss issues of this nature compared to women.

Everyone is discussing and consulting on men's illnesses, while women's illnesses are usually considered confidential and discussed between women only.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine men aged 40 and above, Minbya Township]

### 11.2.1 The Lack of Sex Education and Information About Sex

As with restricted access to health care, sexual norms regarding virginity and taboos on discussion of sex limit the availability of sex education, particularly for young girls and women. Young women worry as they do not always know what kind of behaviour gets them pregnant. They also have a difficult time ensuring that they are able to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in case they do have sexual relationships.

A lot of young girls who enter puberty, they think that speaking to boy will make them pregnant. That is happening today.

[KII with Education Practitioner]

I was in sixth standard. About eleven [years old]. One day, three months or five months after I started menstruating - at that time, I played a lot - I hit a man. And at night time, I got shocked! I thought 'Oh my God, I am pregnant because I hit one man, while menstruating! Oh my God, I am pregnant, I don't know how to solve this problem!' I was crying in the toilet, all day and night, I didn't know how to solve this problem. I wouldn't know who the father was, even if I had the baby. Who is the father? I didn't remember who I hit.

Day and night, I cried and cried. I also thought of committing suicide. But I didn't know how to commit suicide. I didn't know how to cut this one, and this one [gestures to her wrists]. And then, one day, my cousin-sister came and I told her about it. She was laughing and she told me that I couldn't be pregnant. If I had committed suicide, my friends, family, my parents wouldn't have known why I did it.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 3]

For boys, pornography was the most frequently mentioned source of sexual content accessed. Study participants saw this as problematic, because pornography does not provide the information that boys and young men need to protect themselves sexually. The sexual content gathered from such sources also reinforces norms of male sexuality as insatiable and potentially violent and female sexuality as submissive and objectified. Pornography is accessed alone and shared among male peer groups. In combination with the limited or total lack of sex education for both men and women, the role that pornographic material has come to play in shaping understanding of sexuality among men was worrying to those working in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

There can be questions such as, 'Who is a trustworthy person to discuss this issue with? Where can they be found? Where should I go for the specific information I need to get? Besides, boys say that they normally discuss issues among their peer group, which could sometimes cause harm instead of benefit. When they would talk among their peer group about how a real man should perform and what is not manly, they would focus on strong masculinity and that could lead to negative peer pressure. ... Sometimes, parents and teachers prevent young women from speaking and asking about such issues. They would say, 'This is not the appropriate topic to understand or talk about.' Then younger women are likely to get the necessary information only after being infected eventually.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

The existence of HIV and the health risks associated with it were described by study participants as a situation that warranted a break with the traditional taboos on speaking about sex. However, it appeared from the participants' accounts that HIV preventive information rarely went beyond discussions of disease control to broader sex education and sexual and reproductive health and rights information. Openness by necessity in order to prevent the spreading of infections - not by a wish to break with sexuality norms per se - was the typical line of reasoning. There was not the same push for increased openness with regards to sexual and reproductive health and rights at large. Although unsafe

abortions cause immense health problems and are among the top three causes for Myanmar's high maternal mortality rates (UNFPA 2010), they are still not openly discussed.

You will see resistance in every corner of the world – not only in Myanmar but also in every Asian country. Sex education is taught and shared because it is a must. It might not have been a problem if knowledge on HIV wasn't discussed publicly. Now we discuss it widely as it has become an unavoidable topic. HIV is still spreading among people day by day. There are many people who have to receive medical treatment. We can't hide that reality anymore and we have to discuss about it necessarily. I know there are some people who do not like open discussions on such issues. I produce an educational radio program on MRR about HIV awareness. After four or five radio series had been broadcasted on MRR, I received a letter of suggestion from a monk explaining that MRR is a radio station that represents the image of our country and that he also listens to the channel. Therefore, such programs should not be aired through MRR. The monk was right from his own point of view. Yet some worldly activities such as marriage and having children could not be prevented or stopped or such disease would not stop spreading from one person to another. People like me have to publicly voice such issues. If I can't get the opportunity to share through this kind of channel, then I have to find a medium that permits me to do so. There would unsurprisingly be opposition for 'Hnyo',<sup>58</sup> of course. Still, we have to say what we have to say in the ways that we can. Just for the desired message to get to the people who need it, we must say it.

[KII with Female Actress]

In discussions about the appropriateness of making sex education available to the Myanmar public, the question arose as to whether there have historically been taboos on publicly discussing sex. According to one study participant, a longer time perspective on the issue is useful and helps us to see changes in the political stance on the issue:

I want to start from the parliamentary era when U Nu ruled our country. These are my experiences in that age, as I grew up in the 'Ma-Sa-La' age [Myanmar Socialist Party]. There was a famous writer namely 'Mahar Swe' in that age who wrote such kind of literature which we can call sex education. He mentioned different types and positions of sexual intercourse in his book. And 'Karma-Theikdi' book written by Sayar Pe Moe Nin was also very popular at that time. The famous Indian 'Karma-Sutra' was also translated into two languages during [U Nu's] age. What I mean is that we could publish the

books related to sex education and sex freely in that age. The audience would evaluate the value of the books - what we call democracy. But these books were banned in the age of U Ne Win.

[KII with Magazine Editor]

### 11.2.2 ... and the Wish For It!

One of the more surprising findings from the community data, given the strong normative emphasis on modesty, pre-marital virginity, and the widely held taboos of discussing sex in public, was the near universal acceptance and desire for young people - both boys and girls - in communities to be able to access sex education. Male and female community members of all age groups spoke pragmatically of sex education as something that could be life-saving, particularly in protecting youth from sexually transmitted infections and HIV.

Young people should know it. Otherwise, they will get worse consequences from not having the knowledge. Some people had to risk their whole life because they knew nothing about sex education.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Girls should know this kind of information, just to avoid the risks in the relationship with their boyfriends.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

Men should know it because they need to know how to have sex with a woman including their wives, how to prevent getting infection.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine men aged 18-25, Minbya Township]

It appears that HIV prevention sessions, which have been extended to communities in the last decade or so, have led to community members seeing the need for and beginning to accept sex education. However, from the way that such sessions were described, it appears that the information provided has narrowly targeted disease prevention. Much ground remains to be covered in terms of (adolescent) sexual and reproductive health and rights. Moreover, the continued association of sex education with immoral behaviour may be a hindrance to its wider acceptance.

Interestingly, there was a difference in urban, elite and official perceptions of sex education in comparison to those from rural or smaller communities. Among the former group, the need to conform to cultural norms appeared to pose greater barriers to accepting sex education. Attitudes in villages and smaller communities on the issue were expressed more pragmatically.

58. Hnyo Magazine caused controversy through its first and only publication in November 2012, combining sex education messages with seductive images of scantily clad women. The magazine had its license revoked by the Press Scrutiny Board soon after censorship was formally abolished in September 2012.





In 2008 ... I met a girl, she was about 19 or 20. She told me her story. Once she asked her aunt how to do pet spaying and then, what she told me was that she would like to know what is spaying. That is why she asked her aunt. But at that time, she had a boyfriend, and her aunt told the girl's mother 'Okay, your daughter is asking me like this. So please also ask her'. ... And then the two sisters, mother and aunt, forced her to tell what happened. 'Did you sleep with your boyfriend, why do you ask?'. ... They pressured and also scolded her, day and night, day by day. So after many days, she finally decided to get married with the boyfriend. Now she is a mother, living with her parents-in-law. The way she told is she had a lot of potential, and then she did not continue her education. This is often the case with norms, the woman should not ask sexual things. If she asks, it is assumed she must have something to hide, or she would like to do something. That norm forced her to get married early.

Key Informant Interview with Senior Woman Leader 2



Some people don't know about health, how to protect when they want to have sexual relations. In this case, we need to give education about sex. If they want to have sexual relations with other women, who are not their wives, they have to use condoms. It's good for health. But according to our tradition and Buddha's teaching, married men and women must not have sexual relationships with other people. From points of our culture and religion, it's not acceptable to have sex with other people. But for the side of health education, health staff from the Ministry of Health have to educate people, how to protect from HIV/AIDS when people have sexual relations. That's why we need [sex education]. Although we are Buddhists/Myanmar, some people did not obey the Buddha's teaching. They easily have sexual relations with other women or men. For those people, they have to use condoms.

[KII with Information Official]

Since sexual and reproductive health in communities is so strongly seen to be associated with married people, particularly married women, sexual and reproductive health and rights information catering to young people remains an unmet need. In addition to cultural shyness to discuss the issue, lack of time and little prioritization of the topic within the education system were highlighted as constraints by education experts interviewed. However efforts are reportedly underway to strengthen the standing of sex education in national education law and policy (see, for example, Michaels 2014). Only in Yangon did study participants speak of having received some form of sex education through the education system.

I had heard from my teacher when I was in grade 11. After that, I had no sources for such information. We just shared between our friends.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

We had education sessions on sex when we were in high school. Female doctors came to us and met with boys and girls in separate halls for sex education.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Providing sex education was also discussed as something that could help young people (particularly women) 'avoid mistakes', i.e., getting pregnant before marriage, which would be very stigmatizing at the community level. In that sense, having access to more information could help community members conform to widely held norms of modesty. This has implications for how information is presented and for the development of Sex Education Curriculum and learning tools.

Sexual and reproductive health specialists participating in this study observed that cultural barriers to discussing sex were being broken down with increased information. Their statements suggested that increased awareness may lead to increased acceptance of sexual and reproductive health concerns among men and women.

HIV is still a sensitive issue among not only women but also the communities as a whole. ... As the public's sensitivity goes down, more people begin to want to know about it and more people come to us to get information. It's the same with reproductive health issues. As more organizations work for educating the public on reproductive health, more people know about those services and come to us. In our organization, the number of clients is increasing. It's because now, people have more knowledge about those health issues and they are beginning to accept them. ... Some deep-rooted individual views haven't changed yet. Within some families, there are cases that can be done only with the husband's approval and some particular cases are still considered women's business. People are starting to have more open and welcoming attitudes towards reproductive health services.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

In Ayeyarwady Region, the trend towards increased openness could be observed, and sex education appeared to have become a more normalized topic among respondents. Many spoke of the favourable impact health-related NGOs had brought in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Due to health education received from NGOs, family planning was also reportedly improving. Study participants spoke of being able to make informed choices about their desired family size in relation to their economic situation.

I think it is not an issue to be shy about. As the educators are not shy, we, the listeners, do not need to be shy. [The health NGO] came to our village after Cyclone Nargis and they conducted health education sessions on reproductive health every three months. Now the villagers are familiar with it. I think we should start to educate the teenagers about sex because they are willing to learn and test new things; they want to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they want to drink alcohol, etc. So, we should focus on them.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist men aged 26-40 years old, Bogale Township]

### 11.3 Menstruation as Dirty

Norms that hold menstruation to be something, dirty, shameful and inauspicious hold sway across the country. A large number of misconceptions around menstruation exist, including the need for changing eating habits and hygiene practices during the time of menstruation and avoiding sexual relations. These ideas are publicly propagated along with a host of restrictions and prejudices that seek to control and regulate women's behaviour. Some social restrictions are limited to the period that women are menstruating. Other social and cultural practices, such as the exclusion of women from a variety of holy places and functions (see Chapter 5), are applied to women generally throughout their lives with the justification that they, as a sex, do menstruate and that this makes them impure and of lower status compared to men.

During menstruation, we can't touch water. If we touch it, we will have the women's disease. We learned this from our parents.

[FGD with women aged 18-25, Madupi Township]

The misconceptions around menstruation were prevalent among both men and women. They were also found among the younger generations suggesting that misconceptions are socialized between generations. The restrictions and misconceptions surrounding menstruation, paired with the taboo of speaking about the body, sex and reproduction combine to make young women scared, worried and insecure as they reach and go through puberty and into adulthood.

They don't know about what is called puberty and reproductive health. What there is in the medical field and what we know from our surroundings is very different. There are social practices that girls are taught when they have the menstruation. For example, no coffee, no green tea salad, no washing hair, no eating ice. They also don't know why they menstruate and what to do about hygiene. ... They learned this kind of restriction from their mothers or sisters. They are told 'if you drink coffee, menstruation will stop'. ... We are told that we can die if we wash our hair when we are menstruating.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

I heard that a woman can get pregnant easily if you have sex at this time. And I heard also that [women] should not take a bath by pouring water over their heads during their periods.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine men aged 18-25, Minbya Township]

The restrictions on menstruating girls and women were similar across geographic regions and religious and ethnic groups, with minor local variations. For example, women in Tanintharyi were said to be prohibited from performing any religious activities; eating certain foods; climbing trees; and washing their hair. In Kayin state and Mon state some of the respondents suggested menstruating women should stay away from the public altogether during their periods. Menstruating women in Ayeyarwady and Sagaing had to follow an extensive list of restrictions including prohibition on donating food to the monks. Among Muslim communities, where cleanliness is an important religious virtue, the respondents discussed feeling caught between wanting to maintain good personal hygiene, but being afraid - in some cases for their lives - of breaking cultural taboos of washing during their periods.

I had been told not to eat lemon, banana, plums, green leaves and to avoid washing my head and using cold water during my period. I heard that one woman died during her period because she went to a beauty salon to straighten her hair. So I feel very bad to be a woman in this world. I don't care and so I always wash during my period to avoid being unclean.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

The emergence of modern products such as sanitary pads was discussed in positive terms among women. They found that such aids had helped them live more comfortable and hygienic lives. Whether the increased access to sanitary pads had also contributed to the erosion of restrictive norms around menstruation, however, was less obvious, as exemplified in a dialogue among a group of older Mon women:

They need to avoid it [going outside]. How can it be considered appropriate to be going around? There was nothing much more than a piece of longyi before but now there are some pads available.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 40 and above Thanbyuzayat Township]

It was also clear that discussing menstruation openly - including the products associated with it - is still a cultural taboo.

They are very shy, they don't want to open up. They are really shy to talk about this with other people. Even mothers don't know that their daughters are menstruating. They learn peer to peer how to use sanitary pads.

[KII with Girl Child Specialist]

A lot of people criticized TV advertisements for monthly pads for women including the famous writer, 'Sayar Lu Htu Sein Win'.

[KII with Magazine Editor]

You know what they say to us? They say that our menstruation is a dirty thing. When the room is prepared for a child to stay, we have to hang our clothes at the backyard covering them with a sheet so that other men could not see them. But our brothers' and nephews' clothes can be hung in front of the house. We don't have a clue. We don't know that we are discriminated against by our culture.

[KII with Mon/Bamar Woman Leader]

## 11.4 Pregnancy and Childbirth as Shameful

The norms around pregnancy and childbirth mirror to some extent those found in relation to menstruation. While women's reproductive role on the one hand is held up as a strength and with pride, it is clear that the value attached to the reproductive function as opposed to the (male-oriented) productive function is lower. Moreover, the separation of male and female activities and spaces to maintain men's hpon is also found in relation to childbirth. Some participants thought of this separation of spaces as a loss for couples who are about to become parents and a missed opportunity for the husband to support his wife and connect to his child.



Gender inequality and particularly gender norms, you know, they create a lot inequality, and impact on women's health, particularly on sexual and reproductive health. Such kind of norms, like the women who are sexually active are loose women ... and the norm that the woman should always be ready whenever the husband is ready to have sex. And also, linking with the law, marital rape cases are not considered as a rape. There are so many inequalities in sexual relations between the woman and man, based on these norms. But the woman is expected to behave as a good wife. And then, the society, gives pressure to the woman, you know, not to talk about sex and sexuality and particularly about the private matters between the husband and wife to outsiders. Not to the family members, also not to the father and mother. So these are norms that are about the 'ideal woman', 'good woman', whether she is rich or poor. And, also, this creates violations, domestic violation. If the husband, if the man, maybe, is like that kind of norm, it can be interpreted as a right to violate ... maybe not physically but verbally or in some other way if women could not treat them 'well' in their sexual relationship.

Key Informant Interview with Senior Woman Leader 5



In some villages, people still practice the traditional belief in which men are not allowed to enter into the delivery room for 45 days after the delivery. It's bad that the husband is barred from entering into the delivery room when the woman must be feeling down-hearted over her delivery. People think entering into the delivery room can make a man lose his masculine power. A man can come in only after washing the room with soaps and shampoos 45 days after the delivery.

[KII with Shan Woman Leader]

I think giving birth to a baby is such a glory. And it's his own baby. If it's going to make him lose his masculine power, he must have lost all his power and fortune a long time ago. Think about how much a woman must be feeling small and downhearted.

[KII with Kayan Woman Leader]

There are a number of cultural practices and superstitions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, mentioned across the study areas by different age groups, such as not being allowed to attend funerals. Some restrictions are clearly based on ideas of preserving the health of the mother and baby, such as avoiding the lifting of heavy objects during pregnancy. Other restrictions risk contributing to victim blaming of the women - as they are held up as responsible for the success of the pregnancy - if things do not go well:

If women are pregnant, they shouldn't eat crow meat. They shouldn't go to funerals. These are the restrictions.

[FGD with Kayan Takhundaing, men aged 26-40, Demoso Township]

Pregnant women must keep focus on being gentle and tender, and not eating meat so their delivery will be uncomplicated. And they have to keep the Buddha's teachings always in mind for their children to be beautiful and free of birth defects.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 18-25, Bogale Township]

Pregnant women should take a shower as early as possible in the day. Otherwise, her health status will become worse. If a woman takes a regular bath, she might experience a difficult delivery due to a retained placenta.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Monywa Township]

family planning methods, while describing their husbands as apprehensive or even hostile to the use of family planning methods.

Some clients want to have IUDs inserted but their husbands don't like it. ... Their husbands and their mothers-in-law influence decisions about contraception. Most of the time, clients want to use IUDs, but they can't persuade their family members. Sometimes, they use the services without letting other family members know. ... I find that male participation is very low. Some women use contraception behind their husband's back. They leave the record book at the clinic because their husbands will make the problems if they see the record book. Some women take pills as well. Only women can know how hard their life is when they give birth.

[KII with Community Health Worker]

While women are largely held to be responsible for ensuring that family members are fed and healthy, they are not always able to make decisions that would guarantee those outcomes. Study participants in Kachin State spoke of family planning as women's responsibility but also as something that could easily lead to disagreement and accusations of infidelity.

Women usually have to take care of [contraception] as men do not care how many children we give birth to. We wanted to take as many children as we could previously because children are a blessing from God. Now we consider the number of children in a family according to the family's financial income.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Women could be accused as immoral for such kind of decisions [related to family planning]. In a family, women certainly have to do a lot things compared to a man who is only making money outside. And the men usually disapprove of decisions to use contraception when women discuss it.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Study participants in Shan State and Rakhine State also spoke of family disagreements over the use of contraceptives. They reported instances where women would use contraceptives behind the backs of their husbands in order to avoid conflict in the household. These discussions illustrated a situation where norms position women as reproductive beings whose main function it is to give birth to many babies. Women's lack of control over their own bodies was highlighted:

We don't have a plan for having children. We have babies until menopause. Previously, women reached menopause at the age of 40, but now menopausal age is 50. I do not like female sterilization. To have babies is the duty of a woman. We should not stop the babies who are supposed to come to us. Nowadays, most of the couples only have two or three children. But they cannot have more children after the woman

## 11.5 Decision-Making on Sexual and Reproductive Health

The norm that places high value on women's fertility works in combination with the norm of the male household head and principal decision-maker when it comes to family planning and decisions about use of contraception. Across communities, there appeared to be a dividing line between men and women's attitudes towards family planning. Women study participants spoke positively about adopting various

had undergone female sterilization. Some women modified their uterus so as not to conceive and this became a problem later, when the husband realized. We should have babies, because a quarrel between the parents can be stopped by a glance at their child's face. And it can also reduce the rate of being divorced. I heard from the Buddhist history that a monk will not come to a house without a child.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist men aged 40 and above, Kalaw Township]

A particularly vulnerable group when it comes to decision-making about sexual and reproductive health and access to services is sex workers. In particular, this is problematic for sex workers who are controlled by pimps who act as the principal decision makers:

Sex workers form a client group that faces much discrimination. If they come at the same time and meet other groups of clients, other clients show them contempt and unwelcoming manners. For the sex workers, they can come to us only if their pimp or brothel house owner allows them to go - except street-based or freelance sex workers. They are treated with disdain for two reasons: as women and as sex workers. Besides, since the nature of their work means they are controlled and dominated by other persons, they are unable to go freely even if they want to receive health education. Their pimps or employers would not release them to come to us, as that can be unbeneficial for their business.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

The role of health care providers in reproducing gender norms was highlighted in discussions with study participants. Health care providers themselves have internalized many of the norms restricting women's access to health services. Thus their attitudes and actions can prevent female clients from making decisions concerning their own bodies.

In some places, service providers believe that a woman must give birth to a child no matter what. Some providers dislike contraception. Some would ask their clients to go ask for their husbands' permission to receive reproductive health services. In some places, not only the husband but also the husband's parents may have authority and influence on the wife's decision of whether to have children or to not have. Those social norms are the factors affecting women's decisions on whether they would receive reproductive health services or not.

[KII with SRH Specialist]

With regards to decision-making about the health care of family members, particularly children, women were seen as responsible for positive health outcomes. At the same time women were not always enabled to be the ultimate decision-makers, particularly in cases where health related decisions involved larger household expenses.

The mother is responsible for health related decision-making and will be blamed if family members are not healthy. If the children are sick, I am blamed. I am asked to buy the medicine. I am sad that I often have to take the blame from my husband.

[FGD with Kayan Takhundaing, women aged 18-25, Demoso Township]

I think, gender inequality impacts a lot on health, too, because of cultural practices and norms within the family. If the child is sick, the mother is a caretaker, and the mother learns about the symptoms. The mother asks the doctor, the mother asks the friend, what the symptoms are. By the time she knows, it's time to send the child to the hospital. Then, she has to make the decision. But she is not able to make the decision. When it is very important to send, how much money that they need to spend, and where is the most appropriate place. She has no power to make the decision; she has to rely on her husband, especially in villages.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

## Implications of Findings

Gendered norms tend to equate women's health concerns with reproduction. Even so, there are gaps in terms of access to, and enjoyment of, sexual and reproductive health and rights due to norms around virginity, bodily decision-making and norms that link sexuality to marriage. In addition to issues of access, there are also issues of information content that link to norms. In this regard we can see that while HIV prevention has broken down cultural barriers for the purposes of disease control, the same inroads have not been made for general sex education. Women continue to have few opportunities to learn about their bodies and to make informed decisions related to their sexual and reproductive life. The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW) emphasizes that research, policy, implementation and budgets are critical to ensuring women's and girls' right to quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health. Gender mainstreaming of all health policies and plans, as well as working with health personnel as important agents of socialization, are necessary to better serve women's health needs.<sup>59</sup>

59. Detailed recommendations can be found in Chapter 13.



Sex education is not just about sex, but about health, power, violence, law, sexual identities, how you see yourself, your image, your relationships, your communication and decision-making. Knowing about your body is not against culture.

Daw Htar Htar, quoted in Michaels, 2014





When you reach the age of puberty, your body is producing sex hormones biologically. If you lose self-control, the hormones will be out of control. Sex education is necessary. If children are not given any sex education, they will give in to their sexual urges. Only with knowledge can you control your desire and avoid going wrong. There should be sex education at schools. It should be included systematically in the school curriculum. If the course is properly prepared by experts, this won't be a controversy any more. There will be no more comments in the media. Therefore we need to adopt a system to develop an open society. We must get prepared for the all-round development of our society. To achieve our ultimate aim, we must consider everything that will be compatible with the educational system, health system, cultural policy, literature policy and so on. ... For years, generations grew up with censorship. For example, there used to be a censorship program by law. Socially, we had old-fashioned norms. We didn't have exposure for years. The result is we didn't know what was happening in the world. My mother's generation as well as my grandmother's didn't know anything about the world. They lacked world knowledge. Now that my generation has started to know what's going on in the world and wants to call for reform, we met with resistance to change. Our people have been so used to being oppressed throughout their lives that they don't want to reform and they resist change. They feel anxious and worry



about starting to do something new. That's why they resist. We must include those taboo subjects and sensitive issues in primary and secondary school education. It's a must. The subject which is a taboo in the family will be taught at school and the family will soon learn it. Then this will become a norm. There will be no problem once the family accepts it as a school lesson. If a person has never heard about sex education throughout their life, they would think this is something they should read secretly, assuming that this was a taboo. Once they know that sex education is not something they need to do secretly, they won't become confused about their sexuality. Some don't agree. In some cases, it's better to give freedom to do as one wishes rather than restricting. When people can do what they wish, they will control themselves by consciousness. That is called informed consent. You make a decision upon the information given to you. If you don't get informed or given consent, then this is not your own decision. ... You follow what others ask you to do. Then it's very easy to violate. You want to violate. If you control yourself with your consciousness, you will never violate. Therefore, I believe that giving awareness and freedom is far better than giving nothing.

Key Informant Interview with Female Author







To show a scene in which a disaster or a problem is happening, both international and local media have been using images of women or children.

The issue of gender equality and media can be analysed from several angles. Media functions as an important bearer of norms and can be seen as a reflection of society, it is also an important actor in shaping public opinion and perceptions, and it can illustrate differing views within current cultural debates. This chapter tries to place the current media environment in its context, one which is characterized by profound and rapid change, and explores how social and cultural norms around gender are expressed through mainstream media. Discussions with community members about their opinions of the representation of men and women in the types of media that they access is also covered, as are the perspectives of a variety of media professionals on the media sector and gender equality. The print media listed in Table 1. were analysed from a gender perspective, using a modified version of the UNESCO Framework for Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media (UNESCO 2012).

political issues has widened significantly and a large number of new publishing and broadcasting licenses has been granted, including for 30 daily newspapers, of which 15 are in circulation at present. Media ownership, however, remains largely concentrated in a small circle of people from the former regime or closely connected to it (Ko Htwe and Williams 2014). Few people in Myanmar consume news and information from independent media sources, with estimates of only around 300,000 readers of weekly newspapers (McCarthy 2013). Word of mouth continues to be an important channel for sharing news. Only 1.3% of the population have internet access. Social media is a major feature for internet users, with nearly as many Facebook accounts (800,000) as there are internet users. Commentators have highlighted the role of Facebook as an interactive communications tool that facilitates engagement, but that it has also become a channel for negative commentary, which in its extreme forms could be considered hate speech (Bourgault 2013).

It is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain whether media liberalization has changed media consumption patterns in the communities. According to discussions with community members, media access in the study areas remains fairly limited. There appears to be more interest in news media following the liberalization in 2012, as media is starting to

## 12.1 A Changing Media Environment

The most significant change in Myanmar's media environment in recent years is the liberalization of the media sector, particularly the dismantling of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board in August 2012. Media coverage of

Type of Publication	Name of Publication	Number of Issues	Period
Newspaper (Dailies)	Daily 11 News	7	3-10 Dec 2013
	Myanmar Ahlin	7	14-20 Dec 2013
Journal (Weeklies)	7 Day News	3	18-31 Dec 2013
	Mizzima News	2	13-27 Dec 2013
	Myanmar Times	2	6-19 Dec 2013
Magazine (Monthly)	Apyosin	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Shwe Amuytay	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Tharapu	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Irrawaddy Magazine	3	Oct-Dec 2013

Table 1: Content Analysis of Print Media

be viewed as more reliable and trustworthy than before. DVDs appear to be the most popular form of entertainment, including both foreign and local films. Several of the male focus groups also discussed accessing pornography through DVDs. TV is commonly watched for news, weather reports and entertainment. Myawaddy and MRTV were among the channels mentioned. Korean TV shows and movies were discussed in all communities. In Mon, references to foreign films also included Thai films. Radio appears to be the preferred medium for news among the study communities, as well as for listening to music and religious sermons. Pada Myar, VOA, BBC, Laiza FM, and Cherry FM were among the channels accessed. Radio was said to be a preferable alternative to TV for news, as it doesn't interfere with other chores. Print media was not often read among the community members interviewed, partly due to cost, partly due to accessibility. Print media was mostly accessed and discussed by male groups, reading sports journals, for example. An exception was urban groups in Yangon, where both sexes discussed accessing print media to a greater extent than elsewhere in the study areas. Internet was not accessible to most of the communities in the study.

## 12.2 Media Liberalization and Cultural Globalization

The issue of media liberalization elicited different reactions among different groups of people. For many study participants, the liberalization of media in Myanmar and increased exposure to, and participation in, globalized culture were seen as threats to cultural values and traditions. Culture in this line of thought was viewed as something static and unchanging. Cultural change, therefore, was largely viewed with scepticism. It is in this context that we need to view opinions of how men and women are represented in media. Women are cast as 'bearers of culture' and are made symbolically responsible for upholding cultural norms and values. This means that women have to shoulder criticism when their representations in media fail to conform to traditional gender norms. Men's representation in media however appears much less charged, even though this is also undergoing certain changes. Being designated 'bearers of culture' has a range of implications for women's lives, some of which will be discussed in this chapter.

### 12.2.1 Globalization as a Threat to Culture

Dress code functions as a symbol of cultural belonging and values. The way that women dress when they appear in the media is the most common target of the critique against the perceived change in women's representation in the mass media. Norms of modesty and chastity are drawn upon when women's changing dress codes are discussed in the media:

In 2012 August, we totally withdrew censorship. After that, we have positive and negative impact. From a positive point of view, there is more transparency ... but there is negative impact. As there is no more censorship ... they put whatever they like. You may notice some female celebrities wearing very sexy dress. It's not in line with our tradition.

[KII with Information Official]

In the past, women were taught to be quiet, to reduce the laughing voice. Nowadays, they wear whatever they want and it is inappropriate. We see only prostitutes and bad girls in the media.

[FGD with women over 40, Madupi Township]

It is clear from the respondents' accounts that the male body is not targeted in the same way as the female body when discussing dress and media representation. This difference in focus appears to be related to the perception that the male body it is not sexualized to the same extent that the female body is.

My opinion is that it is not appropriate for women to be seen in underwear. But, for men, it can be okay to be seen in underwear, like we often saw in the weightlifting shows.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 26-40, Monywa Township]

Influence of other cultures, particularly Korean culture, through mass media is described as a threat to traditional cultural norms and traditions. Oftentimes Korean movies are blamed for what is seen as the immoral depiction of women in media and the loosening up of cultural norms:

Our tradition and cultures were lost. Myanmar movies imitated Korean movies. They are even kissing in the movies. Dress code and life style are very rude. It is very different from 10 years ago.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine women aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

Media was largely seen as enabling the spread of undesirable dress codes, prompting some to call for regulation in order to preserve cultural values:

I think the government should develop regulations to control the wearing of hot and sexy dresses. It is not appropriate with Buddhist teachings.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women, aged 40 and above, Monywa Township]

It changed according to the age. They have changed their dress style and behaviour. They used to treat older people with respect and in a polite way before. But now they know nothing about respectful and polite manners towards older people. Media used to represent our culture before, but it seems to represent others now.

[FGD with Danu Buddhist women aged 26-40, Kalaw Township]

### 12.2.2 Media Liberalization and Sexual Content

Other cultural taboos such as publicly discussing sex (discussed in Chapter 11) were also extremely sensitive topics as far as media liberalization is concerned. The line between public discussion of sex, sex education, and pornography and sexual violence was sometimes blurred in discussions with study participants. Media liberalization, women's dress and cultural erosion were often held to blame for instances of rape and sexual violence. Rarely were men's actions in themselves the target of criticism:

We have had some incidents. There is 'Hnyo' magazine. The content is about sex. So young people read this magazine, they have bad characters, they can get knowledge about sex. In reading this kind of magazine, rape cases are more and more. Seeing very sexy photos, it incenses the passion. So when a man saw a woman at 10pm on the street, if he had been looking at very sexy photos, he can easily commit rape. In this way, these kinds of things are not appropriate to our customs.

[KII with Information Official]

According to study participants who have looked into the messages in pornographic materials, which are claimed to be proliferating, what emerges is a picture in which men's sexuality is portrayed as natural, given, insatiable and potentially violent. According to the typical pornographic script, a woman is supposed to serve a man sexually in the same way that she is supposed to serve him in other aspects of his daily life. The messages given were said to contribute to a normalization of rape by teaching male readers to ignore women's wishes in sexual relations. Given the fact that marital rape is not criminalized, the socialization of men's sexual entitlement and the promotion of force to overcome female resistance are especially troubling:

There are so many 'blue stories'<sup>60</sup> written in Burmese, a lot, a lot. I could not read them all. But, the one thing that was given in every article, the message is if you ... first you started to, tried to attend to the woman, at first she will refuse it. But if you go ahead, without caring about what she is saying, and then, doing sexual things, the woman got pleasure and later, she will like, and then, at last she will request it. So, this is what the articles say. Mostly teenagers read that kind of article.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

such as trafficking, rape, violence and poverty, are in fact real concerns in women's lives. Stories of women's hardships tend to portray women as helpless victims. In the absence of more empowering portrayals, these depictions play a large part in how women come to be perceived.

We learned from the media, women are being sold and trafficked. Women are being violated.

[FGD with Kayin Buddhist men 26-40 years old, Hpa-an Township]

Women play the role of rich girl and also of poor girl. Women have to struggle in the movies too. Women are not very free when they are facing their problems. Men want to take advantage of women. Men used to take the advantage and win. Women are like a leaf, men are like a needle. Whenever they meet, the leaf is torn and pierced.

[FGD with Buddhist Rakhine women aged 26-40, Minbya Township]

A particular form of victimization of women through media is the theme of women being punished for not conforming to cultural and social norms. This is a common plot in movies and novels and can be seen also in the content analysis of women's magazines (see section 12.10.4):

Since long ago, women have been portrayed as secondary coat in both print media and broadcast media. People are inclined to see women as dependents and as the weaker sex. People would consider the value of a woman only by how much support she could contribute for her family. In movies and novels, women are usually included only as sex objects. If the character is a sharp and smart woman leader, she would end up being punished according to the plot. Films in which women had a leading role and ended up with a rewarding scene are quite rare to see.

[KII with Actress]

In the story quoted below we can see how the technique of punishing women who do not conform to cultural norms of modesty is used in journalistic reporting, in this case crime reporting:

One crime journal highlighted rape cases, particularly against those who are quite young. Some, as young as four years, [were victims of rape] committed by the stepfather. This article mentions six or seven rape cases, committed by the stepfathers of the children. But, the article highlighted, as the heading, you know, 'Be careful woman - you should not re-marry for your own pleasure'. This is highlighted. This is what the journalist would like to highlight. Actually, this comes from norms. The mothers are the first to be blamed for such a case. So 'Be careful, woman', [is the message] in the article. We [are supposed to] understand that if you are a divorcee or widow you should be careful, think about your dignity and ... not be

## 12.3 The Victimization of Women

Another clear difference in mass media's portrayal of men and women is that popular media often assign women the role of victim. Many of the social problems described in mass media,

60. Euphemism for pornographic content.



Some male reporters, I appreciate them; they are concerned about women, but ... men are originally tempted to write about women as poor, in every sector ... so poor, so pitiful. Women are at the camp, they are suffering, they have no toilets, no food, a lot of children, and they have abortions. The male reporters are my friends, so I said 'Why do you always talk about women as poor figures?' They said 'We see women as poor figures, pitiful figures. Our stories are about women who are suffering a lot in Kachin camps, and in northern Rakhine State women are suffering with no place and no food, and no education, so we want to ask the international community or government, why they are not doing more to stop this?' If I were them ... even though I can't save all the women in one article, if I were them, I would write about how women are struggling bravely at the camps, how woman are earning their own livelihoods, planting vegetables at the camp area. A day's food is okay. A week's food is okay. Some fruit and vegetable that can be grown very quickly they try to sow in Kachin at the camps on the border area of China. I heard some woman try to steal firewood and sell it. They try to make small merchandise. They try to make washing liquid, detergent or something like that, and they sell it again ... So I want to write about this ... I discussed with the male reporters. At that time, they said, if you were to

write like this, no NGO or UN agency will give money to them, because with the UN or government or any organization, you have to do a tear-jerker to make people cry. So they think that they are helping the women's cause by making them look very pitiful, so that they would get funding like that. At that time, I said, 'Okay, the story works.' Their story can feed the woman because the people in other countries or the UN or the government feel pity that they can't give. It is a short term goal and it isn't good for me, I try to think long term. When I try to figure out why women figures are pitiful, needy, uneducated and very poor, I feel that their story has been around for a long time, every year and from every edge of our country. The woman is just condemned. The woman is just framed. For me, the reality is 'Why don't they have a different view on women?'... If you believe that your story can earn donations. It is your point. But my point is: this is my dream. It is my right. I can write this story.

Key Informant Interview with Female Journalist



too loose and not too easy, when you try to get re-married. So, it is another kind of inequality norm ... every article and media, whenever a rape case happened, they highlighted, they blamed, based on these words. They blame women a lot. Why do you go alone to that place? Why are you doing this? And then, why do women get married with that kind of a husband? These are the things that are being taught to the whole society.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 2]

## 12.4 The Objectification and Sexualization of Women

Calls for covering up the female body in the name of cultural preservation are a response to what is seen as the inappropriate public depiction of female skin. There are also emerging voices criticizing the objectification and sexualisation of women's bodies in advertisements and for commercial purposes. These voices are typically coming from women themselves, who see through the commercialized use of women's bodies and who wish to see change:

For business, women were used as a beautiful tool to sexually attract men, for making money. For example, in an advertisement for a motorcycle chain sprocket, a business man hired a woman wearing a blouse which exposed her breasts for sexual attraction.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Speaking about women's image on TV, I have seen women in alcohol ads ... Though women do not drink alcohol, they are the ones who are used in the ads. I think they should use men actors for alcohol ads.

[FGD with Mon Buddhist women, aged 18-25 Thanbyuzayat Township]

There was no suggested blueprint for how to improve mass media's and advertising's images of women. However, one female author interviewed cautioned not to fall into the trap of depicting women in objectifying and victimized roles, when one has the chance to create alternative scenarios. The difficulties involved in representing women (and men) differently go to show just how deeply traditional gender norms have become internalized in both women and men:

With the assumption that magazines with a picture of girl on the cover can make a good sale, pictures of girls revealing their body parts are used. For beauty products and keeping one's house in order, images of girls are used and those of men are used for advertisements related to management and leadership. ... Women's images are used to advertise goods

for sale and as victims. For example, to show a scene in which a disaster or a problem is happening, both international and local media have been using images of women or children. It seems that they can't create such a scene with a man. What's more, women are more emotional when faced with such problem or a disaster. Therefore, despite being a woman, finally, even I have to choose women because they are more appropriate for the message I want to give. What I usually say is we women should make an effort to change our image. We can never move forward if we still hold of this mindset, accepting ourselves as products for sale or victims.

[KII with Female Author]

## 12.5 Stereotyped and Narrow Roles for Women and Men

There is a sense among study participants engaged in gender equality work, and among some community members, that the potentially positive role that media could play in bringing about equality has not been harnessed. While positive role modelling has been enabled to some extent, much remains to be done. The stereotypical portrayals of women in the media are criticized for their tendency to present narrow space for women. Moreover critique is directed to media representations that victimize and unfairly assign guilt to women.

Women who sacrificed for the family are really respectable, who sacrificed, who exchanged [the possibility of a] better life for their family's welfare. Such kind of things are also seen in poetry, in movies. Not only this, but also in poetry, women are only about beauty. And then, how women are valuable or respectable, those who maintain the culture and who respect the traditions, who value the norms. Such kind of teachings is spreading in the news and in the media.

[KII with Senior Woman Leader 4]

Among community members, the topic of the spaces and roles available to women in media were of much interest. Some groups who did not question the current gender relations or the gendered division of labour felt that media accurately reflected the situation, such as it should be:

There are a lot of differences between men's and women's portrayals in the media. They had to play different characters as men and women according to their nature. For example, men can also work in the kitchen but women usually have to work household chores in the movies. This is a tradition and custom of our society.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist women aged 18-25, Bogale Township]



For women, we admire beauty and cooking, things like that ... Sport programs are for men. We have a special program, a discussion program for sport. Two or three gentlemen sit together and discuss about sport and soccer. Most gentlemen are interested in this program. Most Myanmar men admire soccer. I think it's a special program for men.

[KII with Information Official]

Those who had begun questioning gender relations were more critical of what they found to be media's stereotypical portrayal of women:

In one of the books that I read, there is an advertisement in which the girl was being teased by the boys and she was encouraged to apply cosmetics to avoid being teased. Girls can misunderstand this kind of advertisement; that boys can tease them unless they are beautiful. And in most of the washing powder advertisements, only women had to wash the clothes.

[FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township]

Our films should not be too behind the age. We need to adjust wisely between the social norms of the current age and the traditions, cultures, characters of Myanmar people. It is not suitable to wear traditional dresses (htine-ma-thein and yin-phone) in a film of the current age. The key point is to assemble the Myanmar spirit in modern people and modern dress code. ... Women are very capable nowadays compared to previous times. There are so many cars in our country nowadays. What I found out on the roads is that most of the drivers were women. So, we need to put the women in the driver character in the movies. Previously, only men drove the car and the women usually sat in the car. But, now women are driving the car and leading the family in the real world.

[KII with Movie Director]

### 12.5.1 Media and the Evolution of Gender Roles

In a few of the FGDs, women spoke positively of what they perceived as an increased range of roles available to women, especially in foreign movies, such as administration roles. Female study participants in Ayeyarwady region linked the more diversified representation of women to the changes they were observing in their own communities and country:

Women in movies are playing administrative roles like men nowadays. Women are changing to participate in higher official roles, even as ministers. I am very happy and satisfied to see the women in the movies playing leading roles like men. Because we have to struggle in today's age for the family, we cannot rely only on the income of men. It can be said that there is less and less discrimination on women in this age. I read the journals and magazines and now NGOs are coming to educate us. NGOs conducted education sessions regarding gender balance and women's rights. Women were not allowed to come to this kind of meeting before. But now we have been taken into consideration.

[FGD with Bamar Buddhist, women over 40, Bogale Township]

Now the women are acting more freely in the movies. Previously, women had to take care of household chores as they are so shy and restricted. But, now they can play in the roles where they are acting out of the house.

[FGD with Kachin Christian women aged 18-25, Myitkyina Township]

Among media professionals there was also a sense that media needs to keep up with social changes in order to remain relevant and believable:

## 12.6 Gender and the Media Industry

Having discussed the 'output' of media in the form of representations of men and women, we now turn to media as a business. Here we need to include the cultural norms that govern women's opportunities to participate in and shape the media industry on equal terms. Most media professionals interviewed agreed that there is gender inequality in the media business, with very few women composers, script writers, and movie directors to name a few. Not all agreed on the reasons for this. Market demand, with consumers preferring male stars, was one explanation given for the fact that there are few actresses in leading roles in movies. Such discussions shed light on the myriad ways in which people wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate gender inequality through their everyday actions.

Nowadays, the fans usually demand certain actors. For example, a fan will ask for films at a VCD shop only by the names of actors, such as Nay Toe, Pyay Te Oo, Aung Ye Lin, and Myint Myat. They will never ask for films by the names of actresses. It is the same all around the country. So, the producer needs to focus on the actor that the fans are demanding. The reason why the people did not ask for the actresses is that the actors chose very hard and heavy characters in the movies, even at the beginning of their profession as an actor. But, most of the actresses did not choose the leading roles and they just followed the actor's character. It is sure that the people will never watch a movie in which only actresses are present. The actresses will get ahead of the actors when they fans ask for them by name in the VCD shop, because the producer chose according to the demand of the fans. When the fans start demanding a certain actress, the producer will not focus on the actor. He will surely try to choose that actress in his movies, because [the movie]

can make money only if he follows the demands of the film fans. The actresses should try to play in the leading roles in the movies. Only then, the fans will decide to choose her or not.

[KII with Movie Director]

It could partly be because of the market. Perceptions of the producers should also be counted. If the director is a man, people believe that a male director would be more authoritative and influential on the crew. Male directors are considered to be more dominant on the whole movie production crew. As for the women, we lack professional directing courses and we therefore we are weak in it.

[KII with Female Actress]

Staying with the movie industry, media and culture professionals said that as with other fields of work (further discussed Chapter 8), female actresses earn less than their male counterparts.

I have just learned that in movies the actors make 100 - 200 lakh<sup>61</sup> and the actresses make at most 40 lakh. The reason is that when people buy films and videos, they are only interested to see who the actor is - not the actress. That's why the actor earns more. Also most directors are men. Only one or two are women. We have no lady composers or scriptwriters. Now 3/5 of writers are men. Before there were only one or two women writers, so there is a slight increase.

[KII with Culture Official]

When differences in opportunities for male and female actors were discussed with media professionals, the focus tended to be on individual characteristics. Such a view conceals the possibility of more structural problems in opportunities for men and women in professional life.

Women had less opportunity because they did not fight for it. I did not have a generation of directors in my family tree and thus I had to fight and find my ways to become a director. Women should have the courage like us enough to overcome the difficulties in life and get what they want. If they became brave like that, they will make their history themselves and we will be very pleased to see women ahead of men. But they need to walk themselves, as the men walked the same way.

[KII with male Movie Director]

With regards to journalism, there was a perception that women are more skilful than their male counterparts in getting stories out of the (often male) officials from government and NGOs by using traditional 'female attributes' like patience and 'sweet talking'. Patience and endurance of rejection were held up as desirable female attributes in the journalistic profession. However, making a successful career in journalism

was still regarded as being more difficult for women than for men. Women were also described as rarely having the chance to receive awards and other forms of professional recognition. If we believe that women have different skills and perspectives to bring into the job, as did many of the study participants, it becomes problematic when women are not encouraged to branch out and focus on issues that they find important. One female journalist interviewed raised the lack of encouragement from editors to report on 'women's issues' and how among journalists themselves, reporting on 'women's issues' did not hold high status and was rarely considered newsworthy.

With regards to writers, a rather small number of women authors have gained a high reputation. Among them, some have experimented with transgressing cultural norms in or through their work including creating unorthodox female characters. These female writers are often mentioned as role models and inspirations to other women, both within and outside the media field. Their popularity suggests that there remains a strong need for alternative representations of women in media, as well as of women as media professionals.

Like Daw Khin Myo Chit, there are some women writers who started writing about women's lives since the pre-independence era under colonial rule... Because of the novel 'Mi Cho' by Daw Khin Hnin Yu, I gained courage and strength to keep on standing like this until now. ... Amongst women in media fields, some such as Daw Khin Myo Chit, Daw Khin Hnin Yu, Ju and some from the younger generation are strong women. Consequently, the characters from their novels turned out to be strong like their creators.

[KII with Actress]

## 12.7 Gender and Visibility in Print Media

Women are marginalized in mainstream print media. As can be seen in Figure 8 below, women make up 20-31% of people represented in mainstream print media (newspapers, journal and magazines). With regards to women's visibility in newspapers, the overall figure of 22% is the average for Daily 11 News (17%) and Myanmar Ahlin (27.5%). In the analysed journals, women's overall representation is 31%. Mizzima News (42%) stands out as having a more balanced representation of men and women, compared to The Voice (22%), 7 Day News (23%) and Myanmar Times (27%). The only general audience magazine included in the analysis was Irrawaddy Magazine. Here, women make up only 20% of the people featured. One has to go to magazines directed to a female audience before one can find more equal representation of women and men. Among the female audience magazines included in the analysis, women's

61. A 'lakh' is a unit of measure equalling 100,000

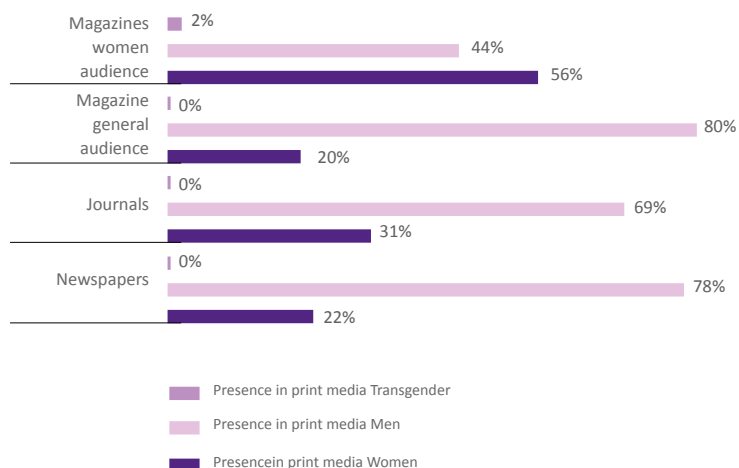


Figure 8: Presence in Print Media by Sex/Gender

representation averaged 56% among Apyosin (63%), Shwe Amutay (50%), and Tharapu (60%). It is of note that the only presence of transgender (TG) populations was in these magazines.

### 12.7.1 Sources of Information and Opinion

Having established the extent of women’s, men’s, and transgender people’s presence in print media, we turn to the question of who the sources of information and opinion are in print media. Figures are similar to the general representation ratios and range between 19-30%. The newspapers analysed have women as sources of information and opinion on average in 22% of their content, with Daily 11 News at 17% and Myanmar Ahlin at 26% respectively. In journals, women make up 30% of information sources, an average that is raised by the more gender balanced sourcing in Mizzima News at 42% compared to The Voice (23%); 7 Day News (22%); and Myanmar Times (25%). In Irrawaddy Magazine, women make up a mere 19% of information sources. Among the magazines directed to a women audience, the category of analysis was modified according to the content and framed as direct interviews. The aggregate result shows a near gender balance, averaging 49% of those directly interviewed being women, with Apyosin at 50%, Shwe Amyotaw at 46%, and Tharapu at 52%.



#### What’s in a Picture?

The National Women’s Dialogue on Peace, Security and Development in Myanmar held in Yangon in November 2013 drew together many of the country’s experts in these areas, as well as foreign peace activists. Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Co-founder of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, Angelina Jolie, had sent an inspirational message to the delegates stressing the need for women’s involvement in peace-making, peace-building and governance and the critical role of civil society to these ends. This was reported in local media the following day, with a file photo of Ms. Jolie, (above left) in attire that would clearly not meet with approval in the regular media environment in Myanmar and that had no relation to the article. The journal’s editorial choice, and the existence of multiple file photos that put Ms. Jolie’s social and political work as a Special Envoy in its context (example shown above right) were taken up in the forum the following day by one of the speakers, where delegates were invited to reflect on the different signals sent by the different pictures. The discussions then moved on to social media where the editor of the journal was made aware of the critique by the delegates, a discussion enabled by media liberalization and the dialogue on social media.

Figure 9: Angeline Jolie in The Voice : November 11, 2013

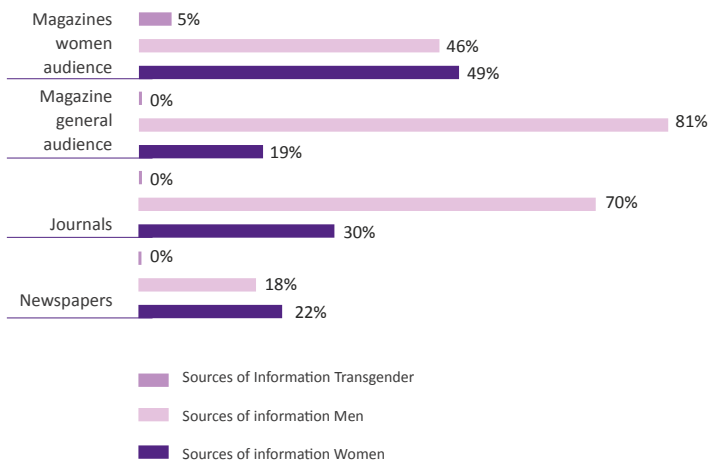


Figure 10: Sources of Information in Print Media by Sex/Gender

### 12.7.2 Spokespersons

The analysis of the ratio of men and women as spokespersons was conducted only on mainstream media sources. The overall result showed lower female representation compared to the simple measure of women’s presence or women as sources of information. As ‘spokesperson’ implies speaking from a recognized position, it is likely that power imbalances in society are more clearly reflected in this analysis. Newspapers analysed had an average of 17% women as spokespersons, with Daily 11 News at 16% and Myanmar Ahlin at 19%. The journals scored even lower at 13.5% overall. The Voice had a mere 7% female spokespersons during the analysis period; and 7 Day News had none. Mizzima News stood at 21% and Myanmar Times at 28%. The general audience magazine, Irrawaddy, had 80% male and 20% female spokespersons.

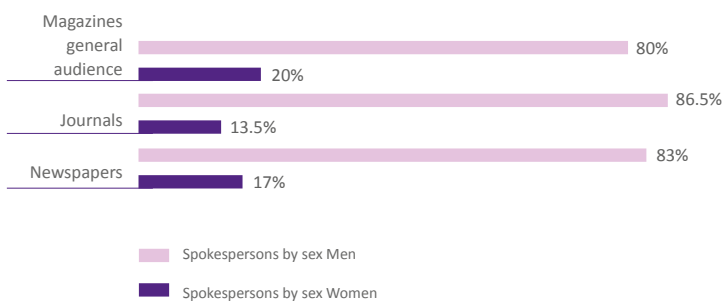


Figure 11: Spokespersons in Print Media by Sex

### 12.7.3 Experts

Women fare slightly better in the roles of experts compared to that of spokespersons. The newspapers analysed have an average of 37% female experts, with Daily 11 News at 33% and Myanmar Ahlin at 50%. The journals had an average of 29% female experts, with The Voice and Mizzima News at

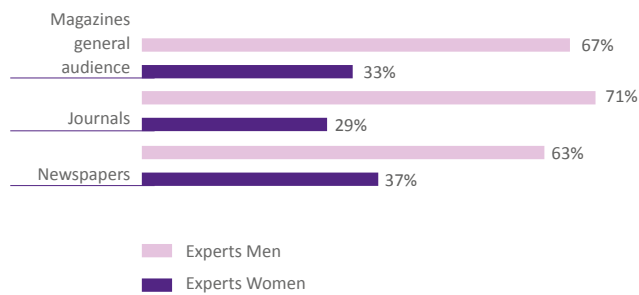


Figure 12: Experts in Print Media by Sex

33%; and Myanmar Times at 28%. 7 Day News featured no female experts in their content during the analysis period. The Irrawaddy Magazine had 33% female experts.

### 12.7.4 Ordinary Citizens

Compared to roles that require a certain position or standing, such as spokesperson or expert, women have higher visibility in print media when occupying the roles of ordinary citizens. In the newspapers and journals analysed, the average results tended to show near gender balance. The newspapers scored 49% overall, with Daily 11 News at 31% and Myanmar Ahlin at 80%. The journals averaged 56% overall, with The Voice at 50%; 7 Day News at 56%; Mizzima News at 37.5%; and MMT at 73%. Magazines were not included in the analysis, as this category was absent in the issues analysed.

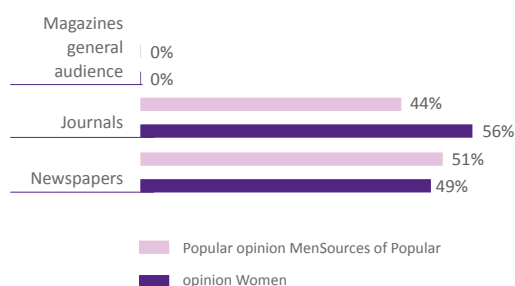


Figure 13: Ordinary Citizens in Print Media by Sex

One particularly inclusive interview was found in the Mizzima News 20 December 2013 issue, concerning reproductive health. Not only were women from different walks of life with different experiences included (the chief of a women’s hospital, an actress, an editor and a working class pregnant woman), the question posed in the interview: ‘Do women lose opportunities due to pregnancies?’ also aimed at inspiring a discussion about the fact that the reproductive sphere is almost exclusively seen as women’s responsibility. This interview is a good example of asking critical questions in order to uncover discrimination and injustice. Some of the participants’ reflections are listed below:

I myself faced that problem; I only had six weeks for maternity leave, so I was exhausted. That's why I can feel for other women in this situation. Some men look after their kids, but most men are irresponsible. They would even say, 'Stop that child crying, I can't concentrate on my work'.

[Doctor Aye Aye, Maw Chief Women Hospital]

These days, actresses who have delivered children have less opportunity than we did in our day. It should not be this way, job opportunities should depend on talents and qualification, not on being women or men.

[May Than Nu, Actress]

Some employers don't want mothers for their job positions. So some women have to pretend they are single even though they are mothers.

[Daw Khin Thazin Aung, Editor, 7 Day shopping guide]

Women should have support from their family and neighbours while they are pregnant and after delivery times. We grassroots women don't have these rights until now.

[Daw Mar Mar Naing]

### 12.7.5 Political Elites

In general the print media analysed was rather elite oriented, with poor, rural and working class populations poorly represented. We find that the newspapers feature women in 19% of the total numbers of people that can be categorized as political elites. A breakdown shows that Daily 11 News stands at 15% and Myanmar Ahlin at 22%. As for the journals, 17% of political elites represented were women, with The Voice weekly at 17%; 7 Day News at 15%; Mizzima at 16%; and the Myanmar Times at 22%. In the three issues of Irrawaddy Magazine analysed, no women were portrayed in the role of political elite. Figure 14 below shows the distribution among the various forms of print media.

### 12.7.6 Economic Elites

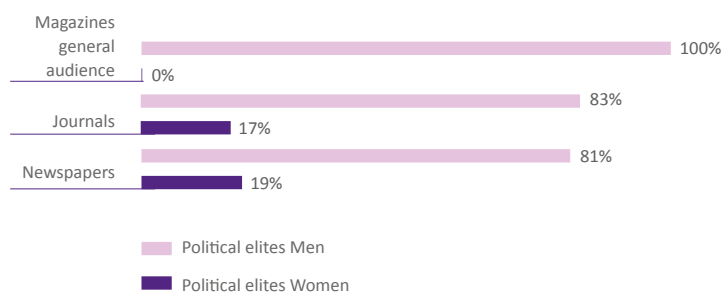


Figure 14: Political Elites in Print Media by Sex

The representation of women as business and economic elites are trailing at the same low numbers as those of female political elites. The newspapers analysed had a mere 16% of economic elites represented by women, with Daily 11 News

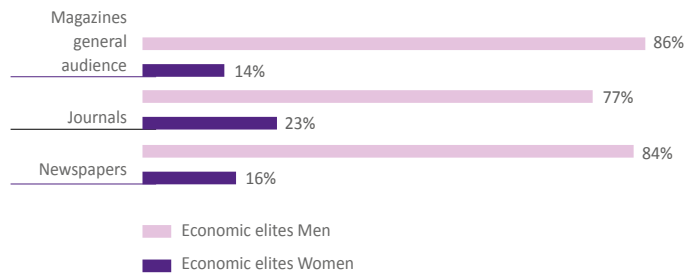


Figure 15: Economic Elites in Print Media by Sex

at 19%; and Myanmar Ahlin at 10%. Among the journals analysed, women make up 23% of economic elites on average, with The Voice Weekly at 10%; Mizzima News at 18% and Myanmar Times at 41%. Once again 7 Day News stood out as having no representation of women as economic elites during the analysis period. Irrawaddy Magazine sported 14% of economic elites as women. Figure 15 below graphically represent these findings:

## 12.8 Who Gets to Speak About What?

Moving on from roles and representation of women and men in print media we now turn to specific topical areas to explore to what extent a variety of voices are heard when different subjects are presented.

### 12.8.1 Political and Government Affairs

With regards to news on political and government affairs, women's voices are heard in 14% of the content in newspapers, with Daily 11 News at 13% and Myanmar Ahlin at 15%. A rare example of women making headline news in the area of general politics is the cover news in Daily 11 News, 4 December 2013. The feature was related to a culture of corruption that had been found by an International Court of Justice (ICJ) publication to be deeply rooted in the judiciary institutions. The female lawyer and author of the report were depicted on the front page. It should be mentioned that a lot of the representation of women in content related to politics is attributable to the extensive mass media presence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who often appeared in several different pieces of news, in one single publication. The high level of reporting on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi skews the statistics, and without her media presence, women would have very small representation in the media.

Among the journals analysed, women discussing political content makes up on average 18% of total political and government affairs content. The Voice Weekly stands at 20%; 7 Day News at 28.5%; Mizzima News at 10%; and The Myanmar Times at 17%. Irrawaddy Magazine had no women discussing political content in the three issues analysed.

While Mizzima News scored low in this particular analysis, the journal stands out among the journals analysed as it has recently allocated two double spreads per issue (4 pages) to women's affairs and gender equality issues. The 13 December 2013 issue emphasizes gender mainstreaming of the Constitution and lists a 17 point framework for assessing the Constitution from a gender perspective. In an opinion section following that article, we can find voices that discuss the need for a transformation in the way that gender issues are addressed in the Constitution. Issues raised include the narrow interpretation of gender equality in the constitution, such as, 'When we studied the Constitution, we found out that women are viewed as only needing protection from the state, not in active roles'

[Nway Nway Htun, Charity Oriented Myanmar, quoted in Mizzima News, 13-19 December 2013]

### 12.8.2 Business and Economics

The representation of women's voices in content that concerns economics and business was similarly low, ranging from 18-24%. Irrawaddy Magazine had 21% of its economic news content attributable to women. Among the newspapers analysed the average figure was only 18%. Daily 11 News stood at 18% and Myanmar Ahlin at 17%. The journals presented a more varied picture, with a slightly higher average of 24%. Once again 7 Day News is remarkable in its exclusion of women's voices – it includes no female voices on business and economic matters over the analysis period. The Voice Weekly also had minimal inclusion of women with a mere 7% of economic content attributable to women. Mizzima News, with 14% of economic content represented by women's voices, was not much more representative. Myanmar Times stood out, however, as having near gender balance in its reporting on economics and business, with women's voices representing 48% of the content. Among the Myanmar Times issues analysed, voices were included that try to make sense of women's marginalization in the economic sphere by looking at potential root causes such as norms and attitudes:

We can't leave behind half of the population of Myanmar. Women are half of the population, and if we don't count women's human rights, our development cannot go forward. Women are capable of participating in the economic field but traditional attitudes hinder their participation.

[Daw Wai Wai Nu, Women's Peace Network, Arakan, in Myanmar Times 13 December 2013]

### 12.8.3 Arts and Culture

While women's voices are marginalized in political and economic content they are heard alongside men's in the areas of arts and culture. This distinction is not by chance, as arts and culture are typically regarded as 'soft' topics, where women's participation is seen as merited, as opposed to

the 'hard' topics of politics and economics that are typically regarded as belonging to the male sphere. In the newspapers analysed, both Daily 11 News and Myanmar Ahlin had women's voices represented in 50% of the content on arts and culture. With regards to the journals the average figure was 48%, with The Voice Weekly at 47%; 7 Day News at 80%; Mizzima News at 46%; and Myanmar Times at 40%. The Irrawaddy Magazine had women's voices represented in 44% of content on arts and culture.

### 12.8.4 Sports

Given the strongly gender biased attitudes that exist around sports that construe sports as more or less a male arena (see Chapter 10), it appears that media coverage of female athletes is surprisingly high. The primary reason for this is that the research period coincided with the 2013 SEA Games held in Myanmar, where women athletes performed well and thus garnered a lot of attention and support from media and the general public. It is not known whether such coverage could be seen as a move in a positive direction for a more gender balanced view on sports. Among the newspapers analysed the average proportion of sporting content attributable to women was 50.5%, with Daily 11 news at 33% and Myanmar Ahlin at 52%. The Myanmar Ahlin highly praised the female Myanmar sports stars in karate and hockey. In particular, their praise of the Myanmar women's football team and their contributions to the national pride is significant, as cultural norms strongly construe football as a male sport:

We are so proud of you Myanmar Women Football Team, you could show the noble heart of sport spirit by fair play and never surrendering. We men and women will follow your example.

[Myanmar Ahlin 20 December 2013]

Assignment of space for male and female athletes within publications shows gender hierarchies to be firmly in place. An example is the gold medals won by both the female and male chinlone (cane ball) teams. This earned the male team a picture on the front cover, while the female team was only represented with a small picture on the back cover (Daily 11 News, December 5, 2013)

Among the journals analysed, women's presence in sporting content amounted to 47% of the total, with The Voice Weekly at 67%; 7 Day News at 20%; Mizzima News at 56%; and Myanmar Times at 100%. Irrawaddy Magazine had no coverage of women's sports during the analysis period.

One of the footballers from the women's teams was given space to discuss traditional attitudes against women's participation in sport that prevail in the country. She relayed how she had had to beat the odds in order to reach her current position:

When I was young, my parents and siblings didn't like me to play football. They used to say, 'This is not a girl thing'. I never cared about what my family said. I always played whenever I had a chance to get into a football match. Finally my family gave me up and allowed to play.

[Ma Than Than Htwe, Myanmar Women Football Team, in 7 Day News, 25 December 2013]

Figure 17 below summarizes the representation of men's and women's voices by topic in general audience print media including newspapers, journals and magazine.

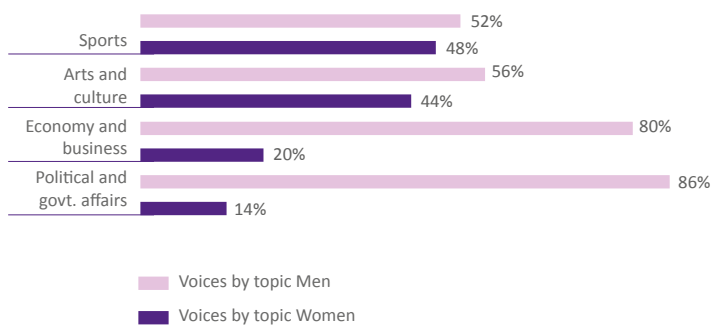


Figure 16: Voices by Topic and Sex in Print Media

## 12.9 Percentage of Stories Focusing Centrally on Women

In assessing media focus on issues of particular relevance to women,<sup>62</sup> it was found that very few of the media sources analysed paid particular attention to such issues. Among the newspapers analysed, the average was 4%, with Daily 11 News at 2.5% and Myanmar Ahlin at 6.5%. With regards to the journals, a similar result was found with an average of 3.5%, made up of The Voice Weekly (1.7%); 7 Day News (3.5%); Mizzima News (6%); and the Myanmar Times (2%). The Irrawaddy had similar figures at 2.5%.

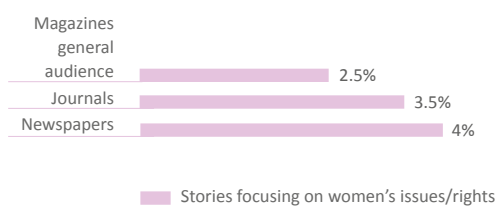


Figure 17: Stories on Women's Issues/Rights in Print Media

## 12.10 'Women's Magazines' as Socializers of Gender Norms<sup>63</sup>

The people featured in magazines directed to a female audience were typically actors, actresses, models, singers, fashion designers, make-up artists, and so on. There was a relative gender balance among the people portrayed and featured in the magazines. These magazines stand out among the media analysed, as transgender people were represented, albeit in very stereotypical areas such as fashion and make-up.

### 12.10.1 Women as Reproductive Beings

The primary content of the analysed magazines conformed to the norms of femininity in Myanmar that hold women to be relationship oriented, and responsible for the reproductive sphere. The main topics were fashion, beauty, cooking, sewing and matters related to love, relationships and marriage. Although the magazines included a few articles where, for example, men cook for their families or friends, the overall pattern where women were portrayed as reproductive beings was very clear.

In a short story published in Shwe Amyutay (October 2013),<sup>64</sup> norms around women's primary roles as responsible for household work are clearly shown. In the story, the wife is portrayed as managing monthly household expenses. While both she and her husband work outside, at the end of their working day, she is still expected to serve her husband and to take on the reproductive functions. Her husband, seeing her lost in thoughts says: 'Hey wife, I said prepare the dinner, what are you thinking about that much?' As she shakes her head to clear her thoughts, her husband asks: 'Shaking your head means you won't prepare dinner?' While the tone of the conversation is not harsh, it reinforces the norm that women are responsible for housework, regardless of whether they also engage in income generating work.

The beliefs that require women to focus on developing their reproductive role and skills in the household are linked to the expectation that a future husband would expect or demand that his future wife is well equipped in these areas. A short story in Shwe Amyutay (November 2013)<sup>65</sup> about a mother who is worrying about her daughter's potential to find a

62. The wording of this category in the UNESCO Framework for Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media is 'percentage of stories focusing centrally/specifically on women and/or issues of special relevance/concern to women in news & current affairs content (for example, gender-based violence, women's rights, women's achievements, etc.)'. The use of this category should not be understood as suggesting that these are the only areas of interest to women, rather, this category of analysis aims to shed light on women's issues given their general marginalization in media content as well as in society.

63. Among the three analysed magazines, Tharapu has a monthly print run of 20,000. Apyosin is more limited with a run of just 1,000 copies per month. Shwe Amyutay declined to answer questions of readership when approached.

64. Thahtinkyaut Yin Kone Tan Chin' written by female writer 'Mya Tway Nee', p. 120-127.

65. 'Key' written by female writer 'Mi Moe', p. 213.

suitable husband exemplifies this concern. The story's mother laments: 'She can't cook nor does she know about how to work in the kitchen; how can she find a suitable man?'. A woman's sacrificing and caretaking nature is another main feature of the content in women's magazines. Oftentimes, the norm of women sacrificing themselves (typically for their family) is held up as the characteristic that allows them to cope in the face of hardship.

While women taking up paid work appear to becoming a more accepted reality, women are often reminded of 'their place', through media. Another short story in *Shwe Amyutay* (November 2013)<sup>66</sup> portrays the life of the only remaining girl-child of a widow, who is trying to fulfil her role as a 'good daughter' in helping her mother generate income for the family. A central feature of the story is the fact that the girl is teased by men in the village for performing hard work, which is seen as work for men.

### 12.10.2 Virginity, Modesty and Submissiveness

The key gender norms prevalent in the content analysed focus on women's modesty and propriety. The norms around virginity are strongly reinforced in the magazines analysed (indeed the title of one of the magazines analysed - *Apyosin* - is *Virgin Girl*). They are at times backed up by reference to religious codes and practices. In an essay in the *Apyosin* December 2013 issue<sup>67</sup>, a journalist straightforwardly claims, 'We Myanmar women have to maintain our virginity until we get married. The opportunity to donate robes to Buddha Images are only for virgin girls. Virginity is very noble. In some areas, virgin girls have to put donation fruits on their heads to offer them to the spirits, that's why crops are growing successfully. That's why the reputation of a virgin is highly valued'. In the essay titled 'Mom's virgin girl' (*Apyosin* October 2013),<sup>68</sup> the mother of a model shares her thoughts on how parenting of girls needs to focus on maintaining a girl's modesty:

Women have to do more or less domestic work. It is a natural thing. When I was your age we followed the saying, 'A women's modesty can't be bought with gold'. My daughter can't go outside without me. Your dad and I are really satisfied with this.

Parental guidance and control to ensure that women's modesty is upheld is a common feature of these magazines.

Another example is a comic strip in the *Apyosin* November 2013 issue that has a young intelligent niece asking her old uncle to choose a husband for her, as she doesn't want to remain single after her uncle dies. As it is not seen as appropriate for the girl to date different men to find one she likes, she looks to her uncle to decide for her, thus reinforcing the view that a girl or young woman does not know what is best for her.

'Appropriate,' i.e., non-revealing, clothing is often used as a symbolic marker of character and is reinforced in the magazines' stories and essays. A rare example of a magazine giving voice to a model who opposes the link between character and dress is found in *Apyosin* December 2013<sup>69</sup>:

Sometimes we models have to wear shorts, but you can't judge people by their dress.

The norm that women should be submissive is also strongly reinforced through these magazines. A common message for women (see, for example, *Apyosin*, October and November 2013 issues) is to remain sexually ignorant and naïve in order to uphold the air of a 'good girl'. This includes pretending that one doesn't notice men's invitations for relationships and refraining from making any sort of advances of their own. Corresponding to submissiveness is the emphasis on men's right to control women as their partners. Women are frequently portrayed as the property of men. The norm that prescribes women to treat their husbands as gods is also socialized through the magazines.

One short story published in *Apyosin* November 201<sup>70</sup> includes the thoughts of a man contemplating how to better control his partner: 'I will ask her to stop using Facebook because I can't stand so many men being able to see her smile'. This reinforces the notion that men are entitled to control women's private lives. Another example of men's perceived entitlement and control over women is an article in the *Tharapu* December 2013<sup>71</sup> issue, where the husband of an actress is quoted as saying:

I lived in the USA for a long time, but I like Myanmar women. They are good at domestic work. Sometimes I was jealous to see her with other men at a shooting, but whenever I thought, "She is mine", I felt relieved.

Yet another example of the submissive roles cast for women, as well as men's expectation that they should be entitled to control their wives, is a story in *Apyosin*, December 2013.<sup>72</sup>

66. Mway Mae Lae' written by male writer 'Yay Aye', p. 227.

67. Mom's beloved Virgin Girl', written by Myo Marna, p. 49.

68. My Niece' written by male writer Ayoe, p. 78-80.

69. Interview with model Nan Sandar Hla Htun, by Ko Ko Hla Myint, p. 39.

70. If you hated me for forgetting to smile', written by female writer Madi Khin Lay, p. 175.

71. Interview with Thet Mon Myint and her husband by Khin Cho Cho Oo, Extra page C.

72. 'A Story of Modern Apple', written by Thet Oo Mg, p. 166-171.



The story is by a male writer who portrays his dream woman as a beautiful angel who makes his breakfast, prepares for him to wash his face and brush his teeth, makes him dinner, and assists him in his research. At the discovery that his dream woman is a robot, the man goes crazy, presumably at the realization that what he is demanding of a woman in a relationship is not realistic.

The magazines analysed contain numerous examples of how women conform to feminine ideals. By following female characters the reader can see the socialisation process through the actions and behaviour of women as they conform to norms, particularly norms around modesty. The examples show how strong and independent girls/women modify their behaviour to become more modest in line with their boyfriends'/husbands' wishes. Below is a quote from such a story, by a male writer, in *Apyosin* (October 2013).<sup>73</sup> The quote is about a man who falls in love with a woman who is intelligent but who does not live up to his expectations of her femininity:

You should know that a woman is a woman. I like real women who are very polite, soft and humble, women who are very graceful. ... Can you come to the office in Myanmar traditional dress? I ask you to do it just for one day. If you respect me, you should come to office wearing Myanmar dress as I like.

The woman in the story concedes to her boyfriend's request and thereby moulds herself according to the norms of feminine appearance and behaviour as she enters the relationship.

### 12.10.3 Women as Sex Objects

With regards to sexual relations, women are usually depicted as sex objects, rather than as subjects, in women's magazines. However, this content is indirect rather than explicit. This issue is addressed in more detail below.

From a health perspective, it is positive that these magazines contain columns where women can write and ask about illnesses, including sexual and reproductive health issues, that may otherwise be taboo to discuss in their everyday lives. Examples include replies to questions received from women about cervical cancer and breast cancer, to name a few. However, more detailed discussions on sexual relations or sex education messages are absent from the mainstream women's magazines.

The controversial Magazine *Hnyo*, banned after its first issue, ran a number of sex-related articles that cast women in submissive and objectifying roles. These articles directed to women contained messages about how to make sex more pleasurable – not for themselves, but for men. Women's sexuality and pleasure were silenced. The articles had titles like: 'How to provoke men's lust', 'How to respond in bed', 'How to make men like women while having sex', and 'Which kinds of women are hated by men'. Statements from these articles reinforce a view that women's role is to give men pleasure – but at the same time she has to keep on the right side of the 'modesty line' so as not to be considered immoral. The following quotes from articles in that magazine<sup>74</sup> illustrate this:

- » 'Do not respond too quickly when you find out a man likes you - men don't like easy women'
- » 'Men don't like smelly bed sheets'
- » 'Men like foreplay; if you can't do it, he will soon become disappointed in you'

Most of the images contained in the magazine reinforce the message that women are sexual objects whose main role is to serve men's sexual needs. However, there are some articles that stand put forward a different message. One such example is an article by a female doctor<sup>75</sup> who boldly states: 'If you still believe that when it comes to making love, women are objects and men are subjects, you are totally out of date'. Her article contains awareness-raising messages, including messages directed at men regarding STIs and HIV, and the need to care about one's sexual health and protecting one's partner.

### 12.10.4 Women as Victims

Other representations of women that can be derived from norms around submissiveness are those that portray women as helpless victims of different circumstances, including war, men's violence or men's adultery. One example is a story from the *Shwe Amuytay* November 2013 issue<sup>76</sup>, of a poor father and daughter who make a living by selling snacks and exchanging diesel for beer and food from a small boat on the Yangon river. One day a bunch of men from an oil tanker shout from their ship: 'Hey girl! Come here!', gesturing rudely to the daughter. While her father is aware of the sexual harassment, all he and his daughter can do is stare at the men's laughing faces.

73. Lyan Zwe Ko, p. 163-166.

74. *Hnyo*, p. 39-40.

75. 'Yin Kwin Dakar Kho win Mhar lar,' written by 'Nightingale'.

76. 'Somewhere in Yangon River,' written by male writer Moe Kyaw Zin, p. 225-230

Another example of the portrayal of women as victims from the same publication<sup>77</sup> is a story of a man who falls in love with a young widow. The widowed woman, having been raped by her deceased husband, married him, as the shame of losing her virginity outside of marriage would have been too much to bear. She had also contracted an STI from her former marriage, and as a result, has had surgery to remove her uterus. Because of her history and bodily condition, she feels that she cannot agree to a proposal from the man who loves her. She is portrayed as forever doomed by her past victimization.

In these accounts, not only are women often victimized, but also often blamed directly or indirectly for their own misfortune. This is the case in a short story published in *Apyosin* November 2013<sup>78</sup> about a young girl who fought back when her stepfather attempted to rape her. Her mother failed to take sides with her, and the girl fled the home for town, where she was promptly picked up by a pimp and forced to start selling sex. At the end of the story she got arrested by police. After her release, while she was happy to have escaped her pimp, she was left with no place to turn, and no options open for her life.

#### 12.10.5 Women as Cunning/Deceitful

The notion of women bearing responsibility for men's adultery, because the women fail to conform to chastity norms, is prevalent in these magazines. Such representations are strongly linked to another theme in women's magazines: that women are cunning and deceitful. An example is an old short story from the eighties reproduced in the *Shwe Amyutay* December 2013 issue<sup>79</sup>. The story reinforces the idea of biological differences between the sexes to condone men's affairs with women outside the marriage. In addition it places the blame for adulterous husbands on their female mistresses:

The natural circumstances favour men so that they can be with many women but nowadays women are acting against nature by using contraceptive methods. The result is the divorce rate is rising'. ... Mostly men like pleasure, because nature favours them that way. Secondly, women give them chances to commit adultery ... if the other women would not accept the married man, that man could not have committed adultery.

portrayed as slaves or prisoners of their marriages. While some of these stories reinforced a view of women as victims of their circumstances, others offered opportunities for reflection on the merits of marriage.

In the short story 'Women in Prison' published in *Apyosin* December 2013<sup>80</sup>, a young woman starts doubting her engagement to her boyfriend after visiting the house of her brother-in-law to be and observing his marriage, which she describes like 'a prison under the name of love'. When her boyfriend asks her to resign from her job once they have married, the young woman finally decides to return her engagement ring. The boyfriend tries to sell the female character a marriage 'security package' that casts the wife squarely in a reproductive role. He says: 'A woman doesn't need to worry about looking pretty after she gets married, she only has to look after children and her husband. Her husband can make enough money for the family, so her life is perfect, she doesn't need anything else'. The female character refuses this offer, stating: 'Material goods can't make my life perfect; I am worried to lose my own standing and liberty as an independent woman. I can only see married life as a prison'. The female character resists her boyfriend's definition of love: 'Love is to be possessed. Man's love is to possess his woman by marrying'. The female character's own definition of love is then put forward: 'In my understanding, love is to have mutual respect, to value each other's happiness, to maintain each other's private life and to be careful not to arrest each other in a prison called marriage.' While most of the stories hold up marriage as the ultimate goal and destiny for women, it is notable that marriage, its forms and merits can also be critically examined this way.

## 12.12 Stories that Transgress Norms

Finally there is also some content that runs counter to the expected norms and holds women up as brave and fearless. One example is an essay in the *Tharapu* October 2013 issue<sup>81</sup> about a female physical trainer in her sixties who is standing on her own feet. She stands out as a rare role model in these kinds of magazines, as she is a divorcee and a widow who has raised her two children on her own. Her message to the women readers is not to give up their efforts.

The most norm-breaking story among all the publications analysed is a short story published in *Shwe Amyutay* October 2013 issue, of a woman, portrayed as brave and honest, who in response to bad and corrupt leadership by men in the village decides to compete for the leadership role in the village. However, the story does not allow the protagonist to challenge the corruption she observes.

## 12.11 Critical Examination of Marriage

Some magazine content around marriage and relationships includes space for stories and discussions that explore marriage in a critical way, particularly when women were

77. 'The Spring Rose', written by male writer Paing Dwe, p. 126-30.

78. 'The Bird Which Lost Its Nest' written by male writer Nat Ye.

79. 'Me and then Love', written by female Doctor Mya Naun Nyo, p. 102-108.

80. 'Written by Htet Myat Naing Zin, p. 175-181.

81. 'Wish all women would be beautiful', written by Daw Malar Tin, p. 118-120.



Oftentimes, translated interviews with foreign stars such as actresses and singers carry messages around women's empowerment rarely found in the publication's other content. The following quote from an interview with female actress Nicole Kidman in *Apyosin* December 2013 is such an example:

My mom taught us that women are equal to men. I taught my daughters the way I was taught. We never let anyone break our spirits. We never need to accept discrimination against any person. This is my stand and my mom's as well.

Another example of empowering messages by 'outsiders' is an interview in *Tharapu* (December 2012)<sup>82</sup> with the female singer Beyoncé who is quoted as saying:

Independence means more than having a regular income. It means a woman can determine one's own life as she sees best. Women should know their value and should not take less than they deserve.

## Implications of Findings

Lack of representation of women in critical areas such as politics and business, reproduction of gender stereotypes, victimization and victim blaming are some of the key issues that need to be addressed for media to become a positive force in the work for increased gender equality. Working with journalists, editors and other groups of media professionals will be important strategies to overcome the negative socialization patterns that are currently taking place through mainstream media.<sup>83</sup>

82. 'Beyoncé Who Crowned The Success', translated from H&M 2013 Summer Issue, by Soe Thein.

83. More detailed recommendations can be found in Chapter 13.





As Myanmar continues along the path of change, there are both hopeful and worrying trends from a gender equality perspective.

## 13.1 Key Findings

Historically, gender inequality in Myanmar has not been acknowledged as an issue of concern. The idea of Myanmar as a country with equal opportunities for men and women that emerged through colonial writings has proven pervasive. Under military rule, gender became a politicized topic and claims to gender equality referencing Myanmar or Buddhist culture were used to ward off criticism from the international community. Continuing today, this gender equality discourse is reproduced at universities, in official political statements, and in development reports. Lack of data in general and sex disaggregated data in particular, as well as conceptual confusion, have hindered the emergence of alternative descriptions of gender relations. This is now beginning to change, and as this study shows, social and cultural norms carry ideas of differential functions and worth for men and women.

### 13.1.1 Key Cultural and Religious Norms

The word culture in Myanmar language is linguistically related to politeness, which sets the tone for what is considered appropriate cultural expression. Study participants tend to see women as 'bearers of culture' and women are often blamed in discussions of disappearing cultural values. Myanmar culture is usually equated with Buddhist Burmese culture in official accounts. This has a dual effect of silencing cultural expressions from ethnic minority cultures, and of positioning the majority culture as gender equal, in opposition to minority cultures which are unequal. Gender inequality in Myanmar can be observed through cultural and religious narratives that are reproduced through patriarchal structures. This was observed across all ethnic and religious groups who participated in the study.

Gender dimensions of cultural norms centre on male spiritual superiority, which is positioned in opposition to female worldly inferiority. Perceptions of women's lesser value are linked to ideas that their bodily functions, notably menstruation and childbirth, are impure. Women's virginity and modesty are highly valued normative ideals, and 'proper' dress code is given immense significance in representing this ideal. 'Indecent' dress draws strong condemnation, and victim blaming of women in relation to sexual violence is often linked to dress codes. Real or potential perpetrators are shielded behind norms of male sexuality that is assumed to be uncontrollable and potentially violent.

Norms around masculinity are linked to heterosexuality and in general are socially controlled through standards of dress. Women's heterosexuality is assumed; other sexual identities and expressions are rarely discussed. Self-control and sacrifice are feminine ideals and part of the gendered dimensions of a face-saving culture. Women's status can be enhanced through their connections to men, which is established through marriage. Their status plummets upon separation, whether it is through divorce, widowhood or rejection of marriage.

Son preference, bride price and unequal opportunities to inherit are among the key issues that are derived from norms of unequal worth and that impact negatively on the lives of women. There are many important agents of socializing gender norms, including the family, the education system, authorities, social services, the healthcare system, literature, mass media and religious leaders. The impact of this all-encompassing socialization is a deep internalization of gender norms. Changes are observed with regards to gender norms, and a gradual loosening up of norms that have restricted women's space is noted, though not appreciated by all.

### 13.1.2 Economy, Work and Livelihoods

Work and livelihood opportunities for men and women are strongly linked to gendered norms that steer perceptions of where women and men can be, what they can do, and when can they do it in order to be seen as 'good' and 'appropriate'. A gendered division of labour was prominent in all of the study areas. The domains of work for men and women are typically positioned in opposition to each other. They include: physically hard work as opposed to easy or light work; inside work as opposed to outside work, and productive work as opposed to reproductive work. A man's perceived strength, bravery and tenacity is held up against the perception that a woman lacks these qualities. The idea that women should focus on reproductive work is largely taken for granted. Reference to women as caretakers of family members is linked to the fact that women give birth. House work for women is often simply described as a duty, a necessity, and as a consequence of men's opposite role, in working outside.

The norms of the male breadwinner and household leader are central in the understanding of gender relations, which derive from the concept of hpon. Men's work is perceived to be more valuable, and the physical strength required to do men's jobs is often cited as the reason for these perceptions. The lesser value placed on women's work points to the fact that housework does not confer either status or income. Community members are largely uncomfortable with taking on a task that is perceived to be the responsibility of the opposite sex, and negative community perceptions of crossing gender boundaries in work strengthen this divide. The extent of the discomfort around breaking gender norms in terms of work reveals the unequal value placed on men's and women's work.

Women's increased role doing paid work should not necessarily be taken as a sign of greater equality, since many experience poor and hazardous working conditions, firm glass ceilings to promotion or advancement, and the double burden of domestic and outside work, as reasons for concern. Social practices, such as listing women as dependents on family registration cards, reproduce unequal valuing of men's and women's work. Among the most obvious material manifestations of the unequal value placed on men's and women's work is the discriminatory wage structure that favours men.

### 13.1.3 Education

Gender equality has not received much attention in the education field, partly as a result of a focus on minimum goals, such as primary education for all, enrolment data, and gender parity measurements, and partly because sex-disaggregated data is scant. At the community level, the value of education for girls is measured against job opportunities and marriage prospects, rather than seen as a right in itself.

In this study, the education system emerged as one of the most powerful socializing agents with regards to gender norms. This takes place through educational materials as well as through teachers. Gender norms that are reproduced through the education system include those where boys and men are portrayed as: tough; externally-oriented; breadwinners; focused on production; intelligent; and responsible for national affairs. Girls, on the other hand, are held up as possessing the opposite characteristics, as: quiet and well behaved; focused on reproduction; family-oriented; and modest. Vocational training continues this pattern of socialization as it prepares boys and girls for an equally gender-segregated labour market.

Gender norms were believed to impact on school attendance, retention and performance. A positive change with regards to the importance attached to the education of girls was observed. However, in several of the study communities, girls' education was described as lagging behind boys'. Internalized gender norms related to family obligations impact on girls' decisions to drop-out. Threats of harassment and violence, real or perceived, against girls, also impact on decision-making related to keeping girls in school. Improvements in infrastructure and perceived safety appear to have positive effects for girls' schooling. Men's expected future leadership roles may favour them in education retention. Girls reportedly do better than boys at school due to the way they are socialized, including norms of obedience and diligence. Beyond schooling, educated men tend to have more opportunities for career advancement, whilst educated women are limited more to low paying jobs.

### 13.1.4 Sport

Sport is largely seen as a male domain entailing traditional masculine attributes such as tenacity and strength. Mixed teams in sport are seen to compromise modesty norms. Women are also dissuaded from participating in sport as it is believed that exercise can interfere with reproductive functions. The 2013 SEA games that took place in Myanmar appeared to have had a positive effect on the view of women in sport, due to successful results by women athletes.

### 13.1.5 Health

Cultural norms impact heavily on women's opportunities for a healthy life. Such norms include those that: hold women's menstruation to be dirty; place high value of women's virginity; see women foremost as reproductive beings; hold sex to be a taboo topic; promote childbearing; discourage family planning; encourage women to sacrifice themselves for their families; and position women as inferior in the household, with men as household heads and principal decision-makers. Norms are socialized through peers, families, health educators and health care providers, and are, in some cases, underpinned by laws and policies related to health.

The impact of these norms include: limited access to information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly among unmarried women but also among men; justification of men's violence against women - including sexual violence - with reference to women's failure to conform to cultural and social norms; reduction of women's health issues to maternal and child health concerns; women's continued inability to decide matters concerning their own bodies; and the marginalization and discrimination of women who do not conform to gendered norms.

### 13.1.6 Media

The rapidly changing media environment, characterized by the removal of censorship and increased liberalization, reveals the firmness of cultural norms as boundaries are tested and crossed. This regards sexuality norms in particular. Media functions as an important bearer of norms and can be seen both as a reflection of society and an important actor in shaping public opinion and perceptions. The globalization of culture is generally met with scepticism, with women who appear in the media having to shoulder criticism when they fail to conform to traditional gender norms. On the other hand there is appreciation among women for the slightly increased range of roles for women that globalized media has brought.

Media largely perpetuates a victimized, objectified and sexualized view of women through the topics it covers and through the way it represents women and men. Print media was found to be elite-oriented and highly male-biased. Women are less visible in print media as sources, spokespersons and experts. Politics and economics are heavily male-dominated, while women are more represented in arts and culture. Women's magazines are reinforcing the view of women as primarily reproductive beings, with norms of modesty taking centre stage.

Similarly the media industry itself presents narrow and stereotyped opportunities for women. Gender biased market demands were given as reasons for wage inequality in the media industry. Fewer opportunities for professional recognition and lack of encouragement to address gender issues through the media were other important findings.

## 13.2 Concluding Discussion

Amongst the participants in this study a wide range of voices and opinions about gender norms emerged. While there is much similarity in descriptions of what these norms entail, participants differ in the conclusions that they draw with regards to how to value these norms. Differences in opinion have to do with - among other things - class, locality, educational background, occupation, age and personal life experiences. More conservative groups tend to speak of

traditional norms as worthy of maintaining. Others are beginning to question gender norms that they find are imposing limitations in the lives of themselves and other women.

This study has illustrated that cultural norms and related social practices impact men and women throughout their lifespan and in every aspect of their lives, from the most deeply personal – the sense of self, body, confidence, love and marriage - to the practical organization and valuing of paid and unpaid work; education opportunities; health status and services; participation in community development and the affairs of the nation; and much more. Until now, gender norms have rarely been aired and debated. Discussions with study participants show that while norms, including those that prevent women's enjoyment of human rights, have proven remarkably stable in Myanmar, many are now undergoing incremental change.

One of the barriers to changing norms is the lack of data and information which links normative ideals to structural discrimination. While this study is a small contribution in opening up this debate, more detailed studies in particular fields are needed. The Government and various Ministries, members of parliament, education specialists, health professionals, media executives, economic policy makers, labour rights activists, officials and programmers in the areas of social welfare, culture, and information officials need to understand and acknowledge the impact of gender norms in their particular fields. It is important that these key persons work to ensure that norms built on gender stereotypes and ideas of unequal worth, do not find their ways into policies, programmes, school text books, directives and operating procedures, and critically – budgets. There is now a comprehensive framework - the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 - and the information generated by this study should be used to inform the process of implementing the Plan.

As Myanmar continues along the path of change, there are both hopeful and worrying trends from a gender equality perspective. The resistance to cultural globalization and the reactivation of a cultural protectionist stance, in which women are cast as 'protectors of a culture,' can be seen as a barrier to the realization of women's rights. By contrast, there are few restrictions or critical commentary on men's behaviour, dress or roles, and any forceful clamping down on the few voices that do speak up against such a development would provide further testament to the strength of the patriarchal culture that claims women's protection as its mission, but leaves women with fewer opportunities to participate in shaping the society they would like to see.

Whether the opportunities brought by increased openness and liberalization will lead to economic improvement and empowerment for women remains to be seen. How labour

market regulations come about and to what extent labour rights are implemented will be important determinants. To be sure, the emancipatory potential of work will also be influenced by the extent to which men will share the burden of reproductive work. Women's increased organizing and strategizing for change are hopeful signs. As the evidence base increases, women's work will be on an increasingly solid footing. Finally, men still need to come on board the agenda for change towards gender equality. Apart from a number of champions, this has not yet happened on a significant scale.

## 13.3 Recommendations

### 13.3.1 Education

- Engage male and female teachers in efforts to transform gender norms and stereotypes and ensure gender awareness is included in teacher training in both formal and non-formal education.
- Ensure gender is mainstreamed in the planned reforms of pre-service teacher education. Efforts targeting both higher education and basic education will be needed. This includes both teaching methods and content.
- Offer in-service teachers and community teachers a chance to discuss and reflect on gender norms and provide practical tools that they can use at school, using a peer education format. Support education practitioners at a personal level to handle any conflicts in consciousness that may arise as they are asked to reconsider deeply held norms.
- Review all teaching and learning materials, including text books, with a gender lens. Ensure future education materials do not reinforce stereotypical gender norms but instead address boys, girls, men and women as equally able to participate in all spheres of life, with equal opportunities.
- Make sure efforts of norm transgression go hand in hand with realistic opportunities for girls and boys to exercise different occupational/study choices. This impacts upon both students and teachers.
- Challenge gender norms in non-formal education and vocational training by creating environments where everyone is able to choose according to interest or talent.
- Consider both 'supply' and the 'demand' side, so that choice of vocations that challenge gender norms can be practically applied in the labour market.
- Bring together a broad range of stakeholders, including education practitioners, employers, policy makers and students, for constructive dialogue and programming aiming to challenge gender norms in occupational choices.

- Free up teaching space for teachers by giving them a chance to focus on teaching and feeling that they can make a difference. This could mean fewer tasks, more teachers, fewer students, different training materials, sufficient time, tools and autonomy. Budget and instructions that focuses on this component are essential.
- Ensure that the development of education laws and policies address gender inequalities as called for in the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR)
- Make sure the development of an overarching education law is in line with the Government's international commitments (CEDAW, BPfA) and national commitments (NSPAW).
- Develop a national, comprehensive, and inclusive education policy, with a strong focus on equity to ensure that all children, youth and adults in Myanmar are able to enjoy their rights to a quality education, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social or economic status, geographical location, religion, disability, or other attribute.
- Ensure that gender is mainstreamed in the development of specific education policies such as proposed initiatives on inclusive education; non-formal education; and language of instruction.
- As called for in the NSPAW, ensure that research and surveys are collecting data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and location.
- Engage civil society in a comprehensive review of educational materials with the intention of producing school materials that are free from gender bias.

### 13.3.2 Health

- Conduct more research on women's health needs, including but not limited to maternal and child health.
- Raise awareness among men and women of sexual and reproductive health and rights with a view to promoting the acceptance of women's decision-making over their own bodies.
- Conduct research in health care settings on how cultural assumptions influence the way men and women are approached (including what is asked of women and men, what is not asked and how it is asked).
- Advance policies which focus on women's right to self-determination in matters concerning their bodies. Gender mainstreaming of community health plans and other policy documents is essential.
- Take advantage of the space created by HIV prevention activities to broaden awareness raising activities from a focus on disease control. Ensure sex education initiatives



include sex, body image and integrity, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Make sure content is age and context appropriate.

- Create space for health care providers to discuss cultural norms and gender stereotypes that may influence how they engage with clients.
- Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services are not limited based on marital status or other factors.

### 13.3.3 Economy

- Ensure labour laws and policies include provisions of equal opportunities for employment (regardless of sex, gender identity, age or marital status) and equal wages. Provide sanctions for employers who do not live up to these standards.
- Improve workers' rights and conditions in factory work, bearing in mind the largely young and female workforce, the unhealthy work conditions, safety at work concerns, and lack of security of employment.
- Strengthen the linkages and cooperation between labour unions and the women's rights movement.
- Improve labour rights and standards for women in unregulated and secluded work environments such as karaoke bars and in domestic work.
- Expand child care facilities to ensure that women who carry out the majority of reproductive work are not structurally discriminated from participating in the labour market.
- Abolish practices that continue to reproduce the idea of women's work as less valuable than men's work, such as listing women as dependents on family registration cards.
- In the spirit of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, holistically review existing and proposed labour regulation. Policy makers, programmers, activists, and unions should address structural issues that contribute to gender inequality, including norms that result in gendered separation of activities and unequally valuing of tasks.

### 13.3.4 Media

- Provide gender training for journalists, editors and other media professionals. Avoiding stereotypes, victimization, and victim blaming of women are key issues that need to be addressed
- Raise awareness of the need for more visibility of women in media and more balanced representation of men and women in various capacities where women are currently underrepresented such as politics, and business.

- Explore the option of instituting an ombudsman function where sexist, misogynist representation of women in media can be tried.

## How to Move the Gender Equality Agenda Forward

- Challenge donors, policy makers, businesses, unions, development organizations, and so on to commit to gender equity in a meaningful and practical way. Highlight the deep roots and far reaching impacts of gender inequality and advocate for the use of a gendered lens on all developmental issues.
- Work towards re-framing gender equality from being seen as a 'women's issue' to an issue of political advancement and democracy.
- Broaden the base in gender equality work from the circles of current activists, and engage men and women of different socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, ethnicities, locations, sexualities and abilities.
- Begin discussions of gender inequality around concrete issues in peoples' lives. Look at the impact at both individual and collective levels.
- Work towards re-claiming and re-valuing cultural and religious texts that promote an attitude of questioning and exploration rather than blind following, and those that have to do with social responsibilities. Use these cultural and religious frameworks to advance a gender equality agenda.
- Be aware of culturally accepted forms of address and interaction. Approach change through constructive dialogue rather than through confrontation.
- Be practical, issue based and address the issue of 'how to' in the work towards mainstreaming gender.
- Equip yourself with up-to-date and reliable information about gender issues in different sectors, and be ready to provide concrete information in order to be taken seriously.
- Identify and target the 'agents of change' in a given situation, for example, people with gender awareness and inside knowledge of a particular field; power holders with a sympathetic ear; teachers, health care personnel; religious leaders; journalists; parents, children and friends.
- Reflect on the gendered aspects of norms that influence you in your own life and begin to make change happen there, not just in your professional role.

Annex 1 Methodology



## Key Concepts

**Gender Equality** is approached in this study as something that is intrinsically valuable, grounded in a rights-based approach that acknowledges women's rights to live as equals with and to have equal opportunities with men in all fields (CEDAW 1979). The study also recognizes, as does CEDAW, that 'the full and complete development of a country....and the cause of peace requires the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields'. From this perspective, gender equality can be seen as an instrumental value – the means to an end. At Myanmar's current crossroads, it is believed that addressing gender equality as a means as well as an end in itself is necessary.

**Gender, Norms and Power** How we understand what it is to be a man or a woman in a particular place, and time, is highly dependent on the social and cultural norms we find around us. The constant reinforcement of certain norms that define femininity and masculinity can be seen as limiting alternative ways of thinking about or being a woman or a man (see, for example, Butler 1993). Gendered norms also carry important power dimensions, and it is possible to see, through history, that there have been numerous ways of justifying women's subordination by drawing upon different sets of social and cultural norms (see, for example, Peterson and Runyan 1993). At times, women have been described as physically strong and capable of back-breaking work for example when they were required to take up work in US factories during the Second World War. At other times, such as when women's labour was required in the export garment and other factories in India as the economy was liberalizing, women were described as suitable for this type of work due to their being patient (Blomqvist 2004). If gender differences are translated into gender inequalities, the constant reinforcement of these differences may lead to the normalization of these inequalities. Moreover, as cautioned by recent studies (WB 2012, 2013) there is a risk that even when there are qualitative changes in women's living conditions beliefs may not change or may change more slowly. Indeed beliefs may even adapt to new conditions. There is also a risk that material opportunities cannot be taken advantage of due to persistent norms and beliefs (Harriden 2012).

**Culture and Cultural Change** This study, unless it is directly quoting study participants, uses the term culture in a wide sense, as a sphere in which meaning is being created

(Tomlinson 1999). It does not explore different cultural expressions such as music, art or dance. The traditional way of treating culture, or 'cultures' has been as more or less static, homogenous entities, sharing the same values and norms, and as being separable from each other. This view has slowly changed and culture has come to be regarded as made up of dynamic processes, constantly undergoing changes. Whether cultures as a result are becoming more similar (homogenization); more intertwined (hybridization) or whether processes of globalization are in fact reactivating what is seen as specific in the local culture is an ongoing debate (Hylland Eriksen 1994). This study will use these various frameworks of cultural change theory to make meaning of the findings around gender and social and cultural norms.

## Sampling Strategy and Study Sites

Local and international literature related to the research field, was reviewed and helped inform the design of the study. The study was designed as a qualitative one and as such it does not aim to provide information that can be generalized to a larger population. Rather, the overarching goal of the study's sampling strategy was to achieve a large degree of variation across the study areas according to a number of variables thought to be of relevance for the study. Therefore the sampling strategy was purposive in ensuring diversity on the variables mentioned below.

Sex was considered one of the critical variables of the study, as it is believed that only through understanding norms pertaining to both men's and women's lives - separately and in relation to each other - is it possible to generate meaningful data on social and cultural norms related to gender. Relatively equal numbers of men and women were therefore part of the study sample. In total 543 people participated in the study; 299 women (55%), and 244 men (45%).

Ethnic and religious belonging were considered particularly important variables in terms of shaping social and cultural norms in relation to gender. Diversity in terms of age groups was considered important in terms of capturing social and cultural norms as they change over the life cycle of an individual. In addition, seeking the opinions of a wide range of age groups is believed to facilitate and understanding of how social and cultural norms are evolving over time. The

study sought to capture perspectives from both urban and rural areas. Participants from different areas are believed to have different patterns of cultural expression and different degrees of exposure to different types of cultural influences. Finally, the sampling frame itself was determined by GEN members' presence, which was a necessary pre-condition for the feasibility of the research. A further rationale for working with GEN members for the implementation of the study was to support member organizations in generating detailed information from their implementation areas which would be useful for their future programming in the area of gender equality.

In keeping with the above mentioned design considerations all of the country's seven States (Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon and Rakhine and Shan) were included in the sample. In addition, four Regions (Ayeyarwady; Sagaing; Tanintharyi and Yangon) were selected for inclusion in the study as per the following considerations. Yangon Region was included in order to ensure that urban realities and the resulting exposure to a great array of cultural expression were captured in the sample. Sagaing Region was included in the sample to capture realities of communities in the Dry Zone where traditional Buddhist beliefs are prevalent (see, for example, Oxfam, ActionAid, and CARE 2011). Finally Ayeyarwady Region was included due to its recent experience with Cyclone Nargis and the indication of altered gendered practices in its aftermath (for example, Oxfam 2009, internal document). The study locations included 7 wards and 19 villages in 18 Villages Tracts, in 16 Townships in 11 States and Regions. Data was collected from November 2013 - January 2014.

## Study Design

A total of 543 people participated in the study; 299 women (55%), and 244 men (45%) from seven States - Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan - and four Regions - Ayeyarwady, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon. Data was collected through the following methods:

- Focus Group Discussions with 458 community members; 235 (51%) women and 223 (49%) men
- Case stories from 10 women and 6 men, using semi-structured interviews
- Community questionnaires with 10 women and 5 men
- Semi-structured Key Informant Interviews were conducted with 54 informants (44 women and 10 men) who are sector specialists, gender practitioners, media professionals, and figures of authority.

In-depth information was sought using qualitative research tools with the aim of obtaining a broad array of views on the

topic from a diverse sample. The main tools employed in the study were two sets of Focus Group Discussion Guides (see below). The study tools were primarily designed to capture gender relations and social norms at a snapshot in time. However, in keeping with the dynamic view of culture set forth in this study, efforts were made to also account for norm evolution and cultural change. Therefore Focus Group Discussion guides included an invitation for participants to compare current conditions on key study topics with conditions 10 years ago or between the current and previous generations. Participants were also asked to share their aspirations for their own future and the future of their children.

The study tools were developed in English; translated to Myanmar language and back-translated to English to ensure consistency of meaning. In cases where ethnic minority languages were used during data collection, oral translation was done by the facilitator.<sup>84</sup>

## Community Questionnaires

Community questionnaires were designed to generate basic facts and contextual information about the communities (villages/wards) selected for the field research. The questionnaires were completed by the field researchers soliciting relevant information from knowledgeable community members for example, village elder or village head/ward administrator by the field researchers prior to conducting Focus Group Discussions in the study communities. 10 women and 5 men responded to the community questionnaires.

## Focus Group Discussions

The aim of using Focus Group Discussions as research methodology is to generate detailed discussions on a particular topic with a select group of respondents. The questions are generally kept open to allow participants to frame the discussion in a way that is relevant to their context. Focus Groups are particularly useful to explore the sentiments of a select group of respondents on a topic or issue where not much information is known. Two separate FGD Guides were developed for the purposes of the study. FGD Guide A focused on family relations; household division of labour; marriage; and social and cultural expression. FGD Guide B covered dress codes; media representation; and gender norms in relation to livelihoods; education and health.

The Focus Group Guides were piloted twice prior to the field research. The initial piloting was conducted by the research team with the primary aim of assessing the duration as well as sequencing; relevance and comprehension of the questions. Significant revisions were done to the guides following the

84. For management of language and translation issues, please see section 5.2 on Transcription and Language.

initial piloting. A second series of pilots were conducted as part of the training for field researchers. The primary aim of this field testing was to check whether previous adjustments to the guide generated the intended improvements as well as providing the field researchers with an opportunity for practicing the roles of facilitating, note taking and observation. Following this pilot, minor revisions to the guides were made in collaboration with the team of field researchers, primarily around tone and language.

The study methodology was designed taking into consideration social and cultural relations in the study communities. All Focus Group Discussions were held separately with men and women, so as minimize the influences of existing gendered expectations of behaviour and encourage open conversation. In addition the focus groups were held separately with respondents according to three broad age categories (18-25; 26-40; and >40) so as to avoid bringing into play any inter-generational power differences due to existing age hierarchies.

The intention of these design considerations was to create an atmosphere where participants felt safe and able to reflect on a range of topics, and issues pertaining to their daily life,

social interactions, dreams and hopes that they may not normally reflect upon. The aim was to gain an understanding of the social practices as well as the underlying cultural norms underpinning practices, thoughts of right and wrong, important life decisions etc. In addition, Focus Groups were kept homogeneous with regards to ethnicity and religion in order to ensure that participants were speaking from a shared cultural perspective. The ethnic/religious composition of the focus group was predetermined - based on the population groups residing in the areas where the GEN member organizations are implementing their activities - in order to ensure variance across the entire study.

Focus Group Discussions were held with men and women in communities in the 11 States and Regions listed above. Six Focus Groups were conducted in each State or Region except in Chin State.<sup>85</sup> As shown in the table below generally three FGDs with men and three FGDs with women were conducted in each State/Region including the three age categories in each area. The total number of focus groups held was 78 (See Table 1 below). Among the 458 Focus Group Discussants, divided into 78 groups, 235 (51%) were women and 223 (49%) were men.

Study Site		Women			Men			Total
State/Region	Township	18-25	26-40	>41	18-25	26-40	>41	
Ayeyarwady Region	Bogale	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Chin State	Madupi	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
	Hakha	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Sagaing Region	Monywa	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Kachin State	Myitkyina	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Kayah State	Demoso	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Kayin State	Hpa-An	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Mon State	Mawlamyine	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Rakhine State	Myebon	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Shan State	Kalaw	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Tanintharyi Region	Dawei	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Yangon Region	Mingalartaungnyunt	1	1	1				3
	Pazundaung				1	1	1	3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>78</b>

Table 1: Details of Focus Group Discussions

85. Except in Chin State where 18 FGDs were conducted. The larger sample size for Chin State was due to the severe lack of gender related data and information; recurrent anecdotal evidence of gender discriminatory social norms and practices; the cultural variation between north and south; and the reach of the GEN member organization supporting the field work in that area, making it possible to select additional study implementation sites.

In the selected study areas, community members who fulfilled the following eligibility criteria were included in the sample frame:

- » Not government or other authority or family member of such person<sup>86</sup>
- » Fit the designated sex/age/ethnicity/religion categories of the focus group
- » Open and willing to talk
- » Have 90 minutes to spare

Random sampling was conducted at village level to recruit four to six participants fulfilling the criteria, for each focus group. The study design made every effort to reduce the potential for bias at all stages of the research. For this reason, detailed descriptions of sampling procedures were outlined in the resource pack that was shared with field researchers during their training course.<sup>87</sup>

## Key Informant Interviews

The Key Informant Interview is designed to generate in-depth information on a particular topic, typically exploring a topic from a number of different angles. In this study, Key Informant Interviews were conducted by the Lead Researcher, the National Researcher and the GEN Research and Training Coordinator, alone or in pairs. Some interviews were conducted in English, some in Myanmar and some using a mix of both languages. Translation to English from Myanmar where needed was conducted by the National Researcher and the GEN Research and Training Coordinator. Interviews took place in Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay alongside the

implementation of the field research from November 2013 – January 2014.

Key informants were primarily sourced from sector specialists in areas relevant to the NSPAW areas prioritized for the study. In addition, key informants knowledgeable about gender issues in the study areas were sourced in order to enhance the understanding of key gender concerns in each area. Other categories of key informants included media professionals, male and female authority figures who formally or informally work to protect culture. Semi structured interviews, designed uniquely for each interview were used for key informant interviews, in order to allow for the probing of key topics and norms that had emerged through the literature review and field research. Seventeen female and nine male key informants were interviewed individually, and 27 women and one man were interviewed in three group interviews.

## Case Stories

Case stories were collected in line with the main objectives of the study, i.e., the identification of social and cultural norms that favour or hinder gender equality. Guidance for the selection of case stories were to focus on cases that a) illustrate the impact of such norms on gender equality and b) evidence of changing social practices. Field researchers were tasked with following up on interesting ‘cases’, i.e., participants/groups/processes/projects and so on that emerged during the course of the field research, particularly following up on issues identified during Focus Group Discussions. The method for soliciting information for these case stories was through semi-structured interviews as per two sets of guidelines developed

Type of Publication	Name of Publication	Number of Issues	Period
Newspaper (Dailies)	Daily 11 News	7	3-10 Dec 2013
	Myanmar Ahlin	7	14-20 Dec 2013
Journal (Weeklies)	7 Day News	3	18-31 Dec 2013
	Mizzima News	2	13-27 Dec 2013
	Myanmar Times	2	6-19 Dec 2013
Magazine (Monthly)	Apyosin	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Shwe Amuytay	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Tharapu	3	Oct-Dec 2013
	Irrawaddy Magazine	3	Oct-Dec 2013

Table 2: Content Analysis of Print Media

86 This criterion was introduced to minimize the power differentials within the Focus Group Discussions, as it is believed that this could impact on the degree of openness of discussions.

87. Copies of the resource pack for field researchers will be made available by GEN upon request.

for field researchers. The interviewees for case stories consisted of 10 women and six men.

## Media Analysis

Media representations of men and women are often illustrative of the fault lines of the current cultural debates. Mass media is given a special role in this study - approached both as a discussion topic with study participants as well as a source material in a content analysis covering popular print media. The following sources were analysed from a gender perspective, using a modified version of the UNESCO framework for Gender Sensitive Indicators for media (UNESCO 2012).

## Recruitment and Training of Field researchers

Data collection at field level was primarily carried out by teams of field researchers comprised of staff and volunteers from GEN member organizations in the respective study areas where the organizations are active, and from Yangon. Each Field Research Team was comprised of four field researchers (two women and two men) including a team leader. In total 35 field researchers, 17 women and 18 men were recruited and trained for the study.

General selection criteria for field researchers included:

- » Basic understanding/background in gender
- » Strong interpersonal and active listening skills
- » Understanding of living conditions in study areas
- » Ability to develop good rapport with local communities
- » Interest in developing qualitative research skills
- » Able to commit to participate in the research for one month including one week for training and three weeks for the data collection

In selection of field researchers, the ability to conduct interviews and focus groups discussion in the local languages of the respondents was prioritized. Field research teams included both men and women, ensuring that facilitators and note takers were of the same sex as the study participants they interacted with. While an understanding of the living conditions of study respondents was desirable, the field researchers did not normally work in the village/ward where they would collect data, although their organization in most cases had activities in or near the study areas. This criterion was introduced as it was deemed important to ensure familiarity and trust between study participants and field researchers by virtue of the organization being known. The study design also acknowledged the need to be mindful of the power relations that may exist between the staff of an organization and community members, and to ensure that this

did not influence the research process.

Field researchers participated in a week long training that aimed to:

- » Increase sensitivity of participants to gender issues at a personal as well as a community level
- » Increase understanding of the goals of the study and the links between cultural norms and gender equality, inequality and discrimination
- » Further develop skills in relation to qualitative research, with a focus on facilitating inclusive Focus Group Discussions and limit bias
- » Develop understanding and skills to follow ethical guidelines and protocols, and
- » Ensure field researchers become familiar with the field research tools and protocol of the study

## Ethics and Safety Considerations

The ethical conduct in all aspects of this research study was given utmost importance. In particular, the following principles underscored the design and implementation of the study:

### **Ethical Clearance:**

The protocol for this study was submitted for ethical review and approval by the Ethical Committee (ERC) of the Department of Medical Research, Lower Myanmar, and modified according to the feedback given by the committee prior to the implementation of the study.

### **Individual Consent:**

All study participants provided informed oral consent to participate in the study. Informed consent was given following comprehensive information by the field researchers about the purpose and method of the study and the requests of participants. For this purpose detailed written introduction sections providing the necessary information, as well as instructions for the field researcher how to handle the issue of obtaining informed consent were included in the field research tools. Oral rather than written consent was sought in order for participants to feel at ease and to encourage openness during the data collection event.

### **Photo Consent:**

Photos were not taken during or in connection to the data collection events, in order to ensure participants felt at ease to discuss all topics. Some photos of the general surroundings of the study areas were taken. If photos of community members were intended, informed consent was sought and the community members in question were asked to sign photo consent forms.

### **Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. All participants were free to choose whether or not to participate,

without inducement. Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences.

**Confidentiality:**

The strictest principles of confidentiality were upheld throughout the implementation and dissemination of this study. This was made clear to all the individuals and groups that the field research teams met with, at every separate occasion. No identifying details were recorded by the field research teams. A message about confidentiality was included in the introduction note in the FGD facilitation guide to remind facilitators to address this issue every time.

**Safety:**

The safety of the participants was deemed to be of paramount importance to the quality and standards of this study. Mechanisms and measures were put in place to ensure that the safety of the participants was guaranteed to the greatest extent possible. No security incidents were reported as part of this study.

**Do No Harm:**

The interviews included questions around issues that could be considered sensitive by the participants. Therefore the research teams stressed the need for conducting the study without judgment and with respect for all participants and interviewers. Every effort was made to phrase questions for interviews and focus group discussions in respectful and culturally-appropriate language.

Permissions and Introductions: At field level, the facilitating organizations were tasked with ensuring that all necessary permissions and authorizations needed to conduct the data collection had been secured prior to the roll-out of the study. Team leaders were responsible to liaise with the facilitating organizations to make sure necessary permissions were obtained prior to data collection.

## Data Management, Analysis and Dissemination Managing Audio Recordings

Audio recording was used during data collection events (for example, focus group discussion or interview), except in a few cases where study participants requested not to have discussions recorded, and in which case detailed notes were taken. Each field research team was supplied with audio recording devices prior to the field research and operation and maintenance of the equipment was included in the training for field researchers. Following each data collection event, the recorded material was moved to a computer and emailed to the research team in Yangon for uploading into the main data set. Once each recording had been reviewed by the research team and confirmed to be complete, all other versions of the

recording were deleted (for example, from the audio recording device, and any computers used to temporarily store the data).

## Transcription and Language

The data was transcribed verbatim from audio files into word documents. Where Myanmar language was used to facilitate the data collection event, the information collected was transcribed into Myanmar language. Where other ethnic languages were used, the data was first transcribed in the respective language, and then translated into Myanmar language by the field research team. In most cases transcription was completed within 24 hours of the data collection event. In a few cases logistic challenges prevented immediate transcription and the data was transcribed within maximum one week from the data collection event. Data transcripts were provided to the research team in Yangon by hand delivery or email. Following confirmation of receipt of the data by the research team in Yangon, transcripts from intermittent computers used were deleted. After review and cleaning by the lead researcher and the national researcher, transcripts were (fully or partially) translated into English.

## Data Analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative data coding methods inspired by Mikkelsen, 1995; Russel, 2011 and Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003. As a first step, the research team developed a coding framework, breaking down the data set into segments in line with the main themes of the study and the research questions. For the second step in the analysis the study findings functioned as a guide for developing sub-codes or categories. Transcripts were coded manually. In order to develop the skills and capacity of field researchers in data analysis, a two day data analysis workshop demonstrating this method was organized for the field researchers, led by the lead researcher and the national researcher. Inputs from the Social and Cultural Norms Research Working Group and the GEN Steering Committee was sought in the later stages of the analysis and during the report drafting stages (for more on the roles of the actors involved in managing the study see 3.7).

## Data Management

In order to maintain the integrity of the research and to minimize any potential negative consequences for participants, data management adhered to the following guidelines:

- The process of obtaining oral consent was done without using the names of respondents.
- No names were recorded on audio recordings, notes or transcriptions.
- Data was downloaded onto password protected computers and original recordings deleted from the recording device.



- As per GEN practice, the GEN Coordination Unit will store and manage the raw data files, including, for example, photo consent forms, transcripts, and translations. Audio files will be destroyed.

## Dissemination of Findings

This report has been produced in both English and Myanmar languages and a detailed ‘Dissemination Strategy’ is being developed.

## Roles and Responsibilities

The study was conceptualized by the Gender Equality Network, and designed by an international researcher, who led the process of drafting of the study protocol and study tools, conducting a literature review, training field researchers, conducting key informant interviews and leading the data analysis and report drafting process. Working closely with the lead researcher throughout this process was a national researcher. The process was also supported by the GEN Research and Training Coordinator with regards to the above mentioned tasks as well as in facilitating the collaboration with GEN member organization and with the help of GEN Coordination Unit staff to ensure logistic arrangements were in place. The research team worked closely with an external translator throughout the process. An external consultant was engaged for the media analysis component.

The GEN Social and Cultural Norms Research Working Group (SCR WG), made up of interested GEN members, provided input and guidance to the study process including providing timely technical and contextual inputs and advice into the study design, implementation, report drafting and dissemination of the results. Members of the SCR WG, along with other GEN member organizations also facilitated the recruitment of field researchers; the piloting of research tools and the field research. The GEN Steering Committee (SC) have ultimately guided the process, through providing inputs through the working group and signing off on major decisions related to the study.

The field researchers recruited for the study worked under the guidance of a team leader, selected from within the group. Main responsibilities of field researchers included: participating in a one-week training on the study and methodology and piloting of study tools in Yangon; participating in debriefing sessions and sharing experiences and lessons learned with other GEN members; collecting data and information; cleaning and checking data in the field; transcribing audio recordings and translating interview

material conducted in local languages to Myanmar language.

For each field research team, a team leader was identified whose main responsibilities included management of equipment; guiding field researchers; detailed planning of the field work and coordination of all data collection and field activities; taking the lead in sampling according to the guidance provided in the study protocol; functioning as the contact person for the field teams as well as the GEN research team; quality control; liaison with authorities and financial management.

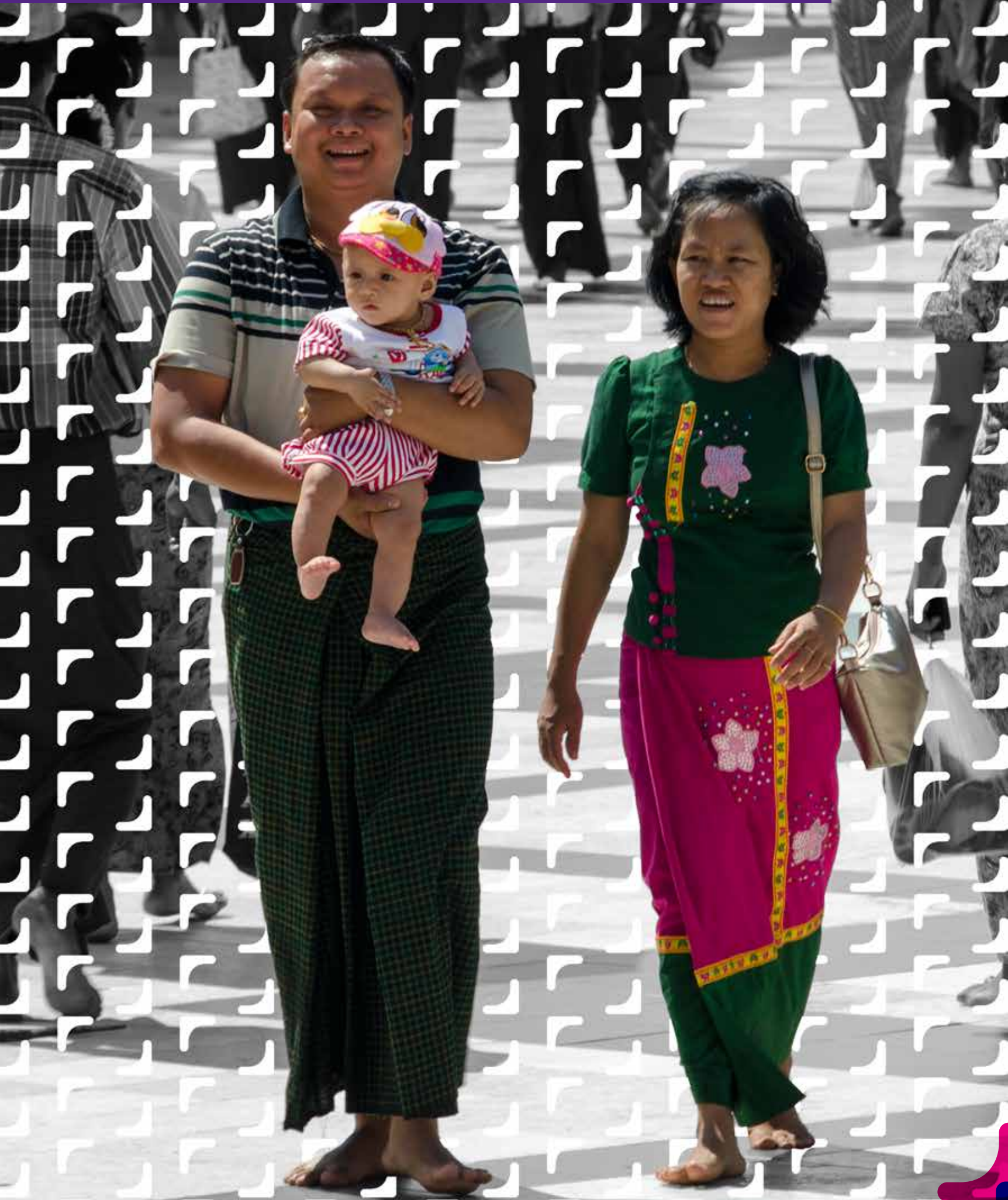
## Study Limitations

The pool of men and women in Myanmar, who have received training in and/or have experience of working with issues related to gender, while growing, remains relatively small. The human resource requirements for this study called for both men and women, with basic understanding of gender and with some experience of qualitative data collection. In addition, the pool of field researchers required men and women with language skills in no less than eight different languages. These study parameters posed some challenges in terms of ensuring that all criteria could be fulfilled, and in some cases language proficiency had to trump other important criteria in order for the study implementation to be feasible.

An important objective of the study - organized as it was by a member driven network - was to offer member organizations an opportunity for hands-on learning in relation to gender and qualitative data collection. In light of the challenges discussed above about the recruitment of field researchers, the objective of capacity development needed to be balanced with the need to ensure a consistent quality of data across the study areas.

The inclusion of northern Rakhine State in the study was deemed important, as previous studies point to significant norm based discrimination of women in that area (see, for example, Oxfam, ActionAid and CARE 2011 and Perera 2012).<sup>88</sup> However, due to a deteriorating security situation in northern Rakhine State at the time of the study’s implementation, the area was removed from the sampling frame, since it was deemed impossible to guarantee the safety of study participants and field researchers given the available resources. Nevertheless, it is deemed important to acknowledge the norm based discrimination of women in northern Rakhine State in the context of the findings of this report.

88. By way of illustration, Perera (2012) writes that ‘religious and social norms and taboos and traditional gender roles act as barriers for women in almost every aspect of life. The beliefs upon which these rules are based are deeply rooted. In particular, many community members strongly believe that women belong at home; that venturing out into society, visiting places where men frequent, and working face-to-face with men is sinful; and that women who do so might get themselves into trouble; and that a man who spends money earned by a woman is committing a sin.’



## Case Story 1 The Interfaith Marriage Bill<sup>89</sup>

As soon as I heard that some Buddhist religious leaders are leading to issue this draft law targeting only Buddhist women, I felt this was unfair for women, that this was not their issue. It is our issue. And the law must be just. Not only the law, the judicial process should also be just and inclusive. In this regard, I couldn't accept the situation. That is why I contacted other women leaders and discussed how we don't need to be silent on this issue, and we decided to issue a statement.

The statement especially mentioned the rationality of the woman as a human being. And on the one hand, our country is going through a transitional period and in order to build a democratic society we need to respect different perspectives and different religions and different people. This law does not help in building a democratic society, as it excludes other religions [than Buddhism] that lived together in our country for a long time. And on the other hand the people who try to draft this law should consider women's perspectives. There was zero representation of women's voices in this law drafting process. That is why we do not accept it. In the past, society, especially religious leaders, have been considering woman as an object, not as a subject. So we needed to respond! Not only women's organizations but also other civil society organizations and some student unions and universities joined in.

The next morning one of our old colleagues called me and he confessed that actually he was part of the group who supports this idea of law. I suggested to him, 'You should think about other alternative ways. If you would really like to protect our women, you should not only think about Buddhist women, but all women.' We had a very strong discussion and argument but I felt like I shouldn't have to compromise on this value. I totally understand his point of view and concern. But we need to stand for our own values. It was the first time for us [to have such a discussion] even within the democratic forces.

We are living in a very stereotyped society. Our guys need to understand more deeply about democracy. It should be all inclusive. In my opinion, Buddhism is really liberal and very individual. And also using the words 'to protect race and religion', it is very easy to use to get the attraction and support

from the ordinary people. So in our experiences, even [the previous] regime used such kind of words 'to protect race and religion' to promote their role and their legitimacy. So I am questioning that [since] we have different races and religions if you say 'to protect race and religion', which race and religion do you protect, especially, as a politician or democratic activist? That is what I question. And why is it that only women have the responsibility to protect race and religion?

We tried to meet with the Buddhist monks who are very actively engaged in this issue. They were really shocked when women groups issued this statement - sincerely shocked! They had no experiences in the past of such kind of response. You know, whatever they say the society follows and whether they agree or disagree, they stay silent and follow them. So what are the elements in this law [that we oppose]? The first thing is that when they draft the law there are no women represented. They just only focus on their concerns. They might be sincere or not sincere. But it is their concerns.

One of the elements [of the law] is that if a Buddhist woman married, she should marry an officially registered Buddhist guy. What does that mean? If he is not Buddhist he should be officially registered as a Buddhist, before the local authority, which is really not democratic. And also I think that this law cannot reach their goal. It cannot really protect [women]. And it only focuses on Buddhist women. What about Buddhist men? How do they do if Buddhist men married [women from] other religions?

Now they try to advocate and try to approach the MPs who can bring this issue to the parliament. They try to politicize this issue. And one of the Buddhist monks stated that if someone rejects this law when they discuss in parliament, he or she cannot win the next election, in 2015. That is kind of threatening. Also us [woman leaders] who tried to oppose the law were accused. On social media they attacked our opinions and our personal affairs with wrong information. Some people encouraged and appreciated me, and said, 'You are so brave to speak out about that'. But some threatened me using very harsh words.

89. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law formerly known as the Interfaith Marriage Bill

I responded by asking why society is so angry when I ask a question that I want to know. I explained that [for me] Buddhism is to practice, and after that, you can choose. Not just follow and worship. It is practice and paying respect to each other. I even referred to a story from the Buddha discourse. Among the very first followers of the Buddha era, was a very rich follower, called Wei Thar Kha. And her husband was not Buddhist but she really believed and was a very close follower of the Buddha, even during the life time of the Buddha. So I explained that even Buddha did not mention that women should only marry Buddhist guys. [KII with Gender Activist]

### Case Story 2 **A Woman's Experience of Divorce Under Chin Customary Law**

I have a son and my ex-husband passed away a long time ago. When I thought about going to Thailand for a job leaving my son in Yangon, he forced me to take him with me; so I took him. We, mother and son, went to Thailand and worked there. I found my second husband there and we got married in Thailand. We both had to work for money in Thailand. Then we went back to Chin State, while my son continued his way from Thailand to Malaysia. One day, I heard terrible news from Malaysia that my dear son all of a sudden died there while he was at his work. As a mother, I was deep in my bereavement for my son and I wished I could build a tomb for him at least, even if I would never be able to see him again. Thus, after a thorough discussion with my husband, I went to Malaysia.

When I got back from Malaysia, I was shocked to be told that my mother was in severe health condition and my husband was committing adultery. This news made me rush back to the Chin mountains. What I was told by my husband when I first stepped into my native town was, 'You are now divorced from me'. I was totally shocked and blacked out. Of course, yes. He really did have affairs behind my back. And men from both sides of our families decided my divorce case on their own, without my knowledge or approval. I was told that my price was a mython (bull) according to our Chin tradition. I even didn't know who took that compensation or I just don't want to know about that anymore. I didn't even ask about it. My husband took all our belongings that we both saved by working our fingers to the bone, and it was me who had to go back to my mother's house with bare hands. As a matter of fact, there has been much money that I earned and saved for my family during our 10 years of marriage life. I think I should have the right to enjoy at least a small pin.

I reported my case to the Women's Affairs Organization and they told me that they were not in a position to take any action on my case, since it had been decided and resolved in agreement with our Chin tradition. Christian religious leaders

preached and consoled me that one had to harvest what had grown and to calm my mind down and ease my pain with the help of God and Jesus. I did as the preachers said to me. However, I still feel pain in my heart sometimes when I think about what he did on me. Every now and then I cried.

What I wanted was just to be involved in the discussion and informed about my divorce as I was also part of it. I also feel so hurt and angry with my relatives from my father's side. I just decided to stay silent and quiet, as the shame would always be on me even if I resolved the problem in a court. I need to struggle harder to survive in this world. Now, I am running a small teashop on my own. But, I would like to leave as my last message that I don't want any other girls to experience the same like me in the future anymore. I really want protective laws for our women, since our Chin traditions are really disadvantageous for women. I will keep my fingers crossed for it.

### Case Story 3 **Should a Woman Have the Right to Inherit?**

My name is Rykit. I am 50 years old. There were altogether four members in our family, my mother and father, my brother and I. We lived in [Southern Chin State] where my father worked as an army man. Unfortunately, when I was just a newborn, my father died at the front line. Then, my widowed mother with her two kids decided to go back to her native area in Chin State as it became difficult for her to survive alone there. When my father died, according to our tradition, it was the relatives from my father's side who were mainly responsible to take care of the children. My mother informed them about my father's death and told them to come pick us up. But, they didn't show up. Next, my mother informed her brothers about her situation and finally my mother's relatives came and took us with them to a small town in Chin State. From that small town, we had to continue our journey to our destination, a small village. But there was nobody to come and pick us up. We had to stay at my uncle's house in the town.

Later, we moved and rented a house. Then, when we applied for the land permit for this yard, luckily, we got it. In the beginning, we built kind of a temporary hut. We got the official grant for our land in the People's Council age. My uncles from my mother's side cut the needed wood and bamboos for our hut. They helped us with everything. My mother, a widow, just owned a house in that way. Because of the family's poor economic situation, we gave a favour to my elder brother and let him go to school. As for me, I received only an 8th Grade education. My brother continued his education until he got a degree and he later became an officer in a government department. When my elder brother got married, there were some disputes and arguments in the household. When they

cooked, they didn't count me in though they cooked for my mum. When my mother knew about it, she was so sad and felt pity on me. Now my mother and I cook together separately from my brother's family.

Then, when the relatives from my father's side discussed about our family problem, they came to a conclusion that the cause of the problem was me and they kicked me out of the house. Because I was a woman, I had to leave the house, and I went to live in one of my uncles' houses. Staying in his house, I made my living as a daily worker for 7 Kyat a day; it would be equal to 2000 or 3000 Kyat in today's currency. While I was living in my uncle's house, my mother monthly sent me some rice that she bought using her pension money. I can't remember if it was one or two months that I stayed in my uncle's house. I made up my mind to join my relatives from my mother's side when I heard that they were about to go to work in another town where gold mines were found. My mother supported me with 3000 Kyat before I went there.

When I was working in the gold mines, as my mother and my brother's extended family could not get along well with each other, we had to split the kitchen into two parts. My friends sent me letters telling me to provide my mother with some money for her meals and small expenses. After reading what they had suggested, I could not be happy to be working in the gold mines anymore because I missed my mother so much. I was already pregnant at that time. So, I explained and discussed everything with my husband and we made our way back to Chin State, which my mother was so fond of. My brother and his family requested us to stay and keep up their house for a short time as they were planning to move to Yangon. After letting us stay at his house for about 2 months, my brother kicked us out again. When we could buy our own house, my mother moved in and lived with us.

My mother was not in good health condition because of her old age. One day, my mother gave me the contract of inheritance and assets that was sworn before the court. I actually didn't know when she did all that. As soon as she gave me that contract, what I immediately realized was that I would need to talk to my father's relatives about the issue. I told them to come around. But, my mother had passed away already at that time. Anyway, I'm pleased that my mother died at my house. My husband and I took care of all the funeral processes and costs.

After that, according to our Chin tradition, the one who inherited the legacy had to kill a pig to celebrate. But while we were still preparing for the pig killing event, relatives from my father's side killed a pig in advance. My husband was furious to find out that they did it without informing us and without our knowledge. Since then, there have been problems concerning the right to inherit between our family and them. What was

described in my mother's will was that I was favoured with the yard, house building and the farm land, as I was the one who took care of her when she was alive.

Before my mother passed away, my brother sold out half of my mother's yard without her permission. My mother at that time got so angry with my brother and asked for the cash that my brother got for selling the house. But, he gave my mother only 800,000 Kyat out of the total of 3.5 million Kyat that he got for half of our yard. Then, as he had sold out the half of my mother's land with the house, my mother gave the other half of the land to me. When my brother also died, he left 700,000 Kyat in debts and I had to repay them.

When my mother passed away, my brother's wife and the relatives from my father's side didn't want to let me own my mother's land. When we argued about the right, they asked me whether I had the documents and contracts for the right of inherit. I told them truthfully that I had the documents and showed them the contract. They took it and burnt it. They criticized me, saying how and for what reason should I want to own a house since I was a woman. I also know our traditions. I realized them. But I told them that it could be better if the house was owned by someone who actually took care of my mother before she died. Then, the relatives from my father's side disputed and argued over this, pointing out that they also helped my mother build this house. As far as I'm concerned, I had never heard my mother speak their names from her mouth. Since then, my sister-in-laws and my father's relatives have been contesting my inheritance in our section office. The legal grant documents for the land and house were already changed into my brother's name at that time. When we resolved the problem before the section administration officers, we agreed that I would pay 3 million Kyat for the ownership of the house and we signed the agreement. I had to borrow the needed money with some interest from other people and when I could manage to find the money that was needed, they had already had changed their mind. They said they would not accept any other things except the land. They could afford for lawyers for the case. So I still have to go to the section administration office and the land Administration and Surveying office whenever they order me to come. And I answer back as much as I know when they interrogate me. I have even been summoned by the police and I had to go there and sort the things out. Some other people suggested I report the case of my lawful inheritance contract that was burnt by my relatives.

Our case is still being heard at the court. I want to be a fine, good example, and an ideal for the course of righteousness and truth. In this case, I would not be experiencing such terrible problems had I been a man. I have to face such trials and miserable experience just because I am a woman. I

have three sons and a daughter. My brother had only three daughters. Now, I'm running my own little shop selling groceries. I don't know when I will be ordered again to come to my next hearing.

#### Case Story 4 Female Factory Workers in the outskirts of Yangon

Mostly, [the factory workers] moved here from Shwe Pauk Kan. Many are from upcountry and from the Delta region as well. The workers from upcountry are mostly from very rural areas. Some came from Magway. There's no jobs in Yaynanchaung or Chauk. Some are from all over Sagaing Region... They came here to work because there was no job there. Farm and paddy problems have now become more severe. Farming is the only career that they are skillful at. When their lands were confiscated by the government, some enjoyed compensation; but some didn't. Farmers usually don't know how to run a business. When their compensation money was spent, in a short time, they became jobless. They had to go and work at the construction sites. They had to come to Yangon to work in any possible random job. Some young women knew how to sew and they came to Yangon where they could start working as basic labourers in the industrial zones, cutting clothes. It's quite tough for them.

Men who didn't have their own lands there – we call them 'farm-hands' – could earn around 2000 Kyat per day... [Women] are paid only around 500 Kyat per day for harvesting paddy. As they could get paid much more for their labour in Yangon, they came to work here. [In Yangon] it's more difficult for men to get a job... There are only few male workers working in the factories because they work only in packaging lines. Usually, only women work in sewing jobs in our country. It's an old tradition and it's still rare to find men who are willing to do sewing... Most of the foreign investments that came into our country under military regime were in the garment field. If things get more developed later, for example, when there is some foreign industrial corporation such as Toyota or deep-water harbor projects coming in, there will be more job vacancies for men.

I think the factory owners believe that women are easier to control and manage. Besides, they limit the age of the women basic workers to a maximum of 30 years old. Women over 25 years would not receive a warm welcome from the employers. Employers prefer younger women who are around 18. Younger persons have energy and are physically fit for such work. The other thing is that they are also more obedient. Employers particularly prefer female workers who come

from the countryside rather than from Yangon. The reason is women from other towns are mostly in urgent need of a place to live and have difficulties for their daily survival. When it is difficult for them to get a place to sleep and to get a meal, they inevitably have to work obediently without complaining. Workers from Yangon are likely to change jobs if they believe another job is better, since they don't have to worry about a place to live. For that reason, employers especially prefer female workers from other towns.

Around 2003, some young women came to Yangon to work in the garment factories. Then they faced some problems, such as the factory having to move to another place or getting fired or problems of salary. Last year, workers went on a strike in a factory and during their demonstration some folks came and advertised job vacancies at some KTV bars.<sup>89</sup> They announced what kinds of girls were required. At this point, some very naïve young women from the rural areas were victimized. Girls are not only sing at those KTV bars. They had to be trained at some other unwanted things. They mostly stayed at the hostels when they worked at a KTV bar. Some girls from the hostels tried to get themselves male sexual partners ('sponsors' in today's Myanmar slang) to support them. Their sexual partners were mostly married men. Many girls got on the dark side seeking a sex partner who was likely to financially support them. It's because it's too hard for them to survive. Working every day, they don't have enough to eat. Then there would be no other option for them. In fact, they actually don't want to work in such workplaces. However, they eventually have become like lesser wives for their sex partners. They had to do it just for their daily survival.

Besides, they have to be concerned about the livelihood of their family left in the village. They have younger brothers and sisters who are still students and need to be taken care of. Let me say that in our country 70% of those women out there are working at these undesirable jobs because they are worried about their parents' livelihood.... In the past, a man's income could cover all the household's expenses. Now, it's changed. Women themselves could not turn their backs on the problems of daily survival of the family anymore. It's even worse for a family that has only daughters. Only the daughters have to shoulder the responsibility in such families.... Both daughters and sons are relied on for the family's livelihood. However, jobs for men are quite scarce. Besides, men usually can do only farming jobs. As for women, they can support men in other ways, at least by cutting fabric at the garment factory or cleaning. Since men traditionally didn't do such jobs and employers prefer only women for such jobs, dependence on men has decreased.

90. Karaoke bars where young women perform for a mostly male clientele. In most establishments, it is understood that the women are expected to also have sex for money with customers.

In our country, many families do not actually want their daughters to be working outside. In the current situation, parents at first did not feel happy with it, though the daughters bring in extra income. Our young women had to use great effort to break out. However, when life became harder and when they found that their daughters' income were of great help practically for the family, many families started to change their points of view on that issue to a more positive perspective. In the past, many women were not allowed to go out. Some were not even allowed to go to school. In our country, people previously thought it was enough for girls if they could do basic reading and writing. However, things have been changed now. Yet, things haven't changed positively to a better stage; people's standpoints have changed because of starvation and poverty. When stomachs are empty, there's no particular complaints for such issue. They became like, 'Well, it should be OK for our daughter to go out and work.' Why not? People's livelihoods have become severely devastated during [the past] 25 years' time. When women from other countries are fighting on their own for their own rights and opportunities, starvation has pushed those from our country to deal with changes.

Young women may face many dangerous situations at the factories. In some factories, young and pretty girls are being seduced and persuaded to do things that are considered bad or wrong by the factory owners. Transportation is also a problem. Female workers are released from work around 10 or 11 PM if there is overtime. It's quite far to get from one place to another in some outlying areas such as Shwe Pyithar or Hlawkar. Paddy fields are everywhere. The bus that takes workers home just pulls up at a convenient distance and girls have to walk to their places in darkness along the rough pitted streets.... There have been some rape cases. Moreover, there have also been increasing and frequent car crashes. Over the past year, there had been more than 10 car crashes that caused casualties and serious injuries. Many women were stuffed into the buses. Then the bus crashed. In one case, four workers died in a car crash. Nobody could investigate or reach their parents. Their friends did not know their native towns.

The fundamental problem is not all workers are recognized as workers as they have no labour cards. Mostly female workers are deprived of that right. You know someone would surely have to take responsibility for the labourers who have labour cards! Workers are employed as daily paid labourers but payments are given on monthly basis. There would be 3 months or 6 months probation period and if their performance does not meet the requirements, they will be kicked out. ...The Ministry of Labour itself does not seriously warn the employers to make sure that their employees get the

necessary labour cards. With the authorities giving no pressure on the relevant government departments, the employers are free to do as they wish. The factory owners fine the workers for the days that they are absent. If the salary of a factory worker is between 40,000 and 50,000 Kyat and they are fined money for absent days, then the worker receives almost nothing.

Since permission has been given to form workers' unions in March 2012, workers have been advised how to establish a workers' union. This advice includes forming unions through elections and collectively selecting the eligible union members with the union leader to be one of the workers. The result is female worker leaders were born. Now women are taking positions of leader and secretary [in the union]. Before, only the pre-independence movements produced women leaders. Women leaders were rarely seen at the workplaces. Nowadays women have to go and work in factories as workers. There have been bad consequences. But the good thing coming out of a bad situation is women have now taken places in leadership positions at the factories. If women kept themselves at home, they would have to spend their lives cooking, doing dishes and taking care of children. They have become leaders because they decided to go out and work. Moreover, women have started to read books and journals.

[The unions] agreed to select leaders from among the women, since there are mostly women working at the factories. When women were elected competitively with men, they stood with the women enthusiastically. But when women's affairs and women's needs were reported, the unions said they were unable to pay attention to such issues as they said they had to solve more urgent problems. When we educate on the subject of rights, we educate both men and women. When it comes to workers' rights, there are too few people in our country who know their own rights. Women have now shown great enthusiasm in such training programs. But the problem is they have only one day available in a week. We have to rush to run our trainings within this limited time. We are doing as much as we can.

There are also criteria that the female workers must be single. In this case, women in many ways have to lie that they are single. When men are employed, being single or married doesn't count.

Most of the men above 13 are in work. What had happened to them then is those young workers around age of 13 are unable to join the union as they are not yet 18. Consequently, the problems of workers under 18 became untouched and cast aside. If there are 20 men out of each 100 people, 40% from the rest would be over 18 and another 40% would be under 18. [KII with labour rights activist]

## Case Story 5 Gaining One's Place as a Professional Woman: Monywa

A few years ago, Kway Ye and nearby villages suffered great losses in their plantation and farming business. Because of the unstable climate changes and fluctuating onion prices, people who usually got daily jobs in the season times faced difficulties. I just can't understand that when a male daily labourer who works in the plantation earns about 3500 or 4000 for a day, a woman daily worker was being paid only 1500 Kyat. We women give the same effort and work for the same time, yet we are unable to take any action against such unfair labour payment. We just thought like 'Ok, men are just superior sex to us'. Also we could not be choosy since there were few job opportunities. The weather was changing rapidly and there were no permanent jobs in our village. So, looking for a possible job, we went to India via Tiddim in order to study looming in Mizoram. Now we are running our own looming business utilizing what we've studied there.

Going to Mizoram to work was an adventure; leaving all my family members to worry for me. We also actually faced various difficulties. We sacrificed a lot to get enough money and efficient knowledge about looming. Working there for about two years and having saved for about 300000 Kyat, we went back to our village. We could start our own businesses only after spending about 2 years in our village. All the necessary equipment for the looms had to be ordered from India. We had only one loom at first.

When we arrived back in our village, the farming business had regained its normal state. But the wages remained unchanged, with women still being treated unequally and being exploited. Such conditions were the push factor for us to start out our own domestic businesses. We weaved and loomed beautiful and neat Chin traditional textures and designs. We went to stores to sell our cloth. The stores and shops bought our products and advised us by showing us what textures and designs were popular and in demand. Now, the shop owners even provide us with the fibre and thread that we need so that we don't have to buy them using our own money in advance. Our businesses are thriving so that we can't even take a rest. I provide free looming training for other people from the village. When the trainees become skilful in weaving, I can even employ them giving 2500 Kyat per piece of cloth. I also give a hand to anyone who fancies running her own loom.

Now, many households in the village have their own looms. That is really a milestone for us women, who once had earned only 1500 Kyat for one day's labour. I think people have started look up to us now, because they treat us with respect; not like before anymore. I feel satisfied and happy that I am able to utilize and share what I have once learnt with hard work. My

self-confidence has risen as people come to me seeking advice and consultations concerning their business.

I regret that I didn't learn how to set up a loom because I had to hire someone who was skilful at it. There is only one woman who learnt how to set up a loom machine. She is as busy as a bee. We need to give more effort to have new, intricate and beautiful textures and designs. I would like to share this looming profession with those who do not have jobs outside the farming season, those who work for sub-standard wages and those who have difficulties finding a job because of lack of formal education. I will not only try by myself, but I also encourage other skilful professional women in this business to join me.

## Case Story 6 A Young Men's Project on Women's Health Care

It's like making my dreams come true. I started to think that it would be so good to have a health care service group in our village that was in need of basic health care; mainly for pregnant women and children under age of 5. I was so sad to hear about the women who had to deliver in the village and lost their lives during delivery since they could not make it to the town, and those newborns that perished because it was impossible to go to the hospital.

Saytanar Myinnt Mol Health Care Group was established in 2013 by 17 young persons with the objectives of assisting with the health care needs of our village and preventing the above-mentioned incidents as much as possible. Now, our group has increased to 23 members since it has been successful in attracting people's attention. We discussed about how to support our villagers for their health care. We decided that we would provide 5000 Kyat for a support person who accompanies the patient to the hospital and takes care of the patient. Though it was not too much of a support, we did as much as we could. We wanted our group to be self-reliant, therefore, we decided to use our own money for the fund and each member started contributing 200 Kyat per month. Now we have raised the monthly fee to 500 Kyat. Besides, we have four individual donors from our village.

Moreover, we did some education programs for basic health knowledge, such as to wash one's hands before and after having meals, to check for the mosquito larvae, and to build fly-proofed toilets. It is really encouraging when the village community donates soap, handkerchiefs, and bowls for our programs. In the past, since there was no toilet in our village, people had to go to the bushes to defecate. In that case, there had been some occasions when young women were sexually harassed.



We don't have enough funds, even though we contribute our member fees on a monthly basis. So, we came up with the idea to seek more funds by working in the village. For instance, if a street was going to be built in our village, we took the street building job. We work without discriminating between men and women, and some interested villagers and wealthy households have started to participate in our activities. Because of the cooperation and unity of our male and female members, our village community praised us by saying, 'They are doing a great job'. But, some elderly persons of the village tend to separate tasks between men and women. They separated and allocated tasks for men and women. Though in the beginning they did not recognize us, now they have started to contribute and support us.

We are now able to do and speak out what we could not before. There are still some difficulties, of course. When we go round the village to check for the larvae, some young men of the village still tease our female volunteers. Some of your male members were inclined to think that female volunteers were of no use and they didn't want to welcome them in their team. But now, their outlooks and points of view have changed. They now give comments on women's activities such as: 'That's a great save!' It's because of them this work has been done so well. We alone would not be able to do it as neatly as they did.

Some elderly people sometimes would say, 'It's their women's tasks to educate villagers to wash their hands. It's not your men's jobs to do. Why would you be busy with such activities?' We from our side also have to train our members so that they will be able to answer the questions smoothly. We have to persuade people to increase our member number and to participate in our group without gender discrimination. We all have made up our mind to go ahead in bettering our village development, without turning back no matter how much criticism or gossip we may face.

We arrange educational seminars for health knowledge with the cooperation of the Ministry of Health (with public

midwives). We include seasonal diseases and protection schemes in those seminars. But no matter how much knowledge of health care we provide, young women who are pregnant for the first time still feel shy to discuss or receive counselling about that issue. Later, only after we had provided counselling training to our female members and let them give counselling to the pregnant women, the women became familiar with our group and felt OK being counselled about maternal health care. It's indeed a surprise. We thought before, 'What can we do concerning such pregnancy health care issues?' But now we have come to realize through our practical efforts that we could do something for it. We realized that things would not work out well if we were separating men's issues and women's issues.

We set up goals and aims for our group to go ahead systematically and sustainably. There are four objectives in our organization: to provide special assistance for pregnant women and children under age 5 from the community; to increase people's health knowledge; to cooperate with the Ministry of Health in providing health care for the village community; and to help the villagers with their general health problems. We also raise funds; assist with daily routines (for example in accompanying and taking care of the patients and assisting the village midwife); and create contacts and connections with vehicle owners and between patients and hospitals in town. We also arrange participatory health educating programs and try to raise people's awareness and interest in such programs.

There used to be stereotypes and firmly-rooted traditional beliefs. To be able to work cooperatively and in a non-discriminatory way on gender like this, we had to negotiate and advocate for the permission from the village head and village community leaders. We had to learn and upgrade our health knowledge from the health department and other social organizations. Now, we are really delighted that our group has been deeply appreciated and successful, to some extent due to our own efforts.

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