

# Women and Leadership in Myanmar



Nilar Win / Oxfam in Myanmar

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## Contents ■

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Executive Summary	5
List of Tables & Figures	7
Acronyms	7
Definitions and clarification of terms	8
1. Introduction and methodology	9
2. Key Findings	11
2.1 Defining leadership	12
2.2 Drivers behind women's journeys to leadership	13
2.3 Stereotypes which block women's paths to and in leadership	16
2.4 Gender based violence	18
2.5 Balancing home and work life responsibilities	20
2.6 Women's roles in contesting discrimination	21
2.7 Recognizing gender equity as a legitimate struggle	23
2.8 The importance of supporting future women leaders	24
3. Conclusion	25
4. Recommendations	26
Annex	29
1. Literature Review	29
2. Bibliography	32
3. Research Participants' Demographics	35
4. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework	36





## Executive Summary ■

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Myanmar is a country in transition. Unforeseen political, economic and social reforms and an unprecedented 'opening up' have paved the way for significant change. While public discourse suggests that gender inequality in Myanmar is not pervasive, a growing body of evidence makes clear that discrimination against women is deep-seated and widespread.

Gender inequality impacts upon women and girls from all ethnic, cultural, geographical, and religious backgrounds. Poverty, livelihood opportunities, land use, education, health, HIV infection, trafficking, violence and sexual abuse are all areas of concern with significant gender dimensions. Integral to these issues is the profound under-representation of women in most areas of public and political life. Whilst the Government recently appointed its first woman minister, only 4.6%<sup>1</sup> of seats in parliament are held by women. Across all sectors women are absent in senior decision making roles. As well as a denial of women's rights, gender inequality is an obstacle to inclusive development and democracy. Making Myanmar's vision for the future – as a modern, developed and democratic nation – a reality means ensuring that women and girls benefit from the advantages of education, participation in the economy and engagement in political decision making. Failing to include and empower women puts the nation's progress in jeopardy.

Despite the many challenges, women are overcoming barriers to take up leadership positions. This research explores the obstacles that women have overcome to take on positions of leadership, the challenges they continue to face in their leadership roles, and the implications of these experiences for decision makers who are tasked with developing policies and programs.

This November - December 2012 study involved 756 participants including women leaders in business, in politics (parliamentarians), and in non-profit sectors in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, along with women leaders from communities in northern Shan, southern Chin, Kayah, Mon, and Magwe, Mandalay, and the Ayeyarwady regions, who were interviewed about their views on and experiences of women's leadership. Men and women community members across the same seven States and Regions participated in focus group discussions. Data was gathered by 35 trained data gatherers.

Key findings from this research demonstrate that women face significant barriers to becoming leaders, and ongoing challenges they face when they take up leadership positions. These barriers are reinforced by persistent stereotypes – in particular the notion that males are "natural" or rightful leaders and women rightful followers, and that women lack some essential capacities to be effective leaders. The research finds that women experience a daily struggle to balance home and work responsibilities. Regardless of their job, women typically retain full responsibility for the care of the household and children. The experience of gender based violence from males – both within the family and in the workplace – in the form of insults, mockery, harassment, physical and sexual assault, was reported by women across all sectors. At the same time, the lack of public debate as well as lack of champions amongst women leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Phan Tee Eain (PTE) & Gender Equality Network (GEN) (2012) *Myanmar Women in Parliament 2012*. Yangon, Myanmar

themselves to contest discrimination means that the space for women's leadership is not expanding as it could and should. Similarly, the failure to recognize gender equity as a struggle in its own right, as an essential component to achieve inclusive and sustainable peace, development and democracy, limits opportunities for women and opportunities for the wider progress of Myanmar.

However, the experience of women leaders who participated in this research also demonstrates that there are opportunities and spaces for women to step into leadership roles. Courage and determination are required for women to succeed in male dominated places and positions. What helps are supportive families, particularly husbands or partners who encourage and assist. Support of other women is also recognized as an important factor, as are role models and/or champions at all levels to promote and motivate women to lead.

In 1997, the Government of the Union of Myanmar acceded to United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The government has also approved the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW) to create enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of gender equality and the realisation of women's rights. This is a major step forward and a signal that political actors and institutions are willing to tackle gender inequality in Myanmar.

The collaborative efforts from all sectors of society – the Government of the Union of Myanmar, civil society, the media, and the international community – are required to address gender inequalities and to advance women's participation and their opportunities to be in leadership and decision making positions. Firstly, legislative and policy reform is required to establish a framework which enshrines women's rights, and which regulates for affirmative action/positive discrimination to achieve gender equality, as well as utilising political processes to advance women's leadership. Secondly, changing social attitudes and cultural norms to challenge gender discrimination and stereotypes is imperative to create an enabling environment for women to become leaders. Thirdly, ongoing support is needed to promote, train and mentor women to be leaders.



## List of Figures ■

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- Figure 1: Map of Myanmar
- Figure 2: Groups/Committees/Organizations Community Women Leaders Are Involved In
- Figure 3: Willingness to Talk About Discrimination

## List of Tables ■

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- Table 1: Characteristics of a Leader across groups
- Table 2: Male / Female influences in youth on Community Leaders

## Acronyms ■

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- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| AVAW   | – Anti-Violence against Women                                     |
| BPS    | – British Psychological Society                                   |
| CESSDA | – Council of European Social Science Data Archives                |
| CSO    | – Civil Society Organisation                                      |
| DSW    | – Department of Social Welfare                                    |
| FGD    | – Focus Group Discussion  |
| GBV    | – Gender-based Violence   |
| GEN    | – Gender Equality Network (Formerly the WPTWG)                    |
| IDI    | – In-Depth Interview  |
| INGO   | – International Non-Governmental Organisation                     |
| MP     | – Member of Parliament  |
| MPC    | – Myanmar Peace Centre  |
| MSWRR  | – Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement            |
| MWEA   | – Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association                       |
| NCDP   | – National Comprehensive Development Plan                         |
| NGO    | – (National) Non-Governmental Organisation                        |
| NLD    | – National League for Democracy                                   |
| NSAGs  | – Non-State Armed Groups  |
| NSPAW  | – National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women            |
| RMT    | – Research Management Team (Oxfam, CARE, ActionAid, and Trócaire) |
| UNESCO | – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| UNFC   | – United Nationalities Federal Council                            |
| UPWC   | – Union Peace Working Committee                                   |
| VAW    | – Violence Against Women  |
| VDC    | – Village Development Committee                                   |
| VSLA   | – Village Savings and Loans Association                           |
| WHO    | – World Health Organisation                                       |
| WPTWG  | – Women's Protection Technical Working Group                      |



## Definitions and Clarifications of Terms ■

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For the purposes of this research, the following terms and definitions have been used:

**National Level:** Women working in business, parliament, or non-profit organisations in Yangon or Nay Pyi Taw.

**Community Level:** Women and men working and living in villages across northern Shan, southern Chin, Kayah and Mon States, and across Mandalay, Magwe, and Ayeyarwady Regions.

**Non-Profit:** CSOs or national NGOs which do not aim to make a profit on their work and are dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable people and / or the environment.

## 1. Introduction and Methodology ■

Despite widespread public discourse which assumes that gender inequality is not a major issue in Myanmar, a growing body of evidence makes clear that gender discrimination is deep and widespread. As the findings of this research demonstrate, the root causes of discrimination against women, which prevent them from taking on or maintaining decision making positions, are very much a feature of daily life for women in Myanmar. At the national level, only 4.6% of seats in parliament are held by women,<sup>2</sup> only one senior minister is a woman, and across sectors women are in the minority when it comes to senior decision making roles.

For years a shortage of data and a political climate in which women's human rights could not be discussed openly has compounded the rhetoric and resulted in an environment where women's rights have rarely been considered with due diligence in policy or practice. Politically, socially, and economically, Myanmar is undergoing vast and rapid change, but against the backdrop of this transition, there is a danger that women's rights and actions to achieve gender equality will be left out. The Government of Myanmar has recently approved its National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAW)<sup>3</sup> and is moving forward with the development of an anti-violence against women law, which will create new opportunities for work on women's rights and gender equality, but much more needs to be done. Women's rights also need to be put at the heart of key political processes such as the Government's medium term plan and the National Comprehensive Development Plan (NCDP).

In 2010 in-depth research was conducted to better understand the barriers women were facing to take on active roles in public life, and what strategies could be employed to support women to break through these barriers.<sup>4</sup> The study, *"If Given a Chance: Women's Participation in Public Life in Myanmar"*, reflected the views of over 400 respondents across Rakhine, Kachin, Shan and Kayah States, and across Magwe, Mandalay and Ayeyarwaddy Regions. Its findings revealed entrenched social norms and traditions surrounding gendered roles, and deeply held beliefs about what men's and women's roles could and should be in both public and private spheres. The research demonstrated that these norms constitute significant barriers to women's participation in decision making, in public life, and in leadership. *"If Given a Chance"* also called for an exploration of the nature of leadership exercised by women in Myanmar, and a deeper understanding of what challenges they continued to face once in leadership roles. This research builds on the 2010 study, exploring the obstacles that women have overcome in taking on positions of leadership, the challenges they continue to face in their leadership roles, and the implications of these experiences for policy and program development. A review of related literature is provided in Annex 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid 1

<sup>3</sup> National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022, Government of the Union of Myanmar (2013). The objective of the plan is to create enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realisation of women's rights.

<sup>4</sup> Lofving, A., 2011. *If Given the Chance: Women's Participation in Public Life in Myanmar*. Oxfam, CARE, and ActionAid: Yangon, Myanmar

## Methodology

This study uses qualitative research to explore and assess the factors that have led women to take on leadership positions that fall outside of traditionally gendered roles defined by social norms. Gendered social norms are the expectations that a community or society have for how women and men should think and act and are constructed socially over time.<sup>3</sup> To better understand the gendered norms that can so often work against women taking up positions of leadership, this research conducted in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) with women nominated as leaders at community level, and with women who are currently leaders in Myanmar's political, business, and non-profit sectors at the national level. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to explore different understandings and interpretations of leadership and role models by members of various communities from villages and townships across Myanmar. These FGDs were held with women, aged 16-25; women aged 26 and above; and men of mixed age groups. The research was conducted in 8 States / Regions, covering 13 townships and 32 villages. 96 FGDs and 52 IDIs were held in these areas at community level. An additional 21 Interviews with women leaders in business, politics and not-for-profit sectors were held in Yangon & Nay Pyi Taw (see Figure 1). The total sample size was 756 participants including 73 women respondents and 683 focus group participants (456 women and 227 men). Details of the research participants are in Annex 2.

A comprehensive research guide and all research tools were developed in English by the lead researcher. (see Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework in Annex 3.) The tools were peer-reviewed by national and international research, gender and development experts, and translated into Myanmar. All tools and methodological processes were put under the scrutiny of the Myanmar Department of Medical Research Ethics Review Committee for ethical consideration and technical rigor. In total 35 data gatherers were involved in the project, all attended a five-day training course before embarking on field research. Data was gathered in November and December 2012.

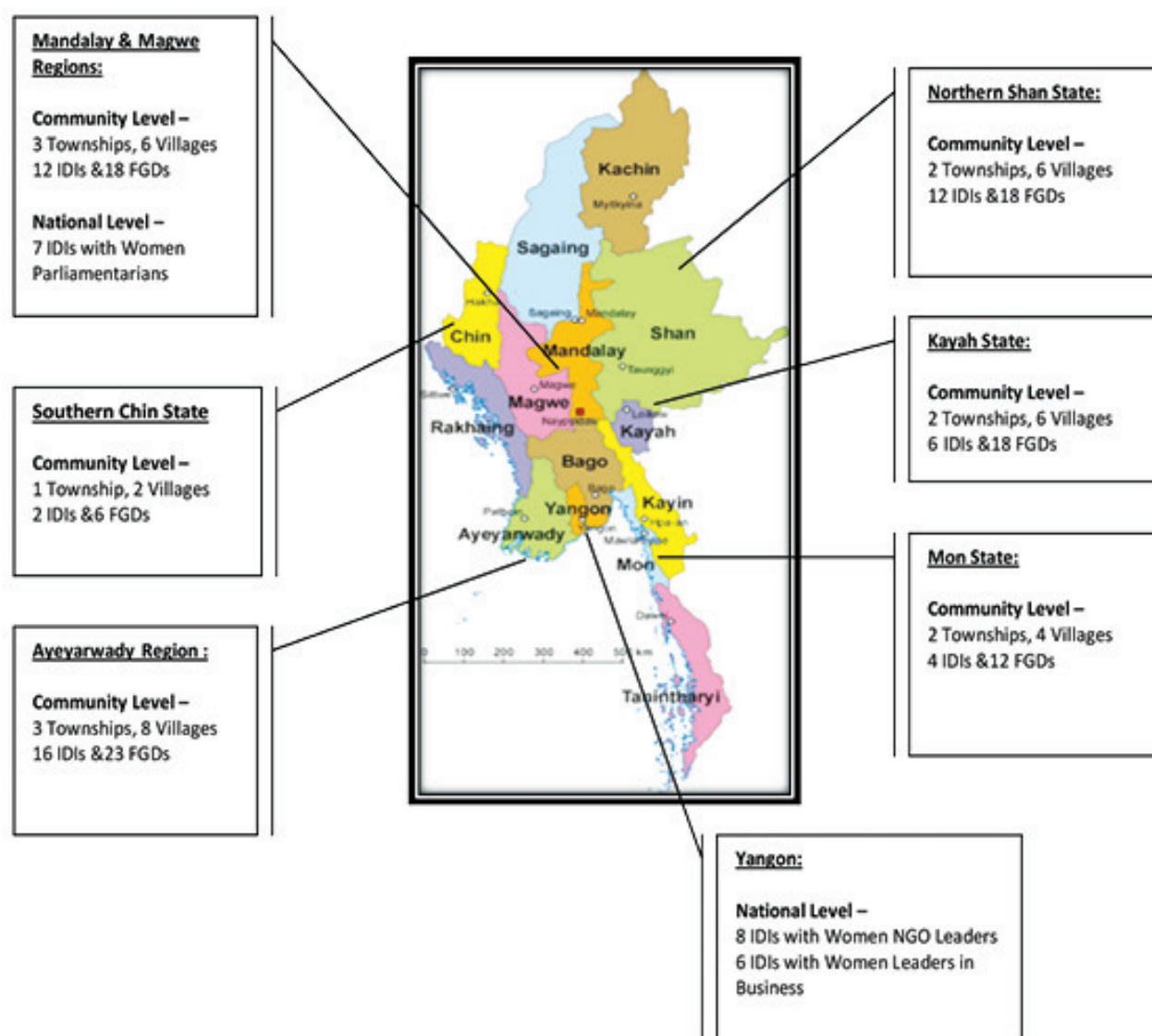
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<sup>3</sup>This study has drawn on social representations theory which enables us to view norms and identities as continually in the making, thus providing a theoretical space in which to consider ways that gender roles and ideas about leadership might be transformed and contested.



## Sampling & Respondents – Geographical Scope of the Study

Figure 1: Map of Myanmar



## 2. Key findings ■

This research sought to investigate *how* women are overcoming obstacles to become leaders, *what* their experiences of leadership are, and *what needs to be changed* to promote and help more women into roles of decision making and leadership.

This leadership research has revealed common themes raised by both national and community women leaders, as well as by female and male community members. The report highlights eight key areas of findings which have significant implications for policy makers seeking to create enabling systems, structures and practices to ensure women's equal participation in decision making and leadership at all levels of society.<sup>6</sup> The first section looks the concept of leadership and how it is gendered. Successive sections look

<sup>6</sup>NSPAW, 2013, Priority Area: Women and Decision making



at the drivers behind women’s journeys to leadership; the stereotypes which block women’s paths to and in leadership; women leaders’ experience of gender-based violence; their struggle to balance home and work life responsibilities; and the role of women in contesting gender discrimination. Recognizing gender equity as a legitimate struggle and goal in itself emerged as a significant issue. The final section looks at the importance of supporting future women leaders. However, these experiences of leadership also indicated that there are opportunities and spaces for women to take up leadership roles.

### 2.1 Understanding Leadership

Leadership is culturally defined and shaped by context, culture, human interaction and experience. In Myanmar, leadership is almost exclusively associated with men. Men were consistently described as natural leaders and women as followers by the research respondents, in particular by the community leaders and in discussions with male and female community members. Views on leadership as a male domain were well-defined and socially accepted. Leadership was represented using words that suggested autocratic attributes rather than communal and empathetic attributes. As shown in Table 1, women over the age of 25 and male community members in all regions spoke of leaders using words such as brave, strong, and confident. Subsequently these words were associated with men, whereas tolerance, patience and shyness were associated with women. There was a shift in perspectives presented by younger women (under the age of 25), as they tended to link leadership to education and fairness.

Table 1: Characteristics of a Leader across Groups

Top 10 Words associated with the Characteristics of a Leader Across All Groups		
Women < 25 years	Women > 26 Years	Men (Mixed Ages)
1. Fair	1. Sacrificing	1. Wise
2. Moral	2. Patient	2. Brave
3. Educated	3. Brave	3. Sacrificing
4. Understanding/Patient	4. Concerned for the Community / Doing Good Work	4. Fair
5. Skilful	5. Strong Voice	5. Concerned for the Community
6. Strong Voice	6. Confident	6. Strong Voice
7. Sacrificing/Selfless	7. Wise	7. Educated
8. Honest	8. Decisive	8. Confident
9. Problem Solver	9. Educated	9. Sociable
10. Brave	10. Sociable	10. Patient

Such representations of leadership serve to reinforce a socially accepted notion that to be a leader demands a more masculine approach. Only one national level interviewee, an NGO leader, commented directly on this: she proposed that leaders can and should display a more ‘feminine’ approach to leadership, which includes greater levels of empathy and consideration for others. Whilst the common association of men

rather than women with leadership is not unique to Myanmar, contrary to other countries, there is an almost total absence of public debate and contestation of this issue; that is, the notion that leaders are male is largely unquestioned.

*Most people think that leaders should not be emotional. I do not agree with that. Feeling empathy for people is a good quality. Some say that women leaders should be like more men leaders and act like men. I do not agree with that either. Some say that a leader should not cry and I do not accept it. A leader can cry and have empathy for people.*

**NGO Leader**

As discussed in the literature review in Annex 1, the fact that attributes such as dominance and power are commonly ascribed to men cements the idea that leadership is male, particularly in highly traditional societies or male-dominated environments. As characteristics linked to women are incongruous with those associated with leadership and men, women are constrained by threats from two directions: (1) conforming to their gender role may be perceived as a failure to adopt an effective leadership style, and (2) adopting the 'normal' leadership style is a failure to conform to (at least traditional) gendered norms prescribed for women.

Many women respondents expressed a level of discomfort at being depicted as leaders themselves and often did not view themselves as leaders, but acknowledged that others might think of them as such. This reluctance to acknowledge their leadership has the potential to hold back women leaders from acting as champions and role models.

Social norms can and do change over time. A few women described changes in others' perspectives once they had been in their role for some time.

*[Before] people did not know me but they know me well now. Once a colleague from the party told me that he thought 'What is this woman doing in the party?' But later he thought that I was doing for the good of the community and was really reliable. – Parliamentarian*

*Everyone encouraged me except men colleagues who used to look down on me. But they recognize me now. – Parliamentarian*

**Implications:** Challenging and changing the cultural and social norms and expectations that leaders are men is possible and must happen at all levels of society. Public education and awareness raising campaigns, which depict women as successful leaders and men appreciating the importance of women's leadership and potential, are essential to stimulate changes in both women and men's beliefs, and attitudes concerning the capacity and right, of women to lead.

## 2.2 Drivers behind women's journeys to leadership

Despite the many challenges, women are overcoming barriers to take up leadership positions. Many of the women leaders interviewed were deeply affected by early exposure to politics and injustice, and the desire to struggle against prevailing inequalities. Impelled by the social injustice they saw or experienced in their own communities or homes, they viewed these phenomena as key influences on their decisions to take on



leading roles in politics, business or development. For a few, the experience of gender inequality itself was a specific driver, and women spoke of their desire as girls to experience as much freedom as the boys in their communities, in contrast to the social constraints and parental restrictions layered upon girls and young women.

*When I was young, I wished to be a boy because they had no restrictions and could do as they pleased*  
– NGO Leader

Upbringing played a central role in some women's journeys to leadership. Some women leaders were able to draw on supportive families who inspired and encouraged them.

*The support of my family is very important. I can do this because they support me.* – Parliamentarian

*My husband always suggests and helps me without any complaint. I have reached this level mostly because of my husband's support, and also my parents and in-laws always encourage me.* – NGO Leader

Others were not so fortunate, and by contrast, some felt that strong, oppressive figures in their family had even catalysed their journey to leadership, by giving them something to rebel against.

*When I decided to study again and finish my schooling, my husband tried to stop me and said 'I did not marry you so that you could go to school.'* – NGO Leader

Other women reported being spurred on by the need to address life-changing events in their lives such as the death of a parent, requiring them to take responsibility for their family's welfare.

*I was under the full control of my mother and could not even dare to walk past boys until the 8th grade. In the 9th grade, my mother had cancer. Then I began to ask myself questions like "Can you live without your mother? Are you ready?" I realized that I had to change myself, and I became a strong, brave woman since then.* – Business Leader<sup>7</sup>

Active participation in community life (being a part of a community group or political activism), or exposure to business or politics from an early age, had a significant impact on women leaders, particularly parliamentarians and business leaders. However, few women parliamentarians set out to take on leadership roles. One parliamentarian described her search for a political party in which women played visible and active roles, but most spoke of having little exposure to politics and no significant training to help prepare for their role as a parliamentarian.

*After women got married, they thought only about how to take care of their husband and their children. Including me, I did not care about politics at all.* – Parliamentarian

Most women members of parliament (MPs) had been approached by male party members and asked to run for election based on their visibility and work in the community. Active pursuit of political engagement was rare and there was an implication that these women would have been unlikely to proactively push for the careers they have now. This signals the need for policy initiatives which seek to actively engage women in formal political decision making processes. Similarly, business leaders had come to their leadership roles through a diversity of routes, from marrying into the business and taking a role in the management of the company, to establishing a small business from scratch. By contrast, many NGO Leaders were founders of the organisations they were currently working in. These organisations often had roots in gatherings of

<sup>7</sup> Please note, to preserve the anonymity of respondents potentially identifying characteristics such as ethnicity and place of origin are not included beside direct quotations. Details of respondent demographics can be found in the annex.

friends focused on discussing problems and injustices, which eventually flourished into formal networks or NGOs.

Role models play an important part in providing incentives and space for women to take on leadership positions. Yet this research showed a clear absence of female leader role models for most women respondents. Some women were directly influenced by their mothers whom they saw as strong role models (although often noted for characteristics that reinforced traditional gender stereotypes such as a soft speaking voice or being able to successfully get household chores done) and many referred to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a highly visible female role model. Beyond this, there were few mentions of women role models influencing the lives of women leaders as they were growing up. However there was consistent reference to men as visible leaders and role models. 82% of women leaders in the community mentioned at least one male influence in their childhoods, and 36% mentioned only male influences. When asked about influences or role models from their youth, parliamentarian and business leaders also talked mostly of men.

Table 2: Influences in Youth on Community Leaders

Male or Female Influences Growing up - Across Community Level Interviews	
36%	Mentioned only Men
18%	Mentioned only Female role models (44% of these mentioned mothers only, and 66% named other women)
22%	Male & Female role models – where Woman mentioned was not the mother
24%	Male & Female role models – where Woman mentioned was the mother
82%	Mentioned at least 1 Man
64%	Mentioned at least 1 Woman

Business leaders referred to male family members who had achieved in business or in education, whilst parliamentarians frequently mentioned historical or political figures, their fathers, and important men in the community such as a village leader. Only women leaders of NGOs spoke of women in their communities, family, in politics and through their education that they had drawn inspiration from, in some cases making a direct link between the influence of these role models and the work they were doing now.

*The Project Coordinator influenced me to try and become a coordinator like her. She said: ‘I was just like you when I was at your age... Don’t you think that you can’t become like me?’. – NGO Leaders*

**Implications:** The drivers and routes to leadership are diverse and defy identification of clear pathway(s) that can be supported in order to promote potential women leaders. What is called for is a multi-pronged approach with different elements being pursued simultaneously, including: public education and awareness raising; active identification of and encouragement for potential women leaders; raising the profile of women leaders as role models to inspire and encourage other women; and promotion of high-profile male champions who advocate for women in leadership.



## 2.3 Norms and Stereotypes which block women's paths to and in leadership

Many women leaders were acutely aware of deeply rooted social stereotypes, norms, and gendered discrimination which act as barriers to women attempting to advance in their fields, as well as how these barriers' impact on the views of men whose support for their work was needed.

*There are still some norms which put women inside a box. This is the challenge for the women leaders.*

*These norms should be left behind. – NGO Leader*

The prevalence of gendered stereotypes had a direct impact on: (i) women's confidence in their own abilities to lead and (ii) how women's capacities to perform their leadership roles were perceived.

### (i) Lack of confidence in women as leaders

As mentioned in section 2.1, unease in the leadership role or with the title of leader was commonly felt at community level. There was a sense of fear of not doing as well as they felt they should or would want to in their roles. This anxiety was linked to a lack of technical skills and a sense of duty and obligation to fulfil a role that seemingly few other women wanted or were able to do. Where women felt burdened by their role, the role itself became disempowering. Lack of technical capacity was referred to in particular by women leaders in the community, but also indirectly by women in parliament and in business.

### (ii) Perception of women's capacity

All national level leaders described being confronted early on in their careers by the lack of confidence others had in their ability, specifically because they were women.

*She is just a woman, what is she going to say about politics? – Parliamentarian*

*What would she dare to say or do at the Hluttaw? – Parliamentarian*

*Some men commented 'She is just doing (this as) a stunt. Fishery is a very difficult job. She will not be able to do this'. – Business Leader*

*Before the project was launched the General Manager (GM) and my boss had conflicts and the GM resigned. At that time, I was the only one who could take over that project.... However, they did not give me the GM position because I was a woman. They thought that only a man could lead well. They searched for one year but did not find anyone. Only then, I became the GM. Business Leader*

*In the first company I worked in, all my other colleagues were men. The first thing they told me was 'Let's see how long you will last here.' – Business Leader*

Religious beliefs can also be used to constrain women's participation and leadership in the public sphere.

*There were some comments from the community saying that women's empowerment is against the will of the Lord. My family, husband and the preachers were worried about me. – NGO Leaders*

Discussions with community members also showed that negative perceptions of women's essential capacities for leadership had clear knock-on effects on the nature and extent of involvement women could have in public life. The views of men across diverse regions in Myanmar reflected strong gendered stereotypes of women's involvement in community affairs and engagement in leadership roles. In Mandalay, Magwe and Ayeyarwady Regions, the majority of male community members felt that it was inappropriate

for women to be involved in decision-making for the community. In southern Chin men also expressed clear views that women were not natural decision-makers, and that taking on decision-making roles was more appropriate for men – that is, that men are leaders and women are followers.

Women community members of all ages described women's involvement and participation in community affairs as mainly limited to religious, social, cultural affairs, or to women-only groups. Women were described as having limited or no involvement as leaders or decision makers in village administration groups. While women were active across a range of community groups, committees and organisations (see Figure 2 below), they tended to take on the roles of accountant, secretary or treasurer. Women involved in other more senior roles in community affairs were found to be in the extreme minority. This corresponds with other recent research on women's participation in public life.<sup>8</sup>

An important finding from the communities was that women considered to be “leaders”, in reality often had little decision making capacity in their “leadership” roles. Women perceived to be doing good work in the community, or who were leading a women's group (microfinance, social, cultural or religious chanting group) were commonly defined as leaders by other community members. However many of the roles that these women community leaders took on were in fact very limited in terms of their decision-making capacity.

*We are able to express opinions, but we have a little or no chance of being involved in decision-making.*

*We would prefer more involvement by women. FGD, Women >26, Kayah State*

*Women are not involved and can't express their opinions; we cannot participate in decision-making processes...There is no women-led community group (in our village). – FGD , Women >26 Kayah State*

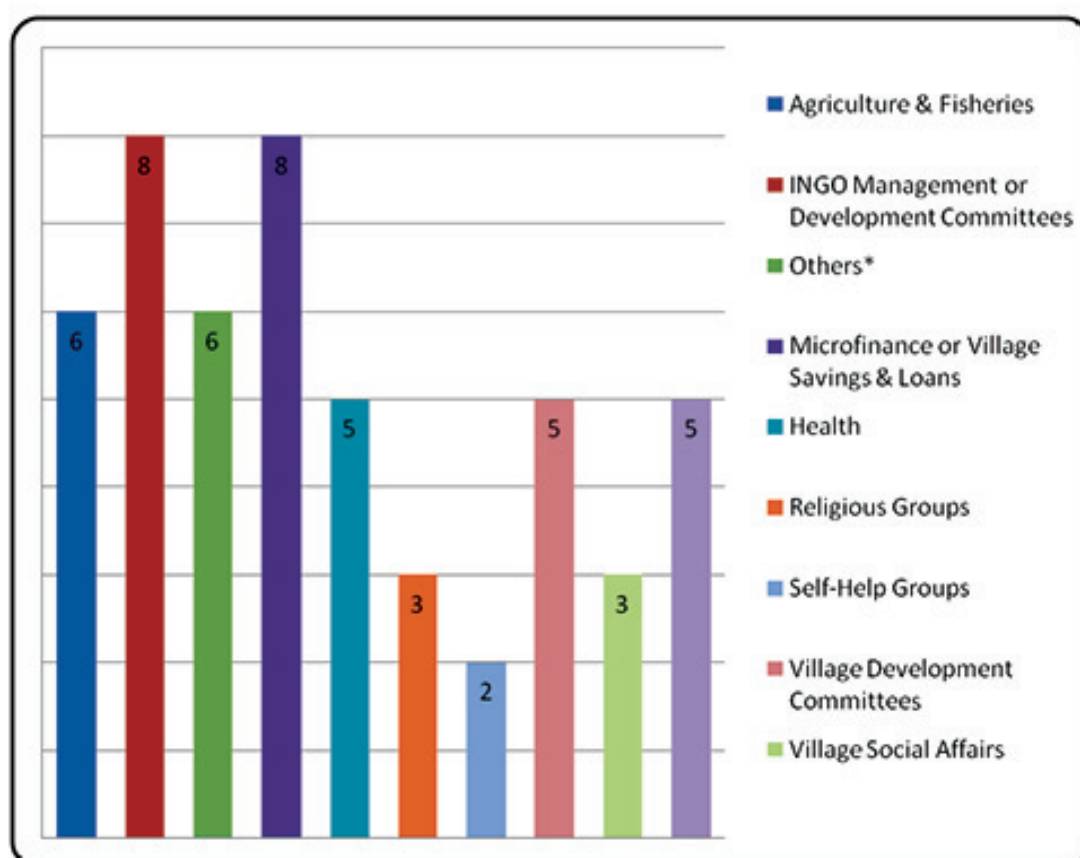


Figure 2: Groups/Committees/Organizations in which Community Women Leaders Are Involved

<sup>8</sup>Ibid 5



The fact that the women nominated to be interviewed for this research as leaders in their communities were largely in roles with little or no decision making power in village administration, echoes findings from the 2011 research that women are restricted to taking on senior decision making roles *only* in groups or committees where women are the majority and not considered integral to village administration. This was reinforced by the fact that most community members had difficulty in identifying women as anything other than secondary contributors to major community events, thus further reinforcing a socially accepted image of men as powerful natural leaders.

In northern Shan, discussions with men in communities indicated they were happy with current levels of women's involvement in community decision making and felt participation from women was already sufficient. Despite this, the group expressed surprise when it emerged that there were no women members of the Village Development Committee, illustrating the misplaced assumption that women experience greater freedoms than they do in reality. This points to a need to understand the realities of women's participation and leadership in the public sphere, and put in place measures that raise awareness of the role that gendered norms and subsequent discrimination play in everyday life to tackle these widely-held assumptions.

**Implications:** Negative stereotypes and social norms have a damaging impact on women's access to leadership roles, as well as their ability to act as effective leaders once they have broken down the barriers to reaching those roles. Gendered stereotypes are correlated with widespread gender discrimination and at times, violence against women (see section 2.4). Greater public awareness of women leaders in various professions and sectors and the benefits that they can bring to the community and to society as a whole is essential to shifting embedded social representations of women and men in gender-specific roles. Action is needed to systematically address and break down persistent and unhelpful gendered stereotypes. Government-led initiatives to introduce or modify legislation and policies to advance women in decision making and leadership are necessary, as indicated in the NSPAW. One example is affirmative action measures, such as the introduction of quotas for greater female representation in government and public office.

## 2.4 Gender-based violence

Across national and community leaders and members, violence against women was mentioned directly and indirectly by the respondents and was seen as a significant barrier for women leaders. Women cited intimidation, insults, threats, and verbal, physical and sexual harassment as blocks along the road to participation in public life and attempts to take on leadership roles.

One parliamentarian described verbal harassment, physical threats and intimidation experienced by herself and by other women MPs in state and regional parliaments. When referring to the upcoming elections in 2015 one parliamentarian suggested that continuation of such intimidation and harassment would potentially prompt her to give up her role as a parliamentarian. Business leaders also spoke of the constraints experienced by themselves or by other female colleagues as a result of gendered stereotyping and bias, describing examples of open insults, threats, and attempts to sabotage their work by men. They believed these issues were experienced by many other women starting out in business.

*There are acts of sabotage by men, like selling lower quality products and naming them as my products...*

*I think it is common for women entrepreneurs. Business Leader*

Almost all national NGO leaders had experienced gender discrimination including mockery and harassment by men, and in some cases also from women, as well as direct backlash from men who felt threatened. As with business leaders, these women had many friends and colleagues with similar experiences.

#### **Experience of Gender Discrimination by NGO Leaders**

*I was looked down on by male colleagues at first, and was warned by people in charge from my husband's work (to stop).*

*Some male colleagues do not want to be led by me; I experienced verbal attacks from them, and they did not listen to my words.*

*There were many cases of sexual harassment.*

In women's responses, violence or fear of violence act as barriers to women's participation in community life and as obstacles to their assuming leadership roles. Women community members spoke of fear of their husbands, the shame they felt at conflicts happening in the home and of the need to hide this conflict from others, and of how this affected their public engagement, sometimes causing them to withdraw from community life.

*I could go only after I finished the housework. If I went leaving the housework unfinished... well, I am afraid of my husband. FGD, Women <25, – Shan State*

*There are some who have arguments and I have seen it. Some men beat their family and children when there is a tension at home. IDI Shan State*

*My husband got angry and I had to explain it to him to understand. – IDI Pyapon, Ayeyarwady Region*

The same gendered situations often produced scenarios where men took the role of "gatekeeper", with serious repercussions for some women leaders. Respondents frequently reported having to ask permission from a husband or family member in order to be able to join their group or committee, which had the potential to result in conflict, prohibition or even violence.

*When I was a dependent (a housewife) I got along with my husband. However, he started to complain when I started to work. He complained that I was trying to compete with him. He tried to control me in many ways. We clashed over this and we had to split up. – Business Leader*

*Some of my colleagues were forbidden to go to work by their families. – National NGO Leader*

However, the evidence also demonstrated that gendered roles are not permanently fixed, and some women leaders observed that in being freed by these gatekeepers to go out to work, there was a subsequent shift or increase in the women leaders' power to achieve goals, to step outside of traditionally defined roles, and to gain self-confidence.

**Implications:** Investigation of the role of gender based violence was not an explicit aim of this research, but the findings demonstrate that gender based violence impacts on women's ability to take on leadership roles and participate in public life. As in many cultures, gender based violence remains a taboo which is



rarely spoken of, leading to high levels of under-reporting and weak evidence on the real extent to which violence impacts on women's lives. Gender based violence is now beginning to be much more widely recognised as a real threat to women in Myanmar, and the Myanmar Government is at the start of the process of drafting an anti-violence against women law.

Without measures to address the gatekeeper roles that some men play, and more broadly to tackle perceived notions about women's rightful roles, women will continue to face critical and sometimes dangerous challenges to entering or maintaining leadership roles. Affirmative action/positive discrimination and legislation, coupled with protection laws that support women in the workforce and tackle the major issue of violence and harassment, are required to overcome the restrictions to women's entry into and participation in decision making roles, and in public life. Initiatives or programs that seek to empower women, increase their participation in public life and capacity to take on leadership roles, must take into account the threat of gender based violence and develop mechanisms so that women who are seen to be challenging the status quo by stepping outside of their stereotypes are not vulnerable to abuse.

## 2.5 Balancing home and work life responsibilities

One of the key challenges faced by women in leadership roles was the struggle to balance the gendered responsibilities of homecare against responsibilities outside of the home, and the restrictions and expectations imposed upon them by family members and by themselves. National NGO leaders and community leaders spoke frequently about the challenges of balancing home and work life responsibilities. Women community members also mentioned this as being a significant barrier to any participation in community affairs or leadership roles. Whilst this was mentioned to some extent by parliamentarians, it was least commonly noted by business leaders. Many men and women community members in almost all states and regions referenced women's home care responsibilities as needing to come before participation in community affairs.

The gendered expectations of women who are responsible for maintaining the home and related judgements on women who work outside the home are illustrated in the following quote.

*If a man does politics and cannot take good care of the family, there is always a wife who can take his place and look after the family. However, if a woman works in this kind of field, she would be blamed for not taking care of her family and husband. She will be blamed by society. This is gender inequality.*

– NGO Leader

Again, women leaders described men and extended family members as gatekeepers. Men (husbands) were repeatedly described as having power over women – to permit or restrict women from taking on a career or community work outside the home. Permission to participate was often required from husbands or extended family members. Interviewees spoke of husbands who made it difficult for the women to be involved in community work, in some cases directly or indirectly reporting acts of physical violence, as previously mentioned. For many women, the challenge of finding a balance meant juggling a “triple burden” – of paid work, household chores, and caretaking, particularly of young children. This was a significant barrier particularly for women at the community level, and more so for women living in poverty who face even greater caretaking burdens as well as multiple roles in and outside the household than women in less economically vulnerable positions.



*My work is full-time. I cannot even give time to the birthdays and anniversaries of my family. I cannot be a good housewife anymore... My sons sometimes ask me to give more time to them. I try all I can to balance my job and home. My husband told me that he has lost a good housewife, but that he would not say anything because I am working for the good of the people. – NGO Leader*

Some community leaders spoke of working together to manage home care duties in order to manage time efficiently and be both wife/mother and community leader.

The importance of raising men's awareness of gendered stereotypes and women's rights was raised by several women in relation to the pressure their own husbands are under to conform to masculine norms, which set out what men should and shouldn't do. Where men were willing to support their wives to work and took on home care duties, some described their husbands as being mocked or harassed by male peers for the work that their wives are doing, making it difficult for a husband to take on a supportive role.

*Though my husband understands gender issues, he has difficulties to apply it because of the peer pressure and social pressures. – NGO Leader*

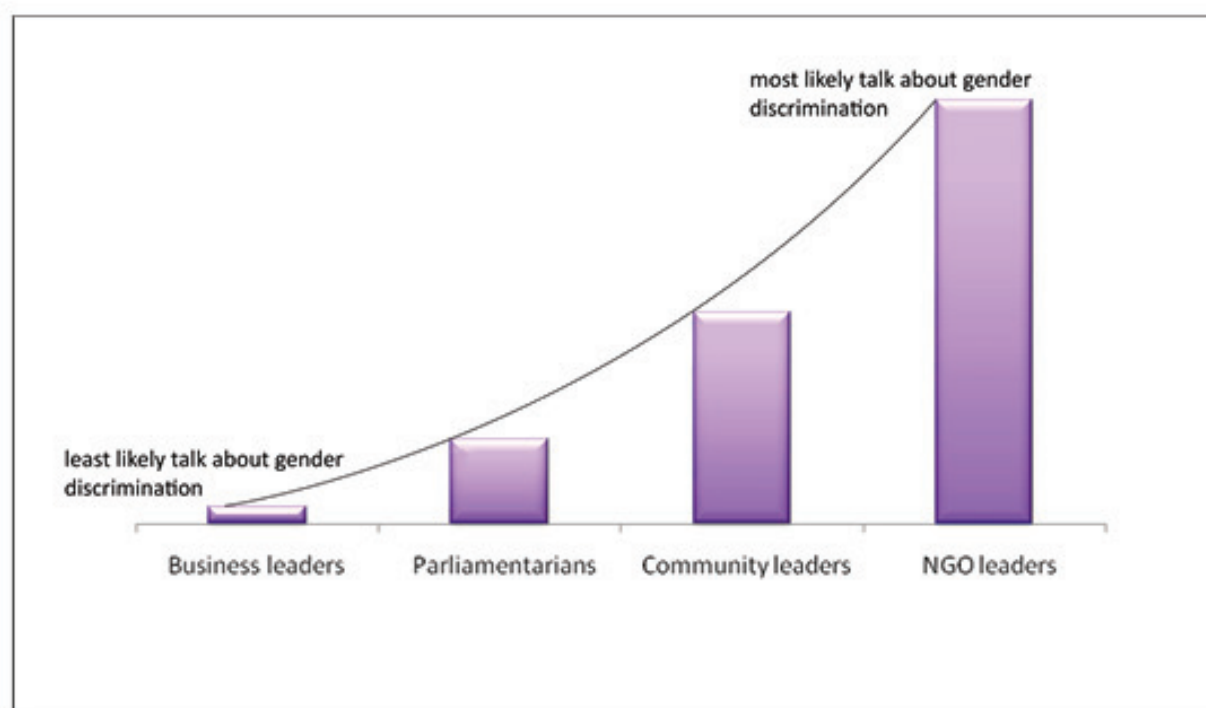
In contrast to home-care work, which many viewed as restrictive and inhibiting, a sense of freedom was expressed by some women who were working as leaders in their chosen field. This sense of freedom was particularly notable in national NGO leaders' responses. The freedom to develop professionally and to move beyond restrictive traditionally defined gender roles instilled women with a sense of power to enact change for the benefit of themselves and their communities.

**Implications:** As in all other countries the value of home-care work and the caring economy are not counted and often not considered as "work", let alone productive work. This is almost universally women's responsibility and plays a major role in determining their ability to take part in public life. Legislative reform to provide for comprehensive maternity leave and strategies to support women to manage multiple roles so they do not miss out on professional development opportunities because of home-care duties must be pursued. Programs to galvanise informal and formal collective action so that women can support each other – and working with men to recognise the importance of women's participation/leadership and their role in sharing the household and caring work that normally falls to women – are required to develop the opportunities and encouragement for women. Negative peer pressure on men who seek to support their wives suggests that continued and renewed efforts to find innovative ways to engage and support men will be essential to attempts to advance women's leadership.

## **2.6 Women's role in contesting discrimination**

Despite widespread gender discrimination, some women leaders did not attribute significance to the impact of traditions, norms and social stereotypes on their own roles and work. For each category of leader there was a greater or lesser inclination to talk about discrimination, both in regards to their place of work or community group, and in regards to gender discrimination as an issue for all women in Myanmar. Parliamentarians and business leaders were least likely to openly discuss and describe the impact of gender bias, whereas national NGO leaders spoke frequently of harassment and discrimination faced by themselves and their colleagues.

Findings from interviews with business leaders and parliamentarians at the national level in particular indicate a divide between respondents who spoke openly about the reality of gender discrimination and those who suggested that there was no gender bias at all when it came to the running of committees and decision making. Community leaders gave contrasting viewpoints on the impact of gender discrimination, illustrating that differing ideas about gender inequality co-exist.



**Figure 3: Willingness to Talk About Gender Discrimination**

Where business leaders or parliamentarians described having transcended traditionally defined gender roles, there was (in some cases) an expression of pride and power gained from stepping into a role traditionally associated with men. Some women leaders in senior positions in business and politics stated there was no need to support other women and were unwilling to engage in discussion on gender-related barriers. An assumption could be that this is based on the understanding that women can make it – as they themselves have done – without any specific support so therefore no measures are necessary to assist women. A possible reason for this may be that some of these women feel that they need to distance themselves from their gendered identity as much as possible, an identity incongruous to the normative image of, for example, a parliamentarian as male. Ultimately, this seems to indicate that the desire to be taken seriously by male colleagues outweighs the need to place gender on the agenda.

*There is no discrimination in my business. Business Leader*

*There are no significant differences in gender; men and women work together in business. Business Leader*

A few respondents also noted that some women are competitive or protective of their achievement/status and are not interested or willing to work together.

*There were two types of responses: One from those who encouraged me because they thought that I was doing the right thing; the other from people who were afraid that I might get more success than them.*

*There are some people who do not want to share what they know with the next generation. Some do not want others to be brighter and smarter than them. – NGO Leader*



Some women in leadership roles may not be aware of or see the relevance of available tools and resources to combat discrimination (such as international standards on gender equality in business or CEDAW), nor see the role that they themselves could play in advancing women's leadership and ending gender bias. Aside from familiarity with CEDAW,<sup>9</sup> few parliamentarians were aware of national advocacy tools and plans relating to women's human rights, and their significance for political reform in Myanmar. One respondent stated that CEDAW was not something that she needed to be concerned about in her day to day role as a parliamentarian.

**Implications:** As in other countries, it cannot be assumed that when women become leaders that they will automatically uphold and stand for the promotion of other women in their field, or for women's rights. If women leaders do not fully acknowledge the barriers affecting themselves and other women, or do not feel fully supported as women in their field, then they may struggle to successfully advocate for other women's rights. Incentives to encourage them to take greater steps to learning about and advocating on the struggles that other women face must be identified. The work of policy makers and law makers to raise awareness on gender specific laws and policy initiatives, and with champions of women's leadership in government and parliament who can push forward gender policy, is vital to challenge and prevent discrimination against women in leadership.

## 2.7 Recognizing gender equity as a legitimate struggle

A key challenge to women taking on leadership roles was the sense that gender equity itself was not seen as a critical factor for Myanmar to become a modern, developed and democratic nation. There was a widely held perception that few decision makers took gender equity and women's rights seriously:

*A government official once said, 'I really want to laugh when you are talking about gender again and again'. – NGO Leader*

*Priorities are for changing the law and building peace... it is (up to) the government who have signed it (CEDAW) to figure it out ...The first step is for Myanmar people to reach to one level (peace and development); the quota of women is the second step.– Parliamentarian*

Parliamentarians and NGO leaders repeatedly raised the challenge of finding space for the promotion of women's rights in a nation rapidly embracing change on multiple fronts. Many parliamentarians and some community leaders felt there were more pressing concerns that took precedence over women's rights issues – such as democracy, law reform, development, peace building and resolution of ethnic conflicts. Consideration of gender issues – women's human rights and advancement – was described as separate, secondary in importance and a token exercise. Furthermore, gender equality was not seen as an essential component to the long-term goal of peace and development.

Several parliamentarians described feeling that there were simply too many other issues to be concerned with that had to take priority.<sup>10</sup> For those who were conscious of the centrality of women's advancement

<sup>9</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Declaration, Millennium Development Declaration, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, ASEAN Charter, National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW 2013-2022)

<sup>10</sup> Despite these comments, several interviewees mention a group of women parliamentarians coming together to bring forward a proposal on CEDAW in July 2012. At the time of research, this proposal had still not been raised for discussion. As a result of the perceived lack of success of this proposal, there was a sense of unwillingness to risk bringing forward other similar gender related proposals again, which may be unsuccessful and may jeopardise their reputations in parliament.



to the progress of Myanmar politically, socially, and economically (primarily national NGO leaders) there was a sense of deep frustration in trying unsuccessfully to convince others of this.

*I went to a place for a discussion; there were youths, women, men and also politicians. They were talking about ethnic issues, youth issues, and political issues. I talked about women's issues, but they thought that it was not that important... They are trying to ignore a very important issue. – NGO Leader*

At the community level, taking on leadership roles specifically to address injustices around gender inequality was not articulated. Many of the women became involved in community affairs to contribute to or support community life, but not necessarily to advance women's rights in their community specifically. Critically, the responsibility for breaking through social barriers to leadership positions was often placed by respondents on the shoulders of individual women, rather than reflecting the need to change the social or economic barriers that stand in their way. Very little specific reference was made to their potential roles as individuals in supporting aspiring women leaders (see next section).<sup>11</sup> Overall, there was little sense among parliamentarians of what they could do as individuals in power to support aspiring young women.

*Yes, I think Myanmar needs more female leaders as there are very few women in leading roles... [but] women need to prove that they can be leader(s). – Parliamentarian*

*In the process toward democracy, we need women. Without women, democratic progress will be interrupted... We should have more women leaders... The law should be amended. In law, women are discriminated against even in the constitution. – Parliamentarian*

**Implications:** Currently gender equity is not regarded as a human rights issue or central to efforts to achieve poverty reduction and economic development. A shift in the current positioning of gender equality as a social welfare issue needs to take place in order for women's rights to be considered integral to all sectors: peace and development initiatives, and to national plans for poverty reduction and economic development. For this to be realised, the immediate operationalization of the NSPAW and ownership of the plan by key government ministries is essential. Additionally, women must be fully involved in peace negotiations at all levels, from the negotiation table to the rebuilding of peaceful communities.

## 2.8 The importance of supporting future women leaders

Solidarity and support were mentioned frequently as mechanisms which enable women to find safe supportive spaces to grow and gain the confidence to take on roles which break down stereotypes. A significant finding across interviews and regions was a desire to support young women and see more active participation by women in the community. However, similar to some of the feelings described by national level respondents, many women community leaders felt they were lacking in experience, knowledge, confidence and resources to be able to help young aspiring women leaders in an effective way.

*We have to educate young women and we have to read a lot to get knowledge. We must have ability to support others. We need to have money and be healthy. We need to give time and chances to develop and support women. – IDI Shan State*

<sup>11</sup> This is a phenomenon not unique to Myanmar but, noted in many other parts of the world: Kabeer, N. (1994) *Empowerment from below: learning from the grassroots* in: *Reversed realities: gender hierarchies in development work*; Burnley, J. (2005) "Women as agents: resisting gender equity and empowerment"



*I can't think of anything specific, I will try my best to support young women to become leaders.*

– IDI Shan State

*At first, I thought I was only responsible for my family. But then I realized I am also responsible for all those young women out there as I work with the organization. I encourage them to go take trainings, support their opinions.* – IDI4 Magwe Region

When asked about potential constraints for young women in Myanmar today to take up leadership roles, communities leaders spoke not only of the negative impact of social constraints and gender norms but also of more tangible limitations as a result of finance, health and education.

*Financial difficulties, health care problems, and lack of encouragement about education; it is assumed that boys will be fishermen and go to sea and girls will find husbands.* – IDI Labutta, Ayarwaddy Region

Despite signals throughout discussions with women leaders regarding the importance of female role models for inspiring other women to take on leadership roles and to champion women once in those roles, there was also a striking tendency by those already in leadership positions to have no vision of themselves as potential role models, particularly amongst parliamentarians and business leaders.

**Implications:** In seeking to advance women's leadership in Myanmar it cannot be assumed that simply by occupying key positions in politics and business that women will automatically advocate for women's rights. It is important that decision makers ground initiatives to promote women's leadership on an understanding of how existing women leaders might be supported to act as champions.

Women who are supported and connected with other women to work towards a common goal – and women who have the opportunity to develop confidence and skills in a nurturing environment, with role models to look up to – can, and do, redefine their experiences of power and self-belief. Formal learning and capacity building are vital, but are likely to be less successful without collective action and support strategies in place to see through and exercise the benefit of technical skills development. Women who are currently leading in their communities or professional lives, or who are in a position to inspire other young women, must be supported to see themselves as role models, and to have the tools and techniques necessary to actively and practically encourage other women. At the same time, support needs to be given to women to help them overcome material as well as structural barriers to empowerment and leadership.

### 3. Conclusion ■

Understanding how leadership is gendered and associated with men in Myanmar is a critical step. To develop policies and programs that can effectively promote women's leadership and participation in decision making, the underlying social and cultural norms and persistent stereotypes that portray women as inherent or "natural" followers need specifically to be challenged and addressed. Women can – and some already do – successfully lead in business, civil society and in parliament, demonstrating that leadership capacities and skills are not linked to gender. While they remain small in number, these women are regarded as aberrations in what is rightfully the male domain. At all levels, from community to national, public education campaigns are needed to achieve the shift required in thinking about what women and men can and should do and how they should act. Promoting and increasing the number of women leaders will slowly, but surely, change stereotypes and support further change.



This research illustrates that women also continue to face several other significant barriers to leadership: women are held back by the daily struggle to balance home and work responsibilities and, for some, their domination by men in their family; by the common experience of gender-based violence in the form of intimidation, insults, mockery, verbal, physical and sexual harassment; by the lack of champions amongst women leaders themselves to contest gender discrimination and openly critique gender inequality in leadership; and by a tendency on the part of women leaders to de-value their role as leaders. Opportunities for women are also limited by the failure of institutions and women themselves to recognize gender equity as something that must itself be achieved in order for Myanmar to become a modern, developed and democratic nation. Where gender equality has largely been ignored in the past, there is now a tendency to consider it as secondary or as extra work that requires additional resources when time might be better spent on development and peace initiatives. The two areas are seen as mutually exclusive rather than, as they are, intricately interwoven. As one respondent posited, there can be no peace without women, and there can be no development without peace. Research and experience elsewhere indicates that gender issues are integral to peace and development initiatives. Ensuring that decision makers effectively engage on gender will require a radical shift in thinking and re-prioritisation on several levels.

However, these women's experiences of leadership also signal that there are opportunities and spaces for women to step into leadership roles, that role models and champions at all levels are key for encouraging women to do this, and that specific policy and program actions are needed to pave the way for increased participation of women in decision making positions, greater rights for women and a more progressive and inclusive future for Myanmar. It is clear that both women and men must be supported to understand the very real benefits for them and their whole communities by increasing women's involvement as leaders and decision makers in community affairs. Many women leaders mentioned the importance of a supportive husband or male family member who is taking on atypical levels of home care work. Such behaviour and roles models should be supported and championed. Men in their peer groups must also be encouraged to recognise the worth in these actions, and not to chastise peers for promoting women as leaders in public life.

Gender inequality at leadership levels and the lack of representation of women contributes to the presentation and re-presentation of women in society as 'less' than men. The general election planned for 2015 provides a valuable opportunity for government and political parties in particular to focus on promoting women's leadership. The development of the NSPAW and its operationalisation also provides a significant opportunity to mobilise commitment and resources across ministries, particularly Finance and Planning (which oversee social and economic reform), to make gender equality a priority. Moreover, women's rights must be put at the centre of important new national policy processes such as the Government's medium term plan and the National Comprehensive Development Plan. These processes and their outputs will shape the future strategic direction of Myanmar. Women are a vital resource; in failing to attend to women's rights and their needs, the Government will ultimately struggle to achieve genuine long-lasting inclusive peace and development for all its people.

## 4. Recommendations ■

The research findings have significant implications for programming and policy interventions by state and non-state actors across various domains. The collaborative efforts from all sectors of society – the Government of the Union of Myanmar, civil society and the media, business and the international



community – are required to comprehensively address the challenges and put in place the systems, structures and practices that will promote gender equality and the advancement of women in leadership and decision making. The recommendations are clustered under three main areas: (i) laws, policies and political processes, (ii) changing social attitudes and cultural norms, and (iii) supporting women in leadership roles.

## **(i) Laws, policies and political processes**

### **a. NSPAW**

The priority area “Women and Decision Making” in the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 provides a comprehensive framework to improve systems, structures and practices to ensure women’s equal participation in decision making and leadership at all levels of society. The allocation of budget, human and material resources to and by designated focal ministries is crucial for the successful operationalisation of the Plan, as well as the review, development and application of the rules, structures, systems and policies at all levels of government related to women’s participation in leadership and decision making.

### **b. Women’s rights at the heart of key policy processes**

Ensure women’s meaningful participation in the development of the medium term plan, the NCDP, and in the new aid coordination mechanisms through the Development Partners Group and the sectoral working groups. The plans should include development and monitoring of gender indicators around women’s leadership and participation.

Given the perceived separation between women’s rights and equality and the nation’s progress towards the long term goal of peace and development, concerted efforts must be made to address the absence of women’s voices by, for example, including women in all peace negotiations.

### **c. Anti violence Against Women laws**

VAW has a direct impact on women’s ability to meaningfully participate and take up leadership roles. Proposed legislative reform to develop anti-violence against women laws to tackle violence and harassment should be supported and the implementation of the law, in terms of enforcement, legal mechanisms and support services should be monitored and resourced. Gender equality laws providing for equality in the workplace and prohibiting harassment are also needed.

### **d. Affirmative action/positive discrimination**

Affirmative action/positive discrimination such as (i) quotas for key positions in local and national administration, and commissions/committees formed by the government will provide opportunities for women to be represented in decision making. (ii) NSPAW and CEDAW highlight the need to have quotas for women in parliament. A quota of 30% should be the aim. (iii) Political parties should commit to quotas for women candidates in winnable seats.

While quotas may ensure that women get promoted/elected, this will not in and of itself end discrimination. Rather, such measures must be coupled with adequate training, resources and support for women and an innovative public awareness campaign. A women’s caucus in parliament should also be established and resourced.

## **(ii) Changing social attitudes and cultural norms**

### **a. Public awareness raising campaigns**

Comprehensive public awareness raising campaigns to tackle social and cultural norms that discriminate against women’s inherent capacity and right to be leaders are required at all levels of society and for all institutions. These

include: exposing discriminatory attitudes and practices and denial of women's human rights; highlighting the benefits of women's leadership in communities and society at large; positive portrayals of women leaders/role models; advocacy by men who champion women's leadership and rights; positive role modelling by men who share the work of home care; and the vital role of women in the achievement of a modern, developed and democratic nation.

#### **b. Women leaders as role models**

In all sectors, specific initiatives should be developed so that women who are currently leading in politics, business and community level decision making have the opportunity to come together, reflect on and recognise their potential and responsibility to be role models, and to actively and practically encourage and mentor other women.

#### **c. Engaging men to challenge negative masculinities and stereotypes**

Work with men to reflect on the role and work of women and the importance of women's leadership; engage male role models who support women's participation and leadership and reinforce unacceptability of violence against women.

#### **d. Gender sensitive language**

Give attention to the use of language so there is no automatic implication that positions, opportunities etc are intrinsically for men. For example the translation of the Myanmar word for "national" is typically "men".

#### **e. Education**

Address inherent gender stereotyping in formal education which perpetuates discrimination and inequality between female and male students and ultimately their expectations of who and what they can be. The Education Sectoral Review is one opportunity to tackle discrimination and include women's rights and the portrayal of women as strong leaders in the school curriculum.

Remove discriminatory practices which restrict opportunities for women such as different entry standards for women and men for some university courses.

#### **f. Media**

Given its centrality in shaping public opinion, the media has a key role in challenging female and male stereotypes and promoting women's leadership by giving space to women leaders and opinion makers, as well as men who champion gender equality.

### **(iii) Supporting women in leadership roles**

Formal education and training provided by government, business and civil society to equip women with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to take on and fulfil leadership roles must be accompanied by innovative strategies to link women with other women and to reinforce opportunities for mentoring, guidance and solidarity. This could be achieved by linking women who have attended a training course with an internship program, or forming networks of women leaders who may be willing to act as mentors. Exchange visits between women's groups from different communities and villages may be a way of sharing ideas and strategies to increase women's participation and leadership at village level. Collective action is a vital component of efforts to increase women's representation as leaders at community level and beyond.



### 1. Literature Review

#### Background and Context – Myanmar

In late 2010, encouraged by a political climate of change and of dialogue, three international NGOs based in Myanmar conceived of a study to explore women's participation in public life and decision making in Myanmar (Lofving 2011). The Government of the Union of Myanmar had acceded to CEDAW, and were developing a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women. The qualitative study explored opinions and perspectives from across Myanmar, running focus groups and interviews with over 400 respondents in Rakhine, Kachin, Kayah, and Shan States, and in Magwe, Mandalay and the Ayeyarwaddy regions. This was a rich and ground breaking study. Findings revealed deeply entrenched social norms and traditions surrounding gendered roles. Whilst there were variations in findings across culture, religion, and geographical areas the study made clear some very deeply entrenched and internalised beliefs held by both men and women, about men and women's roles, in the household and in communities. These norms and traditions often constituted significant barriers to women's active participation in decision making and in public life in particular. Women and men's roles were found to be well-defined; often falling into either inside/light/detailed work for women or outside/heavy/strong roles for men.

Social norms in Myanmar, developed over time, depict women as weak and in need of protection, the home-makers and preservers of culture and tradition; and men as strong, the breadwinners, decision makers, and leaders (Harriden 2012, Lofving 2011, Belak 2002). This depiction reduces the significance of women's opinions and voice. However whilst major barriers inhibit women from participating in certain areas of community life and local governance, within certain spheres women are actively leading, often in small community level women's groups, and in informal ways and settings. Whilst often not openly challenging the traditional gendered representations, women are navigating and negotiating the flexibility in their social roles, and testing boundaries.

Whilst norms can appear resistant to change they are not impenetrable. Present (though often unnoticed) in day-to-day life, traditional roles shift, highlighting the opportunity for change. It is this opportunity that the present study focuses upon. This research explores the concepts of leadership and role models with women who are leading at community and national levels in formalised and informal contexts. We also investigate the perspectives of community members to try and understand their feelings about leadership in general and women leaders in particular.

Leadership has been studied and explored for many years and across many disciplines internationally. However within the context of Myanmar there is little background data or information available on this topic, and particularly when it comes to 'women and leadership'. This literature review therefore, begins by taking an international perspective on the study of leadership and women, before reviewing recent studies from region.

#### An International Perspective

The study of women and leadership has been present in international social research, politics, and business studies for decades. Academics have pondered as to why, despite continued efforts to reduce inequality, women still lag behind men in terms of the male / female ratio of leadership roles held around the world.

70% of the world's 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty are women and girls; 66% of the world's working hours are worked by women; a mere 1% of property worldwide is owned by women; and just 16% of parliamentary seats worldwide are held by women.<sup>12</sup>

In the USA, women constitute only 4% of the five highest earners in the fortune 500 companies and just 0.4% of the CEOs;<sup>13</sup> similar figures characterise most other developed and developing nations (Melkas & Anker 1997, Eagly 2002). Prejudice and discrimination create a glass ceiling that prevents women from taking high level leadership positions.

## Gender & Leadership Theory

Are there differences in leadership style across gender? Studies in organisational and experimental settings, and in managerial assessments, have illustrated that women tend to adopt a more democratic and less autocratic leadership approach than men (Eagly 1990, 2002).

A social role theory of sex differences in social behaviour maintains that as a general tendency people are expected to engage in activities that are consistent with their culturally defined gender roles (Eagly, 1987). Understanding the mechanisms by which gender roles spill over into leadership roles is important in order to understand the challenges that women leading in male dominated environments face. There appears to be glass ceiling, the height of which varies across international settings and cultural contexts, but which inhibits women from taking on and advancing in leadership roles to the same extent as their male counterparts. What causes this glass ceiling and why can it seem to be so difficult to lift?

Consistent with the idea that gender roles spill over into leadership roles, social scientists in the 1970's and 1980's claimed that female leaders and managers experience conflict between their gender roles and their leadership roles (Bass 1981; Bayes & Newton 1978; Kruse & Wintermatel 1984). This conflict arises because the stereotype of manager and the normative expectations about what makes a good manager include more masculine than feminine characteristics. This can be expressed as more democratic (female) versus autocratic (male) leadership styles.

Whilst social role theory can help us to understand the impact of perceived gender differences in roles, the picture is of course far more complicated than just that. Various situational variables have a part to play. Organisation or team structure, in varying fields, institutions and context, must be considered.

Congruity theories suggest that if the female gender roles and leadership roles are seen as incompatible two forms of prejudice may arise – perceiving women less favourably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles, and evaluating behaviour that fulfils the prescriptions of a leader role less favourably when it is enacted by a woman (Eagly 2002). This has several potential consequences: attitudes may be less positive to female than male leaders or aspiring leaders; it can be harder for a woman to become a leader and to achieve success; and once in a leadership role a woman may have to struggle to defend her right to be there more than a male colleague.

Gender roles are normative expectations about perceived desirable qualities or tendencies that should be displayed by a man or a woman in given situations. For example, communal attributes (concerned with

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/>



taking care of others) are often associated with women and non-traditional attributes (leadership, dominance and power), ascribed commonly to men (Eagly 1987). Such qualities were found as frequently attributable to male and female roles in recent gender studies in Myanmar (Belak 2002, Smith 2006, Lofving 2011, MMRD 2012, Furlong 2012).

Non-traditional attributes associated with men cement a particularly male construal of leadership, particularly in highly traditional societies or male dominated environments. Communal characteristics linked to women tend to be incongruous with those non-traditional characteristics associated with leadership, and with men. Effective women leaders may feel the need to display male non-traditional characteristics to be valued or taken seriously in their role; however conversely they may also be devalued or criticized for violations of a traditionally perceived female gender role. Women leaders are constrained by threats from two directions. Conforming to their gender role may be perceived as a failure to conform to the leadership role, and conforming to their leadership role – a failure to conform to (at least traditional) gendered norms.

As mentioned, there are of course many contextual and dispositional factors that need to be considered, and numerous variables which may influence the prejudices postulated. Such variables include: the masculinity versus femininity of types of leadership roles; the status of the role within the hierarchy of an organisational system (the higher up the chain you go the more important non-traditional characteristics tend to become); the sex of the perceiver; cultural context; approval or disapproval by the perceiver of traditional gender roles; and the time factor (tradition versus familiarity with having women in high power and high profile positions).

Time in particular may have a significant role to play. Recent studies have found that prejudice and discrimination may lessen over time with increased exposure to women leaders (Rudman and Kilianski 2000, Duflo, 2008). In 2008 Esther Duflo, published the findings of a study exploring the effectiveness and impact of affirmative action policies for women in public office and quota systems of leadership in India. Considering the impact of voter and party bias the world over in favour of male electoral candidates, can political reservation reduce bias in belief?

Duflo considered that longevity is the key to changing attitudes about perceived effectiveness of women leaders. The study was conducted in a natural setting of West Bengal villages, where over the past 10 years there has been a policy of affirmative action for women leaders and where mandated exposure to women as leaders has in fact served to reduce bias.

Duflo found that mandated reservation alone does not reduce bias. Voters tended to penalise candidates for whom they lack information, and in particular female candidates who were often considered risky. However through a combination of mandated reservation with enhanced information on prospective women leaders – voter beliefs can be influenced. In the short to medium term affirmative action may not alter voter preferences (deeply embedded social norms which tell voters that women are not leaders may kick in), but over time with increased exposure to female candidates, this backlash effect diminishes.

Whilst mandated reservation may make sure that women get elected it will not in and of themselves end discrimination. It must be coupled with adequate training, resources and support for candidates, and additionally an innovative public awareness campaign.

Additionally exposure to female role models and leaders may have a positive impact on young women's

aspirations. A recent study compared adolescents' career aspirations across villages in India, with a presence or absence of female and male leaders, as well as parents' aspirations for their sons and daughters. Whether changes in aspirations were accompanied by changes in educational outcomes and time spent on domestic chores was examined. Significant evidence was found for the importance of female role models in changing parents and girls aspirations, and furthermore that the impact of women leaders as role models has an even greater effect in the long term than short term (Beaman, Duflo, et al, 2012).

## Conclusion

Women who take on certain leadership roles have to carefully balance perceived male and female attributes, and expectations on their behaviour. This may adversely affect how powerful they appear and how far they can progress.

Change is required in social and family roles, over time. An increase in the number of women in the work force and in high profile positions, and a shift in stereotypes (with women taking on more non-traditional roles and men becoming more involved in the caring economy) will support that change. A move towards positive representations of leadership styles involving democratic and communicative characteristics will be favourable to women. The findings of the aforementioned studies and theoretical reviews have great relevance to programming and policy developments in this area. These are issues that must be considered with due diligence if government resources and donor funding is to be channelled into truly effective and sustainable interventions to promote women's leadership.

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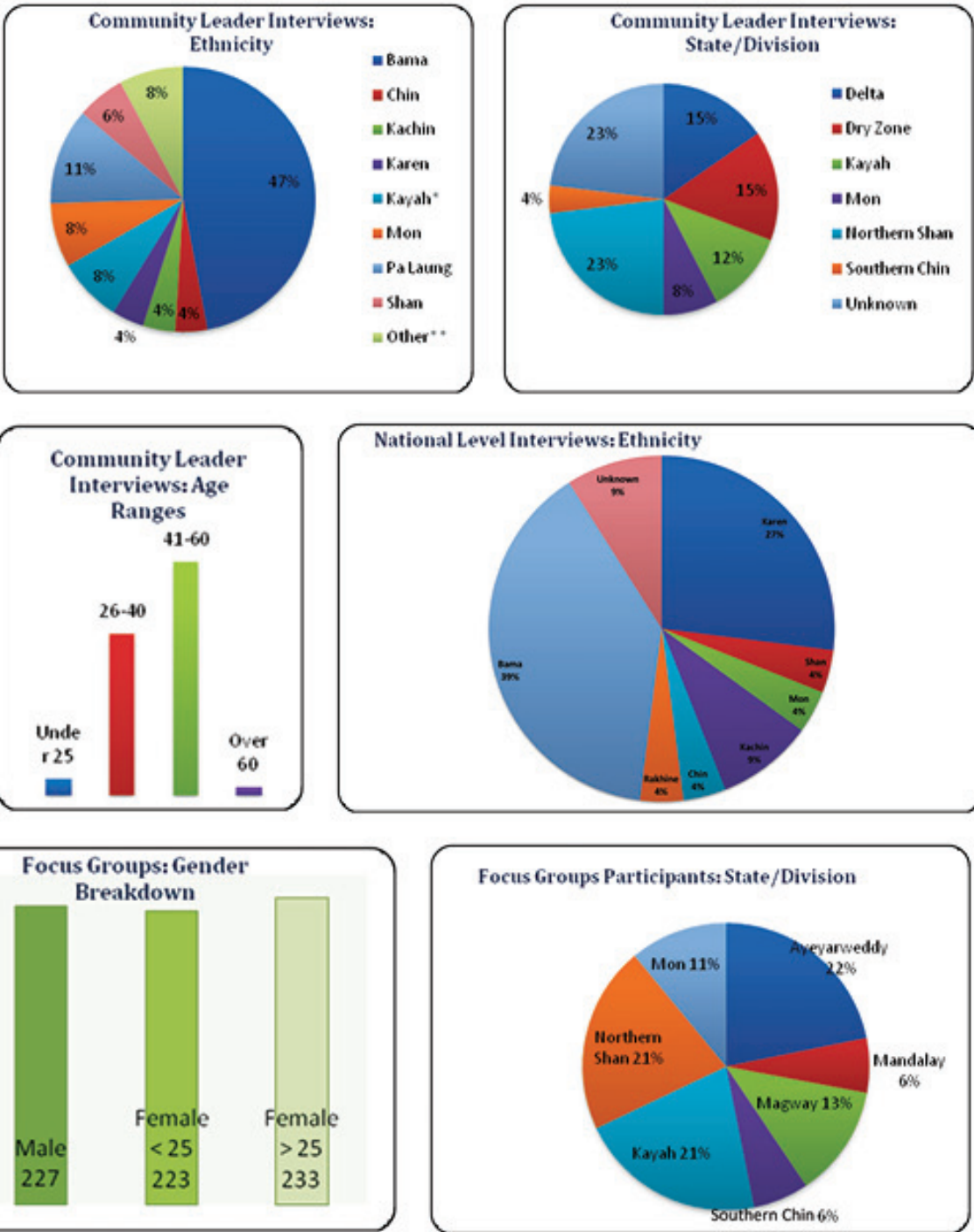


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3. Research Participant Demographics



## 4. Research Methodology & Theoretical Framework

The present study is an in-depth qualitative exploration into women and leadership. This exploration rests on an initial hypothesis that gendered norms may act as a significant barrier to women's participation in public life in Myanmar, and in particular, to taking on leadership roles. Gender norms are the expectations that a community or society have for how women and men should think and act. Gender norms are relational and are constructed socially over time. As a social phenomenon, gender norms do not operate in a vacuum, but rather are created and shaped in the public sphere, and thus affected by context, culture, poverty, wealth, power, education, and knowledge. Leadership itself is a social phenomenon - ideas about what leadership is, are also deeply shaped by context, culture, human interaction, and experience. As such these social constructs or representations, whilst appearing often resistant to change are never entirely static.

Social representations are forms of knowledge that are socially constructed, including values, ideas, and practices, which enable people to orientate themselves in their social world. This includes local or cultural constructions of gender and gendered identities. Social Representations theory enables us to view norms and identities as continually in the making, thus providing a theoretical space in which to consider ways that gender roles and ideas about leadership might be transformed and contested (Campbell, 2012). A social psychological approach, in particular social representations theory, thus provides a valuable theoretical framework for this study.

For an exploratory study such as this, qualitative methods are useful to enable a deep and thorough investigation. They facilitate a comprehensive exploration of a range of voices, and permit the emergence of a variety of points of view.

In-depth interviews were conducted with women leaders in the community, complemented by examples of women who are currently leading in Myanmar's political, business, and non-profit sectors. Factors that have brought these women to leadership positions; what it means to them to be a leader; their experiences in the role; and the constraints or challenges they face were explored.

This study also explored different understandings and interpretations of leadership and role models, by members of various communities. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to explore these issues with community members from villages and townships in seven states/regions across Myanmar.

### Research tool development & a note on language

A comprehensive research guide and all research tools were developed in English by the consultant, following an extensive literature review, including reviews of recent participatory research efforts in Myanmar and in the region, as well as internationally. All research tools, once developed were peer reviewed by national and international research, gender, and development professionals within Myanmar and beyond (Australia, Thailand, and the UK). A full copy of the research guide is available on request.

The Research Management Team (RMT) worked with translators to translate all guides, tools, and ethical consent forms into Myanmar. Interviews and focus groups were conducted across Myanmar in many states and regions where Myanmar is not the commonly spoken language. All tools, consent forms and interview guides were again translated into the locally appropriate language, and phrasing of the questions was reviewed by local researchers with the support of the RMT, to ensure that concepts and vocabulary contained the same meanings as originally intended when translated. Wherever possible locally appropriate phrasing was considered and used.



Finally all tools were pilot tested, and put under the scrutiny of the Myanmar Department of Medical Research Ethics Review Committee for ethical consideration, and technical soundness.

### Ethical Considerations

The following international codes of ethics were considered in the preparation of this study: WHO, RESPECT & CESSDA (Council of European Social Science Data Archives), and the BPS Code of ethics and conduct. Informed consent forms were adapted according to WHO guidelines for both interview and focus group participants; additionally photo release / consent forms were developed. All forms were translated into Myanmar, or where necessary into local languages.

A section on the data gatherer training course specifically featured using the forms, seeking informed consent and dealing with difficult issues around confidentiality and participant safety.

In accordance with international standards, all data once captured, was labelled using an ID archiving system which ensured that names, location, and identifiable characteristics were kept undisclosed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

All data, including tape recordings, was kept in a locked cupboard in the field offices until fully transcribed (within a week of research activity). They were then transported to Oxfam Yangon, where they are securely archived.

### The Research Team

The research team was composed of a Research Management Team (RMT), data gatherers, and translators. The RMT was made up of four international and five Myanmar staff members (two representatives from each of the four INGOs who commissioned the study, and an international consultant who specialises in gender and research, and who is based in Myanmar). The data gatherers were national consultants with experience in leading qualitative interviews and with knowledge of gender, and INGO program partners. In total 35 data gatherers were recruited.

A specially devised five day training focusing on qualitative research methods was arranged for all data gatherers, and held in Yangon. Detailed guides and learning resources were provided for all data gatherers. The purpose of these guides was to ensure everyone involved understood the research and that participation in the research process was a valuable learning experience for the data gatherers themselves. Importantly, the training and guides were essential in ensuring that data gatherers were confident in handling the research materials, vital for the wellbeing of participants and success of the data gathering exercises. Pre and post training questionnaires were devised and administered to chart learning to this effect.

### Sampling & Respondents – Geographical Scope of the Study

The research was conducted in 7 States /Regions, covering 13 townships and 32 villages.

96 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 52 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were held at community level. An additional 21 interviews with women leaders in business, politics and not-for-profit sectors were held in Yangon & Nay Pyi Taw. **Total sample size** – 756 participants: 73 women respondents and 683 focus group participants, of whom 456 were women and 227 were men.

**Sampling limitations** – A qualitative study is concerned with developing a depth rather than breadth of knowledge and understanding in contrast to quantitative studies. Sample sizes are necessarily small to permit adequate and thorough analysis of findings. Sample sizes across national level categories of interviewees in particular are small, and therefore this research does not claim to offer a general representation of the situation or options of all women involved in politics, business, or social / development activities in Myanmar. However the sampling strategy where possible aimed to capture as diverse a range of voices as possible from each field, in order to give some indications of possible themes and trends that may extend beyond this small sample.

The size of the sample at community level on the other hand was significantly larger than is commonly used for qualitative studies. The reason for this larger sample size was based on lessons learnt from previous studies. Previous qualitative research studies on gender issues in Myanmar have come across serious methodological barriers and challenges regarding data collection quality, partly due to lack of investment in research skills training and a culture of silence enforced by the political situation of the recent past. Two attempts were made to overcome previous challenges: 1) A thorough training program was developed for all data gatherers which focused on practical sessions, and role playing of conducting interviews and focus groups, both in the training setting, and in the field as research tools were piloted, and 2) To account for the fact that there was a potential for the training to have been insufficient for all the data gatherers recruited, supervisors were appointed to monitor data gathering in the field, but additionally a larger sample size was considered prudent. Limiting the sample size at community level increased the risk of having incomplete data returned to the research team if some of the data gatherers were not fully confident with the techniques or sufficiently experienced to manage the interviews and focus groups as requested. The return of a rich data set however, which was sufficiently large and varied to make up for some examples of inadequate questioning / omissions, and lack of probing, highlighted that this approach whilst unconventional was beneficial in this situation.

### **Interviews – Sampling & Selection Approach**

At community level, prior to selection of respondents it was important to prepare the village or township by announcing the intention to undertake the research through the local community development meetings or other locally appropriate avenues, and if necessary to inform and seek permission from the local authorities. In addition to informing local authorities, the RMT informed the Department of Social Welfare of the intention to undertake the research, as well as relevant networks in Yangon.

At community level, respondents were selected using a purposive approach. Working with local partners and community groups, respondents were selected who matched the pre-determined inclusion / exclusion criteria. If there were several women leaders who matched the inclusion criteria, those who seemed most articulate and outspoken were selected.

To identify women respondents from national NGOs, a snowball method was used. The intention to undertake the study was announced at the Gender Equality Network monthly meeting. Following this announcement and working with various women's networks, 20 nominations of women leaders were put forward for interview. Using a diversity sampling approach the RMT selected the final 8 candidates for interview. A similar network of contacts was approached, including the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association to nominate women leaders in business and entrepreneurs for interview. Six of ten business leaders approached were available for interview. The Register of Parliamentarians was used to identify female parliamentarians. Based on the selection



criteria the RMT then made the final decision on the parliamentarians to interview. Final selection was restricted by availability of the parliamentarians and desire to participate in the study. Seven of ten parliamentarians approached were available for interview.

Respondent Categories	Inclusion Criteria
Women leaders in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women who participate in decision making (for example, sitting on a Village Development committee, lead a women's group or sit on a board and contribute to decision making)</li> <li>• Women entrepreneurs (or leaders in business in the community)</li> <li>• Women mobilisers of other women, or people, for women's rights &amp; community development</li> <li>• Perceived by others to be a leader</li> </ul>
Women Leaders of National NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women mobilisers of other women, or people, for women's rights, or, for community or national development</li> <li>• Perceived by others to be a leader (other people's perceptions of what it is to be a leader)</li> </ul>
Women leaders in Business/entrepreneurs	<p>A business woman who is running a private enterprise and tries to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• create job opportunities for women</li> <li>• improve working conditions for women</li> <li>• mentor other women to do business</li> <li>• utilise profits of her enterprise for women</li> <li>• perceived by others to be a leader in business</li> </ul>
Women Parliamentarians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women Parliamentarians who represent the geographical research areas</li> <li>• Women mobilisers of other women, or people, for women's rights, or, for national development</li> </ul>

**Table 1: IDI Respondent Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria**

### **A note on the subjectivity of the notion of Leadership**

It was important to remember that the women interviewed may not have automatically considered themselves to be leaders. Respondents were selected based on a specific set of inclusion criteria that was left purposefully broad enough to get a diverse cross section of respondents.

### **Focus Groups – Sampling & Selection Approach**

For the purposes of this study focus groups were conducted with three different categories of respondents:

- Women members of the community, aged 16-25
- Women members of the community, aged 26 and above
- Men members of the community, mixed age groups

Focus groups were held in communities across Myanmar (see Figure 1). Each focus group (FG) contained no more than 8 participants. To avoid problems associated with over stratification of qualitative data sets, whilst aiming to capture a broad range of perspectives, FG categories were limited to three groups. Age was considered an important variable for consideration across groups of women, however limiting the groups to 16-25 and over 26, meant that the older category of women community members tended to be composed of wider range of ages, perspectives and viewpoints.

#### **Inclusion Criteria for selecting focus group participants:**

- Not currently in leadership positions themselves (for example, not leading organisations in the community or sitting on the executive committee or board of a village development committee)
- Not a village elder
- Not a member of government or local authority
- Fit the age/sex categories of the focus group
- Resident, not visitor of the community
- Willing to discuss leadership
- Have 2 hours to spare

Random sampling methods were used for selecting participants. A guide for data gatherers was to select a point in the research area arbitrarily, or by starting from a central point in the community. Data gatherers then visited every 5th house in the village / ward / research area, and sought participants who met the desired criteria. If there was no one at home, if no one was available to participate, or if house dwellers did not meet the criteria, the data gathers moved to the next house, and then proceed thereafter in the same fashion, moving on to the 5<sup>th</sup> next house. They continued in this way until they had recruited 8 participants.

#### **Learning about the Study**

All participants in the study process were ensured the opportunity to hear the results of the study through the dissemination of a briefing paper, and the organisation of community level meetings to share findings with the wider communities at large, if beneficial and desired.

#### **Beyond data gathering: Transcription, Translation, and, Analysis of data**

All data gatherers transcribed most interviews and focus groups verbatim within 24 hours of the interview having been conducted, and at most a week post-data gathering. Transcriptions were sent to Oxfam Myanmar Office in Yangon. An analysis team of four Myanmar specialists in translation and in gender were hired to support the consultant in the analysis of the data set. A training workshop was held in which the team were given a sample analysis and coding framework to work with, and instructions on what to look for in translating the data. The team provided an initial layer of analysis by way of translated summaries, including direct quotations from the transcripts. Translations were loaded onto pre-prepared excel spread sheets which the consultant then used for the final analysis. The approach used for the analysis was based on Attride-Sterling's (2000) thematic networks. A series of codes were extracted from the transcripts and grouped thematically.



