Women and Leadership in Myanmar

This study reveals that Myanmar women typically face a myriad of obstacles to becoming leaders. Despite this, a small number of women are leading in all realms of society, skillfully demonstrating that women have leadership capacity.

Context for women’s participation and leadership in Myanmar

Myanmar is a country in transition. Unforeseen political, economic and social reforms and an unprecedented ‘opening up’ have paved the way for significant change. The launch of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NSPAWM) by the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in October 2013 has the objective to enable systems, structures and practices for upgrading the status of women, and ensuring the equal rights of all people in Myanmar. The Government is also moving forward with the development of an anti-violence against women law. These are very positive steps forward and signal that political actors and institutions are willing to address the power imbalance between women and men in Myanmar society.

Despite these significant changes much remains to be done. Gender inequality impacts upon women and girls across all ethnic, cultural, geographical, socio-economic and religious backgrounds. Poverty, livelihood and job opportunities, land use, education, health, HIV infection, trafficking, violence and sexual abuse are all areas of concern with significant gender dimensions. Integral to all these issues, is the profound under-representation of women in most areas of public and political life. Whilst the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar appointed its first woman minister in 2012, currently only 4.5% of seats in parliament are held by women. Across all sectors women are absent in senior decision making roles.

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. Not only does failing to include and empower women put the nation’s progress in jeopardy, it is also a denial of women’s rights, and ultimately, if left unaddressed gender inequality will be an obstacle to inclusive development and democracy.

Introduction and background to the research

This briefing paper presents key findings and conclusions from research into women and leadership that took place from November to December 2012. This research explored 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 developing policies and programmes. It seeks to add to the body of knowledge and existing research on this issue.

The research involved 756 participants including women leaders in business, in politics (parliamentarians), and in non-profit sectors (National NGOs) in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, along with women leaders in communities in Northern Shan, Southern Chin, Kayah and Mon States, and Magwe, Mandalay and the Ayeyarwady regions. A total of 96 Focus Group Discussions and 73 In-depth interviews were held across these research sites.

Findings

This research revealed common themes raised by national and community women leaders, as well as male and female community members. The research 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. These are as follows:

1. Leadership is defined by gender and culture

Leadership is culturally defined and shaped by the context, culture, human interaction and experience and, 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, in discussions with community leaders as well as male and female community members. Views on leadership as a male domain were well-defined and socially accepted. Leadership was interpreted using words that suggested autocratic attributes, such as “brave” and “strong”, rather than communal and empathetic attributes, such as “understanding” and “patience”.

2. The importance of understanding the diverse drivers behind women’s journeys to leadership

"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.”" - Myanmar Business Leader

Despite the many challenges, women are overcoming barriers in a variety of different ways in order to take up leadership positions. Some of the women leaders interviewed were deeply affected by early exposure to politics and injustice, and the desire to challenge prevailing inequalities. They viewed these injustices 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.

3. Norms and stereotypes block women’s involvement in leadership

Deeply rooted social stereotypes, norms, and gender discrimination act as barriers to women’s participation in public decision-making. These barriers are reinforced by persistent stereotypes – in particular the notion that males are more reliable and better at decision-making while women should be softly spoken and skilled at housekeeping.

4. Balancing home and work life responsibilities remains a significant barrier

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 and are judged by society according to how well they fulfill this role. Women community members, in particular, mentioned this as being a significant barrier to participation in community affairs or taking leadership roles.

“’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

5. Gender based violence affects women’s participation and leadership

The experience of gender based violence from males within the family and in the workplace, in the form of insults, mockery, harassment, physical and sexual assault, was reported by women consistently across all sectors. Violence or fear of violence are clear barriers to women’s participation in public life and to their assuming leadership roles.

6. Women’s role in contesting discrimination

There is a lack of public debate about the role/right of women to be leaders as well as a lack of champions amongst women leaders themselves to contest discrimination, which means that the space for women’s leadership is not expanding as it could and should.

7. Recognizing gender equity as a legitimate struggle

The failure to recognize gender equity as an issue in its own right and as an essential component to achieving inclusive and sustainable peace, development and democracy, limits opportunities for the genuine progress of Myanmar.

“’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.”’ - Community Member, Magwe

8. The importance of supporting future women leaders

Courage and determination are required for women to succeed in male dominated environments and positions. What helps are supportive families, particularly husbands who encourage and assist women. Support of other women is an important factor, as are role models and champions at all levels to promote and motivate women to lead.
These findings collectively illustrate that women continue to face multiple significant barriers to leadership. At the same
time, women’s experiences of leadership also signal that there are opportunities and spaces for women to step into leadership roles. Role models and champions are key for encouraging women and specific policies and interventions are needed to promote and secure the increased participation of women in decision making positions and greater rights of women in Myanmar society. It is clear that both women and men must be supported to understand the very real benefits for them and their whole communities from increasing women’s involvement as leaders and decision makers in community affairs.

**Recommendations**

The research findings have significant implications for programming and policy implementation by both state and non-state actors. Collaborative efforts from the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, civil society, the media, business and the international community are required to comprehensively address the challenges related to gender inequality 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 as outlined below:

**1. Laws, policies and political processes**

Make fully operational the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 through the allocation of sufficient budget, human and material resources by designated focal ministries.

Ensure women’s rights are at the heart of key policy processes such as the development of the medium term plan, the National Comprehensive Development Plan (NCDP), and 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 related to women’s leadership and participation. It is also imperative to include women in all peace negotiations to ensure women’s perspectives are heard.

Proposed legislative reform to develop an anti-violence against women law to tackle violence and harassment should be supported and the implementation of the law, in terms of enforcement, legal mechanisms and support services monitored and resourced. Gender equality laws, as well as gender responsive policies, are required in order to provide equality in the workplace and prohibit harassment.

**Affirmative action**, such as quotas (at least 30%) for key positions in local and national administration, government commissions/committees, and in parliament will provide opportunities for women to be represented in decision making. Political parties should commit to quotas for women candidates in winnable seats. Such measures must be coupled with adequate training, resources and support for women, and innovative public awareness campaigns.

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

Conduct comprehensive public awareness raising campaigns to tackle social and cultural norms that discriminate against women’s right to be leaders. These include: exposing discriminatory attitudes and practices that result in the 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.

Support women leaders to be role models 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.

Engage men to challenge negative masculinities and stereotypes and to reflect on the role and work of women and the importance of women’s leadership; promote male role models who support women’s participation and leadership and who condemn the use of violence against women.

Use **gender sensitive language** so that there is no automatic implication that certain positions or opportunities are intrinsically for men.

Address inherent gender stereotyping in formal education which perpetuates discrimination and inequality between female and male students. The Education Sectoral Review is one opportunity to tackle discrimination and include girls’ and women’s rights and the positive portrayal of women.
as strong leaders in the school curriculum. Remove discriminatory practices that restrict opportunities for women such as different entry requirements for women and men for some university courses.

Utilise the media’s 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.

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 is required in order for women to take on and fulfil leadership roles. This must be accompanied by innovative strategies to link women with other women and to reinforce opportunities for mentoring, guidance and solidarity. This may be achievable, for example, through linking women who have attended a training course with an internship programme, or forming networks of women leaders willing to act as mentors.

Exchange visits should be supported between women’s groups from different communities and villages to enable sharing of 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.

Conclusion

Women’s lack of representation in leadership at all levels of Myanmar society is a strong indicator of gender inequality. Ensuring that NSPAW is successfully implemented will provide a significant opportunity to mobilise commitment and resources across ministries, particularly the Ministries of Finance and Planning, to make gender equality a priority. Moreover, women’s rights need to 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. The general election planned for 2015 provides a valuable opportunity for government and political parties in particular to promote women’s leadership. These processes and their results will shape the future strategic direction of Myanmar.

Women comprise 50% of the population and are a critical resource for the nation’s development. In attending to women’s rights and needs, and in ensuring a rightful place for women in leadership and decision making, the Government will be in a strong position to truly achieve genuine long-lasting inclusive peace and development for all the people in Myanmar.

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1. National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022, Government of the Republic 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.


3. 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. If Given the Chance: Women’s Participation in Public Life in Myanmar (2011). Oxfam, CARE, and Action Aid: Yangon, Myanmar

4. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security clearly identifies the need for women’s participation and involvement in peace processes.