

1 Gender & Economy



Ideas, expectations, and rules based on gender play a major role in governing men and women's behaviour and opportunities. However, in Myanmar, gender inequality has not historically been acknowledged as an issue of concern. [Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices, and Gender Equality in Myanmar](#), illustrates how social and cultural norms carry ideas about different roles and worth for men and women that impact their ability to live full and productive lives. The report examines historical narratives and contemporary cultural and religious views of women in Myanmar, and describes in detail stereotypes and perceptions of women across various sectors. The study is based on data gathered from 543 women and men in seven States and four Regions of Myanmar between September 2013 and May 2014.

This special interest brief highlights some of the key gender issues within [economy](#), work and livelihoods. Other special interest briefs in the series include sport, education, the media, and health. The Full Report and Summary Research Papers are available from www.raisethecurtain.org.




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RAISING THE CURTAIN:


Cultural Norms, Social Practices and
Gender Equality in Myanmar

Gender in Economy, Work & Livelihoods



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

- KII with Hindu Religious Leader



Gendered Division of Labour

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

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

FGD with men 18-25, Madupi Township

Norms that brand certain tasks as male and others as female have long-standing roots. Across communities, the gender division of labour is discussed as historically linked to ways of ensuring survival. With regards to domestic work, women's value on the 'marriage market' is gauged by how well they perform housework. Among women living with in-laws, there were reports of having to work significantly harder in order to gain acceptance in the new household.

One of the most central gender norms in relation to work is that of the male breadwinner and household leader. This strong norm, justified with social, cultural, religious, and economic arguments, was most often exemplified through the proverb: 'The sun doesn't rise with the hen's crowing; only when the cock crows the sun will rise'.

A man's perceived strength, bravery and tenacity are held up against the perception that a woman lacks these qualities. Housework for women is often described as a duty, a must, and a consequence of men's opposite role in working outside. According to gender norms, men handle social communications and generally represent the family in community matters, while women manage the household finances - traditionally seen as earned by the man. Practices such as listing married women as dependents on family registration cards - regardless of whether they hold professional positions - reinforce the stereotype of the male breadwinner and contribute to women's continued subordination within the family.

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

KII with Mon Woman Leader

Despite discussions of the need for, and complementarity of, both men's and women's work, there is no mistaking that men's work is perceived to be more valuable.

A woman is considered a good woman only if she is skillful at doing housework. This notion nowadays is becoming less serious. In the tradition of Chin ethnicity, household leaders are men. However, Chin women usually support the family by doing traditional weaving. But such jobs are not considered by men as real jobs. Only the income generated by husbands is recognized as the main income and wives' are regarded as dependents. Only the husbands are considered as bread winners, while both husbands and wives have to earn money.

KII with Chin Woman Leader

The physical strength required to do men's jobs are often cited as the reason for these perceptions, whereas the lesser value placed on women's work is often linked to the fact that housework brings neither status nor income. When asked about their own experiences and feelings on taking on jobs normally considered to be the task of the opposite sex, community members reported that families and communities would react with criticism, pity, and ridicule, suggesting traditional gendered division of labour still carries much weight.

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

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

Old Norms in Changing Contexts: Women in the Workforce

According to available labour force data, women's share in paid non-agricultural employment has gradually increased, but remains relatively low – reflecting the importance of the agricultural sector for women and their limited access to work in the industrial and services sector.¹ However one of the strongest findings from this study was the perceived increase in women's paid work. This was seen as a necessity for families to make ends meet in the face of what was overwhelmingly described as a deteriorating economic situation. While there was little overt resistance to women's earning as a contribution to the family income, the impacts of these new labour roles proved varied and complex.

Women typically explain work outside the household as required by unprecedented economic hardship or a husband's insufficient salary. Such justifications serve to uphold the ideal of the breadwinning male by describing women as secondary or complementary income earners, regardless of the size of their contribution.

1. Asian Development Bank (2012). Myanmar: Interim Country Partnership Strategy (2012-2014), October 2012; International Labour Organization. (2012). Decent Work in Myanmar: ILO Programme Framework, November 2012 – April 2014, ILO November 2012.

Though equal pay for equal work is guaranteed in the 2008 Constitution, unequal wages for men and women's work were recorded in all study areas. Gender norms around economy and work also impact on access to and control over material resources beyond wages. Barriers to obtaining loans and credit, especially for unmarried or widowed women, and the lack of women's rights to inheritance in some communities, poses serious problems for women's livelihood opportunities.

The reported increase in women working outside the home has not been accompanied by increased male responsibility for household work. The double burden of productive and reproductive work may be one reason why women did not typically regard their income-earning activities as a sign of gender equality. Rather, they tended to describe a situation of increased overall workload:

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

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

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

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

Male community members more often described being pleased with the current division of labour compared to female study participants, though conversations also revealed that pressure on men to conform to traditional expectations of breadwinners and leaders in changing circumstances can result in male frustration, and contribute to drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Women more often tended to describe their situations as being overburdened, a situation sometimes exacerbated by men's use of drugs and alcohol.

Navigating Occupational Opportunities

Both women and men are steered in their occupational choices by what is regarded by society as gender appropriate. For men, conforming to gender norms means aiming for jobs that can generate high incomes. Some study participants noted that this could become a hindrance for men when trying to find a job that would earn them social recognition.

For women, jobs that require working late, especially alongside men, travelling alone, or remote postings are seen to challenge gender norms; thus women are socialized to avoid those occupations. It was also common to hear stories of women who more or less consciously restrict their occupational choices to conform to social values. Such self-restrictions can also be understood in the context of a valued female behaviour pattern, especially when it involves sacrificing for one's family.

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

KII with Culture Official

Among study participants from urban areas and women working in professional roles, discussions concerned women's unfulfilled dreams and potentials:

How do I feel? Well, since I was young, I was eager to learn and I had aims, but when I got married, my aims were not fulfilled. My husband wanted me to put the children first, so I had to forfeit all the aims I've had. In my mind I'm always thinking that I could have been a lecturer, an MSc qualified candidate. I could be someone important outside, but all those chances are lost, doing chores at home; I always have that feeling. However, my friends encouraged me for having such beautiful children and that was that. I'm also pleased and happy. We have no choice, so I have to do my best accepting both good and bad consequences.

FGD with Muslim women aged 40 and above, Mingalartaungnyunt Township

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FGD with Muslim women aged 40 and above, Mingalartaungnyunt Township

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

KII with Education Practitioner, Yangon

Even if women perform well at work, they face difficulties in achieving top positions as this challenges norms of male leadership. Until recently, women have been formally barred from certain occupations and positions, for example, pilots and most military posts. There are many areas in which women continue to struggle for opportunities even though there are no formal constraints on their promotion. This inability to advance to higher positions is sometimes known as the 'glass ceiling'.

To tell the truth, it's still difficult for women to reach a decision-maker level at work and it's more difficult in society. The impact of society is bigger than that of law. In regard to laws, I have some examples. Women are not prevented by law from becoming a member of parliament. But the

social impact on women is worse than a law, for example, a saying says: 'It's a woman who can ruin her own country'. When legal discrimination is compared with social discrimination, the latter one is worse...

KII with Female Author

For women, most norms restricting their occupational choices can be traced back to the value placed on virginity and modesty. The most stigmatized occupations are those where the women's chastity and modesty are compromised. Among study participants, it was mostly those belonging to the societal elite who most strongly expressed distaste at what they considered culturally inappropriate work for women.

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

KII with Education Official

Gender norms around appropriate work for women and men are even more powerfully interlinked with the age hierarchies that are a strong feature of Myanmar society. For girls and young women, the most common work opportunities discussed among study participants were factory work, domestic work, and work at karaoke bars. In all of these settings, being young and female puts girls at increased risk of exploitation. Lack of comprehensive and appropriate national laws and policies on labour rights and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as an absence of work contracts, withholding of salaries, unsafe working environments, and sexual exploitation, are among the potential threats to young female employees.

Changing Economic Times & Women's Work as Emancipatory?

The effects of employment must be approached contextually. There are several indications that Myanmar will embark upon an export-oriented development path through the promotion of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). The recent removal of economic and trade sanctions, coupled with the passing of the Foreign Investment Law (2012), is bringing substantial investment to the country. Given the experiences from other countries in the Southeast Asian region, it can be expected that the primary stages of export-orientation will involve a feminization of the workforce.² Whether this is beneficial for women's agency, bargaining power, and broader gender equality struggles is, however, much debated. Several key areas of legislation pertaining to women and the labour market are still pending, including minimum conditions of work, occupational safety and health, and gender equality.

Steps to Transform Inequitable Norms in Economy, Work & Livelihoods

Some of the clearest examples of the material implications of cultural norms can be found in the area of work, livelihoods, and the economy; namely those that award men and women different wages, as labour inputs are differently valued. It is important to address such practices through regulation of laws and policies, with monitoring for compliance and sanctions if employers continue to discriminate. While the labour market remains precarious for both men and women in Myanmar, women are often found in work that is both unregulated and isolated, which makes women workers particularly vulnerable to abuse. Greater equality of opportunity and remuneration are needed to change this.

2. Caraway, T. L. (2007). *Assembling women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Specific recommendations for increasing gender equality in economy, work & livelihoods include:


- Ensure labour laws and policies include provisions of equal opportunities for employment (regardless of sex, gender identity, age or marital status) and equal wages. Impose sanctions on employers who do not live up to these standards.
- Improve workers' rights and conditions in factory work, bearing in mind the largely young and female workforce, the unhealthy work conditions, safety at work concerns, and lack of security of employment.
- Strengthen the linkages and cooperation between labour unions and the women's rights movement.
- Improve labour rights and standards for women in unregulated and secluded work environments such as karaoke bars and in domestic work.
- Expand childcare facilities to ensure women who carry out the majority of reproductive work are not structurally discriminated from participating in the labour market.
- Abolish practices that continue to reproduce the idea of women's work as less valuable than men's work, such as listing women as dependents on family registration cards.
- Review existing and proposed labour regulation. Policy makers, programmers, activists, and unions should address structural issues that contribute to gender inequality, including norms that result in gendered separation of activities and unequal valuing of tasks.



Take Action to Advance Gender Equality

- Challenge donors, policy makers, businesses, unions, and development organizations to commit to gender equality in a practical and meaningful way. Highlight the deep roots and far reaching impacts of gender inequality and advocate for the use of a gendered lens on all developmental issues.
- Re-frame gender equality from a 'women's issue' to an issue of political advancement and democracy for all.
- Broaden the base in gender equality work from the circles of current activists, and engage men and women of different socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, ethnicities, locations, sexualities and abilities.
- Begin discussions of gender inequality around tangible and specific issues in peoples' lives. Look at the impact at both individual and collective levels.
- Work towards re-claiming and re-valuing cultural and religious texts that promote an attitude of questioning and exploration rather than blind following, and those that have to do with social responsibilities. Use cultural and religious frameworks to advance a gender equality agenda.
- Be aware of culturally accepted forms of address and interaction. Approach change through constructive dialogue rather than through confrontation.
- Be practical and issue based. Address the issue of 'how to' in the work towards mainstreaming gender.



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- Equip yourself with up-to-date and reliable information about gender issues in different sectors, and be ready to provide concrete information in order to be taken seriously.
 - Identify and target the ‘agents of change’ in a given situation, for example, people with gender awareness and inside knowledge of a particular field; power holders with a sympathetic ear; teachers, health care personnel; religious leaders; journalists; parents, children and friends.
 - Reflect on the gendered aspects of norms that influence you in your own life and begin to make change happen there, not just in your professional role.

The Gender Equality Network is a diverse and inclusive network of Civil Society Organisations, INGOS, and technical resource persons working to facilitate the development and implementation of enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realisation of women’s rights in Myanmar. To find out more about GEN, take a look at our facebook <https://www.facebook.com/genmyanmar> or email gen.myanmar@gmail.com



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