

Gender Equality and Cultural Norms in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar is giving increasing attention to *gender inequality* as an impediment to the development and attainment of human rights especially women's rights. Realizing the close inter-relationship between gender equality and cultural norms, a qualitative research study, "*Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar*" was undertaken with the objective of furthering the understanding of social and cultural norms in Myanmar and their impact for men and women in relation to family and community life, work, health and education. The study was implemented in May 2014 covering 543 women and men participants covering seven States and four Regions in Myanmar.

This study illustrates that cultural norms and related social practices impact men and women throughout their lifespan, from the most deeply personal – the sense of self, body, confidence, love and marriage - to the practical organization and valuing of paid and unpaid work; education opportunities; health status and services; participation in community development and the affairs of the nation. Furthermore, it shows how social and cultural norms carry ideas of different functions and worth for men and women, impacting on their life opportunities. Women, regarded as 'bearers and protectors of culture', are often blamed for what are seen as disappearing cultural values and this can be a barrier to the realization of women's rights and gender equality.

Some salient recommendations from the study include i) using gendered lens on all developmental issues; ii) re-framing gender equality from being seen as a 'women's issue' to an issue of political advancement, human rights and democracy; iii) broaden the base in gender equality work from the circles of current activists, and engage people of different sexes, socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, ethnicities, locations and abilities; iv) focus on gender inequality around concrete issues in peoples' lives that have impact at both individual, collective levels.

Key words: Gender equality, cultural norms, social norms, human rights, women's rights, Myanmar

Introduction

Myanmar is giving increasing attention to gender inequality as an impediment to development and the attainment of human rights. The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has acceded to the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). Through the *National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women*

(NSPAW) 2013 – 2022, the Government has signaled its commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of women in Myanmar through the creation of enabling systems, structures and practices. There is increasing momentum within civil society networks and organisations to promote programming and advocacy for women’s rights and gender equality.

Realizing the close inter-relationship between gender equality and cultural norms, a qualitative research study on *“Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar”* was conceived and coordinated by the Gender Equality Network (GEN), an active inter-agency network, comprising over 100 national and international non-government organizations, civil society organizations and networks, and technical resource persons. The study was undertaken with the objective of furthering the understanding of social and cultural norms in Myanmar and their impact for men and women in relation to family and community life, work, health and education and to inform programmes and policies about underlying norms that impact upon the attainment of gender equality.

The study illustrates that cultural norms and related social practices impact men and women throughout their lifespan and in every aspect of their lives, from the most deeply personal – the sense of self, body, confidence, love and marriage - to the practical organisation and valuing of paid and unpaid work; education opportunities; health status and services; participation in community development and the affairs of the nation; and much more.

The cultural norm that consider women as ‘protectors of a culture,’ acts as a barrier to the realization of women’s rights. Gender norms have rarely been aired and debated until now. Discussions with study participants show that while norms, including those that prevent women’s enjoyment of human rights, have proven remarkably stable in Myanmar, many are now undergoing incremental change. One of the barriers to changing norms is the lack of data and information to link normative ideals to structural discrimination. This study makes an important contribution in opening up this debate, however, more detailed studies, as well as awareness-raising, systematic gender analysis of laws, policies, and budgets, and sex-disaggregated data in all fields, are needed.

Civil society networks of women’s and gender organizations, formed over the past several years, are also increasingly directing their efforts to programming and advocacy for women’s rights and gender equality. Sexuality, men’s violence against women, women’s participation in decision-making in public and political life, including in peace-processes, are issues gaining attention. Media liberalization has also led to increasing public discussion on cultural norms and social practices, and their relationship with women’s status and gender equality. This is historically contested territory. A long standing discourse of (Burmese) women’s ‘traditional’ high status exists. This contrasts with observations throughout history, that critical turning points for the country have largely bypassed women’s needs.

Research Findings

This paper presents a summary of the findings from a qualitative study of social and cultural norms and their links to gender equality and inequality in Myanmar, carried out from November 2013-January 2014 in 11 states and regions of Myanmar. The study involved 543 study participants through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and media analysis.

The research maps how existing social and cultural norms influence the attainment of gender equality and women's rights in the study sites. It also explores norm evolution and change, how norms are reproduced and socialized, and what happens when people move beyond the boundaries of the accepted. The full report to be published in September 2015 also presents recommendations for action based on the study findings.

The study found that gender relations are deeply embedded within a cultural or religious 'coat' which has made it difficult to put gender inequality onto the public agenda. Deeply held views passed on over generations also mean that hierarchical gender relations have become internalized among both men and women, making them not only hard to see, but also very hard to question. The result, according to women's rights activists, has been that gender inequality claims are often brushed aside, denied or belittled.

The notion that Myanmar culture stands as a guarantor for gender equality is a stance that is still reproduced today. Recent scholarship on the reproduction of the historical notion of women's 'high status' has showed how elite women are amongst the strongest proponents of the view that women do not need to be empowered.

In addition, gender equality continues to be viewed as a marginal area in the ongoing democratization and development processes, and reliable sex disaggregated data and information on a sufficient scale is lacking. As a result, many of the internationally used gender equality indicators remain unknown for Myanmar. An additional area of confusion is whether gender equality should be understood in a purely legal sense (*de jure*) or if equality of outcome (*de facto*) should also be counted, as CEDAW.

Study participants expressed worries about cultural globalization, and fear the loss of traditional values. Women, who are largely regarded as bearers of culture are particularly scrutinized and criticized when 'failing' to conform to traditional norms. Together, this scenario continues to create barriers for women's rights advocates.

Myanmar is a multicultural society with extensive cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. While population figures are subject to dispute, some two thirds of the population are assumed to be Bamar Buddhists. Study participants consider religion, principally Buddhism, to yield strong influence over gender relations. The roots of constructing a Burmese Buddhist national culture run deep, and is found for example in the media's post-independence campaigns to 'resurrect' the country's 'lost' culture, and in current official texts, the need for preserving culture and traditions is often highlighted. Considering

the strength of the gender equality discourse within the Burmese historical narrative, there appeared to be a tendency to place practices of gender inequality among minority ethnic groups alone.

There is also widespread belief across the country and among different religious and ethnic groups that differential treatment of men and women originate in religious texts and is therefore justified. However gender equality advocates highlighted the cultural construction of religious practice including those that discriminate against women.

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

Cultural norms that prescribe decency, modesty and chastity (*eindray*) for women are amongst those that are most strongly expressed by study participants. A woman's virtue is gauged in no small part based on her ability to live up to these norms. In practice conforming to these norms would mean practicing sexual abstinence and refraining from co-habitation unless one is married. Moreover, modest behaviour is supposedly manifested through one's dress.

The idea of the male gaze as a judge of a woman's appearance and worth was a common theme in discussions with study participants, as was the norm that women's dress code should reflect their marital status. Male sexuality is key in this regard, and is understood as insatiable and uncontrollable. There is a clear conflict between norms that glorify men's sexual prowess as opposed to those that value chastity for women. Women are also expected to regulate their dress and appearance in order to protect themselves from sexual harassment and abuse.

The institution of marriage in Myanmar is much honoured and heralded as an important and stable foundation through which people are to organize their lives. While cultural norms prescribe life-long marriages, there are different expectations of how men and women handle difficulties and frustrations within marriage, and life in general. Men are often expected to find outlets for whatever frustration they may have in daily life by turning to alcohol, engaging in extra-marital sex or even through the use of violence. Women on the other hand are expected to silently endure hardship and present a brave front to the outside world.

People who break with social norms experience strong sanctions from society. The most commonly discussed instances of norm breaking have to do with what are seen as deviations in a woman's relationship to a man, which is supposed to be regulated through lifelong marriage.

In all of the study communities, widows were singled out as a particularly vulnerable group, subject to pity, ridicule and harassment, indeed often blamed for their situation. To a large extent this vulnerability

is linked to the norms of appropriate behaviour for a woman whose husband dies, norms she may no longer be able to live up to. Her social status diminishes, as does her economic status in many cases. Adding to this, widows are reportedly regarded as shameful and their bodily integrity is endangered. Many of the sexuality related norms, such as the value of chastity and modesty, re-appear in widowhood. Widows are not supposed to have a sex life or to be seen to want to remarry. Their dress, appearance and actions are placed under close community scrutiny, and the degree to which they can look to their fellow community members for support are highly conditioned on their ability to live up to these modesty-related norms.

Socialization of Gender Norms

The norms around what is seen as appropriate behaviour for girls and boys, and women and men, are taught and reinforced by the surrounding society. There are many important agents of socializing gender norms, including the family, the education system, authorities, social services, the healthcare system, literature and mass media, and religious leaders. Parents, siblings, grandparents and in-laws were mentioned as some of the most influential socializing agents in the lives of study participants, with both men and women playing a part in upholding patriarchal structures.

Women participants also discussed what they perceived to be a tendency among women to defend what they referred to as a 'men's culture. This could be, for example, excusing certain behaviour among boys, such as sexual harassment, with comments that only served to belittle the issues, such as 'boys will be boys'. In particular, gender equality practitioners saw the participation of women in socializing girls and boys in stereotypical ways as a major problem.

Gender specific norms and the separation of girls and boys become more pronounced as children are nearing puberty. The consequences for the future lives of boys and girls, due to being socialized in different ways, include aspects like self-confidence, assertiveness and sense of worth.

Religion and religious education were described as playing a large part in the daily lives of study participants. For this reason, religious texts as well as religious leaders were said to have important socializing influences on their lives, not just during formative years but continuing into adult life. Proverbs, literature, media and advertising are other important socializing agents with regards to gendered norms and stereotypes.

Observation of Cultural Changes

Many changes in social practices were observed in study communities across the country. These included changes in dress codes, social interaction, communication, information, openness, eating habits, technology, work and mobility patterns, as well as participation in public life. In a time of

profound social and political change it is perhaps not surprising that the response to change among communities is mixed and that changes are often met with caution or even resistance.

While the norms that guard women's dress, behaviour and actions are firmly in place, study participants noted a loosening up of certain social restrictions in women's lives, including increased mobility and social space. Changing work patterns were often referred to as a factor contributing to change, and as something that was opening up social space for women.

The changes observed were mostly described as tentative, slow and incremental, with bigger cities leading the way and smaller towns and rural communities lagging behind. Communities where awareness raising activities related to gender had taken place were described as beginning to warm to the idea of greater physical and social space for women. Women's space to have a say in matters concerning their lives was reportedly increasing. One such example given by study participants was decision-making in terms of entering and leaving a relationship. Still, it appears that there is a long way to go before communities accept men's and women's choices as equally valued.

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

Economy, Work and Livelihoods

Work and livelihood opportunities for men and women are strongly linked to gendered norms that steer perceptions of where women and men can be, what they can do, and when can they do it, it in order to be seen as 'good' and 'appropriate' women and men. A gendered division of labour was prominent in all of the study areas. The domains of work for men and women are typically positioned in opposition to each other. They include: hard work as opposed to easy or light work; inside work as opposed to outside work; and productive work as opposed to reproductive work. A man's perceived strength, bravery and tenacity is held up against the perception that a woman lacks these qualities. The idea that women should focus on reproductive work is largely taken for granted.

Reference to women as care takers of family members is linked to the fact that women give birth. House work for women is often described as a duty, a must and as a consequence of men's opposite role, in working outside.

The norms of the male breadwinner and household leader are central to understanding gender relations, and centre on the concept of *hpon*. Men's work is perceived to be more valuable, and the physical strength required to do men's jobs are often cited as the reason for these perceptions. The

lesser value placed on women's work, points to the fact that housework does not bring either status or income.

Community members are largely uncomfortable with taking on a task that is normally perceived to be the responsibility of the opposite sex, and negative community perceptions of crossing gender boundaries in work, strengthen this divide. The extent of the discomfort around breaking gender norms in terms of work reveals the unequal value placed on men's and women's work.

Women's increased income earning cannot automatically be assumed to be emancipatory, with poor and hazardous working conditions, firm glass ceilings to promotion or advancement, and the double burden of domestic and outside work, as reasons for concern. Social practices such as listing women as dependents on family registration cards reinforce the unequal valuing of men's and women's work. Among the material manifestations of the unequal value placed on men's and women's work, is a lopsided wage structure that favours men.

Education

Oftentimes when gender equality and education is discussed, issues around gender parity - the ratio of boy to girl students – take centre stage. In Myanmar, official aggregate figures – linked to reporting on Millennium Development Goal 3 - hold that relative gender parity in primary education has been achieved. Little is known, however, of gender parity and a range of other equity issues in specific local contexts. This in turn affects the potential scope of public debate about gender and education, and the understanding of how gender influences educational opportunities and experiences. At community level, the value of education for girls is measured against other goals such as job opportunities and marriage prospects, rather than being seen as a right in itself.

In this study, the education system emerged as one of the most powerful socializing agents with regards to gender norms. This takes place through educational materials and teachers.

Gender norms that are reproduced through the education system include those where boys and men are portrayed as: tough; externally oriented; breadwinners; focused on production; intelligent and responsible for national affairs. Girls, on the other hand are held up as the opposite of those characteristics: as quiet and well behaved; focused on reproduction; family oriented and modest. Vocational training continues this pattern of socialization as it prepares boys and girls for an equally gender segregated labour market.

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

The teaching profession is among the few available professional opportunities for women, especially outside of bigger cities. Being a teacher is a respected position, and one that allows women to have a professional career without having to risk breaking with gender norms. Education Specialists described how teachers, who may not have had many opportunities to question and explore gender norms, play an important part in the socialization of often stereotypical gender norms among the future generation.

Gender norms were believed to impact on school attendance, retention and performance. A positive change with regards to the importance attached to the education of girls was observed. However in several of the study communities, girls' education was described as lagging behind boys'. Internalized gender norms related to family obligations, impact on girls' decisions to drop-out. Threats of harassment and violence against girls (real or perceived), also impact on decision-making related to school retention. Importantly, improvements in infrastructure and perceived safety appear to have positive effects for girls' schooling.

Men's expected future leadership roles may favour them in education retention. Girls reportedly do better than boys at school due to their socialization, including norms of obedience and diligence. Educated men tend to have more opportunities for career advancement, whilst educated women are favoured for low paying jobs.

Health

Cultural norms impact heavily on women's opportunities for a healthy life. Such norms include those that: hold women's menstruation to be dirty; place high value on women's virginity; see women foremost as reproductive beings; hold sex to be a taboo topic; promote childbearing; discourage family planning; encourage women to sacrifice themselves for their families; and those that position women as inferior in the household setting and position the male as the head of household and principal decision-maker. Norms are socialized through peers, families, health educators and health care providers, and are in some cases underpinned by laws and policies related to health.

The impact of these norms include: limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly among unmarried women but also among men; justification of men's violence against women - including sexual violence - with reference to women's failure to conform to cultural and social norms; the reduction of women's health issues to maternal and child health concerns; women's continued inability to decide matters concerning their own bodies, and the marginalization and discrimination of women who do not conform to gendered norms.

Sport

In most communities included in the study, playing sport was not seen as appropriate for women, while it was seen as good and healthy for boys to engage in different sports. Men are encouraged to do sport as it is seen as enhancing their masculinity and is in keeping with the norms that hold men to be active, strong, muscular, and physical. Sports seen as appropriate for boys included playing cane ball (*chinlone*), watching cock-fighting and bull fighting, playing football, running and boxing. The few appropriate sporting options mentioned for women were bar aerobics, badminton, jumping rope, and dancing.

Football was seen as particularly unsuitable for women. The idea of women running and playing was seen as going against the norms of modest, quiet and composed behaviour referenced earlier in this study, with sayings such as 'A woman's step is worth a million coins', reinforcing the perceived value of a woman's gentleness, grace and modesty. Mixed teams in sport are seen to compromise modesty norms. Women are also dissuaded from participating in sport as it is believed that exercise can interfere with reproductive functions. These norms reinforce gendered stereotypes and create limiting boundaries around opportunities for boys and girls, and men and women, to engage in play and physical activities. However, the Southeast Asian games that took place in Myanmar in 2013 appeared to have had a positive effect on the view of women in sport, due to women's success in many events.

Media

The rapidly changing media environment, characterized by the removal of censorship and increased liberalization, reveals the firmness of cultural norms as boundaries are tested and crossed. This regards sexuality norms in particular. Media functions as an important bearer of norms and can be seen both as a reflection of society as well as an important actor in shaping public opinion and perceptions. The globalization of culture is generally met with skepticism, with women who appear in the media having to shoulder criticism when they fail to conform to traditional gender norms. On the other hand there is appreciation among women for the slightly increased range of roles for women that globalized media has brought.

Media largely perpetuates a victimized, objectified and sexualized view of women through the topics it covers and through the way it represents women and men. Print media was found to be elite oriented and highly male biased. Women are less visible in print media (20-30% of people portrayed are women). Fewer women are seen as sources, spokespersons and experts. Politics and economics are heavily male dominated while women are more represented in arts and culture. Women's magazines are reinforcing the view of women as reproductive beings, with norms of modesty taking centre stage.

With regards to sexual relations, women are usually depicted as sex objects, rather than as subjects, in women's magazines. However, this content is indirect rather than explicit. From a health perspective, it is positive that magazines contain columns where women can write and ask about illnesses, including sexual and reproductive health issues, that may otherwise be taboo to discuss in their everyday lives. Examples include replies to questions received from women about cervical cancer and breast cancer, to

name a few. However, more detailed discussions on sexual relations or sex education messages are absent from the mainstream women's magazines.

The media industry also presents narrow and stereotyped opportunities for women. Gender biased market demands are blamed for wage inequality in the media industry. Fewer opportunities for professional recognition and lack of encouragement to address gender issues through media were other important findings.

The lack of representation of women in important fields such as politics and business, the reproduction of gender stereotypes, victimization and victim blaming are some of the key issues that need to be addressed for media to become a positive force in the work for increased gender equality and to overcoming the negative socialization patterns that are currently taking place through mainstream media.

Highlights of Key Gender Issues across Multiple Sectors that have Implications for Policy and Programming

Education

The Ministry of Education's Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR, 2012-2014) calls for the development of education laws and policies to address gender inequalities. NSPAW acknowledges that research, policy, implementation and budgets are important to ensure the right to quality formal and non-formal education for girls and women, and stresses the need to eliminate customs, superstitions and beliefs that are obstacles to women's education. Such obstacles are often founded in gender stereotypes, particularly those that influence access, retention, and career opportunities.

This study finds that education is a powerful vehicle for perpetuating gender norms, and recommends increased engagement with teachers to break down inequitable stereotypes. Such initiatives need to be practical and take into consideration that social and cultural norms and values are deeply embedded within a person. Efforts directed at changing norms need to go hand-in-hand with opportunities for girls and boys to have different study/occupational choices in the everyday school environment.

Recommendations:

Engage male and female teachers in efforts to transform gender norms and stereotypes, and ensure gender awareness is included in teacher training in both formal and non-formal education.

- Ensure gender is mainstreamed in reforms of pre-service teacher education, and in reforms of teaching methods and content in both higher education and basic education.
- Give in-service teachers and community teachers the chance to discuss and reflect on gender norms, including deeply held norms at a personal level, and provide practical tools that they can use at school, using a peer education format.

- Review all teaching and learning materials with a gender lens. Ensure future education materials do not reinforce stereotypical gender norms but address boys, girls, men and women as equally able to participate in all spheres of life, with equal opportunities.

Ensure realistic opportunities for girls and boys to exercise different and non-stereotypical occupational/study choices.

- Challenge gender norms in non-formal education and vocational training by creating environments where everyone is able to choose according to interest or talent.
- Consider 'supply' and 'demand', so that choice of vocations that challenge gender norms can be practically applied in the labour market.
- Bring together a broad range of stakeholders, including education practitioners, employers, policy makers and students, for constructive dialogue and programming aiming to challenge gender norms in occupational choices.
- Give teachers the chance to make a difference. With fewer tasks, more teachers, different training materials, sufficient time, and autonomy, teachers will be able to play a key role in shifting stereotypical gender norms. Budget and instructions that focuses on this component are essential.

Ensure that the development of education laws and policies address gender inequalities as called for in the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR)

- Ensure the development of an overarching education law in line with the Government's international and national commitments such as CEDAW, Beijing Platform of Action and NSPAW.
- Develop a comprehensive, inclusive, national education policy, so that all children, youths, adults in Myanmar are able to enjoy their rights to a quality education, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social or economic status, geographical location, religion, disability, or other attributes.
- Ensure that gender is mainstreamed in the development of specific education policies such as inclusive education; non-formal education; and language of instruction.
- As called for in the NSPAW, ensure that research and surveys are collecting data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and location.
- Engage civil society in a comprehensive review of educational materials with the intention of producing school materials that are free from gender bias.

Health

Gendered norms tend to describe women's bodies as dirty or shameful, and equate women's health concerns with reproduction. This study found gaps in terms of access to, and enjoyment of, sexual and reproductive health and rights due to norms around virginity, bodily decision-making and sexuality as linked to marriage. While HIV prevention has broken down cultural barriers to sharing some information for the purposes of disease control, the same inroads have not been made for general sex education, resulting in gaps in critical health information. Women continue to have few opportunities to learn

about their bodies and to make informed decisions related to their sexual and reproductive life. NSPAW (2013-2022) emphasizes that research, policy, implementation and budgets are critical to ensuring women's and girls' right to quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health. Gender mainstreaming of all health policies and plans, as well as working with health personnel to build their comfort and capacity, are necessary to better serve women's health needs.

Recommendations:

- Conduct more research on women's health needs, including but not limited to maternal and child health.
- Raise awareness among men and women of sexual and reproductive health and rights with a view to promoting the acceptance of women's decision-making over their own bodies.
- Conduct research in health care settings on how cultural assumptions influence the way men and women are approached (including what is asked of women and men, what is not asked and how it is asked).
- Advance policies which focus on women's right to self-determination in matters concerning their bodies. Gender mainstreaming of community health plans and other policy documents is essential.
- Take advantage of the space created by HIV prevention activities to broaden awareness raising activities from a focus on disease control. Ensure sex education initiatives include sex, body image and integrity, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Make sure content is age and context appropriate.
- Create space for health care providers to discuss cultural norms and gender stereotypes that may influence how they engage with clients.
- Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services are not limited based on marital status or other factors.

Economy, Work and 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.

Recommendations:

- Ensure labour laws and policies include provisions of equal opportunities for employment (regardless of sex, gender identity, age or marital status) and equal wages. Provide sanctions for employers who do not live up to these standards.

International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies
Burma/Myanmar in Transition: Connectivity, Changes and Challenges

University Academic Service Centre (UNISERV), Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 24-25 July 2015

- 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, unions should address structural issues that contribute to gender inequality, including norms that result in gendered separation of activities and unequal valuing of tasks.

Media

Lack of representation of women in critical areas such as politics and business, reproduction of gender stereotypes, victimization and victim blaming are some of the key issues that need to be addressed for media to become a positive force in the work for increased gender equality. Working with journalists, editors and other groups of media professionals will be important strategies to overcome the negative socialization patterns that are currently taking place through mainstream media.

Recommendations:

- Provide gender training for journalists, editors and other media professionals. Avoiding stereotypes, victimization, and victim blaming of women are key issues that need to be addressed
- Raise awareness of the need for more visibility of women in media and more balanced representation of men and women in various capacities where women are currently underrepresented such as politics, and business.
- Explore the option of instituting an ombudsman function where sexist, misogynist representation of women in media can be tried.

Sport

The UN General Assembly Resolution 67/17 of 11 December 2012 emphasizes sport as a means to, among other things, promote education and health, and empower girls and women. The fact that women are discouraged from engaging in sports means that their opportunities for health promoting physical activity, recreation, team work, and fun are limited. Women have much to gain in terms of quality of life from being able to participate in sports on an equal footing with men. While women and sport were getting more attention than normal during the SEA games, it is important that the recognition of women in sport goes beyond competitive concerns, where results are valued as a sense of national pride, and that the individual's right to participate in sports is not limited based on gender.

Recommendations:

- The health and social benefits of sports for women and men, girls and boys, should be celebrated and explored. Male as well as female gender champions and role models in sport at national and local levels should be identified and supported to encourage their friends, families, and broader communities to ensure equal participation for women and men, girls and boys, in community level sporting activities.
- The Ministry of Sports should seek to promote women's involvement in all types of sports, and provide opportunities for athletic teams and training for women and girls.
- Media should continue to expand coverage of women in sports at local and national levels.

Conclusion

As Myanmar continues along the path of change, there are both hopeful and worrying trends from a gender equality perspective. The resistance to cultural globalization and the reactivation of a cultural protectionist stance in which women are cast as 'protectors of a culture' can be seen as a barrier to the realization of women's rights. The forceful clamping down on the few voices that do speak up against such a development is further testament to the strength of the patriarchal culture that claims its mission is women's protection but which leaves women with fewer opportunities to participate in shaping the society they would like to see.

Whether the opportunities brought by increased openness and liberalization will lead to economic improvement and empowerment for women remains to be seen. How labour market regulations come about, and to what extent labour rights are implemented, will be important determinants. To be sure, the emancipatory potential of work will also be influenced by the extent to which men will share the burden of reproductive work.

Women's increased organizing and strategizing for change are hopeful signs. As the evidence base increases, their work will be on an increasingly solid footing. Finally, men still need to come on board the agenda for change towards gender equality. Apart from a number of champions, this has not yet happened on a significant scale.