

# Promoting Women's Empowerment in Myanmar

Women have a critical role to play in the development of Myanmar, but they face a broad range of challenges including low skills, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate representation and participation in governance. In response, The Asia Foundation is committed to gender equality in its program in Myanmar and works with the government, civil society organizations, business associations, media, and international development partners to support women to maximize their full potential.



## ADDRESSING TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Trafficking is a significant problem in Myanmar, but there is little public knowledge and awareness or services for victims. The Asia Foundation has explored different approaches to address this issue, including partnering with the Karen Women Empowerment Group (KWEG) to provide accessible counseling services for victims of trafficking and gender violence. The Foundation also supported Colorful Girls, a Myanmar community-based organization, to develop a “Trafficking and Risky Migration” curriculum that was delivered to more than 1,500 girls from Kachin State, Yangon Region, Mandalay Region, and Sagaing Region. Colorful Girls also developed and distributed a 10-page cartoon booklet on the risks of trafficking, domestic violence, sexual harassment and forced labor.

In an innovative approach to increasing public knowledge on trafficking, in 2016 and 2017 the Foundation partnered with the Myanmar Library Association (MLA) to train 39 librarians across 10 townships in the states and regions of Yangon, Mandalay, Bago, Shan and Mon

on how to support at-risk, vulnerable young girls and boys by providing them with relevant information and helping them make informed decisions about labor migration. In 2017, the Foundation produced an updated and expanded “Trafficking and Risky Migration” handbook, the first ever of its kind in Myanmar, to be widely distributed through relevant government and civil society channels.

## ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

### WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS

In April 2017, The Asia Foundation and Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home), a women's empowerment organization released, *Women's Political Participation in Myanmar: Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011–2016*, a report that documents the experiences of the first generation female parliamentarians and comparative analysis with the second generation of MPs coming into their roles after the 2015 election. The report was presented to parliamentarians from the union and subnational levels, development partners, women's organizations, media, and other interested parties.



### MYANMAR

The Asia Foundation re-established a resident country office in Yangon in 2013 after an absence of more than 50 years.

The Foundation supported the development of a “Trafficking and Risky Migration” training module for nearly 1,500 girls from Kachin, Shan, and Mon States, and Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing, and Bago Regions.

The Foundation is supporting Charity-Oriented Myanmar to develop a Handbook on Key Women Rights in Myanmar in 2018.

Recognizing the need to strengthen women's ability to take part in Myanmar's political life, the Foundation partnered with Phan Tee Eain to conduct a survey and series of case studies on first generation female parliamentarians. In March 2015, the Foundation and Phan Tee Eain convened the first Women MPs Forum in Nay Pyi Taw, bringing together women MPs from Union and state and region parliaments. Workshop sessions facilitated discussions on the challenges common to women across the various parliamentary bodies and strategies to overcome them. The Foundation and Phan Tee Eain organized the second Women MPs Forum in Nay Pyi Taw in 2017, and the third Women MPs Forum will take place in 2018.

## GENDER IN SUBNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

One critical dimension of Myanmar's governance reform and development agenda is the importance of gender equality and awareness in government representation, civic engagement, and public services. The Asia Foundation issued an early report in 2014 examining Women's Participation in the Subnational Governance of Myanmar, followed in 2016 by a more detailed and action-oriented report *Gender (in) Equality in the Governance of Myanmar: Past, Present, and Potential Strategies for Change*. The research has informed the Foundation's work to promote gender equality in subnational governance by actively training and facilitating dialogue with state, regional, and municipal actors on ways to make government services more gender-responsive. This includes collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data to better inform decisions and policies, introducing gender considerations into the budgeting process, and ensuring public information is accessible for both men and women.

## RAISING AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

How gender is portrayed in children's books contribute to the perception children develop of gender roles in society. There is also a significant dearth of high quality children's books in local languages in Myanmar. As such, The Asia Foundation partnered with The Third Story Project, a social enterprise,

to publish two original children's books on gender equality targeting under-12 audiences. Written by a new generation of Myanmar writers and illustrators, the two books—*Thiri Goes to School* and *Super Hero*—were published in 2015 and 2016, and over 7,000 copies were distributed to local organizations and librarians across Myanmar. *Thiri Goes to School* is available in English, Burmese, Shan, and Rakhine languages, while *Super Hero* is available in English and Burmese.

Myanmar was one of the first countries in Asia to grant women the right to vote. Despite this early commitment, awareness of women's rights and laws is still very limited in the country. The Foundation is supporting Charity-Oriented Myanmar (COM), a Yangon-based civil society organization, to develop a *Handbook on Key Women Rights in Myanmar* in 2018. The handbook will bring together all existing laws and rights affecting women in Myanmar in an accessible format. The Foundation and COM will distribute the handbook widely to parliamentarians, political parties, and civil society organizations across the country.

## STRENGTHENING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Promoting equal economic opportunities for women is fundamental to Myanmar's successful transition to a more open and dynamic society. To this end, The Asia Foundation has been supporting the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association (MWEA) since 2012, to enhance its knowledge of critical issues affecting female entrepreneurs in Myanmar and across Asia. In 2012 and 2014, the Foundation supported MWEA members to attend the South Asia Women Entrepreneurs Symposium in Dhaka. The Foundation is also moving to establish a Myanmar Business Environment Index (MBEI) in 2018, which will identify the challenges facing the private sector at the subnational level. Gender considerations will be taken into account throughout the design and implementation of the initiative.

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*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*



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