

Women's Participation in Agricultural Value Chains

Background

The agricultural sector is the backbone of Myanmar's economy, with 70% of the population relying directly or indirectly on agricultural production for their livelihoods. Agriculture comprises approximately 27% of GDP¹, 20% of exports, and supports the livelihoods of around 50 % of the population.

Women make up around half of the agricultural workforce², yet their contribution is systematically overlooked and their voices under-represented. Traditional notions of farming in Myanmar most commonly consider farming as a male function, which stems from practices such as registering farm land under the name of the male head of household. As a result, training and support for smallholder farmers is predominantly directed towards men, ignoring the substantial number of females engaged in farming activities.

The DaNa Facility, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), provides grants and technical assistance to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and businesses aimed at improving the business environment in Myanmar. DaNa activities centre on three key sectors: agribusiness, financial services, and textiles that each embed cross-cutting initiatives on women's economic empowerment, conflict sensitivity, decent work, and social and environmental sustainability.

This case study explores the conditions experienced by women in different regions of Myanmar, and how DaNa-funded projects support women involved in agricultural production. The findings detailed in this study are based on in-depth interviews carried out with villagers from Shan State, Rakhine State, Magway, and Yangon Regions between May and June 2019.

Gender Norms and Cultural Practices in Myanmar: The Context in Project Areas

As in many countries, there are a number of gender norms that influence the role of women and their position in society. DaNa considers it imperative to understand these norms and how they impact women's ability to benefit from DaNa-supported activities. In agricultural value chain projects, DaNa observed two norms and cultural practices that influence women: the burden of responsibilities in homemaking and contributing to important decisions within and outside the household.

"There is no relaxing time for us except sleeping at night. When I cannot manage all these things, I have to reduce my sleeping hours. In the morning, I have to wake up early around 4:00 am and prepare breakfast for my family. My husband gets up after breakfast is ready and then goes to the farm. We both work on the farm, but when my husband is back from work, he rests, though, I have to prepare dinner and take care of the children."

Daw Nang (Thu Kha Lwi Di Village, Hse Hseng Township)

¹ International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in May 2019.

² Asian Development Bank (2016), Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar: A Situation Analysis

Expectations of Women at Home

Women are responsible for the majority of household work, from caring for children to cooking for the family. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates unpaid care work takes up to four to five hours in a woman's day, leaving little time for leisure or rest³. This time scarcity impacts women's ability to participate in community activities, and confines them to the domestic arena, with few options for sharing domestic responsibilities. This constraint is stricter for younger women with low educational levels, and whilst women with older children are able to rely on them to contribute to household chores, for women with young children, participation in training activities in agriculture or other topics is very difficult.

The burden of household responsibilities along with an expectation that women contribute to household income creates multiple constraints on women's time. There are nuances in the expected responsibilities of women across the regions of Myanmar; in Rakhine State, cooking is carried out solely by women, a deeply rooted social norm that is passed down from one generation to the next within the family unit. In the Magway Region, women are responsible for feeding livestock in addition to their other household responsibilities.

Decision-Making and Access to Resources

Women often face double standards when it comes to gaining acceptance in their communities and must work harder than their male counterparts for social recognition. Including women in positions of leadership in Myanmar remains a challenge as the notion of women occupying leadership roles is alien to many communities as well as to women themselves.

Men are considered the heads of households. Thus, land and other family-owned assets are traditionally registered under the man's name. According to the law, only farmers who possess titles to their land or those that have a recommendation from the village administrator stating they are the next of kin to the titular farmer, can access loans. Therefore, women find it difficult to access finance needed to fund their farming activities.

Traditionally, the male head of the household makes decisions on family and farming matters, including decisions on household expenditures. In most cases, women are informed of, though not able to contribute in the decision-making process.

At the community level, men occupy key decision-making roles, with women mainly given supporting or decorative roles within the community.

"Women have to do cooking and other household chores including cleaning and feeding animals. We don't have time to take rest. If there is a daughter in law or daughter, they will help do the chores."

Daw Mi, (Pike Thin San Pya Village, Min Bu Township, Magway Region)

"Men have been taking decision-making positions for so long. We are in the supportive role. They will not share their position with us. All the committee chairs/heads are men."

*Daw San Nu,
(Kyat Taw Pyin Village, Sittwe)*

³ Ibid

Overview of DaNa's Work with Women in Agriculture

Despite being considered as “helpers” in agricultural production, women actually contribute to the majority of farming activities, including growing cash crops and subsistence crops, planting nurseries, weeding, and harvesting. Men tend to be responsible for land preparation and transporting crops; however, the title of “farmer” is a term associated with men. As such, training on good farming practises is often only accessible to men, and although women do the bulk of the work, they are excluded from opportunities to learn more and enhance their skills.

In addition, in Myanmar, women earn around 20-30% less in the agricultural sector compared to men for the same work⁴, and in the villages visited for this case study, women earn around 20-25% less than men for agricultural work.

The DaNa facility is supporting a number of projects that are working to improve women's roles and recognition in agricultural production. Three projects DaNa is funding are outlined below.



Women farmers sorting ginger to sell in Thu Kha Lwi Di Village, Hse Hseng Township, Shan State

Improving Market Opportunities for Smallholder Farmers in the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone

As DaNa's partner, the Myanmar Institute for Integrated Development (MIID) is implementing a project aimed at improving the livelihoods of smallholder producers, especially women, in the post-conflict Pa-O Self-Administered Zone, which has considerable untapped economic potential in the agricultural sector. The introduction of farmer field schools, agribusiness advisory services, and the creation of producer groups allows smallholder farmers from the Pa-O ethnic minority group to improve their incomes and their role in agricultural value chains. In order to ensure women also benefit from the programme, MIID has undertaken the following activities:

⁴ Oxfam (2014), *Delivering Prosperity in Myanmar Dryzone: Lessons from Mandalay and Magway on realizing the economic potential of small-scale farmers*, Oxfam, 2014

Engaging with community leaders on women’s participation: MIID is advocating at the community level with local leaders to increase women’s participation in agricultural training and meetings. Additionally, MIID is encouraging community leaders to seek gender parity in agricultural committees and producer groups. Currently, the producer groups are 60% female, and MIID is working with community leaders to ensure women actively participate in community meetings and are not merely observers. In some cases, this means encouraging women to sit at the front of training sessions and to engage during practical exercises.

Increasing capacity: The project provides practical training on organic agricultural practices that women benefit from. As a consequence, women are sharing their knowledge with neighbours and peers.

Transforming Rakhine’s Vegetable Market

In partnership with DaNa, Mercy Corps and East-West Seeds are supporting the input supply market in Central Rakhine. By developing competitive agro-input markets, farmers are expected to receive significant benefits through access to products that enable them to increase yields. Smallholder farmers are targeted in the Sittwe, Ponnargyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, and Minbya Regions.

East-West Seed and Mercy Corps are providing agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, innovative techniques, and training to farmers on good agricultural practices (GAP). The project aims to reach a female participation rate of at least 25%, and East-West Seed is working closely with village administrators to reach this target.



Daw Khin San Win, Key Farmer, Kyat Taw Pyin Village, Sittwe Township, Rakhine State

People, Pulses Planet, Profit (P4)

The P4 project led by the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), with support from East-West Seed and the Network Activities Group (NAG), aims at increasing the incomes of 10,000 smallholder mung bean farmers in four townships in Yangon and Magway Regions. The project includes developing seed multiplication and distribution activities, introducing GAP, Climate Smart Agriculture, and collective marketing. The following approaches are used by the P4 project to increase women's participation:

Strengthening women's networks: The project has formed new women's groups and is working with existing women's groups at the village level, resulting in increased incomes through collective selling.

Promoting quota systems: The project created a minimum 30% female quota system in the farmers' committees from the village to regional level. In Magway Region, women's participation in the Regional Farmers Development Association (RFDA) is now very high and includes holding positions of responsibility in committees.

Increasing capacity: The P4 project works hard to ensure that women are able to increase their capacity on GAP and collective marketing through training. In addition, women are offered additional skills training, such as baking and soap making.

Outcomes for Women

The efforts of DaNa and its partners, and the practice of designing projects so they ensure women are able to benefit, have led to a number of key outcomes for women.

Increased productivity and income as a result of new practices

After incorporating new farming techniques learnt from GAP training, women farmers have increased their incomes by up to 200% in Rakhine State. The new techniques reduce the use of fertilisers and seeds, and prevent bacterial growth. Although input costs are moderately higher than traditional methods, yields have doubled providing increased income for farmers.

"In the past I was shy to talk to people because I am scared that people will criticize me on what I said. Now I am able to talk in public with confidence".

Daw Hmwe, (Thu Kha Lwi Di Village, Hse Hseng Township, Shan State)

A year into MIID's activities in Pa-O Region, women report being able to assume leadership positions in the community more easily. Women still face challenges from both family and society, however in some instances there is greater openness towards women's participation. Women are gaining trust from the community by showing that they are able to do the work that is traditionally considered

Women mung bean farmers said that as a result of applying GAP, production quantities had increased by an average of two baskets per acre and market prices had risen by 1,500 Kyats per basket.

Increased female leadership in non-traditional roles

"In the beginning, our neighbours did not listen to us. We think that this is because we are young women who did not have experience in sharing agricultural techniques."

Producer Group Members of Thu Kha Lwi Di village, (Hse Hseng Township, Shan State)

men's work. They are also able to share their newly acquired knowledge with neighbours and peers and demonstrate the correct use of organic fertilisers and pesticides. Importantly, their increased knowledge has generated increased self-confidence with some women indicating they now have greater confidence when talking to people in their communities.

In Thu Kha Lwi Di Village, members of the community said that women are now able to take leadership positions on committees, yet remain unable to take positions as village leaders since these roles involve traveling lengthy distances. Thus, whilst DaNa is seeing evidence of women's increased role in decision making, constraints to gender parity in community involvement remain apparent.

Increased access and participation of women in training

There has been a noted increase in women's participation in training, and communities that DaNa and its partners have worked with are now aware that meetings for agricultural training are not only for men and should also include women. The projects supported by DaNa have made it a requirement that women are included in activities and training is held in a manner that enables women's participation. Across the three projects, the percentage of women participating in training ranged from 25% to 55% of the total trainees.

Women's participation does not revolve solely around the quantity of women present, but also around the quality of their involvement. Since training is conducted in a gender friendly manner, women are encouraged to actively participate, ensuring that female voices are heard. Furthermore, by working with community leaders, women from marginalised communities are now attending agricultural training, including Sittwe Township, where Muslim women are benefiting from the project.

Creating community role models

Women who have increased their yields and are producing volumes as high as those produced by men have encouraged others to take up improved farming practices. They act as role models in their communities, motivating other women to attend training and improving previous practices. In Sittwe and Ponnargyun Townships in Rakhine State, three female farmers out of 15 have changed practices as a result of observing the successes of other community members.

[Recommendations and Lessons Learnt](#)

Understanding the time constraints faced by women. Expectations on women's responsibilities in the home, including unpaid care work and the separation of tasks within a household, is a considerable barrier to women's participation. Aside from the Yangon Region, women from all the areas visited raised concerns regarding time constraints preventing them from participating actively in project activities.

Any subsequent interventions need to carefully consider how the activities interact with women's multiple responsibilities and the social norms that influence individuals and communities. Interventions need to ensure they do not unintentionally increase women's workloads, while at the same time they should attempt to reduce the imbalances between male and female responsibilities.

Considering accessibility. The projects analysed in this case study were able to organise training at times when women are available and at locations women could access. However, this does not always occur at the township level, and the inability of women to travel alone or their domestic responsibilities often

impedes their ability to participate. Training should be organised in locations that are easily accessible for women.

Engaging men in women's empowerment. All project examples highlighted that engaging with men is important to women's economic empowerment. Male support for women investing their time in training is a major factor in women's willingness and ability to participate. By demonstrating the value of women's participation to men, men are more likely to support women to explore different roles. All the projects worked with community leaders to influence perceptions around why women should be allowed to benefit from training.

"My father encouraged me to participate in the producer groups, as he thought it is better for me to learn agricultural techniques. Now I am able to share my knowledge with other people."

Nang Hmwe, (Thu Kha Lwi Di Village, Hse Hseng Township, Shan State)

Invest in women's associations/groups. Women's associations provide valuable support for women. The P4 project offers a good example of how women's groups can be influential at the township level and become actively involved in the GAP process. Women's associations should also collaborate with other farmer's groups to support women leaders. Further resources should be invested in strengthening women's associations as they generate both social and economic benefits for women.

Invest in capacity building for project staff. Understanding gender issues enables projects to increase women's economic empowerment and women's agency. Investing in capacity building for staff is recommended. Most of the DaNa grantees' field staff have limited knowledge on gender and women's inclusion when implementing project activities. This situation hinders the projects' ability to tackle the challenges women face. Capacity building on gender knowledge for staff is recommended. Rather than focussing only on basic gender knowledge, the training should also address how to increase women's participation and reduce women's workloads.

Conclusion

Advancing women's role in agriculture must be addressed through a multi-pronged approach, understanding the social, cultural, and economic contexts that women face. In the agricultural sector in particular, it is important that activities address the significant responsibilities women encounter as both income generators and caregivers. The projects outlined in this case study all began by supporting women's ability to access training that allowed them to improve agricultural practices, and by extension, increase their income. This access has also, in some cases, afforded women greater status and respect within the community, shifting perceptions on the role of women. DaNa is consciously working to provide women with both access to opportunities and an understanding of how the programme can facilitate greater agency and participation in decision making at the household and community levels.