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SUCCESS STORY:

Women's Economic Empowerment the Key to Sustainable Development



Ma Wai Mar demonstrates how to bake chiffon cakes for members of the Nan Yaw Village Women's Group

Empowering women to participate in economic activity results in stronger and more sustainable development. A vibrant economy where women are able to participate equally – as business owners, workers, and consumers – is good for business, good for society, and good for the country.

Ma Wai Mar, a teacher and village development volunteer from Nan Yaw Village in Yangon, is busy playing several roles in her community. The 38-year-old is a leader of the women's group's bakery business, works as an accountant for the Regional Farmers Development Association (RFDA), and is also the village librarian.

"I have improved my social skills, community engagement and gained financial management knowledge by volunteering," she said.

The women-led bakery business was set up with support from Network Activities Group (NAG) and the ICCO P4 project, funded by UK aid's DaNa Facility. The project promotes women's economic empowerment in Khayan and Thonegwa Townships in Yangon by encouraging the formation of women's groups and women-led enterprises.

Group members pay a monthly membership fee of MMK 2,000 that subsidises a low-interest savings and loan fund for women in the community. The fund has two key benefits: first, the 2% interest rate is much lower compared to the 10-20% charged by local money-lenders; and second, the fund is a sustainable source of financing for women-led enterprises. The fund provides financial stability for group members.

The bakery business at Nan Yaw Village sells up to 115 organic Chiffon cakes per month to customers around the village. The business is especially busy at certain times of the year, including holidays, however all the group members provide important contributions.

After attending a two-day bakery training course provided by the P4 project, Ma Wai Mar shared what she had learnt with other members of the group.

"Now almost all the women in the village can bake. As for me, I am mainly involved in the bakery business to ensure hygiene and cleanness in every step," said Ma Wai Mar.

The cakes sell for MMK 2,000 each for the regular size, though the business also produces a smaller size for students and children, which sells for MMK 1,600. The cakes have become a favourite at the village school.

For Ma Wai Mar, selling cakes to school children has an added benefit: "As a teacher, I know most of the children usually eat unhealthy snacks. It's better that they eat our cakes because they are healthier – we only use fresh ingredients and the cakes don't contain any chemicals."

The Nan Yaw Village Women's Group also runs a retail business selling rice. Profits from the businesses are fed back into the savings and loan fund, providing an inexpensive and sustainable source of credit for women in the community.

Women's economic empowerment requires more than access to finance. The group has given women the opportunity to work towards a common purpose. It has enabled them to come together to discuss issues important to them and their community, and it has provided a space where they can share experiences and provide support to each other.