

5 Gender & Sport



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 [sport](#). Other special interest briefs in the series include health, education, the media, and the economy. The Full Report and Summary Research Papers are available from [www.raisethecurtain.org](http://www.raisethecurtain.org).



The Gender Equality Network  
Yangon, Myanmar  
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Published in Yangon, Myanmar,  
November 2015



**RAISING THE CURTAIN:**

Cultural Norms, Social Practices and  
Gender Equality in Myanmar

# Gender & Sport



To do sports is very good if we look from the view of health. But, it is inappropriate for girls to do sports from the view of culture in the village.

Focus Group D with Bamar Buddhist women aged 40 and above, Monywa Township



## Gender and Sport in Myanmar

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. In contrast, the idea of women running and playing was seen as adverse to the quiet and composed behaviour considered desirable for women. Sayings such as ‘A woman’s step is worth a million coins’, reinforce the perceived value of a woman’s gentleness, grace and modesty and discourage participation in sports.

In this research, 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.

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.

The fact that Myanmar women are discouraged from engaging in sports means that their opportunities for healthy physical activity, teamwork, and fun are limited.

Women are not expected to be interested in sport. This is reflected and reinforced through both print and broadcasting media, as sporting content is overwhelmingly directed to boys and men. It was also widely assumed that women do not have time to engage in sport and implied that if they did so, they would somehow neglect their primary household duties.

Another reason for the resistance to sport among women is the view that it is inappropriate for boys and girls to mix in team sports, particularly after puberty. A girl involved in mixed sporting teams would risk having her modesty questioned. Public spaces available for sport and recreation activities are reportedly marked as male spaces.

Women are also dissuaded from participating in sports as it is wrongfully believed that exercise can interfere with reproductive functions. According to one research participant:



It is not appropriate [for women to engage in sport]. In Myanmar, women athletes don't get married. If they are married, they can't give birth. They also have trouble during the delivery.

FGD with men aged 26-40, Madupi Township

While many existing norms discourage women's athletics, 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. When sport is seen as an issue of national pride, women's performance appears to be more acceptable, their participation can be seen as a patriotic duty. As the study was carried out in the lead up to the South East Asian (SEA) games held in Myanmar in 2013, these sentiments may have been more prevalent than usual.

The struggle for women athletes to engage in sport were highlighted with reference to the Myanmar women football team, which was given some media visibility during the SEA games. Almost all the players have cropped hair, which deviates from the norms of beauty for women. In a media

interview, female football players reported that they refer to each other as 'A ko' (brother) on the pitch<sup>1</sup>. This suggests a need to create alternative gender 'scripts' in order to create more space for women, so that women do not feel they have to assume a masculine gender role in order to 'fit in' with a particular sport.

## Steps to Transform Inequitable Norms in Sport

Women have much to gain in terms of quality of life from being able to participate in sports on an equal footing with men. 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.

Recognizing the importance of women's ability to participate in physical and social activities, GEN suggests:

- 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 as well as national levels.

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1. Verbruggen, Yola. (2013). Moe Moe War and her sister symbolise a fight against hidebound tradition, as she takes to the field this SEA Games with the Myanmar women's football team. 14 December 2013. URL: <http://m.todayonline.com/sports/side-strength>







My daughters had to go to the town to represent our village for a sports competition. Women can do sports as well. They are not so bad. Sports and education are related. And it is also good for one`s health.

[FGD with Rakhine Buddhist women aged 26-40, Minbya Township]



# 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](mailto:gen.myanmar@gmail.com)



## Acknowledging the Photographers

GEN wishes to acknowledge the work of the following photographers whose pictures appear in the 'Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices, and Gender Equality in Myanmar' Full Report and Briefing Papers:

**Akar Tun Kyaw, Aung Naing Tun Hein, Dnin Bauk Maw, Htoo Aung Kyaw, Kyal Pyar, Khun Thiha, Myat Thandar Oo, Naing Htoon Wynn @ Young, Rita Khin, Shwe Wutt Hmon, Si Thu Zeya, Tun Tun Zaw, Thu Thu, Thein Naing @ Nyi Daw Maung, Seng Mai and Yee Mon Oo.**

All of these photographers participated in GEN's Gender & Photography Training Workshop & Photo Competition. During this training, photographers learnt about many of the issues covered in this report, along with photo journalism techniques and principles. The photographs used in these documents are the result of their work during this training and competition period. Consent was sought from all subjects prior to taking and using the photographs; subjects preferred to remain unnamed.

**GEN wishes to thank to the following donors  
for the support given to this research:**





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