

4 Gender & Media



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 [media](#). Other special interest briefs in the series include sport, education, the economy, and health. The Full Report and Summary Research Papers are available from 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 & Media



It changed according to the age. They have changed their dress style and behaviour. They used to treat older people with respect and in a polite way before. But now they know nothing about respectful and polite manners towards older people. Media used to represent our culture before, but it seems to represent others now.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Danu Buddhist women, aged 26-40, Kalaw Township

Gender and Media in Myanmar

Perceptions of Women in Media

The most significant change in Myanmar's media environment in recent years is the liberalization of the media sector, particularly the dismantling of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board in August 2012. Media coverage of political issues has widened significantly and a large number of new publishing and broadcasting licenses has been granted. Facebook, radio, TV, and word of mouth are also important conveyers of information in contemporary Myanmar.

The issue of media liberalization elicited different reactions. For many study participants, the liberalization of media in Myanmar and increased exposure to, and participation in, globalized culture were seen as threats to cultural values and traditions. In some cases, media was seen as an agent of corruption. Particularly for women, dress code functions as a symbol of cultural belonging and values. The way that women dress when they appear in the media is the most common target of the critique:

In 2012 August, we totally withdrew censorship. After that, we have positive and negative impact. From a positive point of view, there is more transparency ... but there is negative impact. As there is no more censorship ... they put whatever they like. You may notice some female celebrities wearing very sexy dress. It's not in line with our tradition.

Key Informant Interview (KII) with Information Official

It is clear from the participants' accounts that the male body is not targeted in the same way as the female body when discussing media representation. This difference appears to be related to the perception





that the male body it is not sexualized to the same extent as the female body. Media liberalization, women's dress and cultural erosion were often held to blame for instances of rape and sexual violence.

Cultural taboos such as discussing sex in media were also extremely sensitive topics. The line between public discussion of sex, sex education, pornography and sexual violence was sometimes blurred in discussions with study participants. Some study participants claimed pornographic materials are proliferating, and their portrayal of men's sexuality as natural, given, insatiable and potentially violent contributes to a normalization of rape by teaching male readers to ignore women's wishes in sexual relations.

Popular media often assigns women the role of victim. Many of the social problems described in mass media, such as trafficking, rape, violence and poverty, are in fact real concerns in women's lives, but stories of women's hardships tend to portray women only as helpless, deemphasizing their agency. A particular form of victimization of women through media is the theme of women being punished for not conforming to cultural and social norms.

Those who had begun questioning gender relations were critical of what they found to be media's stereotypical portrayal of women:

In one of the books that I read, there is an advertisement in which the girl was being teased by the boys and she was encouraged to apply cosmetics to avoid being teased. Girls can misunderstand this kind of advertisement; that boys can tease them unless they are beautiful. And in most of the washing powder advertisements, only women had to wash the clothes.

FGD with Muslim women, aged 18-25, Mingalartaungnyunt Township

There is a sense among study participants engaged in gender equality work, and among some community members, that the potentially positive role that media could play in bringing about equality has not been

harnessed. While positive role modeling has been enabled to some extent, more common are stereotypical portrayals that present a narrow space for women.

Most media professionals interviewed agreed that there is gender inequality in the media business, with lower compensation for female actresses and very few women composers, scriptwriters, and movie directors. With regards to journalism, there was a perception that women are more skilful than their male counterparts in getting stories out of the (often male) officials from government and NGOs by using traditional 'female attributes' like patience and 'sweet talking'. Despite the presence of a few well-known female writers, making a successful career in journalism was still regarded as being more difficult for women than men. Women were described as rarely having the chance to receive awards and other forms of professional recognition, and sometimes as relegated to covering only "women's issues."

Women in Print Media

Women are marginalized in mainstream print media, and make up 20-31% of people represented (see Figure 1). Print media were analysed from a gender perspective, using a modified version of the UNESCO Framework for Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media.¹ With regards to women's visibility in newspapers, the overall figure of 22% is the average for Daily 11 News (17%) and Myanmar Ahlin (27.5%). In the analysed journals (Mizzima News, The Voice, 7 Days News and Myanmar Times) women's overall representation is 31%. The only general audience magazine included in the analysis was Irrawaddy Magazine. Here, women make up only 20% of the people featured. Women's representation averaged 56% among the female audience magazines Apyosin (63%), Shwe Amutay (50%), and Tharapu (60%). The only presence of transgender (TG) populations was in these magazines.

Women most often appeared as sources of information or "ordinary

1. UNESCO. (2012). Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media: Framework of indicators to gauge gender sensitivity in media operations and content. Paris: UNESCO.

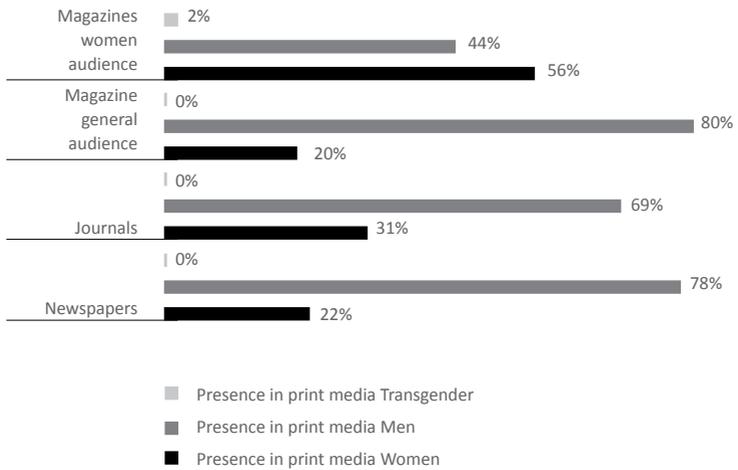


Figure 1: Presence in Print Media by Sex/Gender

citizens” providing general comments for articles. It was rare to find women appearing as a ‘spokesperson’ from a recognized position, or ‘experts’ providing sophisticated commentary. In general the print media analysed was elite oriented, with poor, rural and working class populations weakly represented. However, women made up a low percentage of economic elites and, with the exception of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, political elites portrayed in these articles.

Women’s voices were heard in only 14% of the political content of sampled newspapers and 18-24% of content on economics and business, though they are heard alongside men in the areas of arts and culture (see Figure 2). This distinction is not by chance, as arts and culture are typically regarded as ‘soft’ topics, where women’s participation is seen as merited, as opposed to the ‘hard’ topics of politics and economics, typically regarded as male. Media coverage of female athletes was surprisingly high, primarily due to the fact that the research period coincided with the 2013

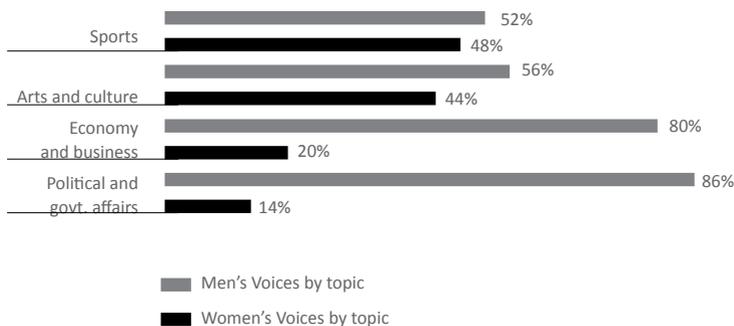


Figure 2: Voices by Topic and Sex in Print Media

SEA Games held in Myanmar, where women athletes performed well and thus garnered attention and support from media and the general public.¹

Very few of the media sources analysed paid attention to issues of particular relevance to women. An exception was Mizzima News, which had allocated two double spreads per issue (4 pages) to women's affairs and gender equality issues. The 13 December 2013 issue emphasizes gender mainstreaming of the Constitution. Issues raised include the narrow interpretation of gender equality.

When we studied the Constitution, we found out that women are viewed as only needing protection from the state, not in active roles.

Nway Nway Htun, Charity Oriented Myanmar, quoted in Mizzima News, 13-19 December 2013.

1. See GEN's related Briefing Paper: Gender in Sport for more on this topic.

On the other hand, 7 Day News is remarkable in its exclusion of women's voices – it includes no female voices on business and economic matters over the analysis period. The Voice Weekly also had minimal inclusion with a mere 7% of economic content attributable to women.

Women's Magazines as Socializers of Gender Norms

The people featured in magazines directed to a female audience were typically actors, actresses, models, singers, fashion designers, make-up artists, and so on. The primary content of the analysed magazines conformed to the norms of femininity in Myanmar that hold women to be relationship oriented, and responsible for the reproductive sphere. The main topics were fashion, beauty, cooking, sewing and matters related to love, relationships and marriage. Although the magazines included a few articles where, for example, men cook for their families or friends, the overall pattern of women as reproductive beings was very clear.

Women are often reminded of 'their place', through media. Parental guidance and control to ensure that women's modesty is upheld is a common feature of these magazines. 'Appropriate,' i.e., non-revealing, clothing is often used as a symbolic marker of character and is reinforced in the magazines' stories and essays. The norm that women should be submissive is also strongly reinforced through these magazines. A common message for women is to remain sexually ignorant and naïve in order to uphold the air of a 'good girl'.

Norms around virginity are strongly reinforced in these magazines (indeed the title of one of the magazines analysed - Apyosin - means Virgin Girl), backed up by reference to religious codes and practices. In an essay in the Apyosin December 2013 issue², a journalist claims,

2. 'Mom's beloved Virgin Girl', written by Myo Marna, p. 49.

We Myanmar women have to maintain our virginity until we get married. The opportunity to donate robes to Buddha Images are only for virgin girls. Virginity is very noble. In some areas, virgin girls have to put donation fruits on their heads to offer them to the spirits, that's why crops are growing successfully. That's why the reputation of a virgin is highly valued.

As in mainstream media, women's magazines often describe women as helpless victims of different circumstances, including war, men's violence or men's adultery. In some accounts, women are not only victimized, but also blamed directly or indirectly. Women were repeatedly portrayed as cunning and deceitful, bearing responsibility for men's adultery as bad wives or devious mistresses.

From a health perspective, it is positive that these 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. However, more detailed discussions on sexual relations or sex education messages are absent. Women are usually depicted as sex objects, rather than as subjects, though this content is indirect rather than explicit.

Some magazine content around marriage and relationships includes space for stories and discussions that explore marriage in a critical way, particularly when women were portrayed as slaves or prisoners of their marriages. While some of these stories reinforced a view of women as victims of their circumstances, others offered opportunities for reflection on the merits of marriage.

Stories that Transgress Norms

There is some content that runs counter to the expected norms and holds women up as brave and fearless. One example is an essay in the *Tharapu* October 2013 issue³ about a female physical trainer in her sixties who is standing on her own feet. She stands out as a rare role model in these kinds of magazines, as she is a divorcee and a widow who has raised her two children on her own. Her message to the women readers is not to give up their efforts. Translated interviews with foreign stars also carry messages around women's empowerment, messages rarely found in the publications' other content.

Steps to Transform Inequitable Norms in 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.

Specific recommendations to increase gender equality in Myanmar media include:

- 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.

3. 'Wish all women would be beautiful', written by Daw Malar Tin, p. 118-120.

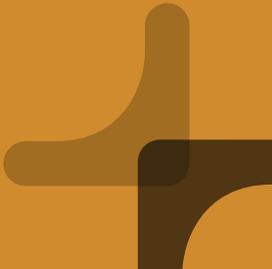
Take Action to Advance Gender Equality

- 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



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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