

6 Gender & Policy



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 for [policy and programming across multiple sectors](#). Other special interest briefs in the series focus on health, education, sport, the media, and the economy. The Full Report and Summary Research Papers are available from www.raisethecurtain.org.



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RAISING THE CURTAIN:
Cultural Norms, Social Practices and
Gender Equality in Myanmar

Gender & Policy



The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) 1995

Twenty years ago, representatives of 189 governments, including Myanmar, endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BfPA), with the aim of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women, everywhere.

The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of forward-looking strategies for the advancement of women and at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities.

The Platform for Action made comprehensive commitments under 12 priority areas including Women and the Economy, Women in power and decision making, Women and the environment, Women and health, and, Violence against Women. Even 20 years later, it remains a powerful source of guidance and inspiration. In Myanmar it forms the basis of the Governments' National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, with the NSPAWs 12 priority areas reflecting those of the BPfA.

Source: <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about>

A Multi-Sectoral Response to Transform Inequitable Norms

Myanmar is giving increasing attention to gender inequality as an impediment to development and the attainment of human rights. The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has acceded to the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). Through the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013 – 2022, the Government has signaled its commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of women in Myanmar through the creation of enabling systems, structures and practices. There is increasing momentum within civil society networks and organisations to promote programming and advocacy for women’s rights and gender equality.

Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices, and Gender Equality in Myanmar aims to further understanding and to inform programmes and policies (including implementation of the NSPAW) about underlying norms that impact upon the attainment of gender equality. The study illustrates that cultural norms and related social practices impact men and women throughout their lifespan and in every aspect of their lives, from the most deeply personal – the sense of self, body, confidence, love and marriage - to the practical organisation and valuing of paid and unpaid work; education opportunities; health status and services; participation in community development and the affairs of the nation; and much more.

As Myanmar continues along the path of change, there are both hopeful and worrying trends from a gender equality perspective. Women are often cast as ‘protectors of a culture,’ which acts as a barrier to the realization of women’s rights, but they can also benefit from new educational and professional opportunities, and changing attitudes.



The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is an international bill of rights for women. In 1997, Myanmar became a signatory to the Convention.

The Convention defines discrimination against women as “...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

By accepting the Convention, States commit to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, including:

- to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women;
- to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and
- to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.

Source: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

Gender norms have rarely been debated until now. Discussions with study participants show that while norms, including those that prevent women's enjoyment of human rights, have proven remarkably stable in Myanmar, many are now undergoing incremental change. One of the barriers to changing norms is the lack of data and information to link normative ideals to structural discrimination. This study makes an important contribution in opening up this debate, however, more detailed studies, as well as awareness-raising, systematic gender analysis of laws, policies, and budgets, and sex-disaggregated data in all fields, are needed.

The Government and various Ministries, members of parliament, education specialists, health professionals, media executives, economic policy makers, labour rights activists, officials and programmers in the areas of social welfare, culture, and information officials need to understand and acknowledge the impact of gender norms in their particular fields. It is important that these key persons work to ensure that norms built on gender stereotypes and ideas of unequal worth do not find their ways into policies, programmes, school text books, directives and operating procedures, and critically – budgets. Civil society groups also have an important role to play to find culturally appropriate strategies to target and change harmful cultural norms and social practices.

Implications & Recommendations for Policy & Programming

Education

The Ministry of Education's Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR, 2012-2014) calls for the development of education laws and policies to address gender inequalities. NSPAW acknowledges that research, policy, implementation and budgets are important to ensure the right to quality formal and non-formal education for girls and women, and stresses the need to eliminate customs, superstitions and beliefs that are obstacles to women's education. Such obstacles are often founded in gender stereotypes, particularly those that influence access, retention, and career opportunities.

This study finds that education is a powerful vehicle for perpetuating gender norms, and recommends increased engagement with teachers to break down inequitable stereotypes. Such initiatives need to be practical and take into consideration that social and cultural norms and values are deeply embedded within a person. Efforts directed at changing norms need to go hand-in-hand with opportunities for girls and boys to have different study/occupational choices in the everyday school environment.

- Engage male and female teachers in efforts to transform gender norms and stereotypes, and ensure gender awareness is included in teacher training in both formal and non-formal education.
- Ensure gender is mainstreamed in reforms of pre-service teacher education, and in reforms of teaching methods and content in both higher education and basic education.
- Give in-service teachers and community teachers the chance to discuss and reflect on gender norms, including deeply held norms at a personal level, and provide practical tools that they can use at school, using a peer education format.
- Review all teaching and learning materials with a gender lens. Ensure future education materials do not reinforce stereotypical gender norms but address boys, girls, men and women as equally able to participate in all spheres of life, with equal opportunities.
- Ensure realistic opportunities for girls and boys to exercise different and non-stereotypical occupational/study choices.
- Challenge gender norms in non-formal education and vocational training by creating environments where everyone is able to choose according to interest or talent.
- Consider 'supply' and 'demand', so choice of vocations that challenge gender norms can be practically applied in the labour market.
- Bring together a broad range of stakeholders, including education practitioners, employers, policy makers and students, for constructive dialogue and programming aiming to challenge gender norms in occupational choices.

- Give teachers the chance to make a difference. With fewer tasks, more teachers, different training materials, sufficient time, and autonomy, teachers will be able to play a key role in shifting stereotypical gender norms. Budget for this endeavour, and appropriate training and instruction on how to achieve this one essential.
- Ensure that the development of education laws and policies address gender inequalities as called for in the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR)
- Ensure the development of an overarching education law in line with the Government's international and national commitments such as CEDAW, BPfA and NSPAW.
- Develop a comprehensive, inclusive, national education policy, so that all children, youths, adults in Myanmar are able to enjoy their rights to a quality education, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social or economic status, geographical location, religion, disability, or other attributes.
- Ensure that gender is mainstreamed in the development of specific education policies such as inclusive education; non-formal education; and language of instruction.
- As called for in the NSPAW, ensure that research and surveys are collecting data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and location.
- Engage civil society in a comprehensive review of educational materials with the intention of producing school materials that are free from gender bias

Health

Gendered norms tend to describe women's bodies as dirty or shameful, and equate women's health concerns with reproduction. This study found gaps in terms of access to, and enjoyment of, sexual and reproductive health and rights due to norms around virginity, bodily decision-making and sexuality as linked to marriage. While HIV prevention has broken down cultural barriers to sharing some information for the purposes of disease control, the same inroads have not been made for general sex education, resulting in gaps in critical health information. Women continue to have few opportunities

to learn about their bodies and to make informed decisions related to their sexual and reproductive life. NSPAW (2013-2022) emphasizes that research, policy, implementation and budgets are critical to ensuring women's and girls' right to quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health. Gender mainstreaming of all health policies and plans, as well as working with health personnel to build their comfort and capacity, are necessary to better serve women's health needs.

- Conduct more research on women's health needs, including but not limited to maternal and child health.
- Raise awareness among men and women of sexual and reproductive health and rights with a view to promoting the acceptance of women's decision-making over their own bodies.
- Conduct research in health care settings on how cultural assumptions influence the way men and women are approached (including what is asked of women and men, what is not asked and how it is asked).
- Advance policies which focus on women's right to self-determination in matters concerning their bodies. Gender mainstreaming of community health plans and other policy documents is essential.
- Take advantage of the space created by HIV prevention activities to broaden awareness raising activities from a focus on disease control.
- Ensure sex education initiatives include sex, body image and integrity, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Make sure content is age and context appropriate.
- Create space for health care providers to discuss cultural norms and gender stereotypes that may influence how they engage with clients.
- Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services are not limited based on marital status or other factors.



The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSAPW) 2013-2022

The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar's National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) was developed over three years and launched by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement, in Naypyidaw in October 2013. The 10-year plan sets out a framework for the creation of enabling systems, structures, and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realization of women's rights. The plan presents practical ways to address challenges in 12 priority areas, based on the Beijing Platform for Action (1995): Women and Livelihoods, Women Education and Training, Women and Health, Women and Emergencies, Violence Against Women, Women and the Economy, Women and Decision-Making, Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, Women and Human Rights, Women and the Media, Women and the Environment, and The Girl Child.

The NSPAW details initiatives to improve access to education and health care as well as the development of laws to eliminate gender-based violence and policies to promote equal rights to jobs, credit and resources. It also suggests ways to increase women's political leadership and harness the media to reduce gender stereotyping.

Economy & Work

Some of the clearest examples of the material implications of cultural norms can be found in the area of work, livelihoods, and the economy; namely those that award men and women different wages, as labour inputs are differently valued. It is important to address such practices through regulation of laws and policies, with monitoring for compliance and sanctions if employers continue to discriminate. While the labour market remains precarious for both men and women in Myanmar, women are often found in work that is both unregulated and isolated, which makes women workers particularly vulnerable to abuse. Greater equality of opportunity and remuneration are needed to change this.

- Ensure labour laws and policies include provisions of equal opportunities for employment (regardless of sex, gender identity, age or marital status) and equal wages. Provide sanctions for employers who do not live up to these standards.
- Improve workers' rights and conditions in factory work, bearing in mind the largely young and female workforce, the unhealthy work conditions, safety at work concerns, and lack of security of employment.
- Strengthen the linkages and cooperation between labour unions and the women's rights movement.
- Improve labour rights and standards for women in unregulated and secluded work environments such as karaoke bars and in domestic work.
- Expand childcare facilities to ensure women who carry out the majority of reproductive work are not structurally discriminated from participating in the labour market.
- Abolish practices that continue to reproduce the idea of women's work as less valuable than men's work, such as listing women as dependents on family registration cards.
- Review existing and proposed labour regulation. Policy makers, programmers, activists, unions should address structural issues that contribute to gender inequality, including norms that result in gendered separation of activities and unequal valuing of tasks.

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

- 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.

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. The UN General Assembly Resolution 67/17 of 11 December 2012 emphasises sport as a means to, among other things, promote education and health, and empower girls and women. The fact that women are discouraged from engaging in sports means that their opportunities for health promoting physical activity, recreation, team work, and fun are limited. While women and sport were getting more attention than normal during the SEA games, it is important that the recognition of women in sport goes beyond competitive concerns, where results are valued as a sense of national pride, and that the individual's right to participate in sports is not limited based on gender.

- 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 and national levels.

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



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