

Investing in Women

Myanmar Country Context Paper

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Introduction

This Country Context Paper provides an overview of women's contribution to Myanmar's economy as farmers, entrepreneurs and wage workers. It identifies key barriers to women's economic empowerment and is undertaken under the auspices of the Australian Government's Investing in Women initiative (under Component Three), which refers to government partnerships to remove selected barriers to women's economic empowerment and implement changes that will encourage partner government regulatory reform. It provides a snapshot of factors either facilitating or inhibiting women's economic empowerment in the country, focusing on: laws and their implementation (Part One); social norms (Part Two); access to markets and productive assets (Part Three); business and work (Part Four); and political representation (Part Five). It lists major factors and actors/institutions driving or resisting policy reforms to consecrate gender equality in the world of work, and provides recommendations for addressing underlying causes of gender gaps.

Myanmar is undergoing a period of unprecedented transformation. Following decades of isolation, the last five years have seen rapid and ambitious social, political and economic reforms. With its rich resource base, Myanmar has the potential for strong economic growth and development.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy came into government in Myanmar in 2016, bringing high hopes for positive change in the country. But the new government faces challenges. Military influence continues across public institutions and the economy. While a peace agreement is in negotiation, there is ongoing conflict and unrest in parts of the country. Limited detailed policies have been released by the new government regarding development in Myanmar. And reforms need to continue and deepen to bring about substantial improvements in the lives of people across the country.

Myanmar's economy is underdeveloped and levels of poverty are high. Major reforms have moved it towards a market-based economy, but decades of isolation, conflict and economic neglect have been costly. Myanmar is in the early years of its transformation. Although improving, it still lags behind regional neighbours on most social and economic indicators. The country ranks 145 out of 184 countries in the 2016 Human Development Index. Poverty rates are estimated to be between 26 and 38 per cent, and vary greatly depending on geography and other factors (World Bank 2015a, p13; ADB & UN 2016). According to 2010 UN data poverty incidence is higher in rural areas (29.2 per cent) than urban areas (15.7 per cent); and many remote, ethnic, border regions (like Chin and Rakhine States) have a higher proportion of their population living in poverty than in other areas (cited in ADB & UN 2016, pp.33-34).

The economic outlook for Myanmar is positive. GDP is expected to grow at 7.7 per cent in FY2017 (up from 6.2 per cent in FY2016). Commodity prices are likely to increase, and agriculture (which employs around 63 per cent of the labour force) is expected to improve. Industry and services (particularly telecommunications) are also expected to grow, and exports to increase following the removal of US sanctions (ADB 2017).

Over the last decade, there have been significant advances in social and economic indicators for women. Around 52 per cent of Myanmar's population of 51 million people are female (MoIP 2014). The situation for women and girls has improved in many areas – particularly the labour force participation rate of women, nonagricultural wage employment, access to credit, literacy rates, primary and secondary education completion, and the maternal mortality ratio (ADB & UN 2016). Myanmar comes in at around the middle of all countries in the 2016 Gender Inequality Index.

Despite gains, women continue to face obstacles in accessing rights. Many of these obstacles are common to women across the developing world (ILO, 2016). However, the OECD reports that the level of institutionalized gender discrimination in Myanmar is relatively high (2014 Social Institutions and Gender Index). Girls and boys complete school at similar rates, but this does not translate into greater earnings or literacy for women (MoLESS & CSA 2015). Women are underrepresented in almost all areas of public life. Patriarchal stereotypes are prevalent, bolstered by religious norms (CEDAW 2016). Age, disability, ethnicity, poverty, geography, migratory status and other factors can compound disadvantage.

New data provide insights into the lives of Myanmar women, and show clear gender disparities. For decades, Myanmar governments did not routinely collect demographic data. The minimal data collected was rarely disaggregated by gender or other characteristics. In recent years, the government (assisted by international donors) has begun to systematically collect data. The 2014 Census was the first in more than 30 years, and the first comprehensive Labour Force Survey was released in 2016 (previous official data had generally been based on outdated projections). In 2015, the overall labour force participation rate was 64.7 – but for males was 80 per cent, much higher 52 per cent for females (MoLESS & CSA 2015). On average, women earn 25 per cent less than men (MoLESS & CSA 2015). Women are often employed in the informal sector which increases the risk of exploitation (ADB & UN 2016). Female ownership (at 27 per cent) and management (at 29 per cent) of private firms is lower than in other countries in the region

(World Bank 2015b; DFAT 2016). Women made up 52 per cent of employees in government administration, but only 39 per cent of leadership positions (Minoletti 2016).

National policy priorities

The economic and development policies of the last two governments in Myanmar have not made specific reference to women. The previous government created the comprehensive *Framework for Economic and Social Development* (2011 – 2015), which identified and sequenced the country's reform priorities under a *Five Year Development Plan* (2011-2015). The current government's *Statement of Economic Policy* (released in 2016) lacks detail. However, it notes the importance of promoting a market system that allows individuals to freely pursue economic opportunities; and employment opportunities for all citizens. Although sectoral plans are being implemented in health and education, the current government has not yet released a detailed and prioritized overarching national development plan.

In 2013, the previous government released the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women [NSPAW] (2013 -2022). Despite its isolation, Myanmar became a signatory to CEDAW in 1997, signed the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, and is party to ASEAN gender equality mechanisms. NSPAW aims to implement international commitments by creating enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realization of women's rights (MoSWRR 2013). There are twelve priority areas listed in NSPAW. The Women and Livelihoods priority aims to improve women's livelihoods and reduce poverty. The Women and the Economy priority aims to ensure fairness and equal rights for women in relation to employment, credit, resources, assets and economic benefits. The Women and Decision-Making priority aims to ensure women's equal participation in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society (MoSWRR 2013).

NSPAW can be a robust platform for women's rights in Myanmar, and momentum is increasing for implementation. Progress to date has been slow. The Ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement [MoSWRR], which is responsible for implementation, manages several competing priorities due to its broad mandate. NSPAW implementation is managed by a small number staff in the Women's Development Division in MoSWRR (GEWESWG undated). Although advances have been made against NSPAW objectives, particularly from within civil society, few of these were directly driven by the NSPAW agenda (MoSWRR 2017). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2016) stressed the importance of turning NSPAW into action. Technical working groups are now being established by MoSWRR to fast track implementation; the groups covering participation and mainstreaming will be particularly relevant to women's economic empowerment. The aim is to develop a five-year costed implementation plan and monitoring and evaluation framework by the end of 2017 (MoSWRR 2017).

Although there is no national development plan currently in place in Myanmar, there is evidence of government commitment to MoSWRR programs. MoSWRR received additional funding of around 300 per cent this year, despite the tight budget environment. This built on increased parliamentary interest in social issues, and additional funds will expand social welfare programs (UNICEF 2017). The budget increase indicates there are openings to build support for social issues under this government, although the budget bid directly related for the Women's Development Division was not approved this year. If MoSWRR is able to deliver on outcomes against the increased budget this year, the case will be stronger for increased funding in future budgets.

Part One: Legal and regulatory frameworks and their implementation

Myanmar's legal system is undergoing major reforms. NSPAW contains goals for the equal treatment of women under land and agrarian reforms, equal pay for equal work and ending harassment. It also prioritizes awareness raising of labour law among employers and employees, and recommends funding initiatives that address women's rights and security in the workplace.

Myanmar's Constitution (2008) enshrines principles of gender equality, including that women are entitled to the same rights and pay as men in similar work. However, the Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (2016) noted that the Constitution contains gaps and contradictory provisions that undermine gender equality principles. The Committee recommended amending the Constitution to remove references to women as mothers and child-bearers, and remove specific provisions that allow gender discrimination in government recruitment. Further, it noted a lack of special measures in Myanmar (like quotas) to achieve gender equality in representation.

Women, business and investment

According to the Women, Business and the Law 2016 report, Myanmar performs well against other countries in terms of enacting of gender-neutral laws. However, the report focuses on the content of the laws rather than their application (World Bank 2016a). Globally, gaps in legal frameworks and failures of implementation undermine the intent of gender equality laws (UN Women 2012). The implementation of laws in Myanmar is often influenced by directives from relevant ministries and practice (Luther 2016). Many laws and regulations impacting on women's economic empowerment are new, and there has been limited assessment of their implementation.

Institutional and structural constraints to the business environment reflect the infancy of Myanmar's transformation towards a market economy. Although many laws have passed that aim to improve the environment for business and investment, these do not have gender-specific provisions. Due to a lack of data, it can be difficult to discern general constraints to engaging in business from gender-specific constraints – particularly regarding how laws are implemented (DFAT 2016).

The business environment in Myanmar is improving, but is still extremely challenging. Myanmar improved from a ranking of 182 out of 189 countries for ease of doing business in 2014, to 170 out of 190 countries in 2017. Between 2011 and 2016, an average of 46 reforms were implemented annually to make setting up a business easier (DFAT 2016). However, Myanmar has not made significant gains in many areas key to effectively doing business. It ranks second last for enforcement of contracts, provides minimal investor protections, and fell in ranking for ease of getting credit from 2014 (World Bank 2017).

Women and labour laws

As part of the reform process, outdated labour laws are being revised or replaced. For example, a new Labour Organisation Law was enacted in 2011, allowing workers to form labour organisations. Prior to this freedom of association and collective bargaining were severely curtailed. Other labour laws followed, including on dispute resolution, leave, factory work and social security (MCRB 2015). There has been minimal analysis of how these new laws have been implemented, and how they impact on women.

Minimum wage legislation has the potential to increase women's average earnings, but implementation is critical. In 2015, Myanmar's first minimum wage was set at 3,600 kyat (AUD \$3.50) per day. With few exceptions, the minimum wage applies across all industries and sectors (Bernhardt et. al. 2016). Data on implementation is limited. However, men paid daily wages earn an average of 4,900 kyat (AUD \$4.80), compared to 3,340 kyat (AUD \$3.30) for women (MoLESS & CSA 2016). Female daily wage workers earn

an average wage that is lower than the minimum wage in Myanmar, which is in turn the lowest set minimum wage in South East Asia (Bernhardt et. al. 2016).

Maternity leave is now enacted in law in Myanmar, however it is likely that few women access it. Under the Leave and Holiday Act 1951 (amended 2014), women workers are entitled to maternity leave of 14 weeks, female civil servants are entitled to six months of maternity leave, and fathers have right to 15 days leave after the birth of a child. Women may access a cash benefit during maternity leave in some circumstances under the Social Security Law 2012 (MCRB 2017). However, as the vast majority of the female working population are in the informal sector, they are not protected by these laws (MCRB 2017). New provisions also require that owners of large factories employing more than 100 women with young children must provide onsite day-care. There has been limited data on the application of this law, although anecdotal evidence suggests it is not being implemented (Kyaw 2016).

Myanmar imposed a temporary ban on migration for domestic purposes in 2014, which has significantly increased the risk of movement for women. The ban aims to protect women from extreme abuses. But the result is that women are now more likely to move as irregular migrants which limits their protections in the destination country (Pollock 2017). There has been pressure by advocacy groups to lift the ban to help regularize the movement of women (MCRB 2015).

New laws (currently in draft) may have a significant impact on women workers. In particular, legislation to strengthen occupational health and safety could substantially improve working conditions in the female dominated garment sector (see below). A draft law on sexual and gender-based violence includes provisions to end harassment and violence and work, although in its current iteration the law is considered too weak to be effective (MCRB 2015; DFAT 2017).

Responsibility for women's economic empowerment in government

The Union-level government plays a strong role in economic development in Myanmar, including responsibility for managing licenses in the lucrative natural resources sectors. Within government, responsibility for women's economic empowerment cuts across many ministries. MoSWRR has a coordination and convening function in implementing NSPAW. Relevant line ministries include: Ministry of Planning and Finance (which implements business and investment regulations); Ministry for Labour, Immigration and Population (which includes the Department of Factories and General Labour Laws Inspection that enforce labour laws); Ministry of Industry (implements legislation regarding SMEs); and line Ministries relating to particular sectors (Luther 2016; MCRB 2015; World Bank 2015b).

Part Two: Social norms and unpaid care work

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2016) noted that patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory stereotypes regarding the roles of women in the family were persistent in Myanmar society. Studies reveal two pervasive misperceptions regarding gender equality: that it actually does not exist in Myanmar; and that it is not critical to becoming a modern, developed and democratic nation (Oxfam, Troicare, CARE & Action Aid 2013; GEN 2015; Williams 2017). One study found that many women leaders felt that gender equality was solely a social welfare issue, rather than central to the aims economic growth and poverty reduction (Oxfam, Troicare, CARE & ActionAid 2013). In recognition of this issue, NSPAW includes a specific goal to eliminate the customs, superstitions and beliefs that are obstacles to women's access to information about the economic sector (MoSWRR 2013).

Opportunities for work and livelihoods are strongly gendered. Work for men and women are typically positioned as: hard work as opposed to easy or light work; inside work as opposed to outside work; and

productive work as opposed to reproductive work. Prevalent gender norms pitch men as the household leader and breadwinner, with the work of a man considered more valuable than that of a woman (GEN 2015). Wage disparities and gender-specific recruitment practices reflect this belief (see above).

Family responsibilities keep women out of the workforce in Myanmar. Of those outside the labour force, 63.9 percent of women said that they did not work due to family and housework responsibilities, compared to only 13.9 per cent of men. And gender expectations appear to be present from a young age. Girls are far more likely to engage in all types of household chores than boys, whether or not they also engaged in paid work (MoLESS & CSA 2016).

Although the number of women engaging in the economy is increasing, this has not led to more equitable responsibility for household work. Women are often left feeling overburdened, rather than gaining any sense of greater equality (GEN 2015). These multiple burdens are particularly restrictive for poor and economically vulnerable women (Oxfam, Trocaire CARE & ActionAid 2013). A small UNDP study in 2012 showed that women spent four or five times more per day on reproductive and domestic tasks than men (cited in ADB & UN 2016). Role reversal can bring social stigma, and appears to take place only in the poorest households out of necessity. Frustrations about not being able to live up to norms can sometimes lead to drug and alcohol abuse in men, as well as domestic violence (GEN 2015).

Gender norms influence the type of work women undertake. Women are more likely to be hired for part-time employment or in sectors, occupations, and tasks considered appropriate for women. Women dominate in teaching and nursing (which fits the stereotype of women as carers). Although many women work across the education sector, they are rarely the rectors of educational institutions (ADB & UN 2016). Recruitment for senior roles is at times open only to male applicants, whereas junior jobs are generally not gender-specified (DFAT 2017). Women are more likely to work in the garment industry and to contribute to family-owned enterprises (MoIP 2016). Large numbers of women work in agriculture, but undertake what are viewed as “gender appropriate” (and less well paid) tasks (GEN 2016). Many women working in family businesses are considered to be in vulnerable employment, defined by inadequate earnings, lack of social protection, low productivity, and difficult work conditions (ADB & UN 2016).

Social constraints, poverty and other factors may combine to draw women into more dangerous work. Women are more often engaged in the informal sector, and in work that is unregulated and isolated (MoLESS & CSA 2016; GEN 2016). For example, although the mining industry in Myanmar is contributing substantially to economic growth, few women work in large mines. However, women make up half the workforce in small-scale artisanal mines. These mines are mostly in poorer, ethnic minority areas, and are labor-intensive, hazardous, and unsafe. Children accompanying their mothers often end up working as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women paid less than men in these worksites. They are also exposed to greater health issues due to the type of work they undertake, and are at greater risk of sexual abuse (ADB & UN 2016). Many young girls in poor, rural families drop out of school to contribute to family income, taking up domestic work, or work in factories or karaoke bars – where they are at risk of exploitation, including trafficking (GEN 2015)

Part Three: Access to assets, finance and markets

Major reforms are underway in Myanmar to improve access to credit, assets and markets. The Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (2016) recommended that Myanmar intensify efforts to include women in the formulation of policies regarding economic development and access to finance. It also recommended increased efforts to eliminate customs and practices that restrict women’s access to economic resources. NSPAW sets a specific priority on women’s

access to credit, resources, assets and economic benefits. Separate sectoral reforms aim to improve women's access to land.

Access to finance and assets

Limited access to credit and financial services represents a binding constraint on growth, and on economic engagement for both men and women (ADB 2017). The formal banking and finance sector in Myanmar is at an early stage of development. Myanmar ranked as 175 out of 190 countries for access to credit in the Doing Business Survey, the lowest in South East Asia. Myanmar was found to have weak mechanisms to enforce rights for both borrowers and lenders, and had extremely limited capacity for sharing credit information (World Bank 2017).

In 2014, fewer than five per cent of adults had a bank account in Myanmar compared with 69 per cent in the East Asia & Pacific region (UNCDF & LIFT 2014; World Bank 2014a). Most people in Myanmar rely on unregulated providers or family and friends to meet their need for financial services at a substantially higher cost than regulated providers. Due to government-supported agricultural financing schemes, people in some rural areas can better access credit than in urban areas (UNCDF & LIFT 2014).

Microfinance is an important source of finance for poor women in Myanmar, but may not meet demand as businesses grow. Microfinance has reached about 2.8 million people in Myanmar. The NGO Pact, the largest microfinance provider in the country, has reached more than 670,000 individuals, 98 per cent of whom are women who may not otherwise access finance. But as businesses grow, they need services beyond microfinance. For example, women successfully producing high value crops have noted that loan ceilings prevented microfinance products being used to fund expansion (ADB & UN 2016).

Women often have highly insecure land ownership, which means they may not meet collateral requirements for formal loans. Current land laws state that land must be registered in the name of the head of the household. However, women are generally listed as dependents on identification documents (GEN 2015). There is no legal mechanism for joint ownership of property, and no framework for women to defend their rights upon divorce or death of their husband. Of male-headed households working in agriculture, 98 per cent had access to agricultural land compared to only 61 per cent of female-headed households. And the average parcel of landholdings for female-headed households was almost 20 per cent smaller than that of their male counterparts (Ministry of Agriculture [2010] cited in ADB & UN 2016, 44). Under religious customary laws that govern succession, inheritance and marriage, husbands and sons often inherit property (ADB & UN 2016).

A National Land Use Policy was approved by the outgoing government in January 2016, providing a framework for reforming land law to make it more gender equitable. It followed lobbying by women's groups and includes a chapter on gender equality addressing inheritance and divorce (MCRB 2017).

Access to markets

In the last few years, the social and economic networks of people living in villages across Myanmar have expanded due to improved telecommunications, migration networks, road infrastructure and market access (Pursch *et al.* 2017). However, many of the basic building blocks for market access are still highly underdeveloped. On the availability and quality of transport infrastructure, the World Economic Forum (2014) ranked Myanmar last out of 138 countries. Although Myanmar has abundant energy resources, only one quarter of the country's population has access to electricity. Even in places where electricity is available, supply is often unreliable (KPMG 2013). On the other hand, mobile phones penetration is

expected to grow and offers inexpensive routes for accessing information. There is still a gap in control over mobile phones, but women are increasing uptake at a rapid rate (Scott 2017).

ASEAN integration may improve international market access in the years to come, but indications are that women benefit less than men from major economic corridors (DFAT 2016). A study in Laos and Cambodia found that although cross-border trade had the potential to empower women to work outside the home, most small-scale women traders faced specific constraints and discrimination. Some of these included: women's comparative time constraints; the higher cost of safe transport for women; and tighter capital constraints (World Bank 2015c).

Migration can expand women's to access labour markets, and can drive economic growth. The 2014 Census showed that women made up 53 per cent of recent internal migrants. The most common reasons for women to migrate internally were to follow family (46.8 per cent) and for employment (27.6 percent). The largest flow took place from the Ayewaddy region to Yangon. Most of these migrants were women and many moved to work in manufacturing jobs. It is likely women migrated to work in the garment industry in the Yangon industrial zone, which hosts half of all female migrant manufacturing workers in the city (MoLIP 2016, GMS Triangle 2015). Remittances are often sent home by migrants using hundi systems (a traditional form of brokered credit) to supplement family incomes (ADB & UN 2016).

Irregular migration overseas may expose women to risks of exploitation, trafficking and abuse. The Census (2014) found that four per cent of the Myanmar population had migrated overseas, of which 39 per cent were women. This is likely underreported, with respondents reluctant to report irregular migration. Most women migrants were aged between 15 and 24 years (MoLIP 2016, GMS Triangle 2015). The primarily ethnic minority areas from which migration often originates closely correlates with parts of the country where identification documents are less prevalent. Lack of identification makes it difficult to access formal worker registration schemes in Thailand, the destination for 77 per cent of women migrants (GMS Triangle 2015). It is likely that most women are migrating for employment in domestic work. As discussed, Myanmar's migration ban on domestic work increases the irregular migration of women. Cross-border social networks may reduce the cost and risk of migration, as implied by the fact that women that migrate overseas do so from a small number of districts in Myanmar (MoLIP 2016).

Part Four: Business culture and practices

There is little data available on many aspects of women's lives, but statistics are particularly scant on women and the economy (especially in the private sector). In a study of gendered barriers to women in the economy, DFAT (2016) noted that the lack of data was a critical constraint in understanding women's role in business in Myanmar and in developing gender responsive economic policy. NSPAW does not contain specific objectives that relate to changing business culture. However, it does aim to improve women's access to vocational training and marketable location-relevant training. Under the separate Women, Education and Training objective, NSPAW highlights the need for training and skill building support for women (MoSWRR 2013).

The vast majority of businesses in Myanmar (estimated at around 620,000) operate informally. The Ministry of Interior estimates that another 100,000 SMEs are registered in Myanmar (however, there is no unified business registry in the country, DFAT 2016).

Although data are scant on women's representation on boards and in senior management in the private sector, anecdotal evidence suggests this is low. A number of recent gender analyses of Myanmar have

called for quotas and other measures to improve the situation (DFAT 2016; ADB & UN 2016). Most Myanmar businesses are registered with male heads of companies. Only 27 per cent of registered firms are owned by women and 29 per cent are managed by women (World Bank 2015b). Female entrepreneurs (along with their male counterparts) primarily work in the services and manufacturing sector. Many women entrepreneurs work in the garment sector (IFC 2017). Although women reported making decisions on financial matters, they generally felt men have the authority for significant business decisions due to company hierarchies (ADB & UN 2016).

Few studies provide direct insight into the gender-related obstacles in business, but there is a clear basis to assume that general barriers more acutely affect women. The 2015 Investment Climate Assessment for Myanmar found the top obstacle to building a business for micro and small firms was access to finance. Access to land was the second most significant obstacle for micro and small firms, and the top obstacle for medium firms (World Bank 2015b). It is assumed women are more restricted by these obstacles, given gender-related barriers to accessing finance and land discussed earlier.

A gender pay gap of 25 per cent exists in Myanmar. Social and cultural factors undermine women's advancement in the workplace. In 2015, the average daily wage for men (including monthly equivalents) was 5,320 kyats (AUD \$5.20) per day compared to 3,990 kyats (AUD \$3.90) per day for women. This represents a 25 per cent pay gap (MoLESS & CSA 2016). Pay differences are justified by social and cultural norms (GEN 2015). Research notes that women struggle to advance their careers due to social and cultural factors playing out in the workplace, regardless of a lack of formal barriers to promotion. Female business leaders reported insults, threats and efforts to sabotage their work. They believed this was the usual experience of women attempting to start a business (Oxfam, Troicare, CARE & Action Aid 2013).

Although workplace skills have been identified as an obstacle to business, the training system is not highly responsive to demands. Only 15 per cent of private firms in Myanmar invest in training, below the average for the region (World Bank 2014b). A 2014 study found that Myanmar's technical and vocational training system was heavily supply-driven. There was no alignment training to the needs of business, or to address the specific challenges faced by women or other groups (Milio, Garnizova & Shkreli 2014).

There are limited legal protections against sexual harassment in the workplace, and planned new laws are considered too weak to address this. This gap was noted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2016. A comprehensive report into violence against women in Myanmar recommended that companies develop internal policies to address and respond to sexual violence and harassment (GEN 2014). However, implementation may be challenging - some Myanmar business leaders (including women) have expressed dismissiveness towards this issue (MBF 2016).

Part Five: Women's visibility, collective voice and representation

Women are profoundly underrepresented in politics, business organisations and economic administration across Myanmar, although represented by an active civil society. NSPAW includes objectives to improve opportunities for women to engage in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society. Specific goals aim to increase women in decision-making positions at institutions concerning livelihoods, the economy and development projects (MoSWRR 2013). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2016) recommended Myanmar adopt temporary special measures to guarantee and accelerate the participation of women in political and public life.

Women in politics

It is no doubt significant for women in the country to have such a visible, and generally revered, role model as the leader of government in Myanmar. In her newly established role as State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi is the first female leader of government, despite the constitutional bar that prevents her from being President. Her National League for Democracy (NLD) party adopted policies for preferential selection of women, ethnic minorities, and youth as parliamentary candidates (Minoletti 2016). The election in 2015 brought a dramatic increase in the number of women both contesting (and winning) seats. Women now occupy 14.5 per cent of all elected seats in the Union Parliament, rising from the previous 5.9 per cent. Similar increases were evident at the state/regional level (Ninh 2016).

However, women continue to significantly underrepresented in politics. The male-dominated military appoints 25 per cent of unelected seats in the Union Parliament. Only two of the 166 military seats in the Union Parliament were filled by women in the previous parliament (Minoletti 2016). Even with recent electoral gains, the proportion of women in the Union Parliament is low: women hold only 10 per cent of all seats (including those unelected, World Bank 2016b). Significant change is difficult in the short-term given the 25 per cent military seats are guaranteed by the constitution (and change requires a super majority which needs more than 75 per cent to pass). Although NSPAW promotes quotas for female parliamentarians, Aung San Suu Kyi has indicated she does not support such measures. She is currently the only female out of 20 cabinet ministers (Minoletti 2016).

Women in the public sector

Across all levels of government, men dominate leadership roles in institutions key to economic management. In 2014, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development (MoNPED) employed 57.6 per cent women and 61.7 per cent women respectively. But women made up only 28.6 per cent of leadership roles in MoF and 40 per cent in MoNPED. Women were mainly found in middle management rather than more senior positions (Minoletti 2016). At the subnational level, women's representation is worse. In 2014, there was not a single female township administrator anywhere in Myanmar. The appointed township administrator is the most powerful official at the local level (Minoletti 2014). At the further decentralized level of village tract/ward administrators only 42 women were elected out of a total of 16,785 positions (or 0.25 per cent) in 2012 (UNDP 2015, p2). The Yangon City Development Committee employed 48.5 per cent female workers but women held only 17.8 per cent of senior positions (Minoletti 2014).

Women in peak bodies for business

Women are underrepresented in peak bodies for businesses in Myanmar. The Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) is a non-governmental organisation that represents the interests of the private sector. There have been modest increases in the number of women admitted to the UMFCCI executive – rising from zero to nine per cent of members as at 2016. Women tend to be clustered in particular sectors, with very few women participating in committees that focus on business information, industrial relations, and the ASEAN community. UMFCCI also hosts the Myanmar Business Forum (MBF). The MBF provides a platform for dialogue between private sector and government to improve the business environment through regulatory reforms. Women account for 5-10 per cent of the Executive Committee and Working Groups in the MBF (DFAT 2016).

There are, however, several active private sector networks that promote women in business. The Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association (MWEA) was established in 1995. It is an active member association of the UMFCCI, and part of the recently formed ASEAN Women's Entrepreneurs Network. The Myanmar Young Entrepreneurs Association (MYEA) was formed in 2012. It has a balanced number of men

and women among its members. The purpose of MYEA is to provide access to networking, knowledge and encouragement young entrepreneurs (DFAT 2016).

Women in labour unions

Labour unions have become important for workers in some female-dominated industries (including the garment industry). The Myanmar garment industry comprised around 300 factories and a workforce of nearly 300,000 people in 2015. Around 90 per cent of these workers were estimated to be young women (Oxfam 2015). Global retail companies like Gap, H&M and Adidas have recently started operations in Myanmar. Industry representatives project growth in industry value from US\$912 million in 2012 to US\$8-10 billion a year in 2022, eventually employing up to 1.5 million workers (Oxfam 2015). Levels of organisation in the garment industry (8-10 per cent) exceed that of the overall economy (0.4 per cent). This covers around 25 per cent of all garment factories (MCRB 2015).

The garment industry highlights some of the difficulties faced by female workers. Minimum wage legislation sets out a standard 44-hour work week and a basic wage. Garment workers are routinely working longer hours and for less pay. Even when overtime increased wages, most workers reported not being able to meet daily costs. Many spend more than half their wages on accommodation alone. This carries risks of entrenching poverty. Almost one in four workers is the sole income earner in their family, and 95 per cent reported that they support other family members. Occupational health and safety concerns are serious. Around 39 per cent of workers reported suffering an injury at work. More than a third of workers reported they worked on an ad hoc basis without formal contracts, which helps employers skirt legal protections (Oxfam 2015).

Women in the household

Women's visibility in the community and participation in family decision-making are curtailed by gender norms. Only 20 per cent of households in Myanmar were female-headed. Only 13 per cent of female-headed households actually contain males and most women were widows (cited in ADB & UN 2016, p38). As heads of households, men are expected to handle social communications and usually represent the family in community matters. Women are often given responsibility for managing the household finances (GEN 2015). Although disaggregated data on household decision-making in Myanmar is limited, Myanmar is likely to follow global trends where women take responsibility for small daily expenditures, but men control larger expenditures. Even when female heads of household earn income from their land (or through non-farm work), it is often appropriated by males in the households (ADB & UN 2016).

Women's networks

Currently, community and civil society groups provide the most opportunities for women to take on leadership and decision-making roles. Myanmar has a long history of community activism, but its shape has shifted in recent years. In the past, many women's groups operated in exile (usually Thailand) and concentrated on advocacy that aimed to influence the policies of the international community towards Myanmar. There is now greater space for women's groups to engage with the Myanmar government. To date this engagement has focused on MoSWRR, and there has been less formal engagement with other ministries and political parties (Minoletti 2016).

Some of the largest women's groups working on gender equality are the Women's Organisations Network of Myanmar (WON) and the Gender Equality Network (GEN). These organisations play an important role in advocacy and government accountability on gender issues. GEN provided technical assistance to the

MoSWRR to develop NSPAW. Neither GEN or WON has had a strong focus on women's economic empowerment, but some members run programs in these areas (USAID 2016).

There are also some other large organisations with a presence from village tract level to Union level: Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAFF) and Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA). In the past, they were closely associated with the military (Minoletti 2016). However, the MWAFF will soon be restructured as an independent organisation (Zaw 2016).

Women's groups have also been leading advocacy for increasing women's participation in the peace process. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2016) noted the importance of framing the peace process in line with international principles regarding women, peace and security. The peace process is likely to shape the future state of Myanmar, including provisions for sharing natural resource revenues (ADB & UN 2016).

The Myanmar National Council for Women's Affairs (MNCWA) has the potential to play a central role in the implementation of NSPAW. It is chaired by the Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and contains representatives from government and non-government organisations (MoSWRR 2017). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2016) recommended that MNCWA received adequate funding and resources to achieve its mandate. To date, however, it has not played an active role in implementing NSPAW (DFAT 2017).

Part Six: Summary

Women face many gender-related obstacles to economic empowerment in Myanmar. At this time when economic, social and political institutions are in a state of change, there is an opportunity to develop an environment in Myanmar that will promote gender equality. And there is evidence that things are moving in a positive direction. However, poverty is widespread and institutions are often weak. Economic disadvantage is not the exclusive domain of women, but it seems undeniable that many obstacles to economic empowerment are faced exclusively, or more acutely, by women.

Some of the most significant to barriers to women's economic empowerment in Myanmar include: discriminatory constitutional provisions and land laws; lack of access to finance; weak implementation of labour laws; gender norms restricting roles for women; a persistent gender pay gap; restrictions on movement; low levels of formal employment; and poor representation across economic, social and political institutions. Perhaps the greatest cross-cutting challenge to developing policy and programs to address these obstacles is the profound lack of data on women in the economy.

Due to the stage of Myanmar's development, these issues are highly interrelated. Reforms required to address these barriers are widespread and overlap. Many barriers combine to compound the disempowerment of women. Other factors (like ethnicity, geography, poverty and migratory status) may enhance disadvantage for women. Greater disaggregated data will be critical to unpacking these issues.

Inclusive economic growth will be critical to improving the situation of Myanmar's women. Growth that occurs without improvements on gender issues will only exacerbate existing divisions. For example, if economic empowerment is to result from growth in the garment industry, wages and conditions for workers must simultaneously improve. Otherwise it could potentially serve to entrench poverty among the more than a million women workers it is projected to employ in the coming years. If the economy grows without reforms to land laws, the disempowerment of women in Myanmar will only deepen.

Momentum for individual areas of reform is difficult to ascertain due to the distinct political situation in Myanmar. The new government took power a year ago, following decades of military rule. Reforms are needed across a number of areas. But the absence of a well-articulated and prioritized national development plan makes assessing government commitment to any particular reform extremely difficult. The arrival of a female leader of government is positive, given the generally low visibility of women across political, economic and social institutions. Although Aung San Suu Kyi has not positioned herself as a champion for gender equality, the current government is expected to be more focused on gender issues. It remains to be seen whether gender considerations will be incorporated in its development policies.

NSPAW provides a solid framework to guide reforms to improve women's economic empowerment. It aims to address many of the key obstacles faced by women in Myanmar. Renewed momentum for NSPAW is promising. But implementation needs resourcing and commitment from across government. This will be tested as a costed implementation plan is developed this year. Ideally NSPAW would be directly linked to a prioritized national development plan, and to sectoral development policies.

It is also important to note that many women engage in the economy outside of legal protections. Promoting the visibility of these women, and strengthening existing community protections will be important while broader government reforms are pending. Labour unions have become increasingly significant for many working Myanmar women. Civil society has always played a strong role in Myanmar for advocating for women outside the formal system, and this needs to continue to ensure the interests of these women are also considered in future policies and programs.

Although the uncertain environment is not conducive to detailed recommendations about next steps for development partners, there are some immediately obvious gaps. For example, development partners can continue to support efforts to collect and analyse sex disaggregated data by government, and other stakeholders. More disaggregated reporting and sharing of information between government and development partners could help to fill gaps. In turn, new data can be used as a basis for evidence-based legal, policy and regulatory change that removes barriers for women's economic empowerment. Special attention could be paid to the implementation of existing legal protections, particularly in the burgeoning garment industry given its expected growth. Support may also be useful to the Women's Development Division secure additional funding and resources in the next budget to implement NSPAW. Women's groups have been critical in demanding changes to discriminatory laws and practices, including access to land and safe migration, and should be supported to extend their engagement with key economic ministries.

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