



WOMEN, WORK, AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

MYANMAR

Exploring the relationship between women's income generation and their experiences of violence

APPROACH

Data was collected applying an intersectional approach capturing a range of women from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- Women from all backgrounds are vulnerable to both public sphere violence and intimate partner violence (IPV).
- Poor women are more likely to use public transport, where much public violence is experienced, and they also suffer most from IPV.
- Women in the higher economic strata are more likely to experience violence that is explicitly associated with 'backlash' to income generation.
- Domestic violence is normalised across economic, migration and age categories.
- Rural-urban migrants experience greater levels of public sphere violence and bullying in Yangon, and they typically do not have supportive family structures to enable them to leave undesirable working environments.
- Many migrant women working in the garment sector live alone and send money to their village families.

RESPONSES

- On its own, having an income does not result in less experience of violence against women either in private or public spheres.
- Confidence gained through work outside the home does lead to greater willingness to resist violence in public, but this does not translate into resisting violence at home.
- Membership of a women's organisation is more significant than income earning for poorer women, in terms of building resilience to end/challenge violence against women (VAW) and helping them overcome the traditional shame associated with victimhood.
- Professional women are less likely to engage with organisations with a specific VAW component because talking about IPV is considered shameful.

THE MYANMAR CONTEXT

Society

- Marriage and divorce are governed by different laws depending on religious background.
- Trafficking is a serious problem in Myanmar.
- Media is heavily censored and state-controlled.
- Labour unions have been legalised.

Law

- There are laws related to inflicting bodily harm, but none that relate to domestic violence.
- The Penal Code prohibits sexual harassment and stipulates punishments.
- Rape is illegal in Myanmar but the law is not enforced.
- The Constitution includes a provision granting amnesty to all members of the regime.
- Labour laws do not specifically prohibit gender discrimination.

Community and household

- Customary law often overrides national law in local adjudication.
- Women are subject to forced labour in various ways.
- Community-based religious leaders have a strong influence but are male biased.
- Strong cultural barriers do not appear to be in place to prevent girls' education.

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Stereotypes still exist in our community and in the minds of women. These stereotypes are not open and clear. For example, in a gender-based violence case, women usually look down on the victim instead of protecting her.

These views or thoughts are barriers for women.

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Quote from a focus group

IN DEPTH COMMUNITY STUDY IN YAE OAK KAN VILLAGE

The area selected for study of women from *lower economic backgrounds* was Yae Oak Kan Village, which borders the industrial zone of the Hlaing Tharyar township in Yangon. This community is surrounded by factories, most of which predominantly hire women.

KEY FINDINGS

- Many women say they would work even if they don't need to.
- So called 'everyday' forms of psychological violence as well as physical forms such as shoving and slapping are accepted as norms.
- It is easier for women to find some forms of secure employment than for men, e.g. in factories, but there is discrimination in terms of both gender and age, and men dominate the senior management positions.
- There is a gradual shift towards challenging unfair treatment supported by unionisation.
- Women employed as domestic servants are particularly prone to violence.
- There are concerns over increased occurrence of muggings and rapes, particularly among night shift workers.
- Divorce remains a stigma and few raised the possibility of leaving an abusive husband.
- Alcohol is seen as a central factor leading to IPV.

INSIGHT FROM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AROUND YANGON IN PROFESSIONAL WORK

Twenty interviews were conducted with women from good economic backgrounds working in professions in various sectors including medicine, the (I)NGO sector, corporate business and entrepreneurial activities.

- Discrimination is fairly commonly experienced by women working in various professions.
- There is no strong tendency to challenge discrimination.
- In homes, domestic duties are commonly shared and domestic workers are often employed.
- Women feel vulnerable in public spaces, and in taxis, and there is a tendency to blame the victim.

INSIGHTS FROM ORGANISATIONAL STUDIES

These insights are to assess the impact of associated training and networking on women's experiences of and responses to violence. The scoping phase identified two distinct programmes for analysis:

(1) AKHAYA

Akhaya is a relatively prominent domestic NGO which regularly speaks out in public forums about women's rights issues. A focus group approach was taken to engage with Akhaya staff, and with women engaged in Akhaya's women's empowerment training.

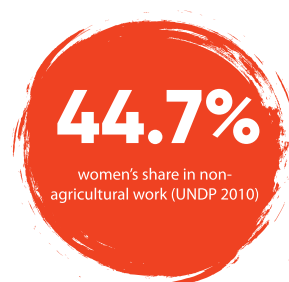
- Working practices are viewed as discriminatory

(2) UNDP SELF-RELIANCE PROGRAMME

This programme works across Myanmar to promote women's autonomy. Fifteen focus groups were conducted with women members from throughout Myanmar at a pre-organised UNDP gathering in Yangon. These women have been engaged in microfinance activities, and more recently in anti-VAW training.

- Working participants from rural areas say they have to do all the home chores.
- Rural women also report higher levels of sexual harassment and abuse.
- They do not relate their lack of safety to work or commuting but do feel anxious when travelling.
- Women often carry implements as weapons.
- This group are more likely to blame violent behaviour on men's ignorance of women's rights.
- They face many forms of domestic violence including spousal rape, child marriage, beating with fists and verbal/psychological abuse.
- Many participants stated that pressures related to poverty and, in particular, those related to masculinity were core causes of violence.
- Men also get angry when they do not have a son.

The strongest finding to come out of this part of the study is arguably the message that membership of women's organisations offers much stronger social support networks than employment or traditional peer activities.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote local women's organisations and build capacity to challenge VAW and advocate for survivors, including extending support to professional women.
- Programmes to challenge the gendering of work are crucial.
- Work-based harassment policies and procedures need to be reviewed across sectors and evidence of good practice identified and encouraged more strongly.
- Women-only transport schemes are clearly needed.
- Official structures that are supportive of women are required. This must target the various levels of community authority, including ward administrators (village tracts in rural areas), police and judiciary.

