



Gender in the Myanmar Media Landscape

Full report: Yangon, Kayin, Saggaing,
Shan and across Myanmar



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GENDER IN THE MYANMAR MEDIA LANDSCAPE
Yangon, Kayin, Saggaing, Shan and Across Myanmar

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TV reporters from the local stations of Burma News International interview representatives from Women's League of Burma.
Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

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www.mediasupport.org



Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

Dear reader,

Gender bias in media content can harm the development of democratic and peaceful societies – a reality that has been acknowledged and highlighted in recent years. In a global context less than one out of four people represented in the news is a woman, and this proportion has remained unchanged during the last five years according to the Global Media Monitoring study from 2015. Myanmar is not a part of this particular study but still well in line with the global trend according to available studies. In Myanmar media outlets, the majority of news sources are men, and their predominance is particularly pronounced among experts and when it comes to “hard” topics, such as politics, security and economics.

Interestingly enough this gender imbalance is kept in a media environment where women now make up the majority of staff. Alongside men, women seem to be reproducing the gender imbalance and gender stereotypes in the content they produce. In order to make the voices of both men and women heard, there is an urgent need for awareness raising among media professionals on all levels. Gender sensitization activities for journalist students and working journalists, as well as leadership and media owners is key.

The concept of gender is still quite unknown in Myanmar, and is often misunderstood as a word only related to women. As human beings we rarely engage in something that we don't see the advantages of. This is why there won't be an incentive for true change until gender equality is understood as equal rights and responsibilities for women and men, boys and girls. There's a need for both logic and creative story telling to explain how gender equality forms an integrated part of democracy, peace and development. The bottom line is the fact that gender equity is not a special interest – but an essential building block of democracy and prosperity.

Media outlets play an essential role in the promotion of gender equity and equality in the Myanmar society. This study is based on UNESCO's gender indicators for media development, and aims to identify minimum standards to protect and promote gender equality within Myanmar's media industry and to provide practical recommendations that could enhance the understanding of gender among media practitioners.

The data gathered through this survey and the analyses are expected to be used in strategizing the educational programme of the newly established Myanmar Journalism Institute (MJII) as well as to inform the media industry at large.

A first report mainly focused on Yangon was published in March 2015. In this report additional data from the regions of Kayah, Sagaing and Shan has been integrated to paint a fuller picture of the complex reality that forms the media in Myanmar.

Johan Romare

International Director, Fojo Media Institute

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are grateful to International Media Support (IMS) and Sweden (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) for supporting this study on gender and the Myanmar media. We are indebted to all participants of focus groups, interviewees and respondents of questionnaires who generously gave their time and shared their experiences to make this study participatory, comprehensive, and rich.

The study was lead by Agneta Söderberg Jacobson, Project Manager for the Fojo Media Institute, Sweden. Björn Widmark, Fojo Media Institute, and Anette Emanuelsson, Global Reporting, edited the research.

TEAM

The field research was carried out by:



Dilrukshi Handunnetti

Dilrukshi Handunnetti is a multiple award-winning journalist, counting two decades of mainstream journalism.

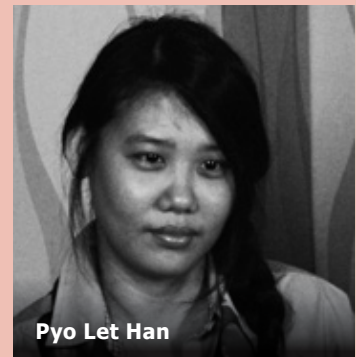
A lawyer by training, she has specialized in investigative reporting, in addition to international affairs, political reporting and column writing. Her work has been published in leading English publications in Sri Lanka as well as Al Jazeera, Reuters, IRIN, SciDevNet and a host of regional publications. She writes, edits and trains journalists and currently serves as co-convenor of the South Asian Women in Media, Sri Lanka Chapter and co-coordinator in Gender for the International Federation of Journalists, Asia Pacific.



Nang Phyu Phyu Lin

Nang Phyu Phyu Lin is an independent gender and development consultant, known as Myanmar feminist and women's rights activist. She serves as co-chair of the Gender Equality Network (GEN) and interim chair of AGIPP, Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process.

She was gender advisor at CARE International in Myanmar for ten years and currently serves as a gender resource person of the NGO Gender Groups and other women's organizations who provide technical support across Myanmar. She has a master's degree in gender and development from the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand and an MBA from the Institute of Economics in Myanmar.



Pyo Let Han

Pyo Let Han is a freelance writer/novelist and consultant, as well as a devoted feminist advocate. Currently she is on the board of directors of the women's rights organisation RAINFALL. In 2014 she was recognised by the Women Organization Network with the "Women and Media" award.

She has published three novels and a book portraying women leaders, and is currently working on her fourth book.

Pyo Let Han graduated from Dagon University with an English major. She and her colleagues run the RAINFALL Myanmar Feminist Magazine, aiming to tackle issues such as religion and traditional and social practices which have an impact on women's rights and development.



Shwe Paw Mya Tin is one of the future graduates of the Myanmar Journalism Institute.
Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gender in the Myanmar Media Landscape report was undertaken to inform the Myanmar Journalism Institute (MJI) as well as the media industry at large on the current status of gender equity in Myanmar and shed light on the relative position of the women in media and their role and representation in networks and other professional bodies.

The research included 298 respondents, including 223 survey respondents. Slightly more than half of the respondents were women. The research was carried out in two phases. The first research phase was mainly focused on Yangon, the second on the regions of Kay-in, Sagaing and Shan.

The research questions focused to derive answers to were the following:

1. Women's representation in media houses, including women in decision-making roles.
2. Gender equity in work and working conditions.

3. Terms and conditions of employment and policies.
4. Career advancement and training for women.
5. Women's participation in media networks and associations.
6. Women's portrayal and content generated for women.
7. Ethnic media challenges from a gender perspective.

KEY FINDINGS

■ The Myanmar media industry reflects global trends to the extent that women are well represented in newsrooms in terms of numbers but media institutions remain significantly male-dominated at the decision making level.*

■ Safety is a major concern for women media professionals within the workplace as well as on their assignments. Prejudice, discrimination in participation of advanced training (safety etc.) and sexual harassment are obstacles that hinder women from working on equal footing with men.

* A correction has been made on page 11 in this edited version of the report concerning proportion of women in the news media industry. There is no available official data on this subject.

- A majority of women journalists' careers appeared to end with marriage and/or childbirth. A majority of the respondents agreed that re-entry after childbirth was difficult for women journalists.
- In Yangon, a vast majority of respondents claimed they have never experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces, though some mentioned having experienced harassment of a non-sexual kind. However, senior women journalists attending a focus group discussion did not agree on this view.
- In Kayin, Sagaing and Shan, over 50% of respondents had experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces, including from news sources.
- Half of the respondents called for the introduction of gender policies in media institutions to promote equity in the workplace.
- The large majority of media houses lacked institutional mechanisms such as gender policies, gender focal persons, gender editors for news and complaint mechanisms for gender-based violence. However, some media houses made an effort to ensure that half of the news staff was female and provide maternity leave with full pay.
- Focus group results from Kayin state indicate that the conflict and political instability is a key factor behind the relatively low number of women journalists, as parents are strongly opposed to their daughters entering the media industry.
- While there appeared to be a certain level of gender sensitivity among decision makers in the Yangon-based media industry, this was not always visible in the media products, where gender stereotypes seemed to be prevailing.
- Media produced by ethnic groups did not prioritize gender issues and was promoting gender stereotypes since ethnic women are expected to function as bearers of culture and be responsible for preserving traditional norms.
- Women felt unions are focused on issues such as threats, arrests and assaults of journalists with no focus on gender issues and policy.
- 80% of the respondents considered women should not become mere members in media organisations but that it was necessary to form an exclusive trade union for women media workers to address many issues that remain unaddressed.
- There was overwhelming support for the call to implement the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women.
- In Yangon, both men and women considered regular and systematic media monitoring and analysis of gender representation in the media to be vital for Myanmar media and felt there should be gender training for both men and women to foster gender-sensitive newsrooms. In many regions however, gender training is seen as a women only topic.
- Over 50% of the respondents felt there was adequate women's representation in the media houses, but despite a few high-flying women media executives, the majority of women held low-ranking positions, which limited their ability to influence context.
- The highest level of equity was discovered in the distribution of beats with two thirds of women respondents agreeing that they were able to select their rounds, and also cover subjects such as conflict, finance, commerce and politics.
- The portrayal of women in the media appeared to reinforce stereotypes, even when women were in charge of content generation. The content appeared to promote the concept of women as family figures/homemakers or as victims, thus reinforcing women's traditional roles and stereotypes, and failing to capture the diverse roles they play and are able to play in the evolving Myanmar society.
- Women participants at the focus group discussions expressed keenness to advance their careers, including undergoing training, in addition to a strong wish to go beyond loose networks to build strong organisations that are led by women.

COUNTRY PROFILE IN BRIEF

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was annexed by the British in 1885. The country gained complete political independence in 1948 and became a parliamentary democracy. In 1962 the military came to power through a coup d'état and Myanmar was ruled by successive military governments from 1962 to 2011. Its chequered political history is marked by consistent political unrest against military rule.

Since the creation of a new constitution in 2008 and a semi-civilian government in 2010, the country has witnessed extraordinary change to promote democratic change, institutional reform, economic growth, and a peaceful transition. The respect for the right to freedom of expression has increased. However, most laws are still extremely restrictive and the government still controls all the broadcast media and large parts of the printed press.¹ The latter through business licenses.

Following the 2010 elections, a new government that was nominally civilian, including many senior military officers who resigned their military posts for public office, came to power. Under the new government an astonishing degree of change was initiated and laws that denied freedom of speech, association, and movement were revoked. Almost all political prisoners were released and political exiles begun to return, which marked an important turn in the Myanmar media development.

The 2015 general elections saw the National League for Democracy (NLD) party win a sweeping victory. The country is expected to see a major shift following the change of government that took place in early 2016 and there are hopes for an increased freedom of expression, although 25% of the parliament seats are still held by military officers.

The dominance of the largest ethnic group, the Burman or Bamar people, over the country's many minorities has been fuelling a series of long-running rebellions. In 2016 the Myanmar government and eight armed groups signed a ceasefire agreement, aimed at bringing an end to the majority of the country's long-running conflicts, while seven of the 15 armed groups declined to sign. But very few women are at the peace negotiation table and participate in the peace monitoring groups. The on-going conflict in some ethnic areas has proved to be a major challenge for women journalists and jeopardized their safety while covering the conflict.

1. Censored Gender, 2015, Article 19, www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38032/gender-report-v1-3-full.pdf



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

GENDER PROFILE IN BRIEF

Myanmar is home to one of the world's most famous former political prisoners, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was released when the country's on-going process of political transition commenced.

However, her political status and the level of political participation hardly reflects the Myanmar society which is deeply conservative, with the status and role of women shaped by patriarchy, religion, ethnicity and sometimes even the location.

Women's contribution to the Myanmar economy remains low, although female participation in the labour market is 85.7%, compared to 82.9% of men.

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2014 ranked Myanmar 85 out of 155 countries surveyed. The GII also records that 23% of adult women have reached at least the secondary level of education compared to 15% of their male counterparts.

The 2008 Constitution does not mention any benchmarks for women's representation in government and



A women-only focus group discussion.
Photo: Pyo Let Han

even reserves some positions for men only; further limiting the participation of women in political life. As a result of the November 2015 elections, 13% of the newly elected Members of Parliament are women, up from 4.6%. When the seats reserved for the military are included in the equation, this means that just 9.7% of the total number of seats will be filled by women.³

Violence against women, particularly sexual violence in the context of armed conflict, has been reported as being widespread and systematic in Myanmar, an aspect of the Burmese society that has been documented by various organisations.⁴

In one national study, 69% of women reported experiencing one or more incidents of domestic violence within a year. Of the women surveyed, only 25% were aware of their rights and 75% believed domestic violence was “a purely domestic affair which should be solved within the home.”⁵ The violence is not only committed within domestic settings, but also by the community and by the state, exacerbated by armed conflict and displacement. The Myanmar government has endorsed the UN Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, but according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), domestic and sexual violence in Myanmar is “accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity”⁶

Myanmar’s gender inequality is further fuelled by a number of discriminatory customary laws concerning

marriage, property ownership and inheritance rights.⁷ These laws often serve to reinforce stereotypes of women as child-bearers, while projecting men as unquestioned decision-makers, both at home and outside.

Although Myanmar ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1997, and has developed a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022), women continue to experience difficulties in being able to advocate or openly comment on government policy and drive change towards a gender-equal Myanmar. Several organisations have come to the fore and are undertaking researches, capacity building and advocacy work to fight the discrimination of women.

At the time of writing, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement is leading reforms to enhance gender equality and empowerment in collaboration with other government agencies, civil society, academia and the international community.

3. www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17910-woman-mps-up-but-hluttaw-still-90-male.html

4. www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=329ref

5. Censored Gender, 2015, Article 19, www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38032/gender-report-v1-3-full.pdf

6. CEDAW. 2008. Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Myanmar. CEDAW/C/MMR/CO/3.

7. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/24/burma-scrap-proposed-discriminatory-marriage-law>

MEDIA INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

Myanmar's media industry currently reflects some of the broader changes taking place in the country, including the changing role of women. The print, broadcast and online media have suffered strict censorship following the 1962 military coup and Myanmar's freedom of speech and press have suffered long years of control.

Following the political changes that began in Myanmar in August 2012, the new government abolished pre-publication censorship and issued new 'daily' licences⁸ to local publications⁹. It also extended visas for international journalists¹⁰ up to three months and passed a new media law¹¹ in early 2014.

Being a country with a large number of exiled journalists, the return of the exiled journalists since 2012 has been identified as a strong indicator of positive changes taking place in the country's media landscape¹². Media actors Mizzima, Irrawaddy and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), having operated from overseas for many years, have established bureaux inside Myanmar and now have a strong local presence.

In 2010, the World Press Freedom Index of the Paris based Reporters without Borders ranked Myanmar 175th out of 178 countries. In 2015, Myanmar moved up to 144th place, ahead of many of its ASEAN neighbours such as Singapore, as a result of political changes in the country and the fact that censorship has been lifted.

Nevertheless, the media industry in Myanmar continues to face serious challenges as it struggles to re-emerge after many years of media suppression by its military rulers. Non-media laws are still being used to arrest journalists and Myanmar's hard-line approach in handling journalists continues to cause global concern¹³.

The oppressive tactics of the previous military regime included strict censorship and it has left its indelible mark. The weakened media industry is considered a by-product of the same, impacted by serious capacity and ethical issues.

Despite the changes taking place at present, there is concern about the use of various out-dated laws in response¹⁴ to what the government considers poor journalism. The imprisonment of five journalists, commonly referred to as the Unity case¹⁵, highlights the capacity concerns that need to be addressed as a top priority in the development of a robust and independent media in Myanmar.



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

According to government records, there are today 2,000 accredited journalists in Myanmar. There is no confirmed data on the proportion of women within this group. Despite several women at decision-making level, there are only a few publications that actually have women taking critical newsroom decisions.

8. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-04/01/c_132276352.htm

9. <http://www.cpj.org/2012/08/-bangkok-august-20-2012--burma.php>

10. <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2013/02/13/myanmar-offers-3-month-visasto-journalists/>

11. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/visas-0124014153716.html>

12. <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2013/06/an-uneasy-homecoming-for-burmas-exile-media.php>

13. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/03/Burma-repression-marks-press-freedom-day>

14. https://ifex.rg/burma/2014/07/15/unity_journal_protest/

15. <https://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/07/30/Myanmar-chemical-weapons-Unity-Journal-case.aspx?COLLCC=966024244&>

Interview

Eaint Khaing Oo

Taking shape – First ever Women Journalists’ Society

A freelance journalist with the Voice of America (VOA) and a journalism trainer, Eaint Khaing Oo was arrested six years ago, for playing the role of concerned citizen while reporting news.

In 2008, when the devastating Nargis cyclone hit Myanmar, she was working in Yangon, reporting in areas where Chinese migrants were settled, many of which had their livelihood destroyed. When Khaing Oo tried to help the victims by sending them to UNDP and ICRC offices she got arrested. She disregarded the military declaration that said that there were no internally displaced people because of Nargis.

She was sentenced to two years and Khaing Oo is now lucky to be free to practise her craft. Currently she works as a trainer and director of the Media for Community Group.

“My feeling is that women get to choose their beats to a lesser extent than men. When women are assigned, they just do it. Sometimes we don’t know what our interests are, so editors often tend to decide,” Khaing Oo said.

She finds the laws that prevail in Myanmar oppressive and restrictive to women. The various laws, very restrictive in practice, place women in a lower position than men. At present, efforts are being made to propose legal reforms.

“According to one law, when a woman is raped, the perpetrator can compensate the victim’s family by offering a cow. Cows are expensive and this is considered sufficient compensation. So you can rape a woman and offer a cow in return!”

She adds: “Laws are also written by men and this is why women find

highly objectionable provisions contained in these laws. A group has petitioned the parliament with regard to this archaic piece of law, what we call the “Cow Law”, that denies justice. The legal system push women down, so naturally, the newsrooms reflect these deep-rooted biases that immediately make women subservient to men,” said Khaing Oo.



Media owners also prefer to have men at leadership level.

“They don’t encourage women even when they are good. They don’t promote women despite their ability. Even where women are appointed to decision-making roles, the actual decisions are mostly taken by men. Sadly, women also end up accepting this.”

Even when there are competent men and women, generally the job is offered to the man, because male superiority is deeply ingrained in the Burmese culture.

Khaing Oo claims that the lack of insurance coverage and transport for female journalists are problems

caused by the absence of systems: “Women only get one month of paid maternity leave. When pregnant, women give up their work. When children are older, some of them return. By that time, it is often difficult for women to re-enter.”

Khaing Oo believes that being organized is key for women to move their positions forward. In late 2015, Khaing Oo and some of her colleagues founded Myanmar’s first organisation for women journalists – Myanmar Women Journalist Society. The aim is to empower women journalist, offer a platform for networking and to work against gender discrimination in the media industry.

“At the time I entered the industry, we had no training opportunities. The country was closed and opportunities were limited. It was about maintaining a low profile to stay safe. Now there are conflict-sensitive reporting and ethical reporting initiatives in Myanmar. Almost equal opportunities now exist for women to get trained. I attended a safety training programme in Thailand, delivered by a male trainer,” Khaing Oo said.

Khaing Oo’s biggest criticism of women journalists is their own contribution to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. “Women are portrayed as successful only if they are celebrities or married to rich people. Of course there is Aung Sang Suu Kyi and she is page one news but beyond that, success is determined differently. Success is measured by a woman’s ability to handle her home well. Women are never really experts or have their opinions valued.”

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out during two phases that used the same methodology and questionnaires. The first phase had Yangon as its main focus and was carried out in September–November 2014. The second research phase was focused on the towns of Hpa-An (Kayin State), Kalay (Sagaing Division) and Taunggyi (Shan State) and also included respondents from ethnic media outlets. It was carried out in October–December 2015.

The research included 298 respondents, including 223 survey respondents. Slightly more than half of the respondents were women.

22 in-depth interviews with journalists, senior editors/media managers and key representatives of media organisations were conducted in Yangon, Hpa-An, Kalay and Taunggyi. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and for over one and a half hour, covering all aspects of the survey questionnaire.

A total of ten focus group discussions (FGDs) were attended by both junior and senior journalists, male and female, representing print, broadcast and online media in Yangon, Hpa-An, Kalay and Taunggyi.

To ensure data comparability, the study used a standardized, structured questionnaire, focused on six key areas. In addition to assessing Myanmar media's current status, the survey was designed for the purpose of assessing the needs for the promotion of a gender equal media. The second phase included an additional research area: media produced by ethnic groups.

The original questionnaire developed in English was translated into Burmese, the local language that is widely used in Myanmar. The questionnaire was distributed among both women and men of different age groups, religious and ethnic backgrounds and the media houses they represented were also of different sizes and focus.

The survey questionnaire was designed in line with the UNESCO Gender Sensitive Indicators for the Media¹⁶ that promote gender equality within media organisations and in media content.

The survey was designed to derive response to the following key research questions:

1. What is the gender representation in the Myanmar media industry? Trends and recent changes.
2. To what extent are women present in decision-making positions in the media industry?



Photo: Pyo Let Han

3. How is gender reflected in media houses' guidelines and editorial policies? Are they in anyway linked to national policy/priorities?
4. What obstacles do women face in their media careers? How do they overcome them?

The areas covered by the survey are:

1. Women's representation in media houses, including women in decision-making roles.
2. Gender equity in work and working conditions.
3. Terms and conditions of employment and policies.
4. Training and career advancement for women journalists.
5. Women's participation in media networks and associations.
6. Women's portrayal and content generated for women.
7. Ethnic media challenges from a gender perspective.

16. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/crosscutting-priorities/gender-and-media/gender-sensitive-indicators-in-media/>

KEY FINDINGS

■ Women's representation and safety concerns

The study indicated a strong female representation in terms of numbers in the Myanmar media industry. Focus group discussions also pointed towards an increase of women media professionals after 2010, due to the political changes in Myanmar. During the military regime the arrest of media professionals was commonplace and the perception that women should be protected and stay at home was more widespread.

But despite a few high-flying women media executives, the majority of the women hold low-ranking and midlevel positions in the media industry, usually working as lifestyle reporters, feature writers, television anchors, announcers and desk editors. Many of those who have reached higher positions are either working for English language media or have family connections to the management. Generally they are well educated, have long work experience and are considered to be "mentally strong".

In Yangon, half of the survey respondents stated that 25-50% of senior editorial positions in their media organisations are held by women. In the regions outside of Yangon, however, half of the survey respondents said that less than 10% of senior editorial positions in their media organisations are held by women. Only 8% of the respondents stated that 25–50% of senior positions are held by women.

In the states and divisions, the majority of respondent stated that women can take senior positions if they have the capacity needed. However, some respondents claimed that women have to prove their capacity by working twice as hard as a man. Others stressed that women leaders are less qualified than men due to a lack of experience and lower levels of respect from society. The findings show that discriminative attitudes towards women are a key challenge for women who hold leadership positions in the Myanmar media industry.

Safety is a major concern for women media professionals within the workplace as well as on their assignments. Focus group discussions (FGD) results from Kayin state indicate that in conflict areas, the political instability often make parents strongly opposed to their daughters entering the media industry. Unsafe roads are another barrier, making it difficult for women journalists to travel on their assignments.

■ Gender equity in work and working conditions

The highest level of equity was discovered in the distribution of areas of coverage, commonly referred to as beats. Seven out of ten women respondents based in Yangon agreed that they were able to select their beats, including equal opportunities for covering areas such as conflict, finance, human rights, commerce and politics. The majority of male respondents also felt they could choose their beats.

The survey respondents outside of Yangon painted a slightly different picture. Here it was only three out of ten survey respondents who said that women mostly got the opportunity to select their beats.

The top areas covered by women were lifestyle and gender, human rights, education, and health. Women went almost missing in science and technology reporting as well as sports. None of the survey respondents were columnists or analysts, considered a serious male preserve.

Female journalists working in conflict areas were not allowed to cover conflict and war related news due to safety concerns from the media houses, but some female journalists stated that they still took the risk in order to get the news. There were also other stereotypical gender norms limiting women's access to information, for example that they shouldn't go out at night alone or sit and chat with strange men since it can affect their morality.

In the regions, bad road infrastructure is a serious challenge for all journalists, and especially for women. The most popular means of transportation is motorcycle, and many felt unsafe when traveling to remote areas.

The research shows that women are strongly represented in newsrooms in terms of numbers but media institutions remain significantly male dominated at decision-making level. In media organisations where women do have a strong say and are included in decision-making mechanisms, the decisions appear to be more relevant to beats that are generally considered 'soft' or segments that are dedicated to women readers or audiences.

There was a general consensus that women's influence on content was minimal, even in institutions with a large number of women or where they were found in decision-making positions. On the other hand, there were media organisations such as the Yangon Group and Mizzima Media group, though different in approach, contributing

Aye Aye Zin from the Myanmar Journalism Institute does interviews about the traffic in Yangon.
Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo





Community radio might soon be introduced in Myanmar, and for this reason several trainings have been held. Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

towards mainstreaming gender and diversity.

Some of the women journalists who attended the FDGs said that pages dedicated to gender or topics on women were ‘women’s preserve’. Many of them expressed reluctance to share that space with male journalists, claiming their decision-making clout was confined to those pages and therefore, they did not wish to allow any encroachment by men. “We would protect these pages because that’s all we got,” one discussion participant said, justifying the way most women protected their small sphere of influence.

A good indicator of equity is remuneration and benefits. Two thirds of the women said they did not receive equal pay for equal work. Considering that the majority of journalists earn less than 100 US\$ a month, this indicates an especially poor pay structures for women journalists.

One FDG participant said it was socially accepted to have men paid more for the same amount of work and there was a belief that men were better employees than women.

More than half of the respondents called for the introduction of gender policies in media institutions to promote equity in the workplace, and where it exists, to further strengthen those policies. However, about half of the male respondents felt there was no need to introduce national or institutional policies and practices as women have already achieved gender equality in the newsrooms. Most media houses lack sexual harassment policies but they have codes of conduct that sometimes cover such aspects.

To help ensure gender diversity and gender equity in newsrooms, four out of ten women thought there should be more gender-sensitive men in media institutions at all levels while five out of ten men thought it important to have more women-friendly employment policies and practices. About a quarter of the respondents, women and men alike, considered it important to have more women at the decision-making level.

■ Terms and conditions of employment and policies

There is little gender discrimination in recruitment today and both women and men seem to get an equal chance. Although individual examples show that some media organisations use biased selection criteria for women that lead to discrimination based on age, marital status and religion.¹⁷

75% of the respondents said they were entitled to a number of benefits, including annual leave, medical leave, maternity and paternity leave. Only 4% of the respondents said that they were entitled to a travel allowance while only 13% mentioned that they were entitled to annual pay increases.

The respondents also mentioned maternity and paternity leave being available. The latter is considered one of the most progressive labour measures taken in the recent past. In general, government owned media industries provide 6 months of maternity leave with full pay.¹⁸ The majority of women working in ethnic media give up their jobs after giving birth due to social and cultural norms and family pressure. Some women sometimes bring their children to the workplace and let their co-workers help taking care of them.

17. Mya Waday TV channel states that their female employees should be married, aged 35 years or above and Buddhists.
18. The labour law provides for 6 months of maternal leave. Men are also entitled to paternity leave but just for 5–7 days depending on the human resource policy of their employer.

Interview

May Thingyan Hein

Fighting for justice and uncovering the truth

For more than 20 years, May Thingyan Hein has been fighting for justice and uncovering the truth, in spite of continuous harassment and the threat of arrest. Today she is the director of the Myitmakha News Agency.

When May Thingyan Hein first started her journalism career, people would question her professionalism. “How can a woman write an interesting article?” they said. That pushed me to prove my ability and try harder. Finally they recognized my capacity.”

In 2007, May Thingyan was taking photos of the Saffron Revolution, led by Buddhist monks and political activists, when she was arrested for five hours. She tried her best to protect her material but the authorities confiscated the film she took of the protests. Her employer, the business magazine Myanmar Dana, was forced to fire her after that. But she kept on reporting through the magazine Irrawaddy and Voice Of America under various names. Her effort was recognized internationally and she was awarded the 2007 Knight Award by the International Center for Journalists, based in Washington.

In spite of harassment and the threat of arrest, May Thingyan Hein has worked for years with courage and perseverance. She started working as a journalist in 1993. At that time there was no training for journalists but May learned from well-known reporters such as Lu Htu U Sein Win and Saya Nat New, while also engaging in self-study by listening to the BBC news and practicing her writing skills.

In 1998, she was named chief

editor of the Shwe Pa Zun magazine produced by the Ministry of Livestock. She started to cover human rights stories and publish articles demanding justice. May also dared to write about the discovery of bird flu in Myanmar, countering official claims that the deadly virus didn't exist here. May's efforts



May Thingyan Hein
Myitmakha News Agency

and pressure from international groups, including the World Health Organization, forced the government to admit the virus' presence. As a result her name was put on the government blacklist.

Since 2004 May has worked as a freelance journalist using various pen-names. Not only has the government tried to intimidate her but she also faces sexual harassment in her daily work, often coming from her sources. When making an appointment for an interview over the phone she might be told that since her voice is lovely, maybe she is too. “In order to reduce violence against women, some of our harmful customs and traditions should

change. Laws and policies also need to be reformed, but if we can't change the mind-sets of the people, there is no use in having good laws and policies.”

May invested the money from the Knight International Journalism Award in the Myitmakha Media Group which she established in 2008. In the beginning Myitmakha lacked capital but in 2011 it was officially registered as a news agency. Thanks to support from the NGO Internews, Myitmakha was able to recruit local reporters in Kachin State in the north, Shan, Mon and Kayin State in the east and Rakhine in the west of the country.

The news from those states are delivered to the agency's subscribers, altogether 36 daily newspapers and weekly journals. May also recruited female volunteers. She says: “Women journalists use both their heads and hearts when writing articles. Women journalists can often get more detailed information than male reporters, and can also cover news about violence against women.”

The Myitmakha Media Group has been conducting free basic journalist training for young people in Yangon as well as in other parts of the country. The main objective of the training is to produce fair and qualified reporters and encourage people of different ethnicities to investigate and report on human right violations in their area. Myitmakha provides gender training for its journalists but as an organisation they don't have a gender policy yet.

According to May, media in Myanmar is not fully fair and free yet. “The control from the government is not the only root cause of our unfree media, the influence from donors, business men and NGOs can also contribute to an unfree media sector.”

Interview

Kyaw Zwa Moe

Irrawaddy – Making room for gender and diversity

When Myanmar's news media was under the jackboot of a military regime, the inner story of a country in turmoil was largely revealed to the world by its exiled journalist community and international human rights organizations.

The Irrawaddy magazine, among the most popular of the exiled media, was published from Thailand for years. Now operating from Yangon, its English Edition editor, Kyaw Zwa Moe, continues to play a key role in highlighting the untold story of Myanmar.

Irrawaddy was founded in 1993 and Kyaw Zwa Moe has been a part of it since 2001, now counting 15 years with the magazine. He had been in exile for 13 of those 15 years and blacklisted by the military regime.

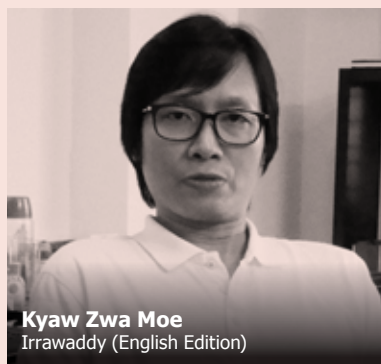
"I was able to visit my country for the first time in 2012 and opened a small office with about 10 people thereafter. In 2013, I returned and now we are Yangon-based," says Kyaw Zwa Moe.

According to him, there are many fears among journalists still and the new government is not yet comfortable with critical voices.

"Things are much better and we are happy to be allowed to return home. Yet, the previous semi-civilian government did not like it when we wrote about Buddhist mobs unleashing violence against the Muslim minority or analyzed the Rohingya issue. There are visa restrictions on foreign correspondents still. But hope is not lost and that's good," he added.

Nearly half a century of being disadvantaged due to socio-economic conditions, coupled with military

rule and violence, the absence of strong public institutions and a deficit in democracy have all contributed to make Myanmar a battered country, Kyaw Zwa Moe remarks. The importance of independent and professional journalism in such a context is the reason for his return to Myanmar.



To make that happen, Kyaw Zwa Moe points out the importance of many perspectives in the newsroom: "Those perspectives become possible when a newsroom is diverse and diversity is possible when people come from different backgrounds, gender and age groups to constitute an editorial team", he said.

At Irrawaddy, eight out of fifteen journalists working for the English language magazine are women, and more than half of the Burmese language team are women. The Irrawaddy has its own women's section and according to Zwa Moe himself there is an avid interest in this section.

When there were communal clashes between Buddhists and Muslim in Mandalay, Irrawaddy's reporting on the incidents proved perceptive and moving. "Our reporter there is a woman. When tension eased, she was harassed while trying to interview people. We asked her to compile a reporter's diary from the field. This drew an amazing response from the readers."

The magazine is also dedicating space to mainstreaming gender and LGBT issues, topics that are considered controversial and culturally inappropriate in conservative Myanmar and he has found that readers are receptive to such stories.

"Gay people are discriminated against in Myanmar so we stay focused on such issues. We encourage women to do hard news reporting and to report from conflict areas. Some volunteer to go on assignment and some don't want to go, but we offer the opportunity to both men and women."

Kyaw Zwa Moe points at how difficult it is to push for equality in a military-driven country that naturally supports male dominance and is traditionally run by men. As for the obstacles women face in their media careers, he says the absence of a well-structured media industry has resulted in the absence of mechanisms that could encourage women journalists.

Continued from page 16.

A majority of respondents agreed that re-entry after childbirth was difficult for women journalists. “That’s normal,” said one of the male participants at one of the FDGs, insisting that it was natural for a Burmese family to require women to dedicate their time to raising children and to remain home-focused, after childbirth.

In a response to health, life and travel insurances, a majority of respondent both male and female, answered in the negative. Very few media houses provided medical benefits for its staff. Some media houses provide a guesthouse with accommodation for their staff for a fee.

When it came to listing available facilities, a majority of the respondents, both men and women, mentioned they had separate toilets.¹⁹ Ethnic media, however, could not provide separate toilets²⁰ due to their limited funding.

About half of the female respondents mentioned that their employer catered for transport after working late hours.

Women who attended the focus group discussions felt the scope of professional organisations for journalists had to be further increased to include labour issues, as in other countries. Participants in Yangon stressed the need to go beyond journalists’ safety issues including arrests – although a serious concern in Myanmar – and for media organisations to clamour for improved working conditions and equity in the workplace.

Among the key aspects that could make women journalists comfortable in the workplace is the absence of sexual harassment and mechanisms that demonstrate an institution’s commitment to the same.

The survey questions about the incidence of sexual harassment got a mixed response. In Yangon, a majority of the respondents, 94%, claimed that they have never experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces, though some of them mentioned having experienced harassment of a non-sexual kind. This view was disputed by senior women journalists who attended the FDGs, who claimed that young women often didn’t understand the concept of sexual harassment and that it was not only physical harassment that should be looked at.

19. Separate toilets for men and women is considered an important facility in the local context.

20. An important facility in this cultural context.

21. In March 2015 a validation workshop, with local stakeholders, was held to present the findings from the first study.

In the regions, 50% of the female respondents had been subjected to verbal sexual harassment from their news sources. But they didn’t know whom to inform, as there is no complaint mechanism or gender committees within their respective media organisations. The survey result also indicated that if women face sexual harassment or any form of violence they don’t want to report it since they find it shameful and worry that people will put the blame on them. The survey also showed that some male colleagues verbally harassed female colleagues without regarding it as violence.

A validation workshop²¹ confirmed that the general understanding of sexual harassment is low in Myanmar. The term is commonly understood as describing the act of rape. The definition of the concept was shared with the focus groups and included in the questionnaire.

The majority of media houses appeared to lack institutional mechanisms such as gender committees and complaint cells, but some had senior women staff members assigned to oversee space and airtime dedicated for gender/women’s issues. However, some of the media owners during individual interviews expressed their keenness to introduce in-house mechanisms that would create a better working environment for women, which augurs well for the Myanmar mass media.

■ Career advancement opportunities and training

Until recently there was no capacity building for journalists in Myanmar. Over the past years, marked by thaw and political reforms, the training opportunities have changed profoundly. Most of the journalists targeted by the study had received training from professional organisations, often in the fields of news reporting, conflict sensitive reporting, business reporting, civic journalism, media ethics and photography. Some also mentioned that they were trained in election coverage and gender.

Survey results indicated that international media organisations (INGOs) made the biggest contribution in terms of delivering journalism trainings, followed by employers. One of the new developments in the Myanmar media industry is the level of interest within media organisations to invest in the capacity building of their staff, sometimes as collaborative efforts with INGOs/media training institutions. Some organisations such as the Yangon Group mentioned having their own trainers while many said, they relied on external expertise, including foreign, for purposes of training staff.



Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

Female participants in the FGD in Taunggyi revealed that they don't get time off for trainings and have to give up the opportunity due to a tight work schedule. Journalists working outside of Yangon also felt that they don't get equal opportunities compared to journalists in the capital, and requested capacity trainings in every state and division.

As training forms a significant component of the development of individual journalists as well as teams, there is considerable support towards building the capacities of journalists in Myanmar. It appears, through the survey findings, that both women and men enjoyed similar opportunities for training, at least in Yangon. But in for example Kalay and Saggaying there were indications that women and men didn't have the same training opportunities.

Despite Myanmar's media beginning to focus on gender, training in gender does not appear to be a priority yet, as opposed to conflict sensitive reporting which the focus group participants considered very important and mentioned as being available on a regular basis. Four out of five respondents hadn't received gender training.

Participants in FGDs in Yangon felt that gender

training would have an immediate positive outcome – improved working relationship between male and female employees as well as better understanding of the constraints faced by women journalists.

More than half of the male respondents agreed that gender training could improve the working environment for both men and women. About as many men said they would like to participate in such trainings and learn about the issue. The other half of the male respondents claimed there was no need for such training as women did enjoy equal rights. Outside of Yangon, the respondents tended to mention gender training as a women only training.

Safety training is yet to reach Myanmar the way conflict sensitive journalism has. It is a critical area for Myanmar since many journalists are involved in conflict coverage. Safety training appears to target more men than women. Only a minority of the respondents have received safety training.

Journalists who participated in FGDs mentioned that in terms of training, one of the missing aspects was refresher courses. "We get to attend the various types of media training now available to journalists. But seniors who have put in about 10 years or more need to enhance their knowledge. We hardly find opportunities to attend refresher courses," one participant said.

■ Women's participation in media networks and associations

In 1944, Myanmar writers formed an association during British colonial rule.

In 1993 the Myanmar Writers Association was reconstituted as the Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association. The MWJA was started with a 25-member executive committee and was led by men, while women writers and journalists participated as members. In 2012 the Myanmar Journalist Association (MJA) was independently formed, separately from MWJA.

MJA is a national network with sub regional networks in all states and divisions. Media professionals have also formed other media associations, such as the Myanmar Journalist Network (MJN) and the Myanmar Journalist Union (MJU). The media networks, which are relatively new in Myanmar, appeared to have some representation of women in Yangon, though none of them appeared to reflect the inclusion of a gender and diversity agenda.

In the regions outside of the capital, most respondents agreed that there are few women active in the different



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

Interview

Mya Wynn Yan

Pioneer reporter with a passion for local news

Freelance reporter Mya Wynn Yan is one of the pioneers among women journalists in Shan state. Her reporting has earned her the respect from her peers, as she fights to increase the coverage of local news in national media outlets.

Mya Wynn Yan is a pioneer among female journalists in Shan State.

She joined the media industry at a young age, since her family had a printing house in Yangon. At that time she was focused on administrative and marketing tasks. Later on she moved to Taunggyi, Shan State and decided to work as a journalist in 2009. She notes that one of the difficulties faced by female journalists in Myanmar is the tendency by people to focus on their personal moral when judging their professionalism. “It’s not fair but I have to protect my reputation both in my professional and my personal life.”

Her reporting and high quality news coverage has earned her the respect from both her male co-workers, and from other journalists in Shan State. Fellow female reporters from Taunggyi testify to the fact that her work has helped increase the respect for other female journalists.

As a single mother with three children, she has had to handle her share of difficulties but her eldest son, who is in his teens, supports her work. “My son said ‘mummy I would like to read your articles and news stories. Please keep on doing your job.’ That made me very happy and it has given me courage to continue my work.” Mya stresses that family support is especially important for female journalists

and her hope is that the understanding of family members will increase in future.

Mya Wynn Yan’s main focus is reporting local news in mainstream media and strengthening media networks in Southern Shan State. She says that news from the different states and regions in Myanmar need to be promoted in mainstream media, since people often don’t know what is happening in the more remote areas of the



country. One of the stories she has been working on lately is about land grabbing in Southern Shan State.

“I want everyone to have access to justice, whether they are far away or close to town. But in reality, people from remote villages don’t know where to turn when they face injustices. Media is one channel for highlighting their situation in order to get them assistance.”

The reason why Mya decided to work as a freelance reporter was the lacking of ethics at some me-

dia houses. When working at a local media house in Taunggyi, her reporting was sometimes presented under someone else’s name. “I complained but there was no action taken.”

She is now trying her best to strengthen media networks in Southern Shan State, since she believes that media networks can address the challenges faced by individual media professionals, as well as improve the quality of local media outlets.

With the support from UNDP, she has been involved in the creation of a new social media network, where she now holds the position of secretary.

She hopes that the network in the longer run will increase the number of media professionals in Shan State. “We face a shortage of human resources, especially in local journalism. Our plan is to build the capacity of local journalists and also establish online media.”

networks, due to several contributing factors. Although they participate, women rarely get recognition for their contribution. Many women are also tied up with household work and have less time to engage in networks. However, there are some women who are very active.

Almost all respondents supported quotas for women or proportional representation in organisational leadership.

A large majority of the responding women supported the view that they should form an exclusive trade union for women media workers to address many issues that remain unaddressed.²² Women also felt unions were focused on burning issues such as threats, arrests and assaults of journalists with no focus on policy or gender issues.

80% of the respondents, of which half were men, said women should not become mere members in media organisations but should become catalysts for change.

The in-depth interviews suggested that women might be included in media organisations only for tokenism. The lack of numbers meant lack of visibility for women as well as the issues they would represent, women journalists at a FGD pointed out, having identified the absence of being professionally organized as a weakness that needed to be urgently addressed.

■ Women's portrayal and content generated for women

One important areas of assessment was the Myanmar media's portrayal of women and the content generated for women audiences.²³

Given that women had near full control over gender related content and women's pages in the print media, it also seemed that women were contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypical portrayals.

Except for a few progressive publications, the content generally appeared to promote the concept of women as family figures/homemakers or as victims, reinforcing women's traditional roles in society, while failing to capture the diverse roles women already play and are able to play in the evolving Myanmar society.

These stereotypes, according to women who attended a FDG, consistently influence not just content but also the newsroom culture. Given that the female body and appearance seem to have a price tag, a senior woman journalist said it was impossible to convince male editors of the unsuitability of the random use of women's photographs, portraying them often

as sexual objects. "This practice is impossible to overcome inside the newsroom," a Yangon based senior journalist said.

This trend was further fuelled by the content generated for women, often by women themselves. The Myanmar media also has a strong focus on celebrities and gossip, further contributing to the stereotypical portrayals of both men and women.

According to the survey findings and interviews, there is extremely limited involvement of men in lifestyle or gender pages or television/radio programming, unless with the more technical aspects of program production.

The survey included a qualitative question that required respondents to analyse the depiction of women in the media. According to respondents Myanmar women are largely portrayed as family figures, sexual objects, weak/timid and victims of violence. Only 4% of respondents said women were depicted as experts/leaders.

The ethnic media was perceived as more or less exclusively portraying men as leaders, reflecting the fact that the ethnic and religious leadership is very male dominated.

The Myanmar television channels have separate programming for women, focused on beauty, health and fashion. Only a few media have women participating in political discussions.²⁴

Respondents, mostly women but also many men, have called for policy measures that promote gender equity, including gender guidelines. Nearly half of the respondents called for the enforcement of guidelines on gender equity, and close to a third called for gender sensitive male journalists and editors.

Two out of five respondents supported the view that more women should be appointed as editors/program managers.

22. Myanmar's first organization for women journalists, Myanmar Women Journalist Society, was founded in late 2015.

23. The study did not include systematic content analysis as such, only respondents' perception of content provided in Myanmar media.

24. For example Mizzima Media.

Interview

Ma Thida

“To find your own space you have to be enabled”

It has been no easy journey for Ma Thida, Executive Editor of Echo and the Myanmar Independent News Journals. She began as a medical doctor who opted for serious journalism with the hope of influencing her country’s democracy agenda.

Ma Thida has been associated with Myanmar’s iconic rights champion and democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and has remained part of Myanmar’s democratic struggle, facing arrests and assault. Now that Myanmar is in democratic transition, she is keen to make her own contribution towards fostering independent journalism in Myanmar.

Among her cherished goals is to encourage women to make their own contribution to the evolution of the media industry, which she feels will take both time and effort.

“They will have to gradually find their own space and exert influence, but to do that, first they must be enabled.”

Ma Thida says: “Women in this country have remained passive for too long. Dictatorships and wars are male creations. The residual impacts are felt by every sphere, including journalism. In numbers, women dominate the industry but they often don’t decide on content, thus reducing their impact on the industry. While they may play decisive roles in the alternate media, their footprint in the mainstream is small.”

For her, Myanmar’s lack of media literacy is a serious concern and contributes to the low standard of professional media. “Journalists do not have exposure to the actual newsroom experience. We have

been doing propaganda for years, calling it journalism. Myanmar never had the tradition of news journalism. Instead, there were publications with heavy doses of advocacy.”

She mentions that the education in journalism and training opportunities are inadequate and inappropriate.

“Yangon University offers a degree course but most university products are attracted to broadcasting rather than print.”



Ma Thida
Echo and the Myanmar Independent
News Journals

Before she made her way into journalism she worked as a story writer. She recalls the serious changes that Myanmar underwent during the Socialist period. “We were allowed only leftist literature. The authorities could not appreciate true forms of literature. Readers ended up consuming propaganda material.”

Authoritarianism had destroyed the country’s public consciousness and people don’t feel encouraged to freely express themselves,

resulting in poor literature and journalism.

Capacity concerns apart, the lack of independence of media owners also debilitate the industry, she says.

According to her, the registration of media institutions largely depended on the owners’ political clout while the absence of editorial policies resulted in owners heavily influencing the outlets. Those who have access to information in Myanmar are those with strong military links or those with political power, she stresses.

Ma Thida insists that to date, the military establishment continues to play a huge role in making decisions for the country’s media, making the media biased, strongly influenced by the military agenda and indirectly controlled by them. There are several daughters of former generals who own media houses in Myanmar, she says.

In Myanmar, cross-ownership is prohibited but according to her, the army has ownership over radio, print and television, a popular ownership model.

“There is no official censorship but there is also no free press,” she insists.

According to her, the inclusion of the gender dimension can enhance the product’s quality. “Some mistake this as promotion of feminist ideologies. For me, it is an equity issue.”

“Admittedly, it is hard for women to reach the same position as men. Getting to the top can be truly difficult for women. Only a few women reach the top and that is mostly due to their investment and (military) family background.”



Burma News International gathers ethnic media outlets at an annual conference to discuss the challenges in reporting in a minority language. Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

■ Ethnic media challenges from a gender perspective

Myanmar has been in a state of constant civil war since the independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Decades of fighting between ethnic minority groups and the government have resulted in large numbers of internally displaced persons and mass human rights abuses. Limited access to information combined with security concerns, have led to less coverage of the ethnic conflicts in mainstream media. In general, media houses don't encourage women journalists to go into conflict areas but rather give these assignments to male journalists. Consequently women journalists are protected rather than empowered.

The ethnic groups that live in the conflict areas are reluctant to use the Burmese language, in order to avoid being dominated by Bamar culture. Instead they have set up local ethnic media with the purpose of raising the voice of the different ethnic groups and explore the peace building process, as well as other injustices and challenges affecting local people. The ethnic media also plays a key role in educating ethnic groups that due to the many years of civil war often lack education. Most of the ethnic media are bilingual, producing both Burmese and ethnic language editions.

One of the staff members from the government owned MRTV ethnic channel in Hpa An, Kayin State, mentioned that due to the low levels of education, their audience prefer entertainment programming. There is no specific programming promoting female leadership. Instead women programming is focused on cooking and beauty, reinforcing stereotypical norms.

Ethnic media tend to portray men as leaders and women as bearers of culture, tasked with preserving traditional norms. Women are also often portrayed as victims of violence. Although the different media outlets employ both male and female journalists, they lack gender policies and the staff tends to be unaware of gender issues. "Our female staff has less confidence. Some say that if they get married and have a baby they will stay home and not return to the workplace since they feel that women should stay close to the children," noted one FGD participant from Taunggyi, Shan State. The notion of the ideal ethnic woman limits the participation of women in public life as well as in the media industry.

The on-going conflict is the main challenge in order to increase the participation of women in all sectors of the media industry, and this is especially true among ethnic media outlets.

Interview

Saw Nyunt Thaung

Giving a voice to the Karen people

As the officer in charge of the independent media agency Karen Information Center, Saw Nyunt Thaung is passionate about giving a voice to some of the marginalised peoples of Myanmar. Women reporters have a key role to play.

“Women are not willing to discuss reproductive health issue and episodes of violence in detail with male journalists. That’s why we need more women journalist to explore women’s issues and violence against women.”

Saw Nyunt Taung is the officer in charge of the Karen Information Center (KIC), an independent media agency located in Hpa An in Kayin State. He’s proud of working for KIC, since the centre fills an important roll to inform about

the situation of the Karen people through its media products; a number of printed journals and one on-line journal.

“I believe the existence of ethnic media is crucial to reflect the life of different ethnic groups and give them a voice.”

His wish is that one day KIC can stand on its own feet. “Ethnic media should stand independently. Currently we depend on donors so whether you like it or not the media houses sometimes have to ad-

just to donor trends and demands.”

KIC produces a monthly journal in both Karen and Burmese language but it has not been able to make a profit, since the majority of the Karen people, who live in remote areas, have little interest in reading newspapers and journals. They prefer listening to the radio to get information about the on-going conflicts.

“Kayin state is a conflict area and most of the news are conflict related. Journalists have to go into conflict areas to get information, which can be very risky. That’s why we have very few female journalists in Kayin state.”

Saw Nyunt Taung stresses the need for more female journalists. “That would mean getting more information from women, as well as more news from women’s perspective.”



Karen girls in Shan state.
Photo: Evangelos Petratos EU/ECHO on flickr

ANALYSIS

Despite forming over 50% of the media practitioners, Myanmar women journalists are facing two main challenges within the industry – lack of opportunity to advance their careers and absence of institutional mechanisms supportive of women media workers. On top of it, safety is cross cutting concern that affects women media professionals from working on equal footing with men.

Myanmar's media industry reflects current global trends to the extent that women are strongly represented in newsrooms in terms of numbers, but media institutions remain significantly male dominated at the decision-making level.

The women journalists found themselves mostly in the low and mid level positions, while a few women had some responsibility with regard to planning of content and daily newsroom management while those with desk duties were involved in leisure/lifestyle/entertainment sections.

The on-going conflict in many ethnic areas has caused security concerns for women journalists and this is one key factor behind the relatively low number of women journalists in the states and divisions, as parents are strongly opposed to their daughters entering the media industry. The coverage of conflict related stories, which dominate in many parts of the country, also tends to be assigned to male reporters. The marginalization of women is reflected in the absence of women's perspectives oftentimes.

The highest level of equity was delivered in the distribution of beats, with the majority of women respondents agreeing that they were able to select their beats, including equal opportunities for covering beats such as conflict, human rights, finance, human right, commerce and politics. However, women are also completely absent in reporting on science and technology as well as sports. There were no columnists/analysts, generally a male preserve in Myanmar.

Among the key issues faced by Myanmar journalists are their low salaries, amongst the lowest in Asia, with many women required to accept lower salaries than men. The industry appears to have concerns about their employment contracts, conditions, institutional mechanisms and policies. Women journalists did, in certain aspects, face significant constraints. Most women journalists downplayed their career post marriage/childbirth, largely due to family pressure/lack of support.



Myanmar's media industry reflects current global trends to the extent that women are strongly represented in newsrooms in terms of numbers, but media institutions remain significantly male dominated at the decision-making level.

Media houses did not have institutional mechanisms that facilitated women's re-entry into the field after childbirth.

Women participants at the discussions expressed keenness to advance their careers, including undergoing training, in addition to a strong wish to go beyond loose networks to building strong organisations that are led by women.

With women indicating the lack of sexual harassment in their workplaces,²⁵ it appears that either a vital condition to achieve gender equality is already found in the newsrooms or rather that the understanding of the concept is yet very low.

As the validation workshop showed that both women and men tend to equal sexual harassment with rape, there is a huge effort laying ahead to raise awareness on gender based violence acts and sexual harassment. Furthermore, the fact that the respondents did not know where to turn if they had been sexually harassed, or were reluctant to share the incidents because of shame, show the importance of setting up official complaint cells within media houses.

With increased opportunities for journalism training, Myanmar journalists have had access to considerable training in news reporting and specialized reporting, in the past three years. The majority of them have received journalism training from international NGOs and from the respective media houses, with both men and women having equal opportunities to undergo training.

Yet, missing in the training equations were safety and gender, two critically important areas of training for a transformative society like Myanmar.

25. 94% in the Yangon based research claimed they had never been exposed to sexual harassments.

Respondents outside of Yangon felt that they didn't have equal training opportunities compared to journalists in the capital, and it was clear that there is a need for training programmes in every state and division with selection criteria also targeting new journalists.



Photo: Petra Quiding/Fojo

The strongest views towards gender equity and women's leadership emerged when a large majority of women called for a media association exclusively for women that could be developed into a trade union.²⁶

As in every culture, Myanmar too has its own fixed images of both men and women, reinforcing gender stereotypes. The media reflects the same strong biases and continue to contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical gender portrayals.

Adding to the restrictions are the lack of capacity and an understanding of concepts among journalists themselves, vital for the creation of a plural and inclusive media.

The fixed gender images, drawn from entrenched prejudices, pose challenges to journalists and to the media. They also contribute to the notion that women are weak, unable to make decisions or to undertake serious work, and therefore, unworthy of being promoted, of receiving equal pay for equal work and to be entitled to certain employment rights.

26. Myanmar's first organization for women journalists, Myanmar Women Journalist Society, was founded in late 2015.

Myanmar media also showed reinforcement of gender stereotypes through content, often portraying women as family figures, sexual objects or as weak/timid persons, as reflected in the survey. Women made news as celebrities or wives of well-known men and hardly ever as experts and opinion makers. Ironically, women in media were responsible to a large extent for the stereotypical portrayal of women, as much of the content generated for female audiences was developed by women.

These issues are compounded by a patriarchal culture that accords women a lower position in society, creating additional barriers for women.

Equity and equality are important to both men and women and necessary for the betterment of any society. Discriminatory practices and prejudices need to be addressed through mechanisms that foster equity, enabling working environments and the introduction of professional journalism founded on sound ethics.

Women's voices can be a strong reflection of a transformative society, reflect societal values and offer a diversity of perspectives that would otherwise go missing in the media.

Respect for gender and balanced portrayals form an integral part of media ethics, as valuable as accuracy and fairness in reporting. Such values also contribute to increased media professionalism, in turn, contributing to the promotion of gender equity in the national context.



Women's voices can be a strong reflection of a transformative society, reflect societal values and offer a diversity of perspectives that would otherwise go missing in the media.

Interview

Thin Thin Aung

“Women are a target audience”

Thin Thin Aung is a woman who considers herself a human rights activist and a feminist. A believer of ‘female energy’ and a woman’s ability to positively influence the world. Aung now plays the role of Consultant Editor on Gender and Diversity, in addition to being a Director of Mizzima Women’s Television and Executive Director of the Mizzima Media Group.

For Aung, gender and diversity are now her main areas of focus and she approaches them from an unrepentant ‘feminist point of view.’ She says that there are many gender issues in Myanmar, including violence against women, that keep women in a subjugated position.

When it comes to reporting on violence against women, Aung blames some of the media, for reinforcing gender stereotypes.

“The media also berates women for going out at night and for the clothes they wear. Instead of blaming women, they should encourage men to become disciplined and learn to respect women. Police sometimes go to the extent of offering advice on the type of clothes women should wear. Often, women are blamed for their choice of clothes instead of a man’s conduct,” Aung commented.

As a move to influence change in the media focus, Aung said, Mizzima dedicates airtime and newspaper space for issues linked to sexual orientation and ethnicity as well as gender and diversity; “We also discuss domestic violence and rape, two less discussed issues.”

“Myanmar has some 100 ethnic communities. We also have a lesbian and gay community. Myanmar hardly reports on lesbians, though there is some reportage on homosexuals. Many don’t want to be interviewed because of the stigma

that would soon follow after their sexual orientation is discussed.”

At Mizzima, there are flexible hours for employees. Women with young children are specially supported and there is paternity leave. Women are supported to return to work after childbirth and women are also facilitated to climb the ladder.



Thin Thin Aung
Gender and Diversity, Mizzima Women's
Television and Mizzima Media Group

“Women usually have to work thrice as hard to prove their worth. When they get married, have children and housework, it becomes extremely difficult. I have seen some good women journalists staying at home, after marriage. This is such a shame that we do not appreciate the professional capacity of women.”

Among her biggest discoveries is the increasing popularity of gender-focused reporting. Likewise, Mizzima’s gender pages are also very popular. Readers wait for those

pages. External contributors are increasing by the day and prefer to contribute to those pages.

“We are happy to have pioneered strong women-focused pages.”

“The highest likes on our Facebook page are for gender programmes. Women are a market, a target audience and the industry must understand this dynamic.”

“There is also a false notion that gender is all about women. At Mizzima, we make it a matter for men too. If men understand gender, it will help create a better working atmosphere for everyone and to produce meaningful and gender-sensitive content.”

“We also have men working on gender and diversity. Though few are interested. That gives me a lot of hope,” she said.

Aung has a few things planned for Mizzima, and a top priority is the introduction of a gender policy for the entire media group. “We are a gender conscious organization and while men and women have a comfortable working set up, the policy can be a forward step and inspire others,” Aung said.

Aung argues for the creation of a strong Women Journalists union or an association that could take up issues on their behalf in the media industry. “How can they fight for their rights when the level of exploitation is high and there is no collective way to fight it?” Aung queried.

“The Myanmar Journalist Network includes both men and women. It is very active. But ultimately, it is best to have an exclusive media organization for women.”²⁷

27. Myanmar’s first organization for women journalists, Myanmar Women Journalist Society, was founded in late 2015.

Interview

Gracy Siang Hlei Dim

Encouraging Chin women to join the media industry

Tv reporter Gracy Siang Hlei Dim works in and around Kalay, where transport is a challenge and there are few other female journalists. Her hope is for more Chin women to join the media industry.

“I would like to encourage Chin women to work in the media industry. I would like to tell them that we are working for our people. We need more women in the Chin media.”

Those are the words of Gracy Siang Hlei Dim, a Chin woman with a theological background, who joined the Chinland Post TV channel two years ago.

“When I started to work in the media industry my parents didn’t support me. Although they didn’t object to my choice they still worry for my safety and security.”

Gracy says that since many Chin

people want to lead a simple life, they encourage their sons and daughters to work for the government rather than in the media industry. Some women would like to



become reporters but their families and communities don’t think that the profession is suitable for women, since it is perceived as a risky industry with challenges such as bad transportation and weak infrastructure.

Gracy says: “The roads are bad in Kalay. The villages are far from town and we have to ride motor-cycles. Sometimes we have to stay overnight in the village. I often feel unsafe and I don’t have any female colleagues who can accompany me and understand me. If I had female colleagues around me, I think I would feel more comfortable working among groups of men and I wouldn’t feel alone. That’s why I really wish we could have more female media professionals in Kalay”.

Gracy keeps telling people the same thing: “Us media professionals are doing good work. We share information, we stand up for justice and our people will surely benefit from our work. So please join us.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Government

- Pursue the intention of the Beijing platform for Action²⁸ and actively promote gender equal access to and influence over the media, and to counteract gender stereotypes in the media.
- Follow up on the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013-2022) to develop recommendations and activity plan related to media.
- Develop a public service media law. This legislation should include a requirement for the principles of diversity and pluralism to be considered as part of the licensing of channels.²⁹
- Incorporation of gender and diversity in journalism curricula of universities and other media related academic curricula.

(2) Media Networks/Associations

- Promote equal representation of women and men in media organizations and unions.
- Consider establishing women journalist media network/association.
- Support women media professionals to take on managerial positions in general as well as top positions in the media industry.
- Awareness rising on the rights of women journalists.
- Regular and systematic media monitoring and analysis of gender representation in the media.
- Promote modernized image of journalist profession as a lifelong professional choice, suited for women as well as for men.
- Advocacy targeting media owners/leadership for post-childbirth re-entry for women journalists.
- Set up an action plan for how media can better mirror society in terms of actual representation.
- Target women media professionals with technical training in different media platforms, as well as multiplatform training.
- Promote security measures so that women can take on challenging beats and assignments without restrictions.
- More in-depth research on gender and Myanmar media.

(3) Media Houses/Industry

- Create workplaces free from gender-based violence, and if gender-based violence happens – ensure that action is taken.
- Train media owners and managers – men in particular – in gender awareness and sensitivity.
- Put in place firm gender equality and sexual harassment policies.
- Promote gender equal salaries and opportunities for capacity building for men and women in the media industry.
- Provide training in gender issues for both men and women, including larger numbers of men to create more gender-sensitive newsrooms and news content.
- Provide training in safety and ethical journalism for all staff.
- Support women media professionals to take on managerial position in general as well as top positions in the media industry.
- Introduce mechanisms within media organizations to deal with complaints and redressal, including gender committees.
- Promote gender awareness in media houses to avoid stereotypical assignment of beats and work tasks, for men as well as for women.

(4) Donor/International Community

- The international community and local NGOs should continue to work with media associations, media outlets, individual journalists, and the Ministry of Information to close the wide gap in achieving gender equality in the media.
- Give leadership training to women but also sensitize media owners and senior leadership to the advancement of women's capacity and roles within media houses.
- Assist efforts at networking and organization, specially towards the formation of women-only trade union in Myanmar.
- Support the development of gender sensitized media curricula and local media training institutions.
- Promote an understanding of gender equality as a newsworthy subject.

28. Endorsed by Myanmar (among 186 states) in 1995.

29. With reference to Article 19 and the report Censored Gender: "The principle of diversity should be explained in the law as meaning that all gender and other minorities should be represented in programmes and should participate in decision making bodies, both of public and private channels."

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MEDIA GROUP

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