Male Gender Champion Report

IMPROVING MARKET OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN
Group 3 M2 F2 Gender balance
Day 1, 16-8-2015
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Executive Summary

MEDA and its local partners implement the Global Affairs Canada-funded Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project in Myanmar (2015-2021). Project activities focus on sustainable agriculture skill development as well as improving women’s access to resources, increased agency and decision-making power, and enhanced participation in community leadership. An important aspect of this work is engaging men as champions of gender equality (GE) to transform social and gender norms that reinforce inequality that harm both women and men. To facilitate this, MEDA has developed a training program for male gender champions (MGCs) to build a solid understanding of the conceptual underpinning of male engagement work and to ensure that it does not marginalize women in gender equity work. With support from MEDA and its local partners, MGCs help to create awareness of key gender equality issues among community members, particularly among men, and serve as role models.

An assessment was designed to assess the effectiveness of the MGC model, gain insight into MGC’s impact in promoting GE and women’s leadership, and gather feedback and recommendations for improvements to the MGC model.

Key Findings

1. MGCs had a clear understanding of the importance of women’s economic empowerment in achieving gender equality including the need for women’s increased participation in decision-making and income generation as well as men’s increased participation in reproductive work. However, there was some misunderstanding of the difference between women’s economic empowerment and women’s leadership qualities. For example, a woman can be empowered but not be a leader.

2. MGCs noted that, because of their work in awareness-raising, women’s and men’s roles in the community are changing. Men are taking on more domestic work while women are investing more time in knowledge and skill-building as well as community leadership positions.

3. MGCs agreed that women bring important skills and knowledge to business because they are more in touch with family and community needs. This suggests there is a need for continued discussion and training on the difference between biological attributes and personal characteristics that are developed through gendered socialization. For example, women are not “biologically” more caring than men, they are socialized to be more caring.

4. Many MGCs noted that women’s economic leadership can reduce men’s burden as the sole source of family income and that women’s political leadership is essential for better governance.

5. All MGCs agreed that women are still vulnerable within Myanmar and highlighted the following barriers to women’s rights and leadership: discrimination, human trafficking, gender-based violence and rape, the burden of domestic responsibilities, a lack of confidence and lower educational attainment are cited as the biggest risks to women’s health and wellbeing.
Finally, MGCs acknowledged that the process of becoming an MGC has helped them make positive changes for themselves and addressed their implicit bias. Before, they shared that they discriminated against women without realizing it. Through the MGC selection and training process, men developed a greater awareness of gender issues and learned how to apply their learning to issues in their daily lives. Now, they confidently consider themselves role models in their community for gender equality.

Key Recommendations

1. Build the capacity of local partners to continue the model

2. Strengthen concepts in the curriculum around the definition of empowerment and leadership and challenge masculine and feminine ideals of women and men which maintain that women or men are “naturally” better at certain tasks

3. Additions to the curriculum should include skill-building in public speaking, social dialogs, and community mobilization

4. MGCs require additional support from key facilitating partners (KFPs) for their work in their communities to customize their approaches to their specific contexts
Introduction

MEDA and its local partners implement the Global Affairs Canada-funded Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project in Myanmar (2015-2021). Due to the significance of the agricultural sector to the country’s economic growth, MEDA focuses on improving the capacity and competitiveness of 25,000 women producers. To achieve this, IMOW supports women economic empowerment at the grassroots levels through KFPs. Project activities focus on sustainable agriculture skill development as well as improving women’s access to resources and increased agency and decision-making power. These changes are key to women’s economic empowerment because they facilitate women’s participation, visibility, and leadership in markets. Improvements to agency are achieved by increasing women producers’ productivity, access to time and labor-saving technology, market linkages, as well as improving their soft skills to become more active, respected, and empowered economic actors and leaders. Increased productivity, efficiency, and access to markets improve women’s agency by elevating their role in the economy and positioning them to influence market actors and systems.

The main goal of the MGC program is to contribute to the project component of “improving the capacity of formal and informal enabling environments to better serve women small producers” by engaging men to educate other men on gender equality, give up some power and privilege and share equitably in the division of labor. The four specific objectives of MGCs include:

- Create a dialog with men to help change gender norms and beliefs on women’s roles in society and their ability to financially contribute to families, communities, and nations.
- Engage men to explore the roots of their own gendered beliefs, biases, and masculine ideals.
- Foster mutual respect, reliability, and cooperation between men and women in the economic sphere leading to an equitable division of labor (including care work).
- Ensure that men have an outlet to ask questions and understand the project’s intentions and benefits for the family overall.

MEDA’s Gender Equality Policy and Strategy and Male Gender Champions

Together with the implementation plan, MEDA developed a Gender Equality (GE) Strategy which is reviewed and updated regularly to align with the evolving needs of clients. The GE Strategy has evolved to increase the project’s emphasis engagement with men to promote women's economic empowerment and gender equality. In 2018, a separate men’s engagement strategy was developed introducing a Male Gender Champion (MGC) model to the Myanmar context taking lessons from MEDA’s Ghana GROW project. Over IMOW’s lifespan, more than 230 MGCs have been trained to advocate for changes in socio-cultural norms that hinder women’s access to productive resources and agency in the community and at home.
With support from MEDA and its local partners, MGCs help to create awareness of key gender equality issues among members of their community, particularly among men, and serve as community role models. The four main objectives of MGCs include:

1. Create a dialog with men to help change gender norms and beliefs on women’s roles in society and ability to financially contribute to families, communities, and nations.
2. Engage men to explore the roots of their own gendered beliefs, biases, and masculine ideals.
3. Foster mutual respect, reliability, and cooperation between men and women in the economic sphere, which in turn has positive spillover effects in other areas.
4. Ensure that men have an outlet to ask questions and understand the project’s intentions and benefits for the family overall.

Purpose of the Assessment

MEDA recognizes the importance of men’s engagement in advancing women’s economic empowerment and promoting gender equality. MGC’s support and work to improve the informal enabling environment will serve IMOW’s goal of promoting women’s leadership. This assessment was designed to assess the effectiveness of the MGC model and gain insight into MGC’s impact in promoting GE and women’s leadership. The specific objectives included:

1. Explore the changing perspective of MGCs on women in leadership
2. Understand the specific ways that MGCs are supporting the women in their communities
3. Evaluate the impact of men-to-men peer awareness raising as a result of the MGC model.
4. Identify weak points of the model
5. Understand the ways the MGCs can be further supported in their work

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 13 of 238 MGCs (by telephone due to the global COVID-19 pandemic prohibiting travel to the villages). Staff from MEDA’s KFPs presented alongside each MGC to address any language or technical barriers. Two MGCs were selected by each key facilitating partner, with a preference for Myanmar language-speakers to avoid language barriers. Interviews were completed between March 16 to 18, 2020. The findings and recommendations in this report are based only on the responses gathered during these interviews. The interview questions are located in Appendix 1.
Key Findings

Women’s Economic Empowerment

All MGCs that were interviewed developed a good understanding of the key concepts of gender equality and the need for women’s economic empowerment to achieve this goal. All respondents agreed that it is important for men to support women in leadership and in decision-making roles. MGCs expressed an understanding of the disproportionate burden of reproductive duties that most women bear, and identified the importance of men sharing the family responsibilities. This is critical to improve women’s enabling environment which will allow women more time for productive activities, community leadership and encourage men to take on care-giving roles, despite possible negative reactions from the community.

“A man needs to understand how to invest his time for his family first. He needs to show it is nothing to be shameful to share the duties inside (the) family (with) his wife. He needs to support women family members to take the leadership role. He needs to be able to influence other men for gender equality” - U Win Soe Oo, Hpa An township

However, most MGCs had high expectations for what they considered an “empowered woman” including: having an education (if they are not formally educated, they would have professional skills such as farming); having good negotiation, community mobilization, and smart decision-making skills; possessing public speaking skills as well as self-confidence; being willing to stand at the same level with men; and demonstrating a commitment to work for the welfare of the whole community. MGCs also noted that empowered women should understand the country’s social, economic, and political situation.

“Sometimes, education is important, but it is not essential. Some women are educated but narrow minded, (she) cannot be called (an) empowered woman. They need to be decisive. Need to be good in public speaking and have good negotiation and mobilization skills. If the educational level is low, they need to have technical skill so that they can be confident.” - Khun San Thein, Pinlaung Township

These perspectives seem to indicate a lack of clarity around the meaning of empowerment, and a conflating of empowerment and leadership. However, the MGC trainings increased their awareness of gender equality issues and the importance of women’s leadership.
Gendered Roles and Division of Labor

All of the MGC interviewees highlighted the changing roles of women and men in their community as a result of their work. Men now recognize the importance of sharing household chores and care taking roles and believed that women were starting to shift their understanding of their roles in the household and in the community. For example, some women have started to invest their time in knowledge-building activities such as joining village saving groups and learning financial management skills. MGCs also noted that community structures have also changed. Before, only men were leading village-level activities, and now, management committees are restructured with women in important decision-making positions. For example, women have started to participate in formal leadership positions like village administrator (as Head of 10 Households or Head of 100 Households).

“The obvious change can be seen in village administration. Now women are (assuming) important duties in village administration. At the family level, the role has significantly changed. There is no more differentiation between men and women in taking care of the family. This is because men’s perception has changed, now both women and men are aware that it is also possible for women to take leadership positions and decision-making roles. With the capacity-building programs provided by the IMOW project, women are now having more capacity and confidence to take leadership roles. Nevertheless, there are still lots of people who have not changed their perception and behavior yet.”

- U Hla Shwe, Hpa An township

When asked for the reasons behind these changes, MGCs noted that it was due to the gender equality awareness sessions provided by the IMOW project, and the MGCs themselves. Half of the respondents attributed the change exclusively to their work as MGCs. This indicated a high level of confidence in their performance. They also expressed a desire to continue their work in their community.

Women in Leadership

According to the MGC respondents, their communities are now more aware of the importance of women in leadership because of the MGC’s work. Most respondents believe that women have unique approaches to business that facilitate creative business strategies. For example, MGCs highlighted what they saw as specific talents of women such as their attention to detail in all stages of businesses. Interestingly, some also acknowledged that simply because women make up half of the country’s population, they should be in positions of business leadership to avoid the negative impacts on the country’s economic development. For example, if a large percentage of the population (women) are excluded from leadership positions in business, this is a significant missed opportunity for economic development. They also noted that, as women typically know more about family or community needs, women’s economic leadership can facilitate a community’s development more easily and effectively.
“Women’s economic leadership can reduce men’s economic burden. Honestly, it is also a big stress for men to be (the) only source of family income. If every family fully uses their human capital, the whole community will be developed. So, women’s economic empowerment is very important for a community.”  
- Khun Kyaw Htay: Taunggyi township.

MGCs actively encourage women to pursue political decision-making positions at all level of governance to benefit the community and as a critical step in realizing women’s rights. They mentioned that they have found women to be decisive and attentive to everyone’s needs. They also noted their appreciation for women’s community mobilization and negotiation talents. However, MGCs presented diverse suggestions for priority area for women’s leadership including economic development, education, child welfare, women’s rights, and peace building. Their diverse answers likely indicate the specific needs of their communities and their beliefs around women’s unique contributions, some of which still reflect gendered social norms and attitudes.

All MGCs suggested that, to increase the number of women in leadership and politics, women need to strengthen their skills in public speaking and community mobilization, and increase their knowledge about the economic, social, and political situation of the country. They also suggested that women should continue to build their skills in a specific profession in order to gain public recognition and increase their chances of being elected to office. Several MGC’s also noted the importance of women leaders in Myanmar’s political transition.

“I will definitely vote in (the) next election. I will also provide voter education to women. It is essential. Women need to involve in Myanmar’s politics.”  
- Khun Ohn Kyaw, Pinlaung township.

MGCs had varying ideas of how women should enter leadership roles, particularly in politics. For example, all noted that it is important for women to be active in in national, state/regional and village level politics, but two out of 16 respondents suggested starting from lower levels such as the Head of 10/100 households or village administrators.

“Men don’t understand their community, women are only hope for him to have better nation and better governance system. So, women are essential in all political level.”  
- U Hla Shwe, Kawkarite township.

While these changes in perceptions are mostly positive, there is also some danger in the way that the ‘business case’ for women’s empowerment is communicated. For example, too much emphasis on the “unique” skills of women can be used to justify women being relegated to specific “detail-oriented” or menial roles at the expense of their personal and professional development. It also deprives men of the opportunity to learn more detail-oriented tasks and supportive roles that may also align with their abilities and desires. There is also a tendency to idealize women in an ultimately disempowering way.
For example, to say that women are “naturally” better at community building and caregiving can put an undue burden on them to fill this role and make men feel less competent as caregivers. It also fails to account for the influence of socialization on women’s and men’s abilities.

How MGC are Supportive to Women in Their Community

All MGCs noted that women are still vulnerable within Myanmar and highlighted discrimination, human trafficking, gender-based violence and rape, the burden of domestic responsibilities, a lack of confidence and lower educational attainment as the biggest risks to women’s health and wellbeing as well as barriers to women’s rights and leadership.

MGCs acknowledged that the process of becoming an MGC has helped them make positive changes. They shared that prior to their engagement with IMOW, they had their own biases against women that they were not aware of. The capacity building helped them to build a greater awareness of gender issues and in turn, enabled them to apply their learning to issues in their daily lives. Now, they confidently consider themselves role models in their community for gender equality.

“I have more gender sensitive actions after admitting myself as MGC. Before, I never ever talked with girls. I never impressed women. I stayed only among men in the community. After receiving training and becoming an MGC, I now have more respectful relationship with women. I am also aware of women’s potential in taking leadership roles.” Khun Htet Shar, a young university student from Hpa An township.

MGCs also shared their role in challenging cultural norms and traditional beliefs about women. Some highlighted their ability to raise awareness of gender equality among men in their villages, others noted that challenges remain in changing men’s perspectives on women’s roles.

“As a young student, I can make changes among my colleagues in university. Now young men in society and in our community are more gender sensitive and pay more respect to women.” Khun Htet Shar, a young university student from Hpa An township.

The assessment also revealed an unexpected positive consequence of the MGC model. Half of the interviewees shared anecdotes of reduced domestic violence among families. Other positive results included the impact on familial relationships and bonding; all of the married MGCs noted that they now encourage their wives to assume a leadership role in the family, the community and, if possible, formal leadership positions. MGCs who are fathers also noted their desire for their daughters to be great leaders in the future.
“I have two daughters; both are still studying. I want them to be great leaders one day. So, I currently invest in their education. I already started to support them to take a leadership role in their environment. My eldest daughter already has the confidence to lead in her school activities, other students also see her skills and accept her as their leader. She also has the appreciation from teachers as well. As for me, I will do my best to support my daughters to show their leadership capacity in every point of their life cycle.” U Soe Paing, Nyaung Shwe township.

Future Plans

Some MGCs shared that they will continue the MGC work they are currently doing. Some noted that they will focus more on promoting women as lead farmers in their surrounding communities. Others highlighted the importance of strengthening the village saving groups and some shared that they will focus on advocating for women in formal leadership roles. All MGCs mentioned that in future elections, they will support women in political leadership positions by voting and being vocal about the importance of women in leadership. They also committed to do more to encourage men to become gender equitable role models in their communities.
Key Learnings and Recommendations for the Future of the MGC Model

1. **Build the capacity of local partners to continue the model:** Based on the assessment findings, MGCs are eager to continue their roles. Sustainability of the MGC model is reliant on local partner organizations to continue and expand this work. MEDA will continue to build the capacity of KFPs to plan, budget, monitor, and evaluate future MGC cohorts.

2. **Refine Key Messages in the Curriculum**
   a. Though MGCs are willing and interested in supporting women’s empowerment, there appears to be some confusion about the definition of empowerment and the difference between empowerment and leadership. For example, a woman can be empowered when she has agency, rights, and access to economic opportunities, assets and resources, but not necessarily hold leadership qualities or positions.
   
   b. The curriculum should challenge the idea that women and men are “naturally” better at certain tasks. Even if framed positively, this can result in women being given unmanageable workloads and boys and men being declared incompetent in detail-oriented and care-giving work.

3. **Include Community Development and Leadership Modules in the Curriculum**
   a. MGCs still face challenges in raising awareness of gender equality with other men in their community. These challenges include a lack of support from other men in their villages, a high level of skepticism and difficulty in organizing meetings. This is particularly difficult if village leaders are not supportive. Even though they noted some important achievements, MGCs expressed interest in additional capacity-building from the project in topics such as public speaking, social dialogs, and community mobilization.
   
   b. MGCs showed their commitment to supporting women in future elections but requested more information on the current state of women in politics and what is needed to advance their participation.

4. **Provide Additional Support for MGCs:** MGCs suggested that all MGCs should do this assessment for their own personal growth. They also mentioned that MGCs need additional support and would benefit from staff to be more present in the field level, so that mutual understanding can be built, and future plans can be more customized and pragmatic.
Appendix 1: MGC Interview Questions
(Translated from Myanmar language)

Reflection Assessment for MGCs – IMOW

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<td>Interviewer:</td>
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<td>MGC Name:</td>
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1. Are roles for women and men changing in your community? Why and how?

2. What does an “empowered” women act like and do in your community?

3. What does a gender-equitable man act like and do? Are their examples of empowered women and gender-equitable men in your community?

4. Is women in economic leadership important in your community? Why and how?

5. Is women in political Leadership important in your community? Why and how?

6. If a women get a seat in political decision making level, which area should she start to tackle first?

7. Do you know how many percent of political decision making level positions are women?
8. Will you contribute in the next election?

9. If yes, how?

10. If no, why?

11. When will next election take place?

12. Why is it important for women to be involved in politics at all levels?

13. What issues are most important for women in Myanmar, why?

14. What would need to change for women to be in positions of political power?

15. What are specific changes you have made in your own life since becoming an MGC?

16. What difference did they make?

17. What specific changes do you want to see for women in your village in the next year?

18. How you can make a difference in the lives of your wife/daughter/mother?

19. What are your goals for advancing gender equality in the next year?

20. What are your goals for advancing gender equality in the next 5 years?

21. Is there anything else you want to tell me? Or do you have questions, suggestions or concerns about the program?
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