



# Mentorship Program Assessment Report

IMPROVING MARKET OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN



*Creating business solutions to poverty*



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# Executive Summary

With support from local partners, MEDA implemented 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 to enhance the capacity of women small producers to participate in community leadership and decision making through activities such as leadership training and awareness raising around gender equality concepts. To facilitate this, MEDA implemented a mentorship model in Shan and Kayin states to promote women's leadership positions in the family, economic, social, and political decision-making.

MEDA's partners facilitated this mentorship model throughout the course of the project and, in August 2020, an assessment was designed to gauge the effectiveness of the program, gain insight into mentor's impact in promoting women's leadership, and gather feedback and recommendations for improvements to the model.

## Key Findings

1. The mentorship program was successful in fostering leadership among women small producers, lead farmers and sales agents in Myanmar. All mentors and mentees noted that they observed changes in their homes and communities as a result of the program, and all but three mentees have become leaders or are in progress since participating in the mentorship program.
2. According to mentors and mentees, the top five most impactful elements of the mentorship trainings included leadership, soft skills, public speaking, gender awareness, communication, and community advocacy/mobilization.
3. The majority of mentors achieved or made significant progress on their mentorship goals of becoming leaders in their family, businesses, and community. Most mentees are also achieving their goals of improved agricultural practices, business skills, marketing and community participation and taking on leadership roles.
4. Mentors and mentees explored and reached a common understanding of an empowered woman in their context as a leader in community development, in savings groups and in the family. Mentees specifically mentioned that an empowered woman is literate, intelligent, simple, hardworking, sacrifices herself for the wellbeing of others and promotes gender equality, responding to gender-based violence.
5. The most significant changes observed were women's increased decision-making in business and farming, in the community, and in the household.
6. Most mentors and mentees responded that they received support both from their family and community and that they feel more integrated into the community as a result of the mentorship program.

7. For the mentors and mentees who were able to achieve their goals, they attributed this to their own personal commitment, interest, and dedication to attending trainings and taking charge of their personal growth. This is an important indication of increased agency and self-efficacy, a key goal of the mentorship program.
8. Persistent challenges include a lack of confidence in sharing, public speaking, and leading at home as well as time constraints. Mentors and mentees had competing responsibilities, including income-generating activities, household chores and community responsibilities.
9. Many mentors expressed that some men still look down on women and do not respect them in leadership roles, making the development of relationships among women and men leaders especially challenging.
10. Both mentors and mentees noted the least amount of changes at the household level, which confirms the need for an increased focus on intrahousehold power dynamics (see recommendations).

## Key Recommendations

1. Build the capacity of local partners to continue and expand the model.
2. Address Household Gender Dynamics.
3. Expand gender equality trainings.
4. Engage men in project activities.
5. Establish networks for mentors and mentees.
6. Include more activities geared toward young people (particularly young women)
7. Use social dialog methodology to sensitize the community to mentorship activities

# Introduction

## Overview

MEDA and its local partners implemented 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 (small producers and lead farmers). To achieve this, IMOW supports women's economic empowerment at the grassroots level through key facilitating partners (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 improving 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 rationale of mentorship is to promote more women leaders in the community in terms of business leaders and community leaders – formal and/or informal. Through mentoring, mentees were given advice, direction, coaching, support, and training, such as sharing new leadership skills and learning from other women within their own community, as the graphic (left) shows. With the use of mentorship, women's confidence (mentors and mentees) build up their skills, confidence, and raise their roles in their own families and in the community.



To this end, MEDA developed a training program for mentorship with the following objectives:

- To encourage women to take more leadership roles at home and in business and coach them on their leadership journey.
- To promote women in community leadership both in formal (10 up to 100 households (HHs) village leaders) or in informal ways (as leaders in community development processes).
- To empower participants to learn by doing and sharing experiences
- To formalize the mentorship relationship between mentors and mentees, among mentors or among mentees.
- To build capacity of mentees by accompanying them to training events and hosting forums for them to share experiences: successes, challenges, and lessons learned.
- To establish a format for life-long learning and community-building among women.

Mentors were accountants, lead farmers, sales agents, leaders and members of savings and loan groups, village leaders, officers-in-charge, and small producers. They had various levels of education and expertise including in agriculture, finance, marketing, trade, community mobilization and leadership. Most mentees were small producers while some were lead farmers, sales agents, and savings groups members. Over the life of the program, 7 KFPs conducted 28 mentorship trainings with 98 mentors who conducted 301 trainings for a total of 451 mentees.

## Peer Mentorship in MEDA's Gender Equality Policy and Strategy

Together with the project implementation plan, MEDA developed a Gender Equality (GE) Strategy which is reviewed and updated regularly to align with the evolving needs of clients. To facilitate the enhancement of women's capacity as leaders, the peer mentorship approach was designed to connect women leaders in business, community, farming, and politics with their peers to coach them on leadership, public speaking, community development, and gender equality.

With support from MEDA and its local partners, mentors helped to motivate women, especially young women, potential leaders to take more leadership positions in the family, economy, politics, and community. The main responsibilities of mentors included:

- Sharing experiences including successes, failures, and lessons learned.
- Conducting mentorship activities, including trainings and coaching.
- Organizing and leading public forums, if requested. For example, International Women's Day, Myanmar Women's Day or 16 days of Activism Events.
- Support the personal development of mentees and promote them as leaders in their community.
- To inspire, motivate and mobilize mentees.
- To be flexible, empathetic, open-minded, respectful, and encouraging.

## Purpose of the Assessment

MEDA recognizes the importance of mentorship in advancing women's economic empowerment and promoting women's leadership. Mentors support and work to improve the informal enabling environment serving IMOW's goal of promoting women's leadership. This assessment was designed to assess the effectiveness of the mentorship model and gain insight into the mentor's impact in promoting GE and women's leadership. The specific objectives included:

1. Explore the shifting perspectives on women's empowerment and leadership in the target communities.
2. Understand the specific ways mentors supported women in their communities.
3. Evaluate the impact of women to women peer coaching and observed improvements.

4. Gauge the perspectives and level of acceptance of mentorship models among families and communities.
5. Identify weak points of the model.
6. Understand the ways the mentors can be further supported in their work.

## Methodology

Interviews were conducted by telephone due to the global COVID-19 pandemic prohibiting travel to the villages with 14 of 98 mentors and 28 of 451 mentees. Interviewees included two mentors and four mentees from each of the project's 7 KFPs. Interviews were completed in August 2020. Each of the mentors and mentees interviewed had been participating in the program for a year or more. The findings and recommendations in this report are based only on the responses gathered during these interviews. The interview questions for mentors and mentees can be found in Appendix 1 and 2, respectively.

# Key Findings

## The Program

The assessment revealed that the mentorship program was successful in fostering leadership among women small producers, lead farmers, and sales agents in Myanmar. Mentors and mentees reported that the key content discussed in the mentorship program included the following (by number of mentions) leadership (39), gender awareness (37), public speaking (35), soft skills (27), decision-making (24), listening skills (23), women's rights (22), gender-based violence (20), marketing (19), community advocacy (14), and conflict resolutions & negotiation (6). The top five most impactful elements of the mentor trainings included (by number of mentions): leadership (23), Soft skills (20), public speaking (12), gender awareness (9), communication (8), community advocacy/mobilization (3),

Other support included:

- Advice, knowledge, and experience sharing (including agricultural best practices, negotiation, and marketing).
- Accompaniment to trainings, events, and meetings (and assistance in arranging transport and accommodation for training).
- Provision of information, education and communication materials, including a mentorship manual.
- Encouragement to stand up and take responsibilities in community affairs equally with men.
- Encouragement to improve mentees' professionalism, accountability, communication, and social skills.
- Organization of experience sharing events with multiple mentees.
- Market linkages.

## Challenges

Mentors noted several persistent challenges including a lack of confidence in sharing, public speaking and leading at home among both mentors and mentees. Some struggled to mobilize women due to their own lack of experience but also lack of interest on the part of the mentees. This was largely because the concept of mentorship for many was new and mentors at times struggled to explain the process and engage women in the activities. Time was another concern as mentors and mentees had other competing responsibilities, such as income-generating activities, household chores and community responsibilities. At times, this also caused conflict in the home. One mentor explained, for example, that her husband would argue with her for neglecting household chores. In some cases, mentors actually trained the husbands of selected mentees if mentees were not able to attend trainings or dedicate the amount of time required. This was, of course, not the intent of the program, but is an important to consider as it underscores a need for men's engagement (see recommendations).

A few mentors also felt discouraged by community members that doubted their abilities to carry out their responsibilities or encountered resistance to the activity. Many mentors expressed that some men still look down on women and do not respect them in leadership roles making the development of relationships among women and men leaders especially challenging. One described the situation succinctly, "most of the villagers cannot let go off the old culture". Finally, mentors noted that the lack of education among many mentees was a challenge as this caused them to struggle in social situations and in public speaking.

Reaching young women was also a challenge. Some of the mentors mentored young women, but most in the mentorship program were between the ages of 30-40 (and one in their 50s). Of the young women who were involved, they were mostly involved in family farming and a few were involved in community development committees or youth committees. Several mentors mentioned that young women are still "under the decision of their family" and, while they participate in village committees, they are not yet leaders. In the future, greater effort could be made to reach young women, who are particularly marginalized facing both gender and age-related constraints, to accessing and controlling resources and taking on leadership roles. This was also mentioned by mentors and mentees as a suggestion for the future of the program (see recommendations).

## Achievements

Despite these challenges, mentors and mentees noted many key skills achievements including mentee's increased levels of confidence as well as their skills in public speaking, negotiation, management, communication, and social skills. Mentees noted that the interpersonal and social skills that they learned through the program are helping them to establish trusting relationships with other village members as well as strengthening family relationships. One mentor noted,

“

*Before the mentorship trainings, women dare not to say or confront anything in the village. Nowadays, women are more proactive and confident after participating the mentorship program...mentees know their right for confrontation in front of the people.”*

Interestingly, these skills were noted both as a challenge and an achievement, which is indicative of the amount of time required for lasting behavior change and even though some of these continue to be persistent challenges, there was a recognition among all mentors that substantial improvements were made in these areas.

In terms of roles achievements, many mentors themselves took on leadership roles in community development committees and village health activities and some are leading youth associations to do environmental maintenance and social affairs in the village. Mentees also reported increased participation in village meetings, religious, and social activities, and increased decision-making at home, in family agriculture businesses, savings groups, and in the community. Both mentors and mentees attributed their skills achievements and acceptance of leadership roles to their participation in the mentorship program.

## Acceptance from Family and Community

Most mentors and mentees responded that they received support both from their family and community and that they feel more integrated in the community as a result of the mentorship program. A number of mentees spoke of their husband's support, who encouraged and helped them with household tasks while they attended trainings because they recognized the positive personal and economic outcomes that could result from these training sessions. Many also noted the importance of the support of village leaders, particularly in organizing sharing sessions. Three mentees even noted that members of the village supported them by providing transportation for trainings. One mentee noted,

“

*I feel more integrated in the community because of the mentorship. In response to COVID-19 in the village, I take part in making sure that the community members wash their hands properly and constantly, also help the village effort in prevention of COVID-19 by making contact with health professions for providing necessary health check and care for people in quarantine center in the village.”*

However, a few mentors and mentees noted that they do not receive full support from the community which kept them from achieving their goals.

# The Impacts

## Mentorship Goals and Results

One of the key components of the mentorship program was goal setting and progress measurement for both mentors and mentees. The assessment revealed that most mentors felt they achieved or made significant progress on their mentorship goals of becoming leaders in their family, businesses, and community. The majority of mentees also expressed that they are making important progress achieving their goals, including improved agricultural practices, business skills, marketing, community participation and taking leadership roles. They also expressed feeling motivated to give advice and support other women and become mentors themselves. One mentioned leading a savings and loans group, which she was able to do with the support of her mentor and another is hoping to be elected as a village leader in the election of November 2020. She noted,



*I would like to be a ten/hundred-household leader in coming 2 to 3 years. I want my children to study until the end."*

For the mentors and mentees who were able to achieve their goals, they attributed this to their own personal commitment, interest, and dedication to attending trainings and taking charge of their personal growth. This is an important indication of increased agency and self-efficacy, a key goal of the mentorship program. Two mentees also noted the importance of family support and two others noted the importance of support from other women. For those that did not achieve their goals, they noted a short period to implement, personal time constraints, and lack of self-confidence as contributing factors.

Specifically, mentors and mentees who were unable to achieve their goals noted the following challenges, mostly related to patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory gender norms: 1) Women still encounter resistance and barriers to becoming 10 and 100 household leaders, though this is happening in some places; 2) Some mentors and mentees still are not recognized, respected or trusted as leaders in their communities; 3) Time constraints due to an inequitable distribution of care work and an inability to attend village meetings that are held at night; 4) Men are influencing and discouraging women in a way that erodes their confidence and keeps them from reaching their goals; 5) Community resistance to behavior change; 6) Language barriers and discrimination against those with lower education and young women. While these challenges were discouraging for some, many interviewees still had a message of hope and persistence. One mentee declared,



*Men do not trust women until now in my village, I will make men to trust women. In upcoming village election, I will try hard to become a ten/hundred-household leader."*

## Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Through the mentorship program, mentors and mentees were encouraged to explore the topics of gender equality and women's empowerment in their own contexts. In the interviews, both were asked to describe their ideas of an empowered woman. Mentors and mentees reached a common understanding

and described an empowered woman as a leader in community development (including peace/health/education and religious activities, record keeping, accounting and mobilizing others), in savings groups and in the family (managing finances and supporting the family). They described her as confident, smart, empathetic, and patient, a good communicator, vocal/powerful at public speaking. She negotiates and convinces others to accept her views and has a good relationship with her spouse and family. Finally, she is honest, accountable, and acts according to her word, makes good decisions, gives sound advice and works to support and empower other women. Mentees specifically mentioned that an empowered woman is literate/intelligent, simple, hardworking, sacrifices herself for the wellbeing of others and promotes gender equality, responding to gender-based violence.

All mentors and mentees noted that they observed changes in their homes and communities as a result of the program, and all but three mentees have become leaders or are progressing since participating in the mentorship program. In addition to the key achievements noted above, they also noted that more women are now actively participating in various committees (participating or leading) such as women's committees, health committees, administration committees, school committees, and disability committees. Mentors specifically noted that - in all of these committees - women are equal with men except the administration committee – where decisions are made solely by men. They also noted key changes in improved agricultural practices and business management. One mentee noted,

“

*Women can now take the leading role in agricultural which was considered not possible in the past.”*

Many have also observed that some villagers are beginning to respect women more as they are involved in community development activities. Mentees also noted that there is more harmony and gender equality at home and in the community and more involved in and leading in agricultural activities and businesses. In particular, all mentors noted that women's decision-making has increased because of the program. The most significant changes observed were women's increased decision-making in business and farming (37), in the community (30), and in the household (27). Interestingly, both mentors and mentees noted the least number of changes at the household level, which confirms the need for an increased focus on intrahousehold power dynamics (see recommendations).

Mentors and mentees attribute these changes to increased education (particularly for young women) and changing social norms and community mindsets with respect to men's acceptance of women's changing roles, responsibilities, and leadership. This mindset shift was facilitated by quotas for women's participation in village administration but also to increased confidence and competence of mentors and mentees as a direct result of the mentorship program and other IMOW and other NGO project activities including trainings, experience sharing, and practical application. Mentees in particular, also noted the importance of education on women's rights as human rights.

# Key Recommendations for the Future of the Mentorship Model

- 1. Build the capacity of local partners to continue the model:** Based on the assessment findings; mentors and mentees are eager to continue their roles and requested an expansion of the mentorship program to all project villages. A few recommended the establishment of a development fund to support this growth. Sustainability of the Mentorship model is reliant on local partner organizations to continue and expand the work. Specifically, mentors and mentees requested more frequent technical support and refresher training related to women's and youth's empowerment including peacebuilding, public speaking, business skills, governance, and social skills.
- 2. Address Household Gender Dynamics:** The assessment revealed that one of the major constraints for mentors and mentees was the amount of time dedicated to the program. Some were not able to fulfill their goals because they simply did not have the time or were discouraged by men in their households and community. Women's empowerment and gender equality cannot be achieved without men's equitable engagement in household chores and care work and further training, workshopping, and monitoring is required to facilitate this kind of intrahousehold gender transformative change.
- 3. Expand gender equality trainings:** Many mentors and mentees noted the importance and impact of trainings on gender equality for women and men. Gender equality training for women alone is not sufficient to make meaningful impact and behavior change. Men and boys must be engaged in this type of training and harmful masculinities and patriarchal systems must be challenged to affect meaningful behaviour change.
- 4. Engage men in project activities:** Many mentors and mentees noted the impact of the male gender champion model and how this should be expanded. They also noted that the project would benefit from engaging both women and men in project activities, including mentorship, trainings, etc...

- 5. Establish networks for mentors and mentees:** Many mentors and mentees expressed the desire for a continuation of the program but also more established and supported networks and messaging groups for more consistent communication among mentors and mentees. Some of the challenges addressed included a lack of confidence in sharing with mentees, and engaging them in such new experiences could be facilitated by better networks to explore common challenges and potential solutions. Specifically, many suggested an experience sharing event for all mentors and mentees to share common successes, challenges, and lessons learned.
- 6. Include more activities geared toward young people (particularly young women):** Mentors and mentees all noted the importance of motivating and mobilizing young women to become more active in the community and in decision-making positions. However, few became involved in the program. For this sort of shift in focus, more community-level engagement with parents and traditional leaders to encourage the participation of young women is essential (see following recommendation).
- 7. Use social dialog methodology to sensitize community to mentorship activities:** A number of challenges mentioned by the mentors and mentees in the program related to time commitment and social acceptance. If the broader community is brought into the process early on to better understand the aims of the project, it is likely there would be more substantial support from key influencers (men, traditional leaders, etc.)

# Appendix 1:

## Mentor Interview Questions

Questionnaire no.			
Interviewer:			
Name of Mentor:			
Date :		Starting time:	Ending time :

1. Participation in IMOW mentorship program	
1.1 How long have you been a mentor?	
1.2 What are your key achievements as a mentor?	
1.3 What are your key challenges as a mentor?	
2. Contribution to mentees	
2.1 What trainings have you provided to mentees?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Women's Rights <input type="checkbox"/> Decision making <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Public Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Community Advocacy <input type="checkbox"/> Soft Skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Gender Awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Marketing <input type="checkbox"/> Listening skills <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution & negotiation <input type="checkbox"/> Gender-based violence
2.2 What other types of support have you provided to your mentees?	

2.3 What key improvements have you observed in your mentees?
3. Goals and Challenges
3.1 Did you achieve the goals that you had for the mentorship program?
3.2 Why or why not?
4. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
4.1 In your opinion, what does an empowered woman look like/act like? What does she do at home and in the community?
4.2 Are you observing changes in women's empowerment in any areas of your community or your home?
4.2.1 If so, what changes are women and men observing in these areas?
4.2.2 What do you think is contributing to this change?
4.3 Have you seen women come into leadership positions as a result of mentorship?
4.3.1 If so, did they take a leadership role in business, community (10 up to 100 households), or in the community development process?
4.4 Did you mentor any young women?
4.5 Do you think they are more likely to take on leadership roles at home and in the community because of mentorship?
4.6 Have you seen changes in women's decision-making as a result of the mentorship program?
4.6.1 Did the decision-making happen in agri-business, the household, or the community?

5. Acceptance from family and community
5.1 How does your family feel about your participation in the mentorship program?
5.2 Do you receive support or recognition for your mentorship role from the village?
5.3 Are you seeing changes in women's leadership in your community?
5.3.1 Do you think this is a result of the mentorship program?
5.3.2 What other factors may contribute to these changes?
6. Additional support
6 In order for the mentorship program to succeed, what should MEDA:
6.1 Start doing?
6.2 Stop doing?
6.3 Continue doing?
6.4 Change?
7. Any final thoughts, comments, or recommendations for the mentorship program?

# Appendix 2: Mentee Interview Questions

Questionnaire no.			
Interviewer:			
Name of Mentor:			
Date :		Starting time:	Ending time :

Participation in IMOW mentorship program	
1.1 How long have you been a mentee?	
1.2 What are 2-3 achievements you have made through your mentorship experience?	
(9) Mentorship Content	
<p>2.1 What trainings have you received through mentorship?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Women's Rights</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Decision making</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Leadership</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Public Speaking</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Community Advocacy</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Soft Skills</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Gender Awareness</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Marketing</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Listening skills</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Conflict Resolution &amp; negotiation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Gender-based violence</p>
2.2 What other types of support have you received from your mentor?	

2.3 What was the most impactful content of your mentorship training?
Goals and Challenges
3.1 Did you achieve the goals that you had for the mentorship program?
3.2 Why or why not?
3.3 Did you encounter any challenges? What were they?
Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
4.1 In your opinion, what does an empowered woman look like/act like? What does she do at home and in the community?
4.2 Are you observing changes in women's empowerment in any areas of your community or your home?
4.2.1 If so, what changes are women and men observing in these areas?
4.2.3 What do you think is contributing to this change?
4.3 Have you entered into a leadership position(s) as a result of mentorship?
4.3.1 If so, did you take a leadership role in business, community (10 up to 100 households), or in the community development process?
4.4 Have you seen changes in women's decision-making because of the mentorship program?
.4.1 Did the decision-making happen in agri-business, the household, or the community?

Acceptance from family and community
5.1 How does your family feel about your participation in the mentorship program?
5.2 Do you feel you are more integrated in the community as a result of mentorship? Do you have an example?
5.3 Are you seeing changes in women's leadership in your community?
5.3.1 Do you think this is a result of the mentorship program?
5.3.2 What other factors may contribute to these changes?
Additional support
6. In order for the mentorship program to succeed, what should MEDA:
6.1 Start doing?
6.2 Stop doing?
6.3 Continue doing?
6.4 Change?
Any final thoughts, comments or recommendations for the mentorship program?



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