Introduction

In 2015, MEDA began implementing the six-year Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project focused on the rice and vegetable value chains in Kayin State and the vegetable value chain in Shan State. Project interventions related to sustainable agriculture, financial and market linkages, women’s economic empowerment (WEE), and the environment were implemented in partnership with local Key Facilitating Partners (KFPs) and private sector development (PSD) partners.

IMOW facilitated stronger linkages to markets for women and supported growth in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) by working in partnership with local organizations, communities, and companies that support and champion women and their economic empowerment. The project is funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC).

This document presents a synthesis of Stories of Change (SoC) written over the duration of the Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project. The analysis includes common challenges that women faced prior to participating in the project, their participation in IMOW activities, and frequently cited changes that women farmers experienced because of their involvement in the project.

Client Profile

A total of 33 client stories of change were reviewed for this paper in order to distill trends and commonalities. Project clients are women farmers and have been participating in the project for varying lengths of time. Most of the women were rice and vegetable farmers growing tomato, garlic, corn, cucumber, ginger, turmeric, beans, and pulses. The majority of project clients learned about the project through the project’s KFPs staff.
What it Meant to Participate in IMOW

Most farmers report joining the project to learn about sustainable or Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) because traditional farming practices were generating low yields. Some joined the IMOW project because they lacked financial access to buy agricultural inputs. A few indicated a lack of confidence in public speaking, which limited their negotiation skills when selling their produce, as a main reason for participating in the project.

Nearly all farmers attended three types of trainings conducted by IMOW staff and project partners. These include: GAP training, business or financial management and literacy, and gender and leadership.

**GAP training:** All farmers attended GAP trainings. Women farmers learned about land preparation, pest management, use of proper pesticide, and how to effectively use pesticide for optimum results, etc. Farmers were also trained on EM-Bokashi (effective micro-organisms and how to harness them to make natural fertilizer and pesticide). Women adopted GAPs and reported changes in yield and income. Women, especially lead farmers, also transferred these skills to other farmers.

*With the knowledge that I gained from the agricultural trainings; I was able to share the process of a making a natural compost called EM Bokashi Compost. I also discussed its advantages and disadvantages within the group. At first, other members were not interested in the organic compost that the process creates. However, when they learned about its lower costs compared to chemical fertilizers, they had requested my assistance and guidance in learning how to make it.” — Woman Farmer*

**Business and financial management training:** Women producers received training on maintaining records of expenses and revenue or bookkeeping. Women Sales Agents (WSAs) attended more advanced business management trainings. In addition to the trainings, women formed savings groups. Women noted improved knowledge and skills after attending the business/financial management trainings. Women farmers found the financial management training and participation in savings groups to be quite useful. With participation in savings groups, women farmers adopted saving practices and did not have to borrow money from their relatives, friends, or other people who would charge high interest rates.

**Gender and leadership training:** Women farmers attended gender and leadership training meant to create awareness about women’s rights, boosting self-esteem and confidence and encouraging women producers to participate and lead community forums. Women producers improved knowledge about women’s empowerment and leadership concepts and increased gender sensitization amongst community members.

Evidence of Change and Impact

Project clients identified several impacts as a result of their improved knowledge and skills and adoption of agricultural, business, and financial management and gender and leadership practices. The economic or tangible impacts included increased income and production.

**Increased income:** Women farmers experienced an increase in their income primarily as a result of reduction in the input cost because of adopting sustainable or good agricultural practices. Women
producers now spend less money on buying chemical fertilizers, seed, and pesticides. Farmers indicated using natural fertilizers and pesticides after attending GAP trainings. More income means that farmers do not have to borrow money for household consumption or farming inputs from money lenders or from their friends or neighbours. Additional income allowed farmers to buy assets, send their children to school, improve household food consumption, and save for emergency situations.

“I received a loan of 270,000 MMK ($170) from the [saving] group to buy 5000 chayote shoots seeds as an investment. I planted the chayote shoots with the knowledge, methods, and techniques that I had gained from the trainings. After selling it to buyers from Yangon, I made 520,000 MMK ($330) as a net profit.” — Woman Farmer

**Increased production:** Improved yield was another change identified by many farmers. Productivity gains were mostly attributed to learning and implementing sustainable agricultural practices.

“In the previous years, I used eight or nine baskets of seeds in seven acres for my farm and I got 180 baskets when I harvested. However, when I applied the methods that I learned from the agriculture trainings, I got 242 baskets. After applying the methods that I have learned, my rice seeds are larger and heavier compared to my previous productions. I also prevented diseases and sixty baskets of rice seeds was sold which gave me more income. In the following year, I will prepare my farmland for seed production and irrigation to have better production.” — Woman Farmer

“When I grow rice using traditional methods and techniques, I got only 40 baskets of yield per acre whereas I could increase up to 70 baskets with the new techniques provided by the IMOW project.” — Woman Farmer

There were many less tangible or social benefits that women identified as a result of their participation in the project.

**Increased recognition:** Women have received increased recognition in the community and within their households because of their knowledge, skills, and improvement in agricultural practices. Even people from nearby villages have come to them, especially to lead farmers, to ask for their opinion about farming techniques and market information.

**Increased public participation and leadership:** Women producers, especially lead farmers, have become more confident in their ability to speak in public and attend community meetings.
This increased confidence was attributed to participation in IMOW training, especially gender and leadership-related activities.

“After I was chosen as a lead farmer, SKBZ [an IMOW KFP] asked me to attend the trainings. It was my first-time attending, so I felt ashamed, nervous, and afraid. But after attending the trainings provided by SKBZ, I gained knowledge and skills on agriculture and have more confidence talking with others and able to make new friends.” — Woman Farmer

Towards Sustainability

Another less tangible impact of the project is that women farmers are optimistic about their future, have become more interested in farming practices, and see agriculture as a viable livelihood option. Women producers intended to continue applying good agricultural practices beyond the life of the project.

“My whole family and I cannot live without farming. I will also encourage my children to continue working on the farm.” — Woman Farmer

Women producers indicated a desire to share their knowledge and skills with other farmers in their villages so they could also get improved yield and contribute to household food security and income.

“I also share the process of making EM Bokashi Compost within the group. Now there are four members from the group using EM Bokashi Compost in their ginger farms.” — Woman Farmer

“In coming years, I will keep sharing the knowledge and technique that I received from the trainings not only from the farmers within the group but also to the farmers from my community.” — Woman Farmer

Some women, especially WSAs, were determined to establish or expand their farming enterprise by buying and selling agricultural inputs, including organic fertilizer.

“I also have a plan to act as a female sales agent, I will collect rice from my village, nearby villages and sell to the rice traders. Moreover, I will run an input supplier shop for agriculture.” — Woman Farmer

Author: Yasir Dildar
Editing and Review: Jennifer Gurbin Harley and Saw Say Htoo
Graphic Design: Wendy Helgerman

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