Women Lead Farmer Learning Model

Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW)
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# ACRONYMS

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1. Introduction

MEDA and its local partners implemented the Global Affairs Canada-funded Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project in Myanmar from 2015-2021. Project activities focused on sustainable agriculture 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 (WSP) and women farmers to facilitate and lead in Agri business within their home and communities.

Many studies have shown that if women have control over income, they tend to spend on their family’s health, nutrition and education. When men and women both contribute to and benefit from economic development activities, household economic stability grows, which can lead to fewer financial worries and stresses. Studies have shown that family relationships are more harmonious when men and women work together and support each other.

The latter can be accomplished through targeting women-dominant sectors or activities, increasing women’s roles in post-harvest handling and sales, or finding opportunities to raise awareness about women’s contributions. The results would need to be monitored through qualitative assessment or additional questions on the impact survey questionnaire as income is currently measured at the household (HH) level.

2. Women Lead Farmers Model

The Women Lead Farmers (WLF) approach is a participatory process that includes MEDA, key facilitating partners (KFP), the WLFs, the WSPs, their family, and other local decision-making bodies who can generate community buy-in. An important aspect of this work is that the project trained selected women farmers as women lead farmers (WLF) and then they trained and mentored the other women farmers in villages on farming and decision making through activities such as agriculture sharing sessions, and implementing model plots, demo plots and seed farm together. Many project activities were delivered through local NGO partners. These Key Facilitating Partners (KFPs) sensitized the communities about the project, highlighted the purpose, and invited women farmers to join and participate. KFPs facilitated the formation of WSP groups in each project village and facilitated the group to nominate one or two group members to be trained as WLFs. To implement this model, MEDA’s agriculture team developed a training program for WLFs to build a solid understanding of the conceptual underpinning of improved agriculture practices which includes four basic modules: soil preparation, seeds and seedlings, integrated pests management (IPM), and post-harvest management. KFPs also offered technical training on specific value chain crops including garlic, ginger, turmeric, and chili. Further training was also provided on Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) and lessons on the environment and climate change. MEDA’s agriculture team trained the agriculture technicians of KFPs so that the KFPs could train the WLFs in the respective townships. KFP agriculture technicians followed-up with WLFs and provided necessary technical support and advice to WLFs to conduct sharing sessions and to implement model plots and demo.
plots successfully. The WLF model was used to nurture potential women farmers as leaders for improved agriculture practices, and to share this important agriculture knowledge and practices widely to many other women farmers efficiently and effectively. WLFs were assigned and guided to record the group members and basic information about sharing sessions in the village for project monitoring data.

The women lead farmers (WLFs) served as model farmers by using good agricultural practices such as soil and water conservation, weed control, and crop nutrition. They also served as a source for new technologies and mentored to the women farmers of the group in the village. MEDA worked with KFPs to improve agriculture knowledge and skills of WLFs by trainings, field days, excursion trips, communication events and introducing them to mobile agriculture applications.

Definition of a Woman Lead Farmer (WLF)

One qualified woman farmer was selected by her peers to be a WLF. These lead farmers were considered qualified if they met the following criteria:

1. Ability to read and write,
2. Willing to give time to attend training,
3. Willing to share them back to other women farmers in the village,
4. Willing to lead to implement demo plot and study plot, and
5. Possessed leadership potential.

Responsibilities of a WLF

The responsibilities of a lead farmer are listed below:

1. Attend agriculture training at least four-modules basic agriculture training or other specific crop trainings,
2. Conduct women farmer group meeting at least once in a month and share back agriculture knowledge to other women farmers in the village,
3. Lead the women producer group in the village for agriculture activities; demo plot or study plot for practical learning by getting supports form KFPs,
4. Adopt improved agriculture practices and to be a model of change for the community,
5. Be a mentor for other women farmers and provide advises on improved agriculture practices,
6. Record information about group members, agriculture sharing sessions and group meetings and report to KFP regularly, and
7. Support KFP's project activities as necessary.

Definition of Woman Small Producer (WSP)

A woman small producer (WSP) is a farmer who is active in growing any crop individually or with family on the owned or rented land regardless of how many acres she farms. In Shan State, most WSPs owned or rented less than one acre of agricultural land which is large enough for them because they grow vegetables seasonally and harvest three crops in a year. In Kayin State, most WSPs owned or rented between 1-10 acres of agricultural land and mostly grow rice only once a year mainly in monsoon season but there are a few WSPs with access to water to grow rice in summer season also.

A WSP is expected to be an active member in the women small producer group and to learn from the WLFS so that she can improve her agricultural practices by attending and sharing the information learned. The WSP is also responsible for joining the group in implementing a study plot or demo plot under the leadership of WLF.

All WSPs were registered as the project clients by KFP staff by using IFomBuilder software on the tablets and the information were stored in the web database of the service provider Zerion. The database generated unique ID number for each project client. All women small producers were registered starting from 2016 up to 2020.

WSPs were considered to have participated in the IMOW project if she met the following criteria:

- A woman farmer who was mentored by a WLF on improved agriculture practices in a group setting during at least 1 meeting a month.
- A woman farmer who was part of a small producer group supported by an IMOW KFP.
- A woman farmer who received training or support from any private sector partner or service provider.
- A woman farmer who benefited from any incentive scheme of IMOW.
- A woman farmer who attended any agriculture event sponsored by a KFP or IMOW directly, or participated in any IMOW learning exchange activity.

Some WSPs became WLFS when they were recommended by peers from the WSP group and after she was trained at basic agriculture training. In this case, they were registered as a WLF in the project client database in addition to previous WSP status.
What is the Woman Lead Farmer (WLF) Approach?

The WLF approach used by IMOW is defined in the following ways:

- A women’s centered extension approach wherein information is disseminated to smallholder farmers to boost their agricultural productivity through the expertise and knowledge of a selected lead farmer

- The selected lead farmers are often referred to as masters or model farmers of their chosen area of agricultural expertise

- The lead farmers are selected based on criteria developed in partnership with the field staff, KFP’s and often from the recipient community

- The gender sensitivity of this approach represents a holistic understanding of the multiple and overlapping factors which influence the agency over and access to, resources, finances and decision making at the market, household and community level.

- It represents a participatory process because the approach is contingent on the assumption that the WLF will have better access to and knowledge of the constraints, barriers and opportunities impacting women’s or family farming practices in that particular locality, in addition to potentially raising the status and representation of women as leaders and innovators within their community.

Daw Maw Maw Lwin, Lead Farmer from Kawkareik Township, Kayin State
3. Implementation: A Women-Centered Approach

In order to implement this WLF approach, the project focused on seven main dimensions:

**Engaging Participants in Meaningful Ways:** The WLF approach works when the process is participatory, including both KFP’s, Lead Farmers, Families and other decision-making bodies that can evoke community buy-in of your project and the WLF approach. So, MEDA team identified Key Facilitating Partners (KFPs) through a transparent due diligent process, and they implemented women lead farmer model by cooperating with MEDA; facilitating the women small producer groups to select the WLFs, to train them and coach team in implementing demo plots and sharing the agriculture knowledge to WSPs in the villages.

**Building Capacity:** The WLF process prioritize capacity building of the field staff, the KFP’s and the WLF’s, at various levels and stages depending on the project’s goals and skills of the players involved. Building capacity of local partners is a critical component of the IMOW project’s approach. Local organizations provide vital knowledge of local context and building capacity of local partners is a critical component of the IMOW project’s approach. Local organizations provide vital knowledge of local context and culture and important linkages with communities for social mobilization. Field staff, KFPs and WSPs were trained on four basic modules: soil preparation, seeds and seedlings, integrated pests management (IPM), and post-harvest management. KFPs also offered technical training on specific value chain crops including garlic, ginger, turmeric, and chili. Further training was also provided on Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) and lessons on the environment and climate change.

**Making Linkages:** The WLF approach involved the WSAs, the private sector including matching grant partners to identify linkages to get products to market.

**Using Appropriate Technologies:** To increase production and improve quality, it is crucial that new and appropriate technologies transferred by KFPs and private sector partners are easily adopted by women producers. There were many new production technologies introduced by IMOW. KFPs led trainings to introduce these new technologies (e.g. equipment and materials) and support their uptake. Proportionate matching grant options were defined as incentives for early adopters of the new technologies. IMOW introduced irrigation systems for WSPs in Shan, rice drum seeder and...
weeder for WSPs in Kayin under the incentive program for adoption of effective technologies by small holder farmers.

**Working with Local Partners:** By partnering with local organizations and businesses, MEDA improved women’s sustainable agricultural practices and agricultural productivity, incomes, leadership and decision-making capacity, as well as inclusive access to goods, services, and market networks. MEDA’s IMOW project trains women farmers on conservation agriculture, integrated pest management, seed production, and efficient irrigation techniques, all of which help them better adapt to the changing climate. Training local partners on climate change adaptation, conducting study tours, sharing educational materials, and facilitating linkages to input suppliers that are addressing environmental issues, are just a few activities employed to help address farmer vulnerability to environmental changes.

**Sourcing High Quality Inputs:** Utilization of good quality seeds and other inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides play a key role to increase crop yield as well as improving crop quality that meet market demand expectations. Value Chain analysis indicate that IMOW targeted women farmers lack access to quality inputs, both in Kayin and Southern Shan States. Hence, IMOW is committed to carry out various options to improve access to good quality inputs by target women producers.

**Improving Harvesting Practices:** IMOW is committed to improving harvest and post-harvest handling practices. By doing so, harvest and post-harvest loss of crops will be decreased and the quality and yield of the crops can be improved.

**Interventions Offered through KFPs**

Agricultural services provided by extension workers of KFPs included training and support for climate smart agriculture and GAP. Specifically, the outreach focused on the 4 areas outlined below:

- Improving knowledge on the use of high-quality seeds, as well as natural fertilizers and pesticides by conducting seed production plots (demonstration plots). The goal of these plots was to develop a local high-quality seed market accessible to women farmers. The plots were used to demonstrate techniques and share learnings.

- Training to learn how to use appropriate inputs including hand tools and machinery, as well as irrigation systems that would increase quality and reduce workload.

Women Lead Farmers from Kayin State received Rice GAP Myanmar certificates from Department of Agriculture
The formation of groups to improve access to services and opportunities, as well as to facilitate linkages to the private and public sectors.

Facilitate, encourage and support interested women-farmers, WLFs and/or WSPs, to go into the business of seed production for sustainable seed distribution in their respective areas.

Interventions Offered Through Matching Grants to Private Sector Partners

The project’s private sector development (PSD) partners included Lead Firms (LFs) and MSMEs. The PSD partners received matching grants to provide increased access of quality inputs to WSPs along with embedded services. PSD partner were also expected to reach WSPs in remote areas. The specific types of interventions are outlined below:

- Implement incentive programs to improve uptake of new and appropriate production technologies including irrigation systems.
- Prevent post-harvest losses and quality upgrading of crops at traders and processors level by encouraging upgrading of Rice Mills in Kayin.
- Supporting MSMEs in Shan to offer better sorting, grading and storage of products in order to better meet the needs of farmers.

List of Activities of the WLF:

- Mobilizing communities and WSPs for project activities in villages
- Disseminating agriculture information and project related information to WSPs
- Attending trainings in town and sharing information back to WSPs in the village
- Pilot testing new agriculture technologies in their own farms
- Implementing demonstration plots and study plots
- Leading to implement seed farms
- Monitoring and supervising the progress of the WSPs including visits to the farms
- Recording and reporting the activities of WSP group to the KFPs
- Coordinating between community and KFP or extension worker for project activities
- Local resource person for WSPs in adopting the improved agriculture practices
4. Successes

- The groups of WSPs formed with the help of the KFPs has promoted WSP participation and ownership which have become self-sustaining. There were 335 WSP groups formed in Shan and Kayin. Further, the groups are able to learn from each other and thus strengthen community ties.

- By the end of the project, 749 Women Lead Farmers (WLFs) were trained and mentored on improved agricultural production techniques.

- WLFs shared agriculture knowledge to WSPs, they became model farmers, and they are inspired by other WSPs in the villages.

- 1,298 of training/sharing sessions were conducted by WLFs and 6,204 WSPs received sharing on improved production techniques (Module 1 - Module 4)

- 560 training/sharing sessions were conducted by WLFs and 4,172 WSPs received sharing on improved production techniques (Non-Module Sharing – garlic, ginger, chili, environment, etc.)

- 634 model plots/study plots were implemented and 5,227 of female lead farmers/women small producers participated in the implementations.

- By the end of the project, at least 3,463 WSPs adopted improved agriculture practices. This number is probably underreported because many WLFs have low levels of literacy and they faced some issues with clarity in their reporting. WSPs adopted agricultural practices that they learnt from the trainings, sharing sessions and demo plots by WLFs. As a result, their products increased in quality as well as their yields and ultimately their incomes.

- Most WSPs and village administrators said in the annual interviews that they had never received training on agricultural practices before and they used traditional techniques only. They appreciated receiving the improved agricultural knowledge. Specifically, improved land preparation, compost fertilizer making, quality seed selection, and pest control with natural pesticides, had the biggest impact. Prior to their participation in the project, WSPs used chemical fertilizer without proper knowledge on dosage or environmental impact, and chose products that were not always a good match for their soil. WSPs are not only adopting the improved agricultural practices but also sharing with farmers from nearby villages and as a result the demand for quality seeds has increased.

- In some villages, the Department of agriculture services (DOA) joined the KFPs in agricultural training and provided raw material to make natural fertilizer.

- By the end of the project, 600 WLFs/WSPs benefited from the incentive scheme (discounted equipment) for irrigation systems in Shan and rice drum seeders and weeders in Kayin.
They became leaders in their communities due to their increased efficiency and effective agricultural technologies.

- Most WSPs received awareness about GAP which was shared by Agriculture Technical Officers of DOA in the KFP organized sessions. WSPs also received information about the process and requirements of applying the GAP certificate from DOA. Some WSPs applied for the GAP certification process and Agriculture Technical Officers of DOA conducted the necessary auditing by visiting the farms. By the end of the project, 92 women small producers received GPA certificate from DOA.

- Some WSPs expanded the agriculture land by buying or renting after experiencing improving quality and better yield. In Kayin some WSPs reuse the paddy land that they left them bare for many years because of low yield.

- In Kayin, some WSPs started getting income from selling surplus rice because they saw increases in their yields. In contrast, before the project, the harvest was barely enough for family consumption for most farmers.

- Almost all WSPs responded in annual survey that they consider themselves to be farmers whereas they regarded themselves as housewife or dependent before the project; despite the fact that most of them have been involved in farming work since childhood.

- Most WLFs/WSPs responded in annual survey that they consider themselves as important economic actors in the community because they doubled their yields and other farmers including men learned improved agriculture practices from them.

- Most WLFs/WSPs responded in the annual survey that they consider themselves as leaders in their community because the community members recognize them not only as leader in agriculture but also, they were elected for leadership positions in other social and development groups in the community.

- One MSME matching grant partner provided garlic sorting services and pay higher prices for larger garlic which encouraged WSPs to adopt improved agriculture practices because more larger heads of garlic were produced as a result. Moreover, the same MSME matching grant partner offered a higher price for GAP garlic which encouraged WSPs to grow garlic with GAP practices. Many WSPs chose to sell to that MSME.

- In villages where there has no WSA to collectively buy fertilizer, pesticides or other inputs, the WSP groups came together to buy from shops in town. They also sold the crops collectively to the buyers in town. It reduced time and energy for individuals during both the buying and selling processes. In addition to that, they gained the power to negotiate to get the best price when selling the crops.

- WLFs were trained on agriculture mobile phone applications to get updated agriculture techniques and other related information. Commonly used applications are Shwe Theenan, Htwet Toe and Green Way.
• 2 KFPs, KBC and NAG, facilitated the formation of WLF associations in two townships in Kayin to work as a team to get updated agriculture knowledge and to try to secure technical assistance even beyond the end of the project. KFPs provided organizational capacities in the last year of the project and facilitated meetings between the groups and the DOA.

5. Challenges

• For the first 2 years of the project, several WLFs did not receive the complete agricultural training (four modules). Some KFPs conducted two 3-4-day trainings or four 1-day trainings. Some participants could not stay overnight at the training because they had childcare and household responsibilities, and their parents or husband did not approve of their absence. Some WLFs felt defeated because they had low literacy levels and did not understand the material or could not take notes the lessons. KFPs changed the situation by conducting training in remote areas, closer to where the WLFs lived. They also shortened the trainings. Some WLFs especially in Kayin had very low literacy level and required more intense support from KFP staff than WLFs from Shan.

• During the first two years of the project, many WLFs struggled to share back the agricultural knowledge to WSPs in their villages because it was very new for them, and they did not have experience in public speaking. The MEDA team included facilitation skills as one more lesson in the training and developed vinyl posters and flipcharts with key messages as sharing tools for WLFs. KFP staff directly supported the WLFs in the beginning to conduct sharing sessions, before they were ready to lead alone.

• Most KFPs experienced that about 10% - 20% of trained WLFs dropped out of the project because either they moved to Thailand for work, they moved to town for job, or they married and moved to their husband's village. Since WLFs are key persons to implement the agriculture activities of the project, KFPs conducted basic agricultural training for new WLFs until the year before the project was closed.

• WLFs were expected to record the progress of WSP groups and report to KFPs but some WLFs did not meet the expectation because of very low literacy levels which were more cases in Kayin than in Shan.

• WLFs were key in sharing agricultural knowledge with WSPs in the village and they received agricultural knowledge and training only from KFPs with the support of MEDA. KFPs invited Agriculture Technical Officers of DOA in townships to train WLFs and facilitated to build relationship so that WLFs would be able to get updated agriculture knowledge and support from DOA after end of the project. In reality, DOA has limited human resources and limited budget to reach WSPs in villages but by building this connection, the DOA offered to provide agricultural advice by mobile phone or verbally if WLFs called or visited them.
• KFPs trained WLFs on use of agriculture mobile applications to get updated agriculture knowledge and updated agriculture information after end of project but some WLFs could not use that because they used keypad phone.

6. Recommendations

• The project could have considered providing appropriate mobile phones to WLFs to access updated agricultural knowledge and information after end of project. They act as local resource people and they could have continued sharing the updated agriculture knowledge and information to WSPs in the villages.

• The project could have considered the situation of WLFs through a more gender-sensitive lens. Most of them are mothers and/or housewives and they have household responsibilities and require a training format that accommodates these realities. A better-designed training program could avoid attrition of WLFs from the project.

• The project could have better tailored their interventions to WLFs from rural areas. Many of them have low literacy levels, less or no exposure about to attending trainings, and a lack of facilitation skills. WLFs may have conducted agricultural sharing sessions more confidently and effectively if they were better equipped in the training.
7. Client Success Stories

Lead Farmer Daw Myaing Aye

Daw Myaing Aye, 43 years old lead farmer lives in Kamayar Village, Kawkareik Township Kayin State. She has two children: one daughter and one son. Her husband works in Thailand. She started farming when she was 14 years old, at that time she was helping her parents but now she is managing 2 acres of farm by herself. She is also a saving member of village savings group.

Before being involved in the project, she planted rice by using local varieties and traditional farming method. As a result, her farm could only produce 15 baskets per acre. At that time, she did not know how to prevent pests and diseases, ensure proper soil preparation, using good quality rice seeds and natural fertilizers. The yield was not even enough for family consumption so she had to work as a casual laborer to support her family.

In 2016, Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) Project was introduced in her village through Karen Women Empowerment Group (KWEG), one of MEDA Key Facilitating Partners in Kayin State. In later 2016, she became a lead farmer and had an opportunity to attend agriculture trainings. She learned about pests, disease, soil, water management, harvesting methods and how to use fertilizer properly. She applied those agriculture methods in her one acre of farm and as a result her farm produced 46 baskets. She sold 10 baskets of rice with the price MMK 5000 per baskets, and she kept 36 baskets of rice for family consumption. In 2018, she continued to apply agricultural methods such as using good quality rice seeds, using natural fertilizer and prevent pests and diseases. As a result, her 2 acres of farm produced 90 baskets.

Although the yield and income has increased, she had some challenges while planting rice. It was difficult for her to manage alone the 2 acres of farm. Therefore, she had to hire casual labor for her farm. She requested loan from savings group to pay the casual labor fees.

Daw Myaing Aye not only applied the agriculture methods but also shared those knowledges to the farmers from her village and nearby villages. She conducted agriculture sharing sessions in her village. Now, there are 30 farmers who applied and adopted those agriculture methods. She said, “the project taught me how to catch the proverbial fish. I am so thankful for that. Being able to grow my own food and share it with others is my pride and duty.”

Daw Myaing Aye continues to apply the agriculture methods even after the project. She said, “I am still applying those methods such as using good quality rice seeds, proper soil preparation, water management, using natural fertilizer and prevent pests and diseases. As a result, my farm produce
90 baskets per acre and the paddy quality is good. I do not need to buy rice anymore, now I have enough rice for my family.”

**Daw Myint Thein’s Achievements by using Drip Irrigation System**

Daw Myint Thein a 48 year-old Inn ethnic woman who lives in West Tha Pyay Pin village, Nyaung Shwe Township, Southern Shan State together with her family. She has two daughters, she and her husband mainly plant eggplants, rice and tomatoes on their one acre of farmland.

Before being involved in the project, Daw Myint Thein planted only rice and eggplants. Due to the unstable market price, climate change and using traditional planting techniques, the yields were low. Also, she planted eggplant by using traditional irrigation system, but the result was not good. But when she was invited to join the agriculture sharing session led by the lead farmer in her village, she started to become interested in the agricultural techniques provided by the Improving Market Opportunities for Women (IMOW) project.

Moreover, Daw Myint Thein had a chance to visit the chili demo plot in her village which installed drip irrigation system from PRIME Co.Ltd. She was interested in the drip irrigation system so she asked the lead farmer Daw Soe Yu Maw from her village to tell her more about it. Daw Soe Yu Maw, lead farmer linked Daw Myint Thein with Shwe Inn Thu, one of MEDA’s key facilitating partners in Southern Shan State. With the link with Shwe Inn Thu, Daw Myint Thein installed drip irrigation system from PRIME Co.Ltd in her 0.5 acre of farm and planted onions and eggplants. The benefits she got from drip irrigation system were lower labor costs and a savings of time and water. When the harvest time arrived, she received 40,000 MMK (39CAD) as a net profit by selling onions. Also, her eggplant produced 9920 kg. She received 1,720,000 MMK (1719 CAD) as a net profit by selling eggplants. Because She kept a farm record, she knew how much her tomato farm produced, how much she earned by selling onion and eggplant. This is also a good practice which she learnt from the project.

With the net profit she received by selling eggplants and onions, she bought one acre of farm from Pyar Pin Taung village. She is now planting one acre of eggplant by using drip irrigation system. Moreover, with the support of Shwe Inn Thu Daw Myint Thein applied GAP (Good Agriculture Practice) certification. She already passed water and soil test of GAP certification process. Daw Myint Thein said, “with cooperation with PRIME Co.LTD, I will plant a rice demo plot by using sustainable rice platform (SRI) method. By seeing my achievements using the drip irrigation system, my son-in-law also bought and installed drip irrigation system. I will also apply GAP certification for other crops in coming year.”
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