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EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS WOMEN IN BURMA

Sharing Experiences, Inspiring Action



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I. INTRODUCTION

Although the message of women's economic empowerment is gaining steam all over the world, the challenge of helping the most vulnerable women achieve true income and food security remains daunting. In August 2015, USAID brought a group of leaders from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a world-renowned movement for empowering grassroots women, from India to Burma. They met with local women entrepreneurs, women-led NGOs, and business associations striving for the economic wellbeing of women, especially grassroots women. The objectives of the 5-day meeting were to:

- Identify, acknowledge, and encourage the work of Burma women leaders involved in economic empowerment activities with an emphasis on grassroots women
- Enhance the capacity of Burmese women leaders, and stimulate development and implementation of innovative ideas in their work by introducing the women to the successful models used by SEWA
- Provide networking and learning opportunities among Burmese women leaders and other enablers
- Explore possibilities over time for synergies, cooperation, and creativity among Burmese women leaders and with SEWA

Five SEWA representatives, including senior officials of the organization and successful network leaders, traveled to Rangoon to share the group's experiences in organizing and empowering 1.8 million self-employed women working in India's informal sector. Meeting with a range of individuals and organizations over 5 days, the SEWA representatives learned about economic conditions for women in Burma and shared their experiences from India, where they have helped grassroots women create their own supply chains in handicrafts, agriculture, and other sectors. The visit not only spurred ideas for new approaches to empowering vulnerable women, but also brought together Burmese companies, individuals, and organizations in Rangoon who share an interest in women's economic participation, but whose paths had not crossed before.

2. THE CHALLENGE

Burma's 75 percent rate of woman participation in the labor market is among the highest in the world. But most women's work takes place either informally without the security of regular wages or legal protections, or in seemingly prestigious but relatively low-paying professional fields such as universities and government services. Especially among the one-third of the population that lives below the poverty line, women balance traditional home-based responsibilities with informal efforts to generate extra income for their families. Rural women overwhelmingly work in the cyclical and vulnerable agricultural sector, while women in cities engage in casual trade and services. Family incomes are often insufficient to support needs for housing, transportation, school costs, and other daily requirements. Women throughout the economy do not have access to traditional financial institutions so routinely resort to taking out high-interest loans from informal money lenders. Although the country is known for the generosity of people-to-people support during times of crisis, services for the poor provided or facilitated by the government, such as rural electricity, infrastructure, welfare assistance, and education, remain minimal or nonexistent.

These and other challenges facing grassroots women are quite familiar to SEWA, which has tackled similar issues of women's income and food insecurity, low access to energy, finance, housing and childcare, and social marginalization in India since 1972. Adopting a "livelihood-centric" strategy for building the resources available to grassroots women, SEWA has refined a number of models for skill, enterprise, and leadership development. Today, about 1.8 million women participate in the nearly 3,200 organizations established under the SEWA umbrella throughout India.

3. WORKSHOP IN RANGOON

USAID kicked off SEWA’s visit by bringing together nearly 70 women entrepreneurs and representatives of women-led NGOs and social enterprises to learn about SEWA’s experiences, and to share information about many initiatives aimed at bolstering women’s livelihoods. Entitled “Economic Empowerment for Grassroots Women in Burma: Local and Regional Experiences,” the workshop was cohosted by Partnership for Change, a Norwegian NGO, and joined by leading local women’s associations such as the Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs Association (MWEA); Women’s Organizations Network—Myanmar (WON-Myanmar); Rangoon-based social enterprise Pomelo; and ActionAid—Myanmar, an INGO.

Opening the day-long activity, USAID Mission Director Chris Milligan noted that women in the country have benefited from the political and economic reforms introduced in 2011, and that USAID will continue to support the emergence of greater inclusivity, transparency, and individual empowerment in the economy. Promoting gender equality and linking women to greater opportunity are “not just women’s issues,” he said, but issues that impact the health of families and the success of national development.

The SEWA representatives then detailed how they have organized informally employed women into groups holding shared interests, including home-based workers, agricultural producers, artisans, street hawkers, garbage collectors, and others. In forming these groups, SEWA identifies their shared priorities while also connecting members to available government services and opportunities in training. Over time, SEWA fosters group leaders from grassroots communities, not only through training but also through mentorships and connections to other services and opportunities. SEWA’s investment as an umbrella organization and resource center, including the operation of a bank, insurance, and logistics companies, has resulted in the creation of thousands of self-help groups over 42 years, with more than 100 growing into formally registered cooperatives, private companies, and NGOs.

Continued progress on gender equality and women’s empowerment is fundamental to this country’s economic development. Women, on average, reinvest up to 90 percent of their income back into their households. Reducing gender inequality gives women more money to spend on food, housing, and education – all of which are crucial components for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development.

However, there are still real challenges, including the lack of an institutional framework to support the integration of women’s rights in policy and legislation, lack of access by women to financial and legal services, and persistent incidences of gender-based violence, particularly in areas of active conflict.”

—Chris Milligan, USAID Mission Director
August 17, 2015



Ms. Umadevi Swaminathan, Managing Director of RUDI, a SEWA group, addresses the workshop

Following the SEWA team’s presentations, the workshop turned to three representative initiatives currently taking place in Burma. One similar model has been developed by ActionAid, which has worked for several years in the country’s rural areas with lacquer-producing communities near the well-known ancient city of Bagan.

They create connections among grassroots producers and help rural

families to access government services, beginning with identity cards. They also provide trainings to improve product quality and productivity. Another presentation was led by Pomelo, a social enterprise and popular retail souvenir store in Rangoon established 4 years ago. It provides an attractive marketing platform for a network of local organizations working with marginalized communities and home-based women producers of handicrafts using local materials. The last presentation was led by a Burmese woman entrepreneur who is successfully running Ananda Coffee & Cocoa, integrating plantation, production and retailing processes for both domestic and export sales and employing a large number of rural women.

Also at the workshop, the USAID-funded Economic Reform and ASEAN Integration program introduced the working draft of a document titled, “The Ecosystem for Women’s Economic Empowerment in Burma,” a topline overview of more than 40 organizations, networks, firms, activities, and services that directly or indirectly support the economic empowerment of women in the country, particularly entrepreneurs. The overview aims to capture services for women in all corners of the economy, whether rural, suburban, or urban, and in a range of capacities from operating informal microenterprises and SMEs to leading some of the economy’s largest companies. As noted at the workshop, this “living” document is intended to grow over time, adding information and resources submitted for periodic updates and encouraging networking and sharing of experiences among Burmese groups.

In addition to the sharing of Burmese and Indian experiences, an important success of this workshop was to bring together a wide range of Burmese women economic development enablers who knew surprisingly little about one another, and provide them the opportunity to learn from and interact with each other. USAID will continue to stimulate productive networking among Burmese business women and enablers to enhance learning opportunities and to champion women economic empowerment issues – both key lessons emphasized by SEWA with its almost two million members and voters.

4. IN-DEPTH DISCUSSIONS AND VISITS TO THE FIELD

For 4 days following the workshop, the SEWA team made individual visits to a number of women-led businesses, organizations and associations in the Rangoon region, learning about conditions in Burma and identifying commonalities of experience and opportunities for applying SEWA's knowledge. The group met with three social enterprises dedicated to the empowerment of women in the handicraft and textile sectors: Pomelo, Helping Hands, and the Sunflower Social Enterprise Group. While operating as for-profit enterprises, these businesses also have strong commitments to social impact, investing in workers through training, jobs, and connections to markets, and revitalizing dying indigenous textile styles and skills. Each business has grown solidly as the country has opened up to outsiders, particularly by selling to tourists or through exports to overseas markets. They face challenges, however, from variable product quality, the high costs of property, and weaknesses in the legal framework. They share a concern that the country has no process or incentives for registering as social enterprises, a form that would allow them to prioritize both profit and social impact.

The team met with leaders of Precious Stones, a nonprofit women and youth empowerment organization, along with several of the grassroots women they have been supporting. Since its founding in 2008, Precious Stones has organized 56 groups of self-employed women into savings circles of 10–15 people each, offering lower-than-market-interest loans to members while also connecting them to vocational training and other opportunities. Precious Stones asked to meet with SEWA immediately after the workshop, wishing to learn how to delve even deeper into issues of organizational development and sustainability by drawing upon lessons from SEWA. Despite their 9 years working to make a difference in the lives of marginalized youth and



SEWA Vice President Rehana Riyawala speaks at a meeting with the Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association, August 19, 2015

women, they have not yet been able to obtain a legal entity though they have applied for registration with the relevant authority.

SEWA visited Kayin Seik village, referred to as “a model village” by the Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs’ Association (MWEA), where MWEA has been providing holistic support for education and livelihoods over the last 20 years. With seed money from the MWEA, the village started a collective savings and loan group 15 years ago, with a revolving fund managed by a 10-member committee. It is only an hour outside of Rangoon but the village had no access to electricity until 4 years ago, when the village leaders decided to spend 700,000,000 kyats (about \$70,000) of their collective saving, plus 300,000,000 kyats (about \$ 30,000) from the MWEA to set up a power grid and cables, bringing electricity for the first time to the entire village. With electricity, they have been able to encourage business operations that create jobs outside of the agriculture sector. However, the majority of the villagers are rice farmers, and they are having difficulty securing enough employees, as the majority of the women have left the village to work in what are perceived as more attractive jobs in garment factories.

SEWA also visited Aye Myitta Center, a self-supported local NGO for children with disabilities, where a group of self-employed low-income mothers discussed the challenges of making ends meet. They later met with the Karen Baptist Women’s Association, a 100-year old organization, to discuss connecting grassroots ethnic minority women to vocational training, childcare, and other services critical to the economic empowerment of women, especially those with limited opportunities for formal education. Finally, the SEWA team met with H.E. Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, India’s ambassador to Burma, who remarked on SEWA’s great influence in his own country and the potential for future collaboration with grassroots women in Burma.

5. REFLECTIONS AND WHAT'S NEXT

At the end of the visit, the SEWA team presented its initial findings at the Knowledge Sharing Center, a facility operated by Partnership for Change. After noting the highlights of the trip, everyone was agreed on the importance and challenge of not only maintaining the momentum gained from the week-long meetings with leaders and enablers of grassroots women, but also of finding ways where this marginalized group in Burma can better raise their voices to advocate for change. It was observed how far Burma still has to go in connecting women's groups to formal organizations, such as through registration as cooperatives, as well as the need for development partners to strengthen the formal structures and modernize the regulatory and policy environment that limits all businesses in Burma but especially those with few resources.

Based on the evaluations received from the participants, many were inspired and empowered by SEWA's remarkable achievement in mobilizing grassroots producers. Several noted that they intend to use the knowledge gained from the program to improve their own efforts for grassroots economic development. Burmese women were particularly fascinated by SEWA's success in integrating grassroots women producers in the informal sector through collective organizations and enterprises that they helped establish but that now operate independently.

For follow-up activities, the participants expressed the desire for similar workshops plus more in-depth local learning opportunities on specific topics such as marketing (both domestic and international), product quality control and packaging, and legal and regulatory issues including business and organization registration. They want to maintain the momentum gained from the discussions in the workshop.

Presentations on existing initiatives in Burma were among the favorite topics mentioned by the participants. The results show the effectiveness of including local presentations with those of international experts in designing a workshop agenda and program. Regarding areas for improvement, some participants pointed out that SEWA's presentations were a bit long and text heavy, and would have liked translated versions and more time for group discussions and

Feedback from Participants in the Workshop

"I think the presentations from the SEWA team are an eye opener. It is amazing to see how they were able to mobilize 1.8 million women in India."

"Hearing from SEWA was inspiring and interesting as they gave a lot of details on how they can work on many [women producers at] different levels."

"Very inspiring to see so many women entrepreneurs coming together with a passion for grassroots communities. Also very much enjoyed the opportunity to talk and share experiences."

"I think this kind of meeting should take place more frequently. I'd like to learn more about some specific topics."

"SEWA's experience gives us new ideas on how we should step forward."

interactions with one another, especially for brainstorming potential activities that address the local context.

Most questions directed to the SEWA team concerned the challenges of building sustainable groups with lasting impact. Organizing such groups does not happen overnight, the SEWA representatives cautioned.



Rather, grassroots organizations emerge after a slow and steady investment of time, knowhow, and interactions with each other. Continuous capacity-building, of both members and leaders, drawn from the grassroots over time, is critical.

Although all SEWA groups have the potential to join the formal sector in a variety of forms such as a cooperative society, public charitable trust, a public limited company, or a not-for-profit company, the vast majority remain established as unregistered self-help groups. SEWA itself is registered as a trade union. Adapting informal sector organizations into formal systems presented a significant challenge to workshop participants. They noted that Burma's legal and regulatory systems and the institutions that enforce them are not yet designed to enable the growth and success of self-help groups formed by and for women.

As noted earlier, the vast majority of women in Burma work in the informal sector while still bearing family responsibilities. It is important to ensure that they can enjoy a fair share of benefits as the country further opens to the world with anticipated improvements in economic activities. No overarching SEWA-type organization exists in Burma that pulls together all the grassroots women-empowering economic organizations to help deliver such a result. But a number of home-grown organizations, including sector-specific networks and associations, do exist and are engaged in their own economic empowerment activities. With support, these have the potential to become a stronger collective force with greater scale and networking advantages. Pilot programs may be launched to test new ideas, including how to develop a better platform where like-minded women who share common passions can gather, brainstorm, and benefit from responsive training approaches.

SEWA's visit to Burma is the first of two exchanges. Later this year, a group of grassroots women economic enablers and social entrepreneurs from Burma will visit India to learn more about SEWA and how it operates in practice, with the goal of bringing home insights to share and adapt in Burma. SEWA is preparing a trip report assessing conditions in Burma with recommendations on how these conditions can be most effectively improved and how to best structure a visit to India by Burmese representatives. Upon completion of the exchange programs, USAID will work with Burmese partners and SEWA to evaluate opportunities for further support,

including recommendations that can be followed by the new USAID-funded Private Sector Development Activity, for which advancement of women economic empowerment will be a major objective.