

GENDER AWARENESS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN MYANMAR

JANELYN I. AGBAYANI, PhD

College of Teacher Education, Cagayan State University, Sanchez Mira, Cagayan, Philippines.

Abstract

Gender roles impact the development of a country. A clear perception of citizens on their roles to gender equality enables their full participation and contribution to development. The perceived gender roles of the civil society organizations in the different ethnic states of Myanmar were described qualitatively using the discourse and content analysis. Subject and setting were determined through the Center for Development and Ethnic Studies and seminar-training workshops on gender conscientization have been intensified in the ethnic states. Common tropes among the perceptions revealed by the subjects of diverse ethnicities were along socio-politics, economy, education, culture, and religion as anchored on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Based on the perception of gender roles of the civil society organizations among ethnicities in Myanmar, their culture and religion impact most their socio-political, educational, and economical roles. Men perceived their roles to be superior over women in decision making in socio-political and religious affairs from family to the spheres of the community and society such as the peace and reconciliation process, men are preferred to be educated from boyhood to adulthood and hold major economic roles such that they dominate in the fields of national defense, engineering and business. Women also perceive that they are only tapped for domestic roles not only in their homes but also in the peace process and must maintain their posts as followers of men in the decision making. As a whole, the civil society organizations of Myanmar have stereotypical perceptions on gender roles as greatly dictated by their culture and religion but these gender stereotypes are now being gradually mainstreamed through educational, socio-political, and economic interventions.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Gender Roles, Civil Society Organizations, Ethnicities, Myanmar

INTRODUCTION

A vision of an ideal society living in a democracy is anchored on equality. Lamentably, researches all over the world still prove that most women and men have never enjoyed life on equal terms despite the revolutions and repetitive attempts to assert gender equality. Despite international treaties, laws, and policies as well as national orders and laws, still, gender inequality is one of the perennial and persistent global concerns. Gender beliefs and not ethno political differences are proved to be at the core of endless conflicts, wars, and the “clash of civilizations (Bowen et. al., 2015).

Gender inequalities are at the root of all chaos, crises, conflicts, or wars in the world, and “the treatment of the women and girls is at the center of the war and conflict, never a side issue. They are the very best measure of the level of conflict both internally and externally, as the treatment of women- what is happening in intimate interpersonal relationships between men and women- creates the context in which violence and exploitation seem natural. On the contrary, “societies that are more gender-equal are less likely to go to war.” (Hudson et.al.2012).

Without gender equality, the challenges of realizing the potential of every born girl and boy or every man and woman including the LGBT to contribute to the political, economic, social, and cultural development of a country will remain elusive (CEDAW). Without it, the challenges of laying the bedrock or preconditions for reducing poverty, promoting peace and sustainable development, and building good governance remain unconquerable. It is not only a man's issue, nor a woman's issue. It is a human issue that affects us all. And it needs "men to stand up for the rights of girls and women so that men truly measure up" as Desmond Tutu articulates it. Also, women who are empowered and able to realize their full potential, are an incredible force in taking whole nations forward and in contributing to their well – being (Finnish Government, 2020).

Myanmar is in the process of building sustainable peace after decades of civil war and military rule. Addressing the structural roots of violence, including gender inequality is crucial to building a sense of sustainable peace. Not only that gender and power in peace processes have become a central theme in the international arena but also because, women are involved and are affected by civil wars as victims, survivors, and agents of conflict and peace in specific ways that are often different from the experiences of men. Thus, the need for their critical and crucial role and participation in all levels of decision making in the creation of peace and national reforms to be truly all-inclusive and effective to prevent, manage and resolve conflict. (The Transnational Institute, 2016).

Based from the data elicited from the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, Myanmar signed and ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997. It is provided therein the mandate of the government to adopt temporary measures to remedy or address discrimination against women in all areas of life. The peace process is no exception. A reasonable number of women is best operationalized with a commitment to ensure that women are included in all aspects of the Political dialogue at a minimum of 30 percent in number (AGIPP). However, in the Second Union Peace Conference, 21st Century Panglong held on August 31 to September 3, 2016, which is one of the most historical political events in the country, only 13 percent of women were involved and participated. There is at least an increased percentage of participation compared to the first union conference in January 2016.

The under involvement of women, their presence and influence in political and public life, peace processes, and peace building more broadly, has been widely explored and documented, (Domingo, et al. 2013) but there is a dearth of studies probing and revealing how men support women's meaningful representation, infusion and meaningful participation in the peace process as to the gender awareness and attitude towards gender equality. Myanmar is one of the member states that signed the UNSCR 1325, in 2000, which is bound to respect and implement resolutions supporting gender equality.

There are women's movements, unions, and networks as well as NGO's advocating gender mainstreaming but still, evidently, the society seems so resistant to accepting or understanding and embracing gender roles and equality. "Many challenges continue to hamper the work by women's organizations towards equitable representation and gender justice in Myanmar. These

impediments are widespread across the political, social, and national landscape. Underpinning these difficulties are several attitudinal, conceptual, and institutional challenges in politics and society that need to be addressed. First, patriarchal values and beliefs continue to persist among many decision-makers in the country, both male and (some) female, who deem women's leadership in the public domain is culturally inappropriate and unnecessary" (The Transnational Institute, 2016).

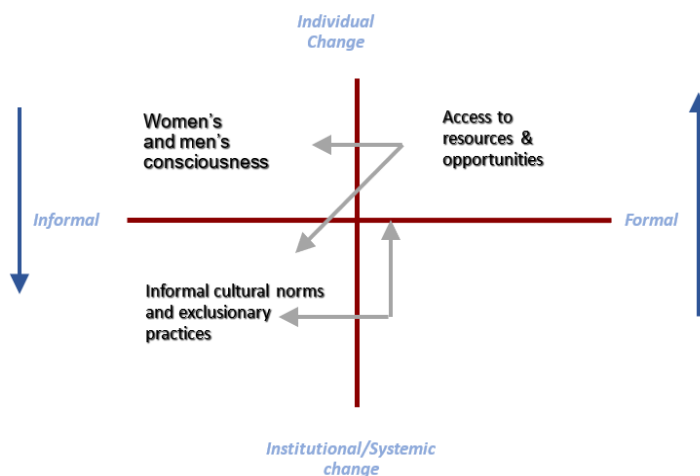
In one article, SAGE in 2016 stressed that gender stereotypes today are as strong as they were thirty years ago and that people are even more likely now to believe that men avoid "Traditional" female roles. It poses a positive lead that clarifications of gender roles can not only stop the damaging effect of gender stereotyping to children but can now affect the decision making of all in all spheres and at all levels.

As a think-tank responsible in developing empirical knowledge that can promote and defend democratic principles and practices to facilitate the peace and reconciliation of the country, the Center for Development and Ethnic Studies in its pursuit of promoting democracy has been conducting seminar-workshops in the seven ethnic states and eight regions with the civil society as the main partners all over the 75 districts of the country. From these experiences, the imperative to conduct a study and its main goal was to investigate on the perceived gender roles among the civil society organizations of the ethnic states in Myanmar.

Specifically, relevant to the goal of diminishing gender misunderstanding and prejudices or gender stereotyping and clarifying gender equality to the civil society organizations, it sought answers to the problem, "What are the perceived gender roles of the civil society organizations in Myanmar?" by employing qualitative method using combined discourse and content analysis (1) on the "frames", or "language" on the themes for gender roles. According to Luo (2023), Discourse analysis is a research design for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. This was used because it tried to reduce the materials from the core group or focus group discussions from the five ethnic states into core contents on gender roles. As emphasized by Chaney (2016), the "frames" can be viewed as a necessary property of a text - where text is broadly conceived to include discourses, patterned behavior (2) and systems of meaning (3), policy (4), logics, constitutional principles (5), and deep cultural narratives (6). The attention in this report is on the civil society organizations and their perceived gender roles to determine their gender awareness. Hence, this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Leaning on the Theory of Everything by Ken Wilber (2000) specifically on the framework to link individual change, organizational change, and systemic or institutional change to gender equality, this study is concerned with the individual psychology of women and men, their access to resources and the social structures in which they live. This framework is not in itself a theory of change – it is a framework to help a group of people think through how change might take place.



The participants of the study were the active members of the civil society organizations who participated to the Center for Development of Ethnic Studies (CDES) organized seminar-workshops on federalism and peace process across the ethnic states in Myanmar.

Non probability sampling was used in the study. Specifically, it used availability sampling method, also sometimes referred to as haphazard, accidental, or convenience sampling. The primary advantage of the method is that it is very easy to carry out, relative to other methods especially so with the situations when and where this research was conducted.

Participants of the Study	Seminar-Workshops on Peace and Federalism (Peace Women and Security, Gender Equality and Development)
1.	ALP Sittwe, Rakhine State
2.	RCSS Taunggyi, Shan State
3.	KNU Hpaan, Karen State
4.	NMSP, Mawlamyine, Mon State
5.	CSO Paletwa, Chin State

Procedures adopted and undertaken to seek answers to the research questions in this study include:

First, the CDES team leaders coordinated with the local or community leaders and secured the necessary permission from the state government for the conduct of seminar-workshops in which the vital topics in the peace process to include gender equality were conducted.

Second, the researcher as a member of the CDES core team was personally immersed into the community where the participants were gathered for the conduct of seminar-workshops for peace process and gender equality.

Before the lecture proper, the researcher established and interacted with the participants by asking the semi structured questions during the interview in a form of group

discussion, interaction or workshop. During the lecture and seminar workshop proper on gender equality, all the participants were grouped into four or five groups for the gender conscientization by asking them to write down their perceived gender roles then they presented their outputs in oral and written manner as the official translator also must simultaneously do the translation during the presentation of outputs.

Their outputs were properly documented by capturing their presented outputs and some videoclips were also taken to maintain the authenticity of the data.

The recorded presentations were transcribed with the aid of official translator. Initial notes were listed and emergent themes were identified. The first emergent themes were then listed and the researcher tried to see the connections of each theme. The general theme is paralleled and aligned with the research aim which yielded various subordinate themes. Transcribed statements from the participants were provided to further enlighten the floated theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To have an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the problem presented, the table below discusses the perceived gender roles of both sexes among the members of the civil society organizations in the different ethnic states of Myanmar. Those significant statements which were substantiated and validated were highlighted and given much attention in the discussion.

Perceived gender roles of the male and female members of civil society organizations in the different Ethnic States in Myanmar

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Male Perceived Gender Roles Significant Statements	Female Perceived Gender Roles Significant Statements
Perceived Gender Roles among the Civil Society Organizations	Socio Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Men take the lead and they are responsible for decision making and problem solving and authority be it at home or in the community or society. ➤ Men are leaders in politics and in the peace process and negotiation ➤ men claim for equality and self-determination. ➤ They acknowledge that they advance themselves as leaders and women will follow and if women can take the lead bravely and boldly, they are also willing to follow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In the family, women are responsible for all household chores. ➤ Women view themselves to be housekeepers. As housekeepers they are expected to know sewing, laundering, ironing beautifying the house. They are the caretaker of the whole family especially the sick babies and children. ➤ Women perceive that they always have many tasks or multiple burdened but they just keep quiet. ➤ Women are always expected to be beautiful, artistic, with the traditional long hair and tanakah. Shan women claim that they have a place socially as they are now allowed to join community or civil organizations however not so much free time because of multiple burdens.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Men are in defense, military and police which to them is so honorable. ➤ Men looked up to themselves to be powerful leaders. ➤ Men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in social service even in politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Women in politics have less if not, women are not involved in the decision making. ➤ While women have started to find a place socially, still they are not allowed to be friend with men, cannot go out freely like men and not allowed to go out for vacation. ➤ Women in politics have less if not, women are not involved in the decision making. ➤ Women perceive the discriminations they suffer and they assert their voices to be heard saying they need space in politics. ➤ Women are responsible in maintaining peace and harmony at home, community and state. ➤ Women need support of men not only in household chores but also in politics and social obligations. ➤ Women have less participation in the peace process which is a basic political process
	<p>Economical</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Men land a job easier and earn more ➤ Men are agriculturist, farmer, fishermen, industrial leaders and workers, mechanical engineers. They claim that men are economic leaders. ➤ Men earn by their livelihood such as being an agriculturist, farmer, jade miner and engineer. ➤ Men have more opportunities and inclination to business ➤ Men as breadwinners and faithful husbands to their wives submit their earnings to their wives. 	<p>Women contribute to economy in the family through business like teashop and restaurants, do also farming and agriculture.</p> <p>They are the ones to handle money in the family yet the one responsible also to budget and must earn more to add the family income or meet the needs.</p> <p>Women in the workplace don't receive as much as the men. They are discriminated to have less even if the work is the same. They are not appointed higher position or promoted but men are.</p> <p>Women have poor women network because of diversity.</p> <p>Women are responsible to do proper budgeting of family's income.</p> <p>Women are also creative in making money</p> <p>Women have less opportunity in employment as well as promotion</p>

		➤ Men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in employment	
	Educational	Men must be educated over the women because they will become the head of the family. Men are prioritizing education than women. More equality now can be observed health and education Men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in education	Women are responsible in educating their children
	Cultural	Men perceive themselves to be socially accepted as leaders, achieve more than women, freer than women, tougher than women in making decisions and rightful heir not women. Men are brave, strong adventurous	Culturally, women are discriminated. Women are not given equal rights to education. Women are not given the right to inheritance Women are responsible to attend social obligations like wedding and baptism Women claim they are discriminated by culture
	Religion	Men always walk ahead of women when entering the pagoda. Men are always favored by religion as superior over women.	Women are discriminated. Men always enter the pagoda first and women are always followers. Women cannot get close to Buddha. Women claim they are discriminated by religion Women claim religion is a barrier to gender equality

The study found out the likelihood that a typical man or woman has a set of gendered characteristics. The researcher found that despite greater diversity in the different ethnic states, people continue to strongly stereotype men and women on gender role behaviors (socio-political, economic, educational, cultural and religious values).

Along socio-political roles, it can be gleaned from the data that men take the lead and they are responsible for decision making and problem solving and look up to themselves as authority be it at home or in the community or society. Men are leaders in politics and in the peace process and negotiation table. Men do claim for equality and self-determination. They acknowledge that they advance themselves as leaders and women will follow and if women can take the lead bravely and boldly, they are also willing to follow. It is so honorable for men to be in the military, defense, police, and in the parliament. Men looked up to themselves to be powerful leaders. Men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in social service even in politics.

All these imply that the perceived gender roles of males are product of their history and patriarchal society which is commonly observed among the civil society organization of the different ethnic states. Furthermore, men have an allowance of change in their perceptions for women to be able also to take the lead. This result further corroborates with the study of men supporting women in Cambodia who promoted gender roles and strengthened gender relations by adopting strategies such as door- to door greeting in the community and organized community activist and people to promote particularly STOP violence against women; also visiting the prisoners for prisoners meeting by coordinating with the ministry or departments in- charge , coordinating with nuns and priests to pray for forgiveness, tolerance and peace in people's heart when sponsoring vigils and public concert to stop violence against women and gender equality, TV roundtable discussion with sponsorships , GAD network through the social media and youth groups with creative means like wearing t shirts exhibits of posters, slogans and paintings for gender awareness, and campaign to stop VAW (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2021).

Data also showed that, women lead in the family as responsible for all household chores. Women viewed themselves to be housekeepers. As housekeepers they are expected to know sewing, laundrying, ironing and beautifying the house. They are the caretakers of the whole family especially the sick babies and children. Women are responsible in maintaining peace and harmony at home, community and as well as the state. Women perceived that they always have multiple burdens but they just keep quiet as they have been taught having such tasks serve as expression of their love to the family. Women claimed that they have a place socially as they are now allowed to join community or civil organizations however not so much free time because of social restraints and multiple burdens.

Moreover, women in politics have less or no involvement in the decision making. Women perceived the discriminations they suffer and they assert their voices to be heard saying that they need space in politics. Women have less participation in the peace process which is a basic political process. Yet, while women have started to find a place socially, still they are not allowed to be friend with men, cannot go out freely like men and not allowed to go out for vacation. Women need support of men not only in household chores but also in politics and social obligations.

These allude that the perception of women along socio political roles reveal that women are still inferior and less heard as reflected from their participation in socio political affairs which indicate gender inequality.

All these expressed roles are affirmed by a report on Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar, A situation analysis by the Asian Development Bank in 2016 reported that the status of gender equality and women's rights to participation in political processes reveal yet a low number of women and limited participation. And governance. Peace processes were led by military leaders and marked by closed-door negotiations, unwritten agreements, and the absence of women and their priorities from the consciousness of conflicting parties. This situation is changing, albeit incrementally.

Similarly, women's absence in decision making is the experienced in Nepal where men had absolute power at all levels in the society from the family to the group, head of village, commune, district, police and so on. Women were largely absent from decision making. The consequence of this power imbalance was violence in the family. When women complained, their request for justice and intervention were met with official demands that women should obey their husbands (Dahal, Joshi, & Swahnberg, 2022)

Inequalities in the peacemaking processes are due to socially conditioned relations between men and women and gendered divisions of labor. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) singled out that these social norms directly affect the design and conduct of peace processes around the world. Further studies reveal that the common barriers to women's participations include: the inability to access to male networks, self-doubt, and gender-based violence, and lack of recognition among society that women's existing skills and abilities are relevant to peace making (Dahal, Joshi, & Swahnberg, 2022).

Women's involvement in the peace process is essential for sustainable peace. Peace processes that include women are 64 % more likely to realize sustainability. Countries that enjoy a high degree of gender equality experience less wars than do countries that discriminate women (Zalis, 2018). Indeed, the absence of women from peace processes has been identified as a key contributing factor to the recurrence of conflict. Global studies, show that women's participation has the potential to increase the legitimacy of peace processes, not least because they are able to voice different needs and aspirations from traditional power holders. Due to the gendered experiences, many women are uniquely situated in their ability to build ties among opposing factions and have proven to be astute coalition builders in contexts where trust is low and the stakes are high. Ample global evidence demonstrates that women have mobilized around these differences in creative and effective ways, of direct relevance to inclusive peace negotiations. (Noma, E., Aker, D., and Freeman, J. (2012).

Regarding economic gender roles, the data disclosed that men land a job easier and earn more. Men are agriculturists, farmers, fishermen, industrial leaders and workers, mechanical engineers and businessmen. They claimed that men are economic leaders. Men have more opportunities and inclination to business. Men as breadwinners and faithful husbands submit their earnings to their wives no matter how meager the income like the taxi drivers, street vendors or ambulant vendors.

Noteworthy, men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in employment.

These imply that men have greater economic opportunities and that they have that strong belief that women have less capability to earn for a living. These imply further that women are not accepted nor given positions with higher salaries in the workplace. However, due to the demands of family needs, the women are occupied with livelihood they can do as they work at home responsible for domestic roles.

As regards the perception of women along their economic roles, the data unveiled that, women contribute to economy in the family through business like teashop and restaurants, do also

farming and agriculture. They are the ones to handle money in the family yet the one responsible also to budget and must earn more to add the family income or meet the needs of the family. Women in the workplace don't receive as much as the men. They are discriminated to have less even if the work is the same. They are not appointed higher position or promoted but men are. Women have poor women network because of diversity. Women are responsible to do proper budgeting of family's income. Women are also creative in making money. Women have less opportunity in employment as well as promotion

These imply that women are resourceful and they make the necessary remedy to augment their financial needs from their families only that their opportunities do not warrant.

As regards economic opportunities of women, according to the World Economic Forum, it will take 170 years to close the economic gender gap. This should not come as a shock instead a situation to combat.

With regard to, educational gender roles, men are given priority in education than women because men become the head and breadwinner of family. However, men also support women to be given same rights and opportunities in education.

These imply that there is this fossilized belief that men be more educated than women but due to increased promotional campaigns toward education, they have been exposed treatises along equal rights to education and have started to embrace the fact that education is a need or key for development.

Based on the data however, it was brought to light that, women are responsible in educating their children. This implies that women have fully realized the importance of education in the upliftment of quality of life and the promotion of gender equality. This fact of enlightened women educating their children agrees with the study, "Gender awareness and attitudes toward gender equality among students participating in teacher training "(Mägi et.al., 2016) where gender equality is regarded to be one of the core factors of any democratic society and the facilitators of economic growth and societal well-being. It is education that is often considered to be one of the key institutions that should be addressed in order to promote equal opportunities and mainstream gender equality. On the one hand, education and schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum and are informed by the general tendencies, values and attitudes that are prevalent in the society. At the same time education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation.

Cultural gender roles as this study divulged that, men perceive themselves to be socially accepted as leaders, achieve more than women, freer than women, tougher than women in making decisions and rightful heir not women. Moreover, Men are allowed to talk freely while women must keep quiet and be passive. Notably, culture favors men in all spheres of life be it in socio-politics, economy, education, education and religion. These imply that culture impacts the understanding of men on gender roles. On the other hand, women claimed that they are discriminated by culture. Women are not given equal rights to education. Women are not given the right to inheritance as dictated by their culture. It is very interesting to note that, women are responsible to attend social obligations like wedding and baptism. These imply that culture

in all facet of life is relative.

As regards religious roles, men always enter the pagoda first, women are always followers. This implies that men are respected in the religious activities of Myanmar.

These religious practices suggest that there is high reverence to men as taught by religion. Meanwhile women have clear perception that they cannot get close to Buddha without the men doing it first. Women claimed they are discriminated by religion. It is sad to note that women claimed that religion is a barrier to gender equality. These imply that women do not religiously practice equal opportunities to religious activities in Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

Men and women of the civil society organizations among ethnicities of Myanmar have stereotypical perceptions on gender roles as greatly dictated by their culture and religion but these gender stereotypes are now being gradually mainstreamed through educational, socio-political and economic interventions. Thus, it is suggested that the government of Myanmar should continue adopting related policy frameworks in the international level that funds be appropriated such that duplication or redundancies be not done in terms of activities, instead a comprehensive plan of action that should reach all people and places in Myanmar regardless of gender and ethnicity and to develop a long term, definite and comprehensive and doable, pragmatic and effective plan to be implemented with efficiency using the right resources such as human, financial, machinery, time and materials to implement for gender equality as a means towards an end and not an end itself.

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