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# Women & Local Leadership

Leadership Journeys of Myanmar's  
Female Village Tract/Ward  
Administrators

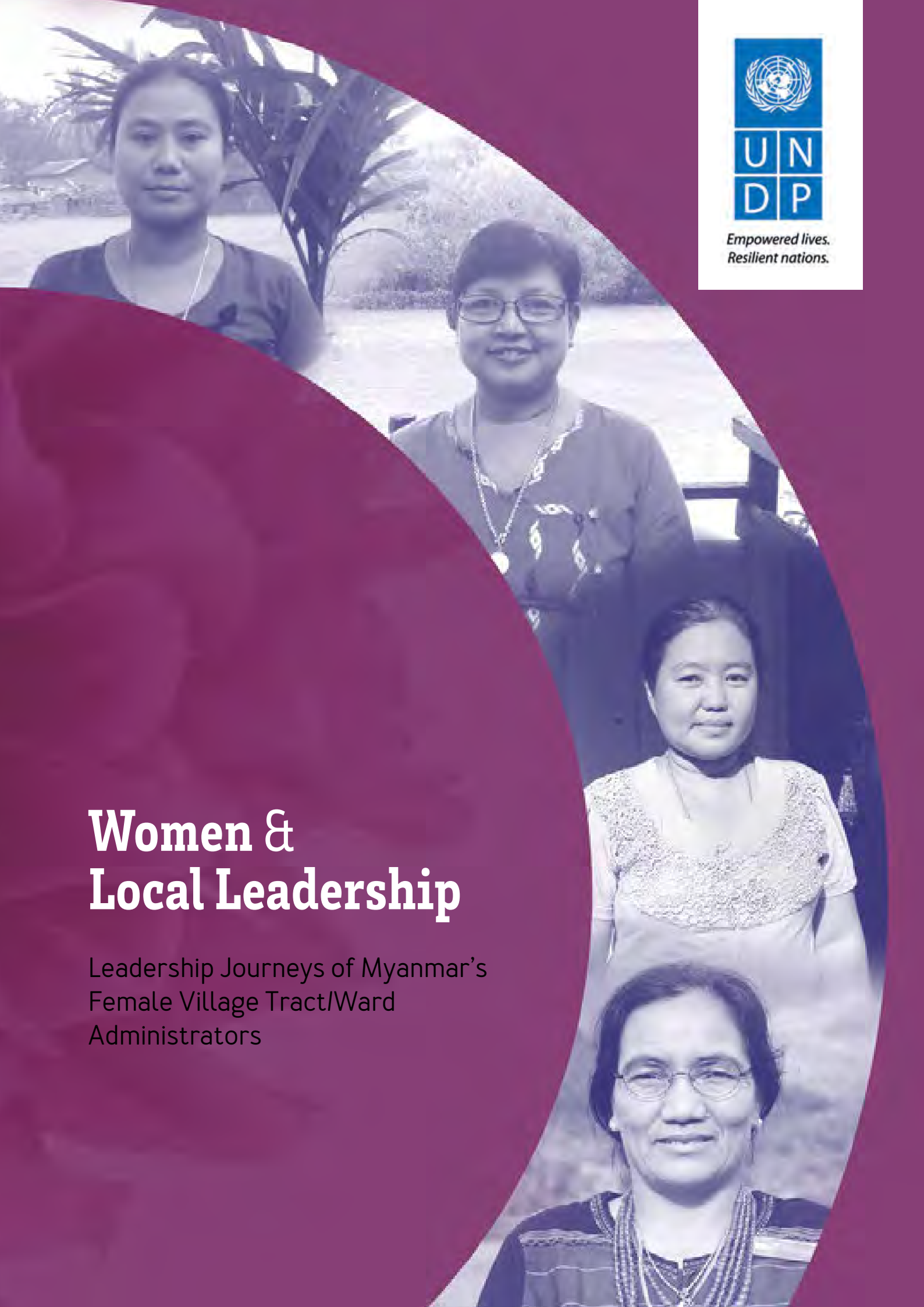


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Emilie Röell  
Thaid Dhi

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# WOMEN AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership Journeys of Myanmar's Female Village  
Tract/Ward Administrators

UNDP MYANMAR



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# Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GAD	General Administration Department
GoM	Government of Myanmar
HH	Household Head
LGM	Local Governance Mapping
MDRI-CESD	Myanmar Development Resource Institute - Centre for Economic and Social Development
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSPAW	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women
TA	Township Administrator
TDSC	Township Development Support Committee
TDAC	Township Development Affairs Committee, also TMAC
TMAC	Township Municipal Affairs Committee, also TDAC
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
VT/WA	Village Tract/Ward Administrator
VT/WDSC	Village Tract/ Ward Development Support Committee





# Executive summary

This report documents leadership journeys of women in local leadership roles in Myanmar, in particular of Myanmar's small cohort of female village tract/ward administrators (VT/WAs). The report is based on field interviews with 15 female VT/WAs undertaken in June and July 2015, and data from the UNDP Myanmar Local Governance Mapping (LGM) conducted between late 2013 and early 2015. Complementing previous studies on social norms and women's participation in governance in Myanmar, in this report the lives of a number of existing local female leaders and their experiences with local election and leadership take center stage, granting insight in how barriers to women's participation can be overcome and female local leadership can be expanded.

**In every society, gender equality in governance is crucial to achieve gender sensitive policies and inclusive, sustainable development.** While the physical presence of women in governance does not guarantee representation of women's interests per se, it has been proven that the presence of men and women in local and union level governance structures is the most effective way to ensure that the voices and perspectives of men and women are incorporated. Local level participation by women in governance is particularly important, as the local level is often the avenue for women to build up the leadership experience required for higher-level office.

**In Myanmar, VT/WAs are the key interface between the Central State and Myanmar's largely rural population, for which it is important that women are equally represented at this layer of administration.** VT/WAs form the lowest and, in terms of number of people involved, largest layer of the Ministry of Home Affairs, General Administration Department. Since 2012 they are elected by representatives of households rather than appointed by the Township Administrator (TA), and they are now the key figure representing communities at the township level while at the same time sharing information from the township administration with communities. For the Government of Myanmar to achieve its reform ambition of people-centered bottom-up development, it is important that these VT/WAs represent the needs of men and women equally, and the most effective way to ensure this is to have a gender-balanced body of village tract/ward administrators.

**Previous studies on barriers to women's participation and leadership in governance in Myanmar identified limited skills and experience, time constraints, stereotypes and socio-cultural and religious norms, and lack of confidence as key reasons for limited women's participation and leadership.** Women have few opportunities to start building up relevant skills and experience, which is related to existing stereotypes where women are considered less capable and relevant for leadership trajectories, as well as to lack of time as they are responsible for household affairs and childcare. Women are also not expected to travel outside of the village alone overnight; a type of travel that often comes with leadership positions. As a result of these various discriminations against women, there is a serious lack of confidence amongst women preventing them from taking up leadership roles.

**Previously identified enablers to women's participation and leadership in governance in Myanmar include a relatively high level of gender equality in formal educational attainment, deliberate actions to promote women participation, and female role models.** However, at present deliberate actions to promote women participation and female role models inspiring other women remain somewhat limited in number and scope.

**This report zooms in on 15 of the 42 female VT/WAs who were elected among a total of 16785 VT/WAs (0.25%) during the first VT/WA elections in 2012.** These 42 female VT/WAs head village tracts/wards spread over 11 states and regions (all except Rakhine, Mon and Kayah), with the highest

concentrations of female VT/WAs in Kayin State [2.39%], Tanintharyi Region [0.86%], Ayeyarwady Region [0.36%] and the dry zone particularly around Pakokku. Although in both cases it is below 1%, the percentage of women VTAs is nearly twice as high in urban as compared to rural areas [0.41% versus 0.21%; or 1 in 244 against 1 in each 475 VTAs], probably due to higher educational attainment of both men and women in urban areas and household duties being less demanding compared to rural areas. Data from the LGM suggests that there were women competing in the 2012 elections in a rather more substantial number of village tracts and wards (In 18% of the surveyed village tracts and wards there was at least one female candidate).

**It appears that the majority of female VT/WAs is from higher social classes and, in line with previous studies, well educated.** Given that VT/WAs are not paid a full salary, all interviewed female VT/WAs depend on other household sources of income. As such, most of the 15 interviewed VT/WAs were middle or upper class. About half of the female VT/WAs had completed graduate training. While data on the socio-economic background of male VT/WAs is lacking, Local Governance Mapping data shows that a significantly lower percentage of male VT/WAs has completed graduate training.

**Female VT/WAs are often single or older, and have fewer family duties and household work.** The average age of the 15 women covered by this study was 48, and the age distribution appeared to be similar compared to male VT/WAs interviewed during the LGM. Out of the 15 interviewed women, 6 were single, 7 were in a family situation with a husband and 1 or a maximum of 2 children (still) at home, and two were widowed (having taken up the position of VT/WA after their husband passed away). For those in a family situation, the pressure of the dual role at home and in administration, and sometimes also income-generation, was felt. But most of these women mentioned having relatively fewer family duties and household work due to the fact that most children had left the home already, and/or because their husbands and other family members are providing good support. The idea of women being responsible for family duties and household work, while men may or may not support, is deeply engrained both amongst men and women.

**To a considerable extent, respected male elders in the community currently drive female local leadership.** The survey data shows that the female VT/WAs' decision to participate in the elections was often inspired by respected male elders in the community, including religious leaders and in some cases family members. Serving the community was an important motivational factor for these female VT/WAs to decide to contest, indeed, the duty to do so was the most common motivation stated by the interviewed women to participate in the elections. Only a few women stepped forward to participate in the elections without having been requested to do so.

**Experience with social work, family member's experience with politics and family reputation, endorsement by respected male elders, education, and being single are experienced as key factors for women's election into village tract/ward administration.** The 15 women were asked why they thought the communities had chosen them to represent them, and mentioned previous engagement in social work or community affairs, their family's experience in politics and reputation, endorsement by respected elders, education, and being single due to which the community thought they would have a lot of time. A few women referred to their personal skills or characteristics as the reason for being elected, such as being brave, the ability to talk with both communities and local authorities, and willingness to work hard for the community.

**Male and female local leaders emphasize different parts of their job description.** Female VT/WAs emphasize their role as problem solvers and their responsibility in development, whereas male VT/WAs underline their responsibility ensuring peace and security. Amongst both sexes, there appears to be a growing sense of accountability towards the community, with both female and male respondents

talking about their responsibility to look after the needs of the community which elected them.

**There is a strong perception of difference in leadership styles of men and women, with female local leaders emphasizing they are able to cover both the 'male' and 'female' roles (while men are more limited to their male role attributes).** Differences in leadership style between women and men were discussed by the women as follows: Women's strengths include being serious, precise, patient, hard-working, dutiful, good at planning, focused on conflict resolution, negotiation, focused on long-term solutions to problems, cooperative, bringing people together, and not focused on power, while their weaknesses are being soft, shy, afraid, slow. Men are straight, strong, strict, powerful, fast and clear but also tend to be less good at listening, and more proud, impatient, prone to alcohol abuse and gambling, and corrupt. While the women emphasized the strengths of their female leadership characteristics, at the same time several also sought to make it clear that they could work "as a man", as they put it. Women emphasized their own strengths as a woman while also stressing they possessed over positive traits they ascribed to male leadership. International research remains inconclusive about sex differences in leadership, although there is generally consensus that differences take the form of highly overlapping distributions of women and men, meaning that differences are small. Nonetheless, in light of the long absence of women in the political arena in Myanmar, it is understandable that women refer to male attributes when explaining their own leadership qualities.

**Certain aspects of village tract/ward administration are challenging for women, but they find ways and strategies to deal with these.** The 15 interviewed women as well as others around them emphasized that certain situations are more challenging for female VT/WAs than for male VT/WAs, such as engaging in physically demanding activities, having to travel or go out at night, and dealing with violence. But all interviewed female VT/WAs appeared to have found effective coping strategies to deal with such work requirements. Generally, they effectively mobilise support networks available to them such as respected elders or the village tract/ward development support committee, and it may be that this cooperative approach sometimes leads to more sustainable solutions. Some women do mention however they feel they have to work harder in order to earn the same respect.

**Negative perceptions of female leadership continue to exist.** All of the interviewed women shared stories of being criticised for being a woman doing the VT/WA job. It appears that particularly in rural areas, it is often considered shameful for men to be led by a woman, which these men express by criticising women leaders. Male VT/WAs generally also feel that women are not suitable for the job. On the other side, 3 of the 15 women mentioned being *positively* discriminated, for example feeling they receive a relatively higher amount of local development funds than others. They felt that particularly the township administrators, but also higher-level people including their Chief Minister, gave them more attention exactly because they are women and more unique local administrators in that way.

**At the same time, female VT/WA appear to enjoy a high level of popularity in their community and with the township administration.** While the research did not investigate community perceptions, the 5 TAs that were interviewed stated that the female VT/WA(s) in their township generally enjoyed a lot of support from their communities. While they regularly receive complaints about male VT/WAs, e.g. related to alcohol abuse or the harsh way in which they solved a problem, few or no complaints had been received about the female VT/WAs. It seems to be the case that due to the fact that most female VT/WAs were requested by respected elders in the community to run in the election, they enjoy a high level of support.

**Female VT/WAs remain shy and modest in stating their future ambitions, although ambitions appear to be growing.** When discussing what they would like to do in the future, 8 (of 15) female VT/WAs mentioned they are willing to continue their work as a VT/WA if the community continues to

support them. Five of these women even said they would like to progress and take up a higher position in administration or politics, either in township administration or as Hluttaw Member. However, the other 7 women expressed that they rather not continue work as VT/WA or in administration. For 3 of them, this was due to age, while all also referred to the overall difficult nature of the job and the low financial compensation. On the basis of the stories of the women, it appears that female VT/WAs are getting used to their leadership role, growing in confidence and ambition.

**Female local leaders criticize the lack of aspiration of other women rather than the underlying social norms and structures.** When discussing reasons for the low grade of participation by women in Myanmar and how that could be addressed, the female VT/WA confirmed some of the previously mentioned barriers including lack of education, lack of skills and experience, lack of support from the family or husband, and poverty, but they emphasize the lack of interest and aspiration of other women. Having overcome the previously mentioned obstacles, the female VT/WAs were critical of the lack of motivation amongst other women, and felt it was time for other women to no longer take “the easy way” and instead “stand up”.

**People seem to lack awareness of the fact that women are eligible to participate in local level elections.** Another important reason for limited participation according to the female VT/WA is that a lot of people, including women, are not aware women are allowed to participate in the VT/WA elections. Several of the female VT/WAs who were requested to participate were surprised to learn that they could participate.

**Recognising the value of women participation in local governance, female local leaders want to inspire and encourage other women to take up leadership roles.** All female VT/WA thought it was important to expand the number of women in local administration. They feel that women bring other knowledge and qualities to the job that are important for good local governance and development. Several of the interviewed female VT/WAs did not yet seem fully aware of their own potential important role in this. When directly asked, they expressed being interested in taking an active role in encouraging and mentoring other women.

**Altogether, the 0.25% of VT/WAs being female is far removed from the 30% women in decision-making positions target stipulated in the 1995 Beijing Framework for Action endorsed by Myanmar. Raising awareness of gender roles, the importance of gender equality in [local] governance and of participation opportunities; and encouraging women to utilise participation opportunities through role models, mentoring and training; is crucial, while more education and opportunities to build up experience with social work are also important.** On the basis of the research, suggested ways to address the limited participation of women include awareness-raising for women on gender equality and participation opportunities in local decision-making and leadership, but also education and training, and role models and mentors for women VTAs as well as networking amongst women. As a start, more women need to be made aware of opportunities to participate, and then their confidence needs to be built through training and relevant experiences. Existing female VT/WAs may also be supported in their role as local administrator through targeted skills training including participatory project planning and budgeting, conflict mediation and resolution, public speaking and social mobilisation, and leadership, resulting in more effective leadership inspiring other women.

**At the same time, it is clear that male leaders have a crucial role to play in increasing the VT/WA gender balance.** Activities specifically targeting male respected elders and other leaders in the community, making them aware of the complexities of gender discrimination and the necessity of and mechanisms for promoting women participation, are equally important.



Chapter 1

# Introduction & methodology

Between December 2013 and February 2015, UNDP Myanmar undertook a Local Governance Mapping (LGM or 'mapping') aimed at acquiring more knowledge on how local governance actors in Myanmar function within the context of the current reforms while assessing their possible capacity needs in adjusting to new demands of people-centred service delivery. The mapping focused in particular on the township and village tract/ward level, with an emphasis on three specific areas where government interacts with the people, namely (i) development planning and participation, (ii) access to basic services such as education, health and water supply, and (iii) accountability and transparency.

One of the cross-cutting themes of the mapping was **gender**, whereby it looked at women in township administration, women in village tract/ward administration, understanding of governance amongst and participation in local governance by female members of the community, and perceptions of equal access to and treatment in services for men and women.<sup>1</sup>

**A very low level of women in township administration and village tract/ward administration** was observed. While there are women working for the General Administration Department at the township level, it is rare to find female gazetted staff (such as "staff officers or "deputy staff officers"). Rather, women usually work in non-gazetted positions as accountants or clerks. Similarly, for other departments, it is rare to find a female head of department. Regarding the presence of women in village tract/ward administration, when analysing data of the survey carried out among the village tract/ward administrators (VT/WAs) in the 112 selected<sup>2</sup> sample village tracts and wards across the 56 sample townships it was found that none of these VT/WAs were women.

On the basis of the findings of the LGM, UNDP and the Ministry of Home Affairs committed to do more research and provide targeted support to women's participation in local governance in Myanmar in 2015 and 2016. This commitment is based on the conviction that women's participation in governance at the local level is crucial, for a variety of reasons.

As the influential World Bank 2012 World Development Report states, gender equality is a core development objective in its own right and it is also smart economics. "Greater gender equality can enhance productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, and make institutions more representative."<sup>3</sup> Regarding Myanmar's transition process towards a more democratic society, there can be no real democracy if half of the population<sup>4</sup> is excluded from participation and power. Moreover, women spend their time on other things than men and as such have other experiences and governance preferences - e.g. more often related to healthcare, education, sanitation and microfinance - best recognised and responded to by women leaders.<sup>5</sup> It is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of society's perspectives in policy and decision-making processes, in line with Myanmar's **people-centred development** ambitions.

Women participation in **local governance** is particularly important, because leadership experience is most accessible for women on the local level and can provide women with the knowledge and

1. More information on the Local Governance Mapping can be found in the report *Local Governance Mapping in Myanmar: Background and Methodology*, and the individual *State of Local Governance Reports* for every state and region. All reports are available at the UNDP Myanmar web page.

2. Given the current political and security situation in Myanmar and the consequent lack of access to many areas, random selection of townships was not deemed feasible. Instead, the surveyed townships and village tracts/wards were selected jointly with government and civil society through purposive sampling. The selection criteria attempted to capture the socioeconomic differences within each state/region and included township size, rural/urban, diversity in economic activities and development, accessibility factors and ethnic diversity. Wherever the security situation allowed, post-conflict and ceasefire areas were included.

3. World Bank, 2012, World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development, p. XX.

4. Women make up 51.8 percent of Myanmar's population (2014 Census).

5. Research by Lena Wängenerud (2009) suggests that female politicians contribute to strengthening the position of women's interests. Research by ActionAid Myanmar (2011) suggests that female decision-makers in Myanmar may be more responsive to the priorities of women citizens of Myanmar than male decision-makers.

confidence to move on to higher levels. Barriers to taking up a decision-making and leadership role – such as the need to travel and spend time away from home, a large disposable income, a reasonable level of education, experience of political competition, and social connections – are lower at the community level. In Myanmar, the lowest level of governance is village tract/ward administration (see Figure 1). For women who have multiple caring responsibilities, village tract/ward level local governance roles can be easier to access than township, state/region or union level governance, requiring less travel time and more flexible working hours. In addition, women’s greater use and knowledge of certain spaces and services in the local community, such as water, electricity, health clinics and other social services, can constitute important experience and clout for local level office.

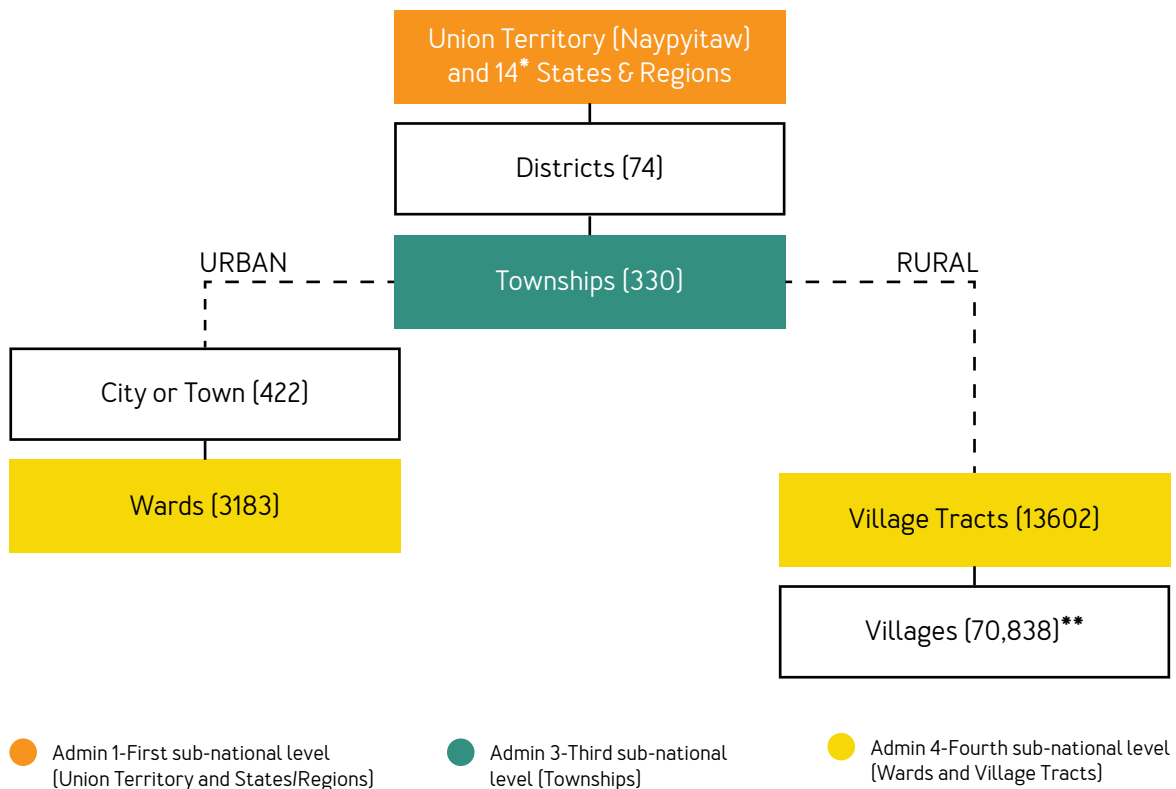


Figure 1: Myanmar’s Administrative Structure<sup>6</sup>

Not much is known about the few female women who enter into political life at the local level in Myanmar, their experiences as elected leaders, the decision making processes at the local level that influence their leadership roles, and the factors and perceptions about factors that would inhibit or enable women’s participation in the political process in the future. This research was commissioned to explore the exact number and location of women participating in village tract/ward administration, and to explore the leadership journeys of these women who contested and won VT/ WA elections. The objective was to learn how barriers to women’s participation can be overcome and female local leadership can be expanded, particularly by focusing on four elements or questions:

6. MIMU, August 2015. Source: General Administration Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2015. \*According to the Constitution-2008, there are total 7 states, 7 regions and 1 union territory, however in the MIMU P-Code list; Shan State is subdivided into 3 Sub-states (South, North and East); Bago Region is subdivided into 2 sub-regions (East and West). \*\*This number in the MIMU Pcode list release in August 2015, which also includes villages are already taken out by GAD *with remark* and villages as reported by UN and NGOs field offices are differs from the last dissemination of GAD list.

1. **Context:** What have previous researches on women participation concluded about key barriers and enablers for women participation in (local) governance in Myanmar?
2. **Actual problem statement:** How many women are currently fulfilling the position of VT/WA in Myanmar and where are they?
3. **Enhanced understanding:** What is the background of these women, what are the barriers they experienced, how did they succeed in overcoming barriers and being elected as VT/WA, and what are their experiences as local leaders?
4. **Proposals for action:** How do these women think that participation of women in village tract/ward administration can be expanded, and what are their own training or support needs in order to become more effective local leaders?

## 1.1 Methodology and sample

To answer the first question a review of existing literature was undertaken. To answer the remaining three questions, the report builds on the findings of the Local Governance Mapping as well as on additional qualitative research on female VT/WAs carried out in June and July 2015.

The Local Governance Mapping was conducted in close cooperation with the Ministry of Home Affairs, General Administration Department.<sup>7</sup> One of the components of the mapping used for this report is the VT/WA survey, which was, as mentioned above, carried out amongst the 112 VT/WAs of the 112 selected sample village tracts and wards across the 56 selected townships of the LGM. In this survey, there were several questions related to gender and women leadership. Thereby it should be noted that the mapping took place in three phases whereby the methodology was adjusted after phase II to reflect lessons learned during the previous phases. As such, some questions were added for the 58 village tracts and wards of phase III, for which there are answers only for these 58 VT/WAs (rather than 112).

Also for the additional research on women in village tract/ward administration, UNDP collaborated with the Ministry of Home Affairs, General Administration Department. An overview of existing female VT/WAs across the country was created, and out of the 42 identified female VT/WAs (amongst over 16 thousand in total), **15 women** across 12 townships across 2 states and 4 regions were selected for **interviews and limited participant observation**. For the selection, an effort was made to balance states and regions, as well as urban and rural areas. An exact overview of the sample is provided in section 3.2.

All 15 women were visited in their offices and homes, and they participated in 3-4 hour long semi-structured interview, often spread over 2 days, also allowing for observation of their daily work and interactions and more ad hoc interviews with township administrators, clerks, village tract/ward development support committee members, respected elders, family and community members. A translator accompanied the researcher; sometimes even two (in the case of Chin). A few of the VT/WAs were later contacted by phone for some follow-up questions.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the methodology of the Local Governance Mapping, see Annex 1 of the *Local Governance Mapping in Myanmar: Background and Methodology*.



## 1.2 Limitations of the study

Among the 15 female VT/WA selected for this study, **female VT/WA in regions are overrepresented compared to female VT/WAs in states.** While out of 42 identified female VT/WA, 18 are in states (Chin, Kachin, Shan and Kayin), this research could only include a total of 5 of these (in Chin and Kayin) due to logistical and security challenges. The three women in Kachin were in villages that would take around a week to reach (as you need to walk long distances). All of the women in Shan and several of the women in Kayin were in conflict or conflict-prone areas. As such, while a particular conflict-related dynamic is the reason that several of the 42 women have taken up leadership positions (a dynamic that will be further elaborated in next chapter's literature review), and while there may be other dynamics specific to the ethnic states, these aspects are largely missing in this report.

**Interview circumstances differed significantly from location to location.** In some places interviews took place in private, while in other places, representatives of the township administration attended the interviews, as well as the village tract/ward clerk, village tract/ward development support committee members and respected elders. In addition, in Ayeyarwady, Magway and Kayin, representatives of the police were present. Family members would in some place also attend the interviews.

This research focused on the experiences and perspectives of female VT/WAs. This research did not explore community perceptions of female VT/WAs, and only includes some perspectives from colleagues in the local administration.

Given the additional research on women in village tract/ward administration did not include male respondents, it cannot be assumed that certain answers are exclusive for women. While this paper compares some issues with data from the Local Governance Mapping's male sample, interview methods and questions were different and data is difficult to compare.

## 1.3 Overview of report

**Chapter 2** starts with some background on decentralisation, local governance and village tract/ward administration, and, in section 2.3, responds to question 1 by providing a brief summary of findings of previous studies on barriers and enablers to women's participation in (local) governance.

**Chapter 3** deals with questions 2 and 3, and presents an overview of female VT/WAs in Myanmar, followed by sections on the female VT/WA's socioeconomic background and family situation, the election process, perception of role, representation and leadership style, experiences as a woman, relationships with the administration and community, and ambitions.

**Chapter 4** addresses question 4 and presents the recommendations by the interviewed female VT/WAs on how to support the existing female VT/WAs and on how to inspire and encourage other women to participate in local governance and take up leadership positions. Finally, **chapter 5** offers some concluding remarks.



Chapter 2

# Background

This chapter shows how VT/WAs are positioned in Myanmar's local governance structure and how they form a key avenue for bottom-up participatory development, demonstrating the need for gender equality in this level of administration. The chapter also provides an overview of what previous studies have suggested regarding existing barriers and enablers for women participation in local governance, pointing at the need for more in-depth insight in the lived experiences of the few existing local female leaders.

## 2.1 Decentralisation, local governance and village tract/ward administration in Myanmar

**Decentralisation** is an important component of Myanmar's reform agenda; an agenda that intends to bring government closer to the people, improve the quality and efficiency of services, and increase participation in local development and local decision-making processes. As such, the 2008 Constitution established **state and region governments** consisting of an executive led by a Chief Minister and a cabinet of state/region ministers, a partially elected state/region parliament as legislative, and state/region judicial institutions.

Below the state/region governments, there are **township administrations** coordinated by a Township Administrator (TA) who is a senior official of the General Administration Department (GAD) of the Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>8</sup> Currently, there is no body of elected representatives at the township level, but the President of Myanmar recently announced that "Within the next five years the administration of township and city affairs will transfer to democratically elected Township Councils and City Councils. In order to facilitate this change from administration by government departments to a citizen governance mechanism, appropriate constitutional amendment will be made."<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, responsibilities of the Township Administrator and the General Administration Department have expanded over the last years, and now comprise the promotion of social and economic development through management of township affairs, oversight of implementation for development projects, and coordinating with other parts of government.<sup>10</sup> If indeed these duties would become part of a democratically governed township administration this would signify an important step towards a truly decentralised governance system.

Below the township level, at the lowest tier of the official government administrative structure in Myanmar, is the **village tract administration in rural areas and the ward administration in urban areas**. The village tract administration consists of a Village Tract Administrator (VTA) and a clerk, supported by 10 household heads (10 HH), and the VTA has a direct line of communication to the Township Administrator. The arrangements for wards in urban areas largely follow the same model, with ward administrators (WAs) being in the lead.<sup>11</sup> Whilst VT/WAs were previously appointed, and as such under the direct command of the Township Administrator, since 2012 they are elected by household leaders, having become 'peoples representatives' that form the link (or bridge) between the township administration and the people in the wards and tracts.

8. In between state/region governments and the township administration there is also the district administration. The role of the district office is primarily that of coordination and communication with the respective townships below, and with the state and region governments, above.

9. HE U Thein Sein, Radio Speech, October 6, 2015.

10. Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Mathew Arnold, The Asia Foundation & MDRI, *Administering the State in Myanmar: an overview of the General Administration Department*, Discussion Paper No. 6, MDRI-CESD and The Asia Foundation, October 2014.

11. UNDP 2015, *Local Governance Mapping in Myanmar: Background & Methodology*, p. 35.

## 2.2 The village tract/ward administrator

After the passing of the *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law* in 2012, a new **election process** was implemented to elect the VT/WA, and the same law also expanded the number of tasks for the VT/WAs.

As described in the law, the election process starts with the TAs appointing a supervisory body of five respected residents, who combine households into groups of 10, with each group holding a secret ballot to select a nominee.

From the leaders of each group of 10 households (the 10 household heads) an administrator for each village tract or ward is then elected by all 10 household heads through secret ballot. The winning candidate has to fulfil a number of criteria as outlined in the 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law* (see Box 1) and needs to be approved and officially appointed by the TA.



**The Republic of The Union of Myanmar**  
**Ministry of Home Affairs**

### **THE WARD OR VILLAGE TRACT ADMINISTRATION LAW**

#### **Box 1: Criteria for Village Tract/Ward Administrators according to the 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law***

Article 5: Shall be fulfilled with the following qualifications:

- a. Citizens born of parents who are both citizens;
- b. Attained an age of 25 years;
- c. Having received a fair level of education;
- d. Having sufficient means for a living;
- e. Person consecutively residing in the relevant ward or village tract for at least ten years and residing in the relevant ward or village tract at the time of performing duty. Exemption: if the candidate is a local retired government servant, the required period of residency within the relevant ward or village tract can be reduced;
- f. Person who is respected by the society and has dignity;
- g. Person who is in good health and has the ability to perform the assigned duty;
- h. Person who is desirous to perform the duty with enthusiasm for the benefit of the Union and the community;
- i. Person whose family members are persons of good morality, simple and honest;
- j. Person who is not an active government civil servant still performing duty;
- k. Person who is not a member of an armed organisation or a person who is not participant in or does not communicate with unlawful organisations.

The first elections of 10 household heads and the Village Tract and Ward Administrators organised in this manner took place in December 2012. As noted in UNDP's report *Local Governance Mapping in Myanmar: Background and Methodology*, there was a large degree of continuity from who occupied these offices before the new Law was adapted.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, however, individuals not previously connected to local governance structures were elected, including the small number of women that take centre stage in this report.<sup>13</sup>

Previously, in their traditional controlling roles, Village Tract/Ward Administrators used to act primarily as an extension of the GAD's Township Administrator, with tasks that included for example reporting on overnight guests in the villages and keeping track of demographics. The 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law* assigned 32 duties to the VT/WA, of which **22 are directly related to maintaining law and order, eight functions are more general administration functions, and two are more developmental in nature.**<sup>14</sup>

For their work VT/WAs receive a reimbursement of 70,000 kyats per month from the GAD and another 50,000 kyats for office material. In addition, a clerk, directly employed by the GAD, is provided for assistance. Although VT/WAs are seen to report primarily to the GAD, it is important to emphasize that a VT/WA is **not** an employee of GAD and **not** a civil servant, which is a common misunderstanding. The Local Governance Mapping indicated that since being elected VT/WAs start feeling **more accountable to the people**, and that they stress their role in development and meeting the needs of the people who elected them more explicitly.<sup>15</sup>

Other key relationships of the VT/WA are with the Village Tract or Ward Development Support Committee (VT/WDSC), which is involved in the use of local development funds, and, on a more informal basis, with a community's often male respected elders who fulfil an important position of authority in village tracts and wards including for example a para-legal judge function deciding over customary law (e.g. related to heritage practices).

Due to the elections, and also due to the emergence of the various funds available for local development that require the involvement of communities, the VT/WA is increasingly becoming more of an **elected representative** and **coordinator of development** of the village tract or ward, acting as the intermediary between the village tract or ward and the township, passing information from the township to community members on the one hand and bringing relevant village tract or ward problems or needs to the attention of the TA and the relevant departments on the other.

When announcing the future transfer of administration responsibilities to democratically elected Township Councils and City Councils, the President stated: "only through a civil governance mechanism' will the needs of the community be met."<sup>16</sup> In the absence of an elected body at the township level, the VT/WAs are currently *the* key elected representatives in Myanmar's local governance structure. While there are a few other elected representatives - at the township level in the township level committees (the Township Development Support Committee and the Township Development Affairs Committee and the village tract/ward level in the Village Tract/Ward Development Support Committee) - in addition to having less clear election procedures and being less universally representative none of these committees have a mandate as distinctive and clear as the VT/WA does, nor are they anchored in Union law. Altogether, VT/WAs are the emerging key **bridge between the people in the village**

12. Relevant findings from the Local Governance Mapping are presented in chapter 39. HE U Thein Sein, Radio Speech, October 6, 2015.

13. UNDP 2015, *Local Governance Mapping in Myanmar: Background & Methodology*, p. 39-40.

14. A full overview of the duties of the VT/WA clustered along the different areas of work is provided in Annex 1.

15. UNDP 2015, *The State of Local Governance: Trends in Myanmar – A Synthesis of People's Perspectives Across all States and Regions*, p. 3.

16. HE U Thein Sein, Radio Speech, October 6, 2015.

and the township administration and as such a core asset not only for the GAD as 'coordinator of development activities' but also for other departments at the township level seeking to strengthen their responsiveness to people's needs.

The term of the ward or village tract administrator is the same as that of the Pyithu Hluttaw. As such, the next VT/WA elections are scheduled three months after the general elections, i.e. around February 2016.

## 2.3 Women's participation and leadership in local governance – documented barriers and enablers

To form the bridge between communities and the administration inclusively and effectively, it is key to involve women in village tract/ward administration. As stated in an influential iKNOW publication,

*The physical presence of both women and men in local government administrations positions is a conduit for interests and needs of women and men being incorporated in politics and policies and therefore the numbers of women in politics matter if gender perspectives are to be incorporated in politics and policies in a sustainable way.<sup>17</sup>*

There is a **historical notion of the high status** and participation of women in Myanmar. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century Christian missionaries, colonial administrators and European travellers have all commented on what they perceived to be the exceptional liberty of Myanmar women, resulting in a resilient perception of the high status of women in Myanmar.<sup>18</sup> Today, Southeast Asia scholars concur that these claims are problematic, having been constructed in a specific and complex historical context of colonisation, modernisation and nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Regarding political participation of women, when looking at actual historical and contemporary research on women's presence in the legislative, executive and judiciary branches of Government, it is indeed clear that women's participation and representation has been and continues to be very low.

In 2014, MDRI-CESD and The Asia Foundation published a comprehensive study on women's participation in subnational governance<sup>20</sup>, which includes a review of existing literature and new data. Their report provides an overview of the number of women occupying key decision-making positions in subnational governance, and looks into **barriers and enablers** to women's participation in subnational governance.

Barriers to women's participation in subnational governance were found to include: traditional norms that ascribe authority and glory to men over women, low intra-household bargaining power for women, lack of time, a lack of opportunities to gain experience and relevant skills, restrictions on women's travel, and, largely as a result of the foregoing, a lack of confidence.<sup>21</sup>

The traditional societal structure of Bamar areas and most of Myanmar's ethnic groups is **patriarchal**, assuming women's secondary status to men. Women are traditionally confined to household spheres,

17. International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2010, "Women's Participation in Local Governments", p. 5. The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) is a joint project of UNDP, UN Women, NDI, IPU and IDEA.

18. Chie Ikeya, 2005-2006, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma", *Journal of Burma Studies*, volume 10, p. 55-65.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

20. For an overview of women's presence in the Union Parliament, see Gender Equality Network, 2013, *Gender Equality in Public Life & Elected Office*.

21. Paul Minoletti, 2014, "Women's participation in the subnational governance of Myanmar", *Discussion paper 3 of MDRI & the Asia Foundation*. See also *Gender Equality and Development*, p. 1.

and to subsistence farming activities in rural areas and street vending activities in urban areas (markets are almost wholly run by women).<sup>22</sup> Women are expected to be submissive to their husbands and other males, whom on the basis of cultural and religious grounds enjoy a higher status. An example is the concept of *hpone*, which is an abstract quality that all men are believed to possess and which makes them spiritually superior.<sup>23</sup> Important agents reproducing these gender norms include the family, the education system, authorities, social services, the healthcare system, literature and mass media, and the various religious systems with their various written and unwritten prescriptions.

Research by Oxfam, Care, Trocaire and ActionAid in 2010-2011 describes how, when female and male community members were asked about the desired qualities or characteristics of a good community leader, they came up with an almost identical set of 'universal' qualifications, across gender as well as cultural, religious and geographic boundaries. These desired qualities included honesty, justice, perseverance, active nature, educated, decisive, well-spoken, good in social dealings, empathic, humble, experienced, interested, rich, exact, respected by others, moral, committed, thoughtful, having organizational skills, confidence, knowledgeable, able to give time, able to encourage youths etc. Community members in all focus groups expressed that both men and women could possess these characteristics.<sup>24</sup> However, when asked to discuss whether both men and women were capable of being community leaders, a different picture emerged where respondents, both male and female, started using terms drawing on a different set of norms to explain current practices. Those norms had less to do with the 'objective' qualifications describing good leadership and more to do with the **social, cultural and traditional norms** that assign different places to women and men in society and attach a different value to those places.

Due to these **social norms**, women are less likely to build up the experience, skills and confidence needed to be elected into local level office. The report suggests that while women's formal educational attainment relative to men's does not appear to be much of a barrier to their participation in governance in Myanmar because gender parity in education is quite high; their lack of experience in occupying public decision-making roles does significantly affect their participation.<sup>25</sup>

Women's **bargaining power within a household** is also related to confidence and therefore ability to participate in governance, with the report quoting an interviewee explaining that women who have an income-generating role have considerably more confidence to speak in the village meetings than women who do not have such a role.<sup>26</sup>

Not only the study from Oxfam, Care, Trocaire and ActionAid and the study from MDRI-CESDI/Asia foundation but also several other studies have identified time constraints as a major barrier to women's participation in governance.<sup>27</sup> Being responsible for household affairs and childcare, women have little time left for leadership activities. Men are generally unwilling to share some of this burden if women are engaged in income-generating activities outside of the home or community/political activities.

Another important factor is that women are **not expected to travel** outside of the village alone overnight; travel that often forms a part of administration or leadership positions.

As a sum of several of the above factors, **lack of confidence** is a key barrier to participation amongst women.<sup>28</sup> Many women have internalised a view of themselves and other women as inferior and less capable, and do not aspire to participate in community and decision-making affairs.

22. Pansy Tun Thein, 2015, "Gender Equality and Cultural Norms in Myanmar", International Conference on Myanmar Studies.

23. Ibid, p. 28-29.

24. Löfving [Oxfam, Care, Trocaire, ActionAid], 2011, *If Given the Chance: Understanding Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation in Public Life and Decision-Making in Myanmar*, p. 29.

25. Ibid, p. 24.

26. Ibid, p. 25

27. Ibid, p. 26. Also see Gender Equality Network, *Taking the Lead: An Assessment of Women's Leadership Training Needs and Training Initiatives in Myanmar*, p.17; Löfving, pp.10, 60; UNDP, 2012, *Village Institutions and Leadership in Myanmar: a View from Below*, p. 39.

28. Ibid, p. 29-30.

The study by MDRI-CESD and the Asia Foundation found that enabling factors for women’s participation in Myanmar include: **a relatively high level of gender equality in formal educational attainment, deliberate actions of certain governance actors to increase women’s participation, and women who are already in leadership positions inspiring and enabling other women to follow in their footsteps.** Another peculiar “enabler” for women leadership in conflict areas is outlined in Box 2.

In the next chapter, barriers and enablers as perceived by the VTIWAs will be discussed, confirming several of the above mentioned barriers but also showing that these barriers can be overcome.

### Box 2: Women leaders in conflict areas

In February 2010, the Karen Women Organisation published a report documenting the remarkable stories of Karen female village chiefs in eastern Myanmar. As male village chiefs were more likely to be killed by the Myanmar Army, since the 1980s women in eastern Myanmar have increasingly been taking on the role of village chief in the hope of mitigating abuses, overturning deeply engrained tradition. The report describes:

*Over 30 years ago, it was highly unusual for rural Karen women to be elected as village chiefs. According to traditional gender roles, Karen women were mainly expected to remain at home, looking after children and performing household and farming tasks. Only rarely, when women were regarded as particularly capable, were they chosen to be chiefs. It was in the early 1980s, when the military regime stepped up operations against the Karen resistance and expanded their military infrastructure further into lowland rural areas of Eastern Burma, that the tradition began to change. As Burma Army persecution of male village chiefs became more intense, fewer men were willing to risk their lives in this position, and women were increasingly asked to be chiefs.<sup>29</sup>*

While the improved security situation has led to less persecution of (male) village chiefs, there are still older female leaders in Kayin State and likely also in Shan, including VTIWA, that first took up leadership positions for the reason that the position was too dangerous for men.



29. Karen Women Organisation Network, 2010, Walking Amongst Sharp Knives – Karen Women Village Heads in Conflict Areas of Eastern Burma, p. 9.



A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a yellow lace top and an olive green button-down shirt, stands in front of a wooden wall. The image is framed by a large, semi-circular purple graphic element. The background is a solid purple color with faint, stylized floral patterns.

Chapter 3

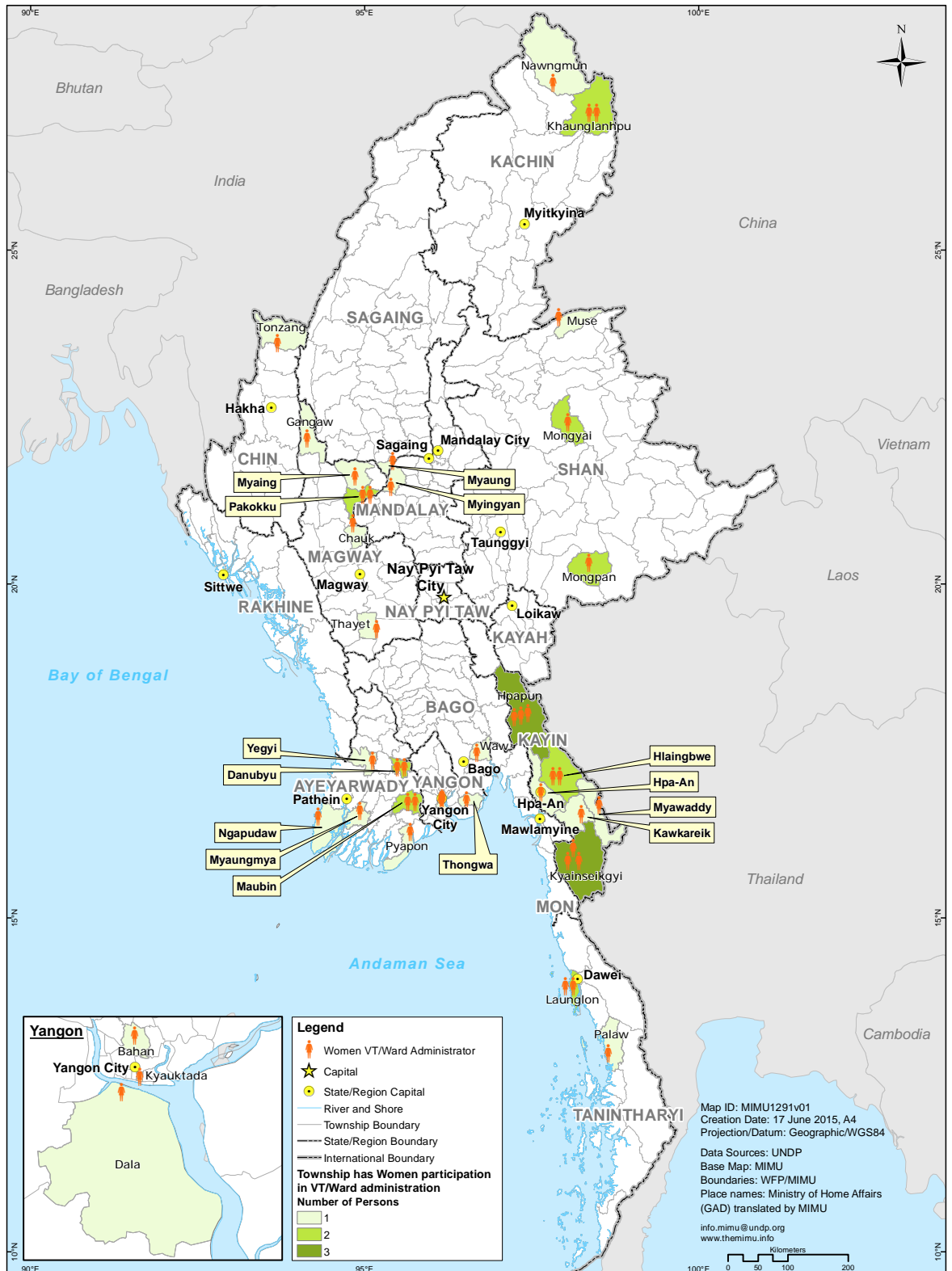
# Female village tract/ ward administrators in Myanmar

This chapter presents an overview of the presence of female VT/WAs in Myanmar, and describes their background and their experiences of becoming and being a local leader. In addition to the experiences of female VT/WAs, perceptions of some village tract/ward clerks and township administrators (TAs) are also detailed. Through recounting these experiences and perceptions, insight is gained in key factors enabling election and leadership of women on the local level.

### 3.1 Location of female VT/WAs

According to figures from the General Administration Department there are 42 female Village Tract/Ward Administrators (out of a total of 16785 i.e. 0.25%). Figure 2 shows their location.

Figure 2:  
Location of  
female VT/WAs.  
Map created by  
MIMU.



The highest concentrations of female VT/WAs appear in **Ayeyarwady and Kayin as well as around Pakokku in Magway**. Indeed, when weighing the number of female VT/WAs against the total number of village tracts/wards per state and region (see Table 1) Kayin has the highest proportions of female VT/WAs (2.39%), followed by Tanintharyi (0.86%) and Ayeyarwady (0.36%).

Possible reasons for the concentrations of women in the position of VT/WA in Kayin, Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady could be what respondents in Tanintharyi explained as 'Tanintharyi generally being more progressive', and in Ayeyarwady the influence of cyclone Nargis which may have led to a number of women receiving training and building up skills that helped them achieve these leadership positions. One township administrator mentioned the generally low level of education in Ayeyarwady, due to which women are on more equal footing with men and therefore more likely to take up leadership positions. Regarding Kayin, conflict-related circumstances sketched in the previous chapter led to a relatively high percentage of female VT/WAs there.

When looking at their distribution across urban and rural areas, it is about twice as common for a VT/WA to be female in an **urban area (ward)** compared to rural areas (village tract) (0.41% versus 0.21%, or 1 in 244 against 1 in each 475 VTAs). It is likely that the comparatively higher levels of female local leadership in urban areas are related to the higher educational attainment of both men and women which reduces social gender inequality norms.<sup>30</sup> Previous studies indeed observed that across Myanmar resistance to female leadership is highest in rural areas and lowest among highly educated urban dwellers.<sup>31</sup> Another factor could be that women's time constraints arising from household tasks are lower in urban areas because of better infrastructure and available technology in urban areas.<sup>32</sup> However, there is no conclusive evidence.

State/region	# of VTs	# of female VTAs	% of female VTAs	# of Wards	# of female WAs	% of female WAs	Total # of VT/Wards	Total # of female VT/WAs	Total % of female VT/WAs
Ayeyarwady	1919	7	0.36%	273	1	0.37%	2192	8	0.36%
Bago	1417	1	0.07%	290	0	0%	1707	1	0.06%
Chin	470	0	0%	40	1	2.5%	510	1	0.20%
Kachin	594	1	0.17%	160	2	1.25%	754	3	0.40%
Kayah	74	0	0%	31	0	0%	105	0	0%
Kayin	376	8	2.13%	84	3	3.57%	460	11	2.39%
Magway	1535	3	0.20%	184	3	1.63%	1719	6	0.35%
Mandalay	1416	1	0.07%	270	0	0%	1686	1	0.06%
Mon	368	0	0%	99	0	0%	467	0	0%
NayPyiDaw	187	0	0%	57	0	0%	244	0	0%
Rakhine	1036	0	0%	143	0	0%	1179	0	0%
Sagaing	1761	1	0.06%	229	0	0%	1990	1	0.05%
Shan	1566	2	0.13%	498	1	0.20%	2064	3	0.15%
Tanintharyi	264	3	1.14%	83	0	0%	347	3	0.86%
Yangon	619	2	0.32%	742	2	0.27%	1361	4	0.29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>13602</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>0.21%</b>	<b>3183</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0.41%</b>	<b>16785</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>0.25%</b>

Table 1: Number of village tracts/wards and number of female VT/WAs across states and regions and Nay Pyi Daw<sup>33</sup>

30. Males and females have significantly higher education attainment in urban areas compared to rural areas. Census, 2014, IHLCA 2009-2010.  
 31. Paul Minoletti, 2014, "Women's participation in the subnational governance of Myanmar", Discussion paper 3 of MDRI & the Asia Foundation, p. 30, Lövving (Oxfam, Care, Trocaire, ActionAid), 2011, *If Given the Chance: Understanding Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation in Public Life and Decision-Making in Myanmar*, p. 2.

32. E.g. collecting water and firewood, Paul Minoletti, 2014, "Women's participation in the subnational governance of Myanmar", Discussion paper 3 of MDRI & the Asia Foundation, p. 26.

33. MIMU P-Code list August 2015.

Data from the Local Governance Mapping suggests that women were competing in the 2012 VT/WA elections in a rather **more substantial number** of village tracts and wards. As part of the LGM, in 7 states and regions, in 29 townships, VT/WAs were asked whether they had been elected or appointed, and if elected whether there were women candidates during the elections. As can be seen in Table 2, out of a total of 58 male VT/WAs interviewed, 55 stated they had been elected, and out of these 55, **10 (or 18%) stated there was at least 1 female candidate in the elections they won.** Highest percentages were in Magway and Shan. Again, the percentage of elections with at least one female competitor was significantly higher in urban areas. The exact number of female candidates in these village tracts/wards is unknown.

Table 2: Number of elected VT/WAs in 7 states/regions covered by the Local Governance Mapping facing women competitors during the VT/WA elections

State/region	# of elected VTAs	# of VTAs who faced women	% of VTAs who faced women	# of elected WAs	# of WAs who faced women	% of WAs who faced women	Total # of elected VT/WAs	Total # of VT/WAs who faced women	Total % of VT/WAs who faced women
Kachin	6	2	33%	2	0	0%	8	2	25%
Magway	4	1	25%	2	1	50%	6	2	33%
Mandalay	4	0	0%	2	0	0%	6	0	0%
Rakhine	6	0	0%	2	0	0%	8	0	0%
Sagaing	6	0	0%	2	1	50%	8	1	13%
Shan	6	0	0%	7	4	57%	13	4	31%
Yangon	3	0	0%	3	1	33%	6	1	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18%</b>

For this study, 15 women across 12 townships from 2 states and 4 regions were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. 8 were in rural areas (village tracts), and 7 in urban areas (wards). Table 3 gives an overview.

Table 3: Locations of female VT/WA included in this study

State/region	Township	Village Tract/ Ward
Ayeyarwady	Myaung Mya	Dar Mya Chaung VT
Chin	Tonzang	Kyi Khar Ward 1
Kayin	Hlaingbwe	Pain Kyone Ward 3
	Hlaingbwe	Shan Ywar This, Que Lay VT
	Hpa-An	Taung Kalay VT
	Kawkareik	Kyone Doe Chaung Phar VT
Magway	Myaing	Myaing, Ward 1
	Pakokku	Pakokku, Ward 6
	Pakokku	Kan Hla VT
Tanintharyi	Launglon	Na Kan Taw VT
	Launglon	Nyin Maw VT
Yangon	Bahan	Shwe Taung Kyaw Ward 2
	Dala	Myoma Ward 4
	Kyauktadaw	Kyauktadaw, Ward 3
	South Tone Gwe	A Zan Taw Sone VT

It was attempted to establish whether these women live in village tracts/wards where women in general are more active compared to other places. The research therefore looked at the number of female 10 household heads (HH) in the selected village tracts/wards as VT/WAs are elected from amongst 10 HH. It can be observed from Table 4 that apart from Kayin, **the number of female 10 HH is quite small in these village tracts/wards, suggesting that the female VT/WAs are an exception in their own village tract/wards as much as they are in general.** Or, in other words, it appears the enabling environment is not much stronger than elsewhere.

State/ region	Township	Village Tract/Ward	Population	# of 10 HH	# of women 10 HH Heads (including WA/VTA)
Ayeyarwady	Myaung Mya	Dar Mya Chaung VT	1675	37	1
Chin	Tonzang	Kyi Khar Ward 1	735	10	2
Kayin	Hlaingbwe	Pain Kyone Ward 3	530	5	5
	Hlaingbwe	Shan Ywar This, Que Lay VT	> 4000	30	15 <sup>34</sup>
	Hpa-An	Taung Kalay VT	> 3000	54	3
	Kawkareik	Kyone Doe Chaung Phar VT	> 3000	10 <sup>35</sup>	5
Magway	Myaing	Myaing, Ward 1	2865	64	3
	Pakokku	Pakokku, Ward 6	5181	84	5
	Pakokku	Kan Hla VT	1672	10	4
Tanintharyi	Launglon	Na Kan Taw VT	3000	10 <sup>36</sup>	1
	Launglon	Nyin Maw VT	2000	19	2
Yangon	Bahan	Shwe Taung Kyaw (2) Quarter	> 2500	70	1
	Dala	Myoma Ward 4	1500	45	8
	Kyauktadaw	Kyauktadaw Ward 3	3346	37 <sup>37</sup>	4
	South Tone Gwe	A Zan Taw Sone VT	3240	85	2

Table 4: Number of female 10 Household Heads

Unfortunately, there are no official statistics on the 10 HH elected in 2012 across the entire country.

## 3.2 Characteristics and experiences of female VT/WAs

The following sections present an overview of the key characteristics and experiences of the 15 women.

### 3.2.1 Family situation and socio-economic background

#### Socio-economic background

When considering the background of their parents, and observing the current living conditions of the female VT/WA, it can be concluded that **most female VT/WA are either from a middle or upper class family or have married into a middle or upper class family** (see Table 5 on p. 23). The only

34. In this village tract, an entire household fulfills the role of 10 household head. In practice (according to the VTA), the wife often fulfills the role. The role of 10 household heads is not written in the law and largely consists of supporting the VT/WA.

35. Ten 10 HH in her village which rotate every two months, none in the 2 other villages.

36. As stated by the VTA, while those nominated during the VTA elections as candidates could be seen as 10 HH, this village tract does not really have 10 HH. She mostly works with respected elders and youth.

37. As stated by the township administration and the VTA, officially there should be 53 10 HH, but in practice there are only 37 in place.

exceptions to this were two VTAs in Kayin who stated and could be observed to be from a relatively poor background. They detailed the lack of food and clothes when they grew up and continue to live in relatively simple houses.

**Another important shared characteristic appears to be previous political engagement of the father or other family members.** From Table 5 on the next page it can be noted that in the case of 9 out of 15 interviewed women, their father or another close member had previously been engaged in village tract/ward administration or township administration. All across the world, family background is often considered a significant factor in a person's decision to compete for political leadership. If the father or other members of the family have been engaged in political work or been elected to different political positions, it is likely that the next generation of people in that family lineage will also aspire to political leadership, including daughters.<sup>38</sup>

Looking at the educational level of the female VT/WAs, it appears the female VT/WAs have either had relatively little education, or the opposite, they have higher education. Over a third of the women (6 out of 15) had completed primary education only, while almost half of the women (7 out of 15) had a university degree. When comparing this with the sample of men VT/WAs from the Local Governance Mapping **a significantly higher proportion of the female VT/WAs has completed graduate training** (see Figure 3: most male VT/WAs have only completed middle school). As such, it appears that education is a major enabler for a woman to take up the position of VT/WA.

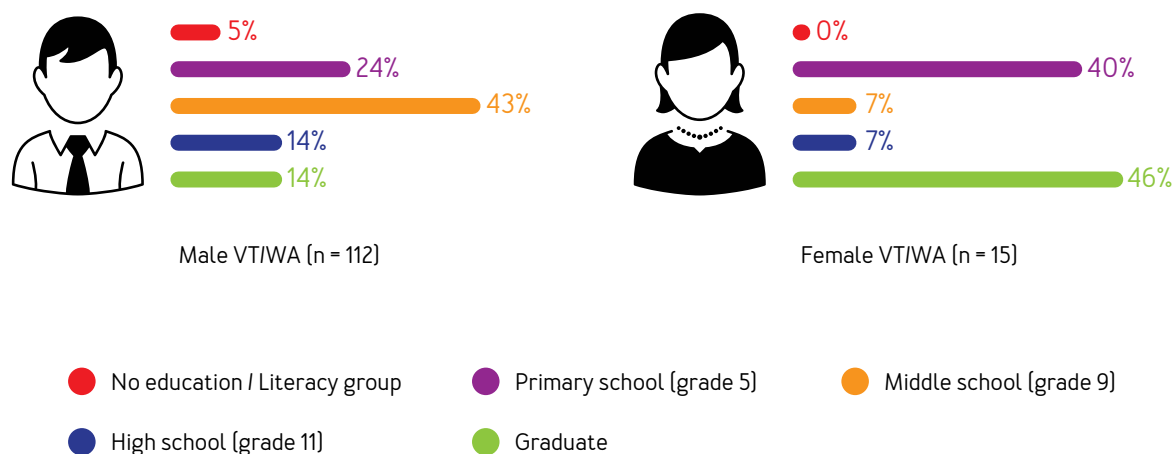


38. See for example Verba, Sidney, Nancy Burns, and Kay L. Schlozman, 2003, "Unequal at the starting line: Creating participatory inequalities across generations and among groups" *The American Sociologist*, volume 34 (1-2), p. 45-69.

Table 5: Socio-economic background

<i>State/region</i>	<i>Township</i>	<i>Village Tract/Ward</i>	<i>Background of parents</i>	<i>Highest level of education reached by VT/WA</i>	<i>(Previous) Occupation of VT/WA</i>
Ayeyarwady	Myaung Mya	Dar Mya Chaung VT	Farmers. Father was also a VTA (socialist period)	Grade 7	Shopkeeper, farmer, social worker
Chin	Tonzang	Kyi Khar Ward 1	Father was a soldier	Grade 8	Family construction company, hostel, social worker
Kayin	Hlaingbwe	Pain Kyone Ward 3	Farmers, shopkeepers	Grade 5	Auxiliary midwife, snack vendor
	Hlaingbwe	Shan Ywar This, Que Lay VT	Farmers	Grade 5	Vendor
	Hpa-An	Taung Kalay VT	Father was a soldier, and also a VTA (socialist period). Mother opened a grocery shop	BA Law (University of Distance Education)	Economics teacher at monastic school, candle making, tailoring, youth leader
	Kawkareik	Kyone Doe Chaung Phar VT	Farmers. Father was also a VTA (socialist period)	Grade 7	Farmer
Magway	Myaing	Myaing, Ward 1	Farmers	BA Geography (Pakokku College)	Middle school teacher, social worker
	Pakokku	Pakokku, Ward 6	Vegetable merchants	Grade 10	Supporting her father's business, working at gem counter in Yangon airport, social worker
	Pakokku	Kan Hla VT	Farmers	BSc Chemistry (Mandalay University)	Volunteer for Save the Children
Tanintharyi	Launglon	Na Kan Taw VT	Farmers/ merchants	Bsc Maths (Dawei University)	Astrologer, youth leader
	Launglon	Nyin Maw VT	Farmers/ merchants (mother's brother was VTA)	Grade 5	Maid, cook (including in Thailand)
Yangon	Bahan	Shwe Taung Kyaw Ward 2	Father was representative of medical company. Adopted father was ward administrator.	BSc Zoology (Yangon University)	Working in marketing. Managed her own restaurant, social work
	Dala	Myoma Ward 4	Father was judge in township administration.	BSc Botany (Yangon University)	Clerk at Myanmar Railways
	Kyauktadaw	Kyauktadaw, Ward 3	Merchants. Father was also secretary of ward council	Grade 11	Supporting her parents trade, housewife, social worker
	South Tone Gwe	A Zan Taw Sone VT	Father was civil servant agriculture department	BA History (University of Distance Education)	Primary school headmaster, farmer

Figure 3:  
Education level  
of men VT/WA  
versus women  
VT/WA [sample  
of 112 and of 15]



Finally, another common characteristic is the women's previous engagement in **social work or youth activities**. In Table 5, social work is only mentioned for those women who had spent a lot of time on social work, but all women mentioned some experience with social work.

It should be noted that in general in Myanmar women are more likely to have a university degree compared to men: The 2014 Census revealed that in Myanmar more men are literate compared to women [92.6% of men compared to 86.9% of women of 15 years and older]. Related, more women have not completed any education or only completed primary education compared to men [2,698,192 versus 1,671,231 for no education, 6,861,381 versus 5,298,794 for primary school only]. At the same time though, significantly more women have continued to university [1,234,067 versus 988,277].<sup>39</sup> A similar distribution was found in the Integrated Household Living Conditions Assessment (IHLCA) 2009-2010.<sup>40</sup> This is despite the sex-specific quota system in force at certain universities, meaning there are different entrance requirements depending on the applicant's gender, with women having to score higher to enter professional institutions such as medical schools, engineering schools and technology schools. A reason could be the larger number of women in the population [51.8% versus 48.2% of the total population according to the 2014 Census].

It is not surprising that most VT/WAs are from a middle or upper class family, given the **reimbursement** for working as a VT/WA is 70,000 kyats/month, with an additional 50,000 kyats/month for office expenses. In fact, the 2012 *Village Tract/Ward Administration Law* stipulates that candidate VT/WAs should have "sufficient means for a living" meaning able to support him- or herself. All interviewed female VT/WAs shared that the reimbursement was just enough to cover their phone charges and some of their travel expenses, but that otherwise they were depending on other household sources of income e.g. their family business, brother's income or husband's income. Some of the women also engaged in economic activities to support themselves/their families (see Table 6 on the next page).

39. UNDP quotes the following figures for GPI in tertiary education: 151% in 1990, 168% in 2000 and 164% in 2010, see <http://www.undp.org/content/myanmar/en/home/mdgoverview/overview/mdg3.html>. These figures should be read in light of the fact that Myanmar has more women than men [51.8% versus 48.2%].

40. As outlined by Paul Minoletti, 2014, "Women's participation in the subnational governance of Myanmar", Discussion paper 3 of MDRI & the Asia Foundation, p. 24: "For individuals in the survey aged 20 and above, 84.6% of females had ever attended school, only slightly lower than the 87.4% of males. Of those that did not attend any formal schooling or had completed no more than the first standard, females (7.4%) were considerably less likely than males (19.1%) to be able to easily pass a test of basic literacy and numeracy. Among the individuals surveyed who had attended formal schooling, females (26.4%) were more likely than men (19.1%) to drop out before the 'fourth standard' [i.e. fail to complete primary school]. However, females (17.1%) were slightly more likely than males (16.1%) to complete the 'tenth standard' [i.e. high school]. And females (11.3%) were also more likely than males (8.1%) to hold a bachelor's degree or above."



Table 6: Current livelihood situation of the female VT/WA

State/region	Township	Village Tract/Ward	Means of supporting themselves in VT/WA period.
Ayeyarwady	Myaung Mya	Dar Mya Chaung VT	Savings from shop. Income from farm (23 acres)
Chin	Tonzang	Kyi Khar Ward 1	Income from family construction business. Supported by children who live in USA, UK, India and Malaysia
Kayin	Hlaingbwe	Pain Kyone Ward 3	Selling snacks
	Hlaingbwe	Shan Ywar This, Que Lay VT	Sells some clothes from town. One son in Bangkok supports her, but she supports another son who is studying to become a priest
	Hpa-An	Taung Kalay VT	Supported by her mother. Candle-making, tailoring
	Kawkareik	Kyone Doe Chaung Phar VT	Supported by her children who are working in Thailand
Magway	Myaing	Myaing, Ward 1	Supported by her husband who has a welding workshop and a transportation company
	Pakokku	Pakokku, Ward 6	Supported by her brother who has a construction company. The family rents out the bottom floor to a shop-owner
	Pakokku	Kan Hla VT	Supported by her family farm (over 20 acres). Runs a small convenience store
Tanintharyi	Launglon	Na Kan Taw VT	Works as an astrologer
	Launglon	Nyin Maw VT	Supported by her husband and sisters/brothers
Yangon	Bahan	Shwe Taung Kyaw Ward 2	Rents out her grandmother's house
	Dala	Myoma Ward 4	Supported by her husband who is a seaman
	Kyauktadaw	Kyauktadaw, Ward 3	Supported by her husband who drives a taxi
	South Tone Gwe	A Zan Taw Sone VT	Income from big farm (over 100 acres)

### Age and family situation

The average age of the female VT/WA was 48, with 3 being between 31 and 40 years of age (the youngest being 33), 5 being between 41 and 50 years of age, 5 being between 51 and 60 years of age, and 2 being 60+. Comparing this to the 112 men, it appears **age distribution is rather similar**, with 6 men between 18 and 30, 20 between 31 and 40, 38 between 41 and 50, 37 between 51 and 60, and 11 60+ (see Figure 4 and Table 7).

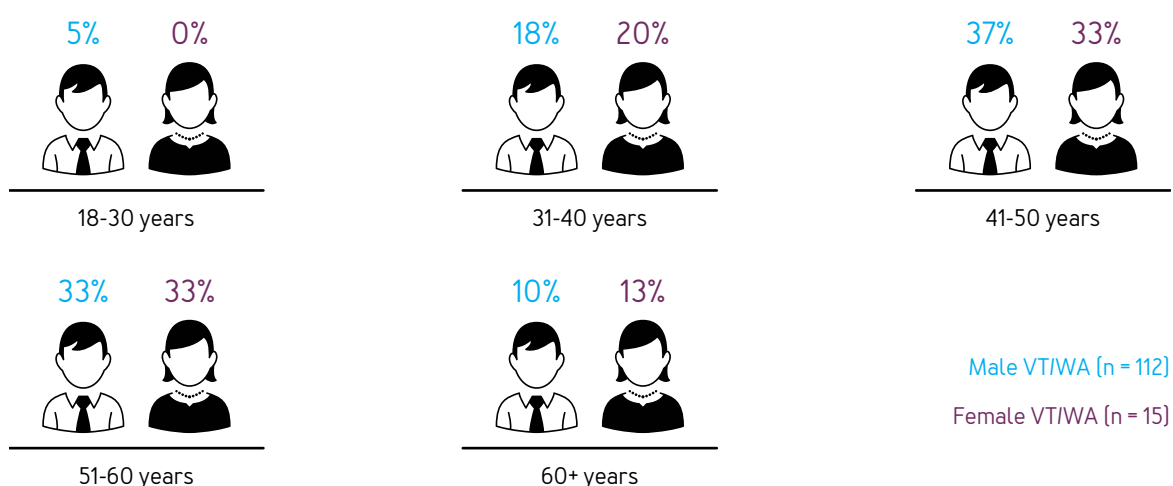


Figure 4: Age of female VT/WA

Out of 15 female VT/WA, 5 were single and 1 was recently separated. Another two were widowers and took up the position of VT/WA after their husband had passed away. As such, **out of 15 women, only 7 were in a family situation with a husband and 1 or a maximum of 2 children (still) at home** (see Table 7).

Table 7: Family situation

State/ region	Township	Age	Marital Status	Children
Ayeyarwady	Myaung Mya	53	Married	3 (1 still at home)
Chin	Tonzang	55	Married	9 (1 still at home)
Kayin	Hpa-An	39	Single	No
	Hlaingbwe	56	Married	7 (2 still at home)
	Hlaingbwe	62	Married (husband passed away)	7 (none at home)
	Kawkareik	61	Married (husband passed away)	5 (none at home)
Magway	Myaing	45	Married	2 (both still at home)
	Pakokku	46	Single	No
	Pakokku	41	Single	No
Tanintharyi	Launglon	33	Single	No
	Launglon	39	Married	No (raises son of a sibling)
Yangon	Bahan	41	Single	No
	Dala	45	Married (separated)	1 (still at home)
	Kyauktadaw	53	Married	2 (still at home)
	South Tone Gwe	52	Married	2 (1 still at home)

### Management of household duties

Domestic duties for women in Myanmar usually consist of looking after the children, preparing food, and cleaning the house. While previous studies noted lack of time as an important constraint for women participation in decision-making, **all interviewed female VT/WAs noted the pressure but mentioned it was not too challenging for them to combine their household work with their VT/WA work.** The fact that most of the VT/WA are either single or only have 1 or 2 children might explain their answer partially. Another reason for some of the relatively well off female VT/WA is that they hire some support or have other female family members living with them who can help out. In general, participation in governance may be a matter of **socio-economic class** as much as gender. It could also be a matter of attitude of the women VT/WA. Almost all of the married VT/WA mentioned good support from their husbands, showing that exceptions are possible to the observation in previous studies that men are generally not willing to partake in household work. Overall though, the notion of women being responsible for household duties is deeply engrained.

### 3.2.2 Becoming a leader: the election process

#### Election process

From discussions on the election process that took the women to office, it appears **the process proscribed by the 2012 Ward and Village Tract Administration Law was followed in most village tracts and wards.** Generally, the TA started by forming an election oversight committee of respected elders, although in some of the 15 visited village tracts and wards the people themselves formed the election oversight committee (generally by people nominating names and then making a selection). Next, the representatives of households came together to elect a 10 household head (10 HH) amongst

themselves. Either all these 10 HH were subsequently candidates for the VT/WA position, or a more limited number of candidates was nominated (e.g 10 HH that were explicitly interested). As a final step, the next day, all 10 HH then voted for the VT/WA through secret ballot.

As previously mentioned, it seems likely that there is **a large degree of continuity in the people fulfilling the VT/WA office with before 2012**. Indeed, during the VT/WA survey part of the Local Governance Mapping which included 112 VT/WAs, out of 58 of whom were asked the question of whether they had previously been appointed or elected as VT/WA, 39 mentioned they had previously been appointed or elected as VT/WA and only 19 said they had not.<sup>41</sup> Among the female VT/WA however, except for the two VT/WA in Kayin's Hlaingbwe Township who have been VT/WA for a long period of time, **all of the women stated having been elected for the first time end of 2012, and appointed early 2013**. As such, it appears the elections have made some space for participation by people who were previously not involved. One VTA in Launglon was elected in 2014, after an unpopular VTA was taken out of service and new elections were organised.

Very little advance notice was given of this two-day process; most women mentioned people knew of the elections only a few days in advance. As such, this process allowed for **little or no campaigning**. Similarly, the LGM VTA survey showed that in only 2 of the 55 surveyed village tracts with elections there was some campaigning/outreach to voters before the election; these being a village tract in Rakhine and a village tract in Sagaing.

The 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law* states "If the ward or village tract administrator is member of any political party, he shall not participate and carry out the works of the party of such party organisation within the term of performing his duty start from the day of appointing and assigning as the ward or village tract administrator."<sup>42</sup> As such, being a **party member** or having been politically active in the past is officially allowed. A few women mentioned they were active for the NLD before getting engaged in village tract/ward administration, and one is a member of the USDP. Several of the women mentioned having been active in the Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation (MWAF) and other semi-government committees.

### Motivation to participate in the VT/WA elections

Several of the women described how they attended the 2-day process organised in their village tract or ward without the goal of becoming VT/WA, and were surprised to be asked to be 10 HH and candidate for the position of VT/WA. It appears that only a few stepped forward out of their own initiative, with most women being asked or requested to contest the elections, generally by respected elders from the community. Some of the women explained contesting the election was not really in their interest, but that they felt obliged to participate when asked [see Box 3].

Indeed, the interview data shows that **the women's decision to contest was primarily inspired by respected male elders in the community or family members, with the key motivational factor for their participation in the elections being their desire to serve the community**. Out of 15, 4 women explicitly mentioned how they were already active for their community, and that they stepped forward as candidate on their own initiative considering the VT/WA position as an additional step up, as a position that would allow them to do more for the people. A few of the women shared they did not actually want to become VT/WA, and do not particularly enjoy being VT/WA. They highlighted feelings of not daring to refuse, or not wanting to disappoint.

41. However, out of 112 whom were asked how long they had been in office, 78 said they had been in office between 0 and 3 years, which would correspond with having been elected in 2012 or after, and only 34 said they had been in office for 4 or more years.

42. 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law*, Chapter IV, clause 10.

### Box 3: Motivations

*I was initially keen to only be 10 HH head, so I could vote for the WA (I wanted to be sure to have a good WA). But then they encouraged me to be the WA. At first I was shy, because I am a woman. But respected elders and others encouraged me and said they would support me so I agreed. (WA in Yangon)*

*When I started work as a teacher here, the education and healthcare services were very poor, and there was no road. I wanted to improve these things. Amongst others, I wanted to connect the road with the ocean. Initially, my husband intended to become the VTA/WA. But there is one condition; that the person must live in the area for 10 years already continuously. For this reason he was not eligible. Then I developed my mind: if a man can do this work, why not the woman? I felt I must be able to do it. (VTA in Yangon)*

*When I was elected VTA, I was very surprised, worried and wanted to run away. I myself had voted for another person, I didn't want to win. I was leading a very free life and didn't feel I was the right person for this job. But I thought it would be disrespectful to run away. I am very dutiful and always feel like I cannot refuse. I also want to make my mother proud. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

### Reasons for being elected

Respondents were asked why they thought they were elected. All of the women explained they had engaged in **social work or community affairs** before contesting the elections, and that this was a key reason for being considered a good candidate. Some were social workers, some volunteered for political parties, and some were engaged in monastic or Church life or youth groups.

8 of the women mentioned their **family reputation and role** as a reason for being trusted by the community. The fathers of at least 6 of the women were engaged in village tract/ward administration, and the fathers of at least 2 were engaged in township administration. They grew up in houses that were the centre of community life, often supporting their father, and have remained at the heart of community dynamics since, supported by their fathers.

**Endorsement by respected male elders** in the community was also a frequently cited reason for being elected.

As previously noted, 7 of the 15 women had completed a university degree. These women all mentioned that their **education** was a major reason for the community to trust in their capability as VTAs.

Finally, four of the single women mentioned that it was the combination of their background/education and **being single** that made them the first choice of the community. Because they are single, the community felt they would have a lot of time to devote to their VT/WA work and so would be good leaders. As such, it seems that women's usual occupation with domestic tasks does prevent them from being trusted with or engaging in community affairs or leadership positions.

Only a few women referred to their personal skills or characteristics as the reason for being elected, such as being brave, the ability to talk with both communities and local authorities, and willingness to work hard for the community.

When looking at the vote count of the elections that made these 15 women VT/WAs, most of them won with a clear majority. Having been asked by the community rather than putting themselves forward, there was often large support for their candidacy. Nonetheless, several did experience criticism during the elections, most of all for **being a woman**. Opponents or just other members of the community would doubt their ability and strength. Lack of education (specifically linked to being a woman: being an uneducated woman) was also mentioned by a few as criticism they heard during the election period.

### 3.2.3 Being a leader: perception of role and representation

#### Perception of role

When asked after their daily work routine, the women generally mentioned a mix of household duties, paperwork, meetings, and for those engaged in business also commercial activities. **Time spent on VT/WA tasks appear to vary hugely**, with some women saying they spend about 2 hours a day, and others saying that the work never ends and often even keeps them busy at night. Especially those VT/WA whose office is inside their family house, and generally also the WA in urban areas, appear to be very busy.

Data from the LGM shows that the interviewed male 112 VT/WAs emphasize their traditional roles in **ensuring peace and security and mediating between villagers when there is a problem**, followed by bringing village problems to the township administration (see Figure 5).

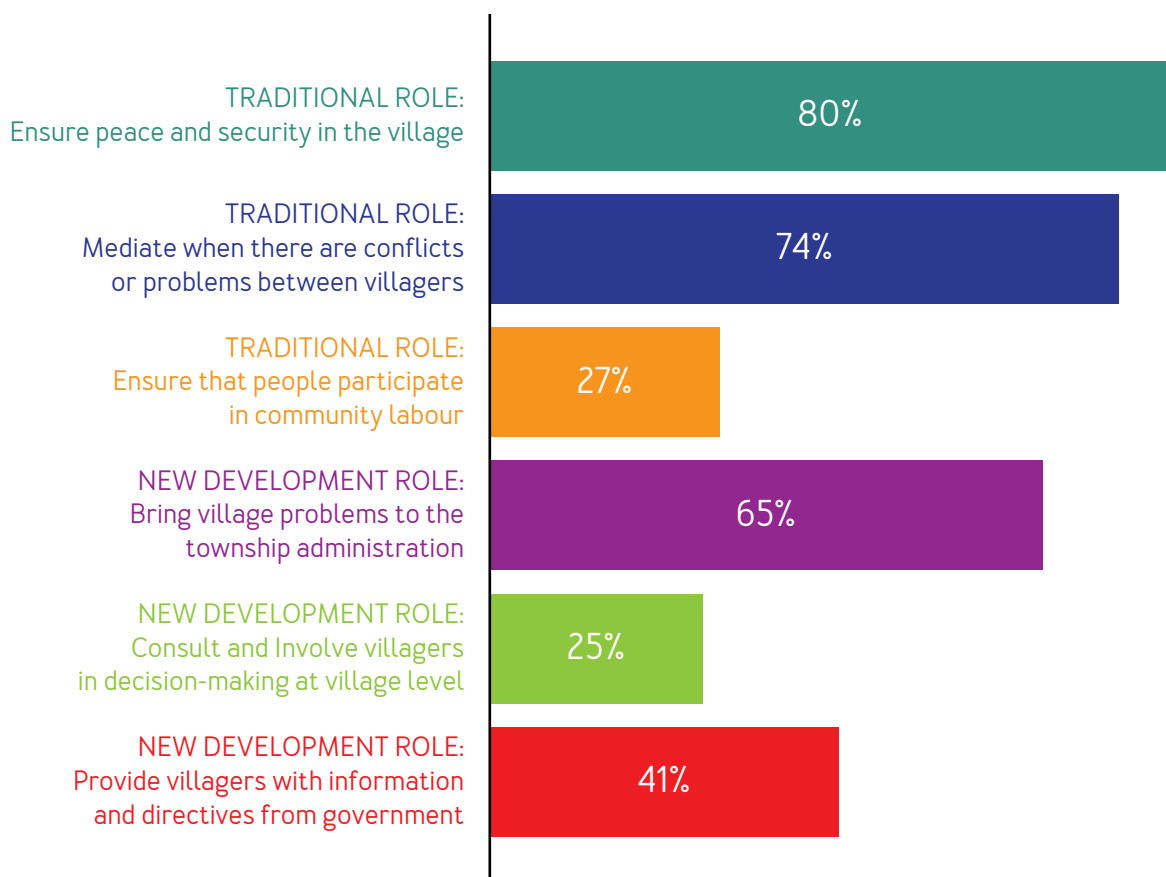
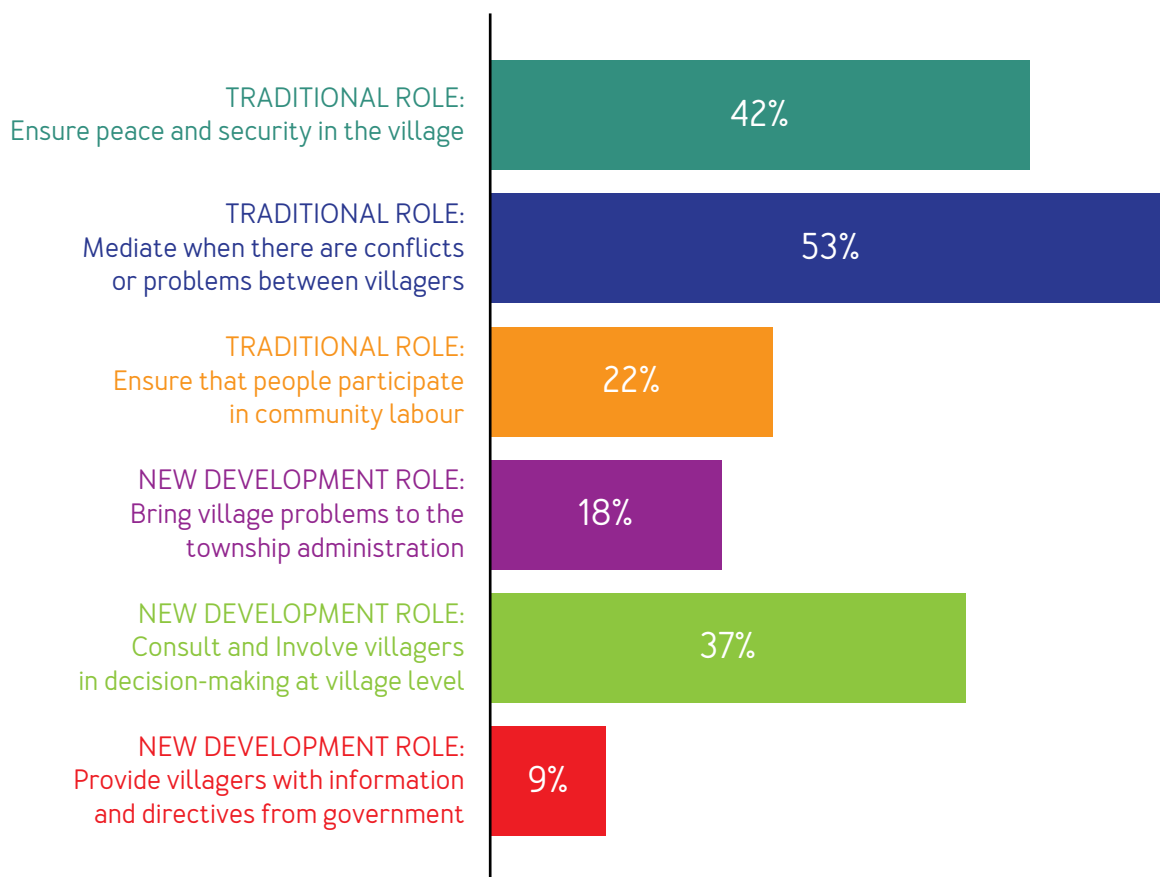


Figure 5: What are the most important functions of a village tract/ward administrator according to male VT/WAs (n = 111, multiple choice, one respondent missing)

Slightly different, citizen respondents emphasized **mediation**, followed by **ensuring peace and security and consulting and involving people** (see Figure 6). Particularly, citizen respondents emphasized consultation and involvement of people much more frequently.

Figure 6: What are the most important functions of a village tract/ward administrator according to people (n = 5400, multiple choice)



When asking the women about their role, many started with naming the official VTA roles of 1. Rule & law, 2. Peace & security, 3. Development, 4. Serving the community (e.g. prevent dengue fever, drainage). However, when asking what they really do on a day-to-day basis, they elaborated more on their key role as **problem solvers and promoters of development**. Most sample village tracts/wards are rather compliant and safe and there is not much need for law enforcement and security-related work. As such, there appear to be differences in the perception of their role amongst male and female VT/WA.

#### Box 4: Roles

*I see my role most of all as serving the community through developing the community. I want to fulfill the community's needs, e.g. help farmers with loans. To get a loan farmers must have a good credit history, and they need to travel to town, so I take out loans on behalf of others and am the guarantor. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*I focus on problem solving, whether it is about marriage or administrative issues. I have also taught the 10 HH heads to solve problems. (WA in Chin)*

*I would describe my role as follow: 1. To solve difficulties and problems in this ward 2. To share information with the village. And 3. To support for development. Most important to me is to share knowledge with the people in this ward. Critical thinking in this ward is quite low and I would like to strengthen it. (WA in Magway)*

It should be noted that the women in Hlaingbwe rather stressed their more “historical” role of communication with the various present organisations (KNU, Border Guard Force, Kayin State Government) on behalf of the village. They mentioned how sometimes the KNU wants to provide support and sometimes the Government wants to provide support, and how they try to have good relations with all for the benefit of their community.

Strong international evidence suggests that as more women reach leadership positions within their political parties, these parties tend to prioritise issues that impact health, education and other quality of life issues. In addition, as more women are elected to office, policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities increases.<sup>43</sup> At present, evidence of such outcomes related to increased women leadership in Myanmar is absent, but it is likely increased women leadership in Myanmar will lead to similar shifts.

### Their role being elected

VT/WAs are not directly elected by the community, and most VT/WAs do not campaign and reach out to their communities/constituencies before elections with plans and promises. Nonetheless, when asking about their relationship with the community versus their relationship with the administration it is clear many of the female VT/WA directly accountable to the people, in the sense that they **feel responsible for serving the needs of their community, recognizing that it is the people who elected them.** However, the degree to which VT/WAs stand up for their communities varies, with some emphasizing the needs of the community over the directives of the administration (within the realm of the possible) more than others. A few of the interviewed women were very vocal about the need to stand up for the community strongly and to not blindly follow the directions of the GAD whereas other stress following the GAD. When asked if they represent any group in particular, such as farmers or women, all women emphasized that they represent **everyone in the community and do not focus on any specific group.**

### Leadership styles

During the interviews, considerable time was spent on forming an idea of how the women see their own leadership style as a woman, and how they would compare their style as a woman with the leadership styles of men. Specific character and behavioural traits were discussed that the women feel they or men in leadership roles often exhibit. Figure 7 gives an overview of terms that were often mentioned, and so does Box 5.

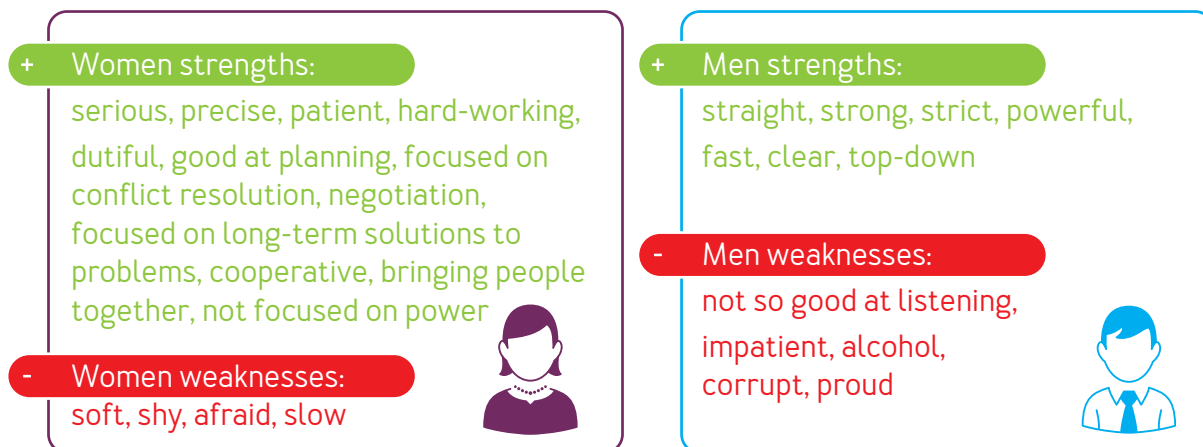


Figure 7: Leadership styles

43. S. Markham, 2013, “Women as agents of change: having voice in society and influencing policy, World Bank Group.

### Box 5: Leading as a woman

*As a woman, I focus on solving the problems through the Chin traditional way. In case of a conflict, I bring together all involved parties as well as the respected elders, to discuss and find a way of compensation. In this way there are few issues that have to go up to the town and township level. (WA in Chin)*

*The biggest difference between men and women is in handling problems. Male VTWA are not very patient, they don't listen to disputes very carefully. They also often drink. A woman can listen very carefully to all sides, record what each has said, and ask for detailed explanations. She tries to negotiate with both sides and solve issues on the village tract level rather than send up to township level. She puts the community first. Men are often not like that. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*Men are very decisive and can be very short and impatient. As a woman I take more time to understand situations. My style is also very cooperative. When I need to take a decision, I involve a lot of people in the decision, so that people can accept the decision. I never do anything alone. Finally, as a woman I have motherly love for the community. I want to make sure that people suffer the least. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*As a woman I have to do the job differently than a man. I have to use force in a different way: a man VTA could beat up another man as punishment (e.g. when they drink or beat their wives). What I do is ask household heads to stop the ongoing violence and then I summon the perpetrator with a letter to the office the next day and make him promise to never do it again. I often even make him sign a paper. If he then does it again I call the police. I think this is smooth and effective way of solving problems. (VTA in Kayin)*

*In a family usually the father makes money, and doesn't think about the needs of the family in detail. The mother does this: what do we eat, where do we go when we are ill, etc. As such, women may be better at caring for the community. As a woman VTA, all the community members are like my children. (VTA in Kayin)*

*Women are better at calming down angry people, they know how to talk with people. Also, women are better at receiving guidance from the officials. Men have their pride and sometimes disobey, they sometimes do what they think is right. Women are more respectful and more obeying. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

The point of these discussions was not to prove that women are different and perhaps better leaders than men in the context of Myanmar. The more simple objective was **to analyse whether there is a perception of difference by the women themselves**. In the last decades, internationally a lot of research has been carried out to see whether women do indeed lead differently. Generally, there is consensus that there are sex-related differences present in leadership style, but that these differences take the form of highly overlapping distributions of women and men, meaning that differences are small.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the gender gap may be decreasing and stereotypes may be changing as more women are entering leadership roles. Whether this is true for Myanmar is beyond the scope of this research, but the perception that women may be different leaders could be equally influential for daily local decision-making dynamics.

It should also be noted that about half of the interviewed female VT/WAs were highly educated, while male VT/WAs and other local leaders may be less so. Of course this also influences the type of characteristics mentioned, some of which may rather be ascribed to a difference in education.

44. Alice H. Eagly, 2013, "Women as leaders: leadership style versus leader's values and attitudes", Harvard Business School.



**Patience and soft mediation** in conflict and problem solving were the most frequently emphasized characteristics of the women's leadership style. For example, one woman shared a story of a domestic dispute where the wife wanted to divorce, and whereby the wife wanted to refer the case to the police. The VTA talked a lot with the wife and husband and finally they resolved the problem. She said a male VTA probably would not have been so patient; would not have taken the time to try and resolve the problem. Of course we cannot evaluate whether mediation or a divorce was ultimately the better solution for this situation.

In addition to patience, a **cooperative attitude** was mentioned as a characteristic. Women tend to not go about things alone, but involve respected elders, the support committee, and others in the community. Women explain they need the support of these actors to achieve the intended result. Several women felt that on the basis of their household responsibilities, they are **better at considering and addressing all different needs of the community**.

Perhaps related to patience and a **cooperative attitude**, is also the general attitude of **"obeying"** mentioned by two VT/WA. Men have their pride and sometimes want to do their own thing, arguing against higher levels. Women do not have this urge per se, the interviewed women explained. However, other women talked about how in general VT/WAs are listening to higher levels too much rather than to the community, and did not see obeying as a good thing.

However, at the same time several women emphasized they **could "work as a man"**, as they would put it themselves. These women wanted to emphasize that women can do the same things as men can do, in the same way, or that they can do **"both styles"**, as some women said. One woman even said she does not like the style of women and sees her own style more as that of a man (see Box 6).

It is interesting to hear women discussing such gender styles and stereotypes. It should be seen in the context of a long history of gender inequality and oppression in which women have been largely absent from the public arena. Female VT/WAs are now trying to negotiate a new identity and respected position for themselves as women leaders next to a much larger group of male leaders, and it is understandable they 'measure', compare and even identify themselves with men.

#### Box 6: "Working like a man"

*I don't like the style of many women. They are too soft. My working style is more like that of a man. The other men/colleague WA also refer to me as a brother [example: when the TA wanted to make a harsh joke but held back because there was a woman [me] in the room, others said no because "Daw ..." was not like their sister but like their brother]. I can work like a man if needed. [WA in Magway]*

#### Things women have to do differently

As the quotes in the previous section show, several women believe they as women use a different way of problem-solving, based on the power of mediation and cooperation rather than force, because they are a woman and cannot use force effectively. While this may be a perceived difference in style, it is also something they *have to* do differently, as often without the support of respected others they may not command the necessary respect and compliance.

A number of other things also came up when talking about concrete things women have to do differently than men in their day-to-day work:

Certain **physical limitations** came up, such as walking far to check things (e.g. the border or a water supply) or walking through muddy fields with a longyi on. The women who mentioned this said they would often ask a 10 HH or other leader to accompany a mission instead of them. This was particularly the case for the elderly women.

Issues related to what is **appropriate and safe at night-time for women** were often recurring. Generally, going out at night is considered inappropriate for women in Myanmar, particularly in rural areas. However, it is a duty of the VT/WA to check on problems such as disputes, accidents or criminal cases including at night. It appears the female VT/WAs have developed a range of coping tactics for this. Many seek the company of 10 HH. The married women generally tended to bring their husbands. One single lady in Yangon mentioned that she sometimes dresses up like a man in such an occasion, in order not to attract too much attention from community members and, as she said, not to bring shame on the police who do not like to be seen with a woman. Similar tactics of involving others are used in **case of violent or potentially dangerous situations** during the day, such as drunkenness, gambling or domestic violence. 10 HH or others are involved to get an idea of the situation, and if needed the police is involved to solve the situation.

**All women generally seemed to accept such barriers as a given.** As one woman put it:

*I have made two decisions. I have accepted this job, so I have to do everything I have to do, no choice. But being a housewife, I also need to accept my limitations and sometimes request the help of my family and respected elders.*

Some of the women emphasized that they **tried their very best** to be able to cope with these kinds of cases in *the same way* men do. For example, one WA mentioned that sometimes they get the instruction to stop the activities of sex workers, whereby the TA then tells her she does not need to participate because it is not appropriate for her to be involved in such work. But she wants to show that she can also manage, that she can also take her responsibility, so she does get involved. Another case mentioned was flooding during the rainy season, whereby the WAs are assigned to the waterfront area to provide relief. The interviewed WA went along with the men to show that she can do the same as men. Several women mentioned similar responses to the duty of night watch at checkpoints (something most VT/WA need to do about once every two weeks or once a month). Most of them find a way to fulfil this duty, whether accompanied or alone.

One woman summarized the overall situation as follows:

#### **Box 7: The “resourcefulness of women”**

*Women can do the same as men for 8 out of 10 things. With 2 out of 10 things we have more difficulty and we need to find another way of doing it. Women can usually find a very good way of doing these things. There is a Myanmar saying which is about the resourcefulness and tact of women. Women can think of many clever ways. But there are some cases in which women simply cannot handle, e.g. when men threaten with violence. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

Connected, some women mentioned that they feel they have to **work harder, in order to earn the same respect as men do** (see Box 8).

### Box 8: Working harder to get the same respect

*I feel I have to work harder, to prove that I can do the work. If men don't meet a deadline, they get away with it. If I don't, I get confronted with being a woman. This is my perception. So I overcompensate. [VTA in Ayeyarwady]*

A story of one of the other women, who said she was the only one who always showed up during the introductory one month VT/WA training and studied very hard, and was given a longyi in recognition, should probably be read in the same light of overcompensation too.

The experience of the two female VTAs in Hlaingbwe was altogether different, and illustrated in Box 9:

### Box 9: Being a woman in a conflict area

In accordance with the earlier described dynamics in conflict areas in Kayin, the women in Hlaingbwe stated that women are much better at the job than men are, in the past as well as today. These were their stories:

*In the past I think women were definitely better at the job. Still today I think they are better. Today when the KNU comes to the village I can serve them tea or coffee. If there would be a man VTA, they would have to serve beer and other alcohol. Most men village tract administrators in fact also drink alcohol. This leads to problems. [VTA in Hlaingbwe]*

*I am better at negotiating with the Armed Forces. Once the KNU called me to collect taxes [300,000] from the mill owner, and I said 'go yourself [the mill owner has no money]. I called two Buddhist monks to give 10,000 each and I also contributed 10,000 and the KNU accepted. As a man one cannot talk to the KNU like that. As a woman, especially an older woman, you can. The KNU don't fight or torture with woman, and respect bravery of the people. [VTA in Hlaingbwe]*

### Challenges/Discriminating experiences

The women were asked how it is to work with so many men, and whether they ever had bad experiences with their male colleagues or with the community due to being a woman.

Most of the women stated that they did not mind working with so many men. Several mentioned that **at** the beginning they were feeling very **shy and embarrassed** among all the men being township staff and VT/WA, but with time they got used to the situation.

A few had indeed experienced certain degrading situations with male colleagues. For example, one woman mentioned that during the preparatory training some of the trainers talked about drugs and sex in front of her in an offensive way, aiming to make her feel embarrassed and uncomfortable.

More women had faced critique from some in their communities. Especially in rural areas, the VTAs mentioned that **some men consider it 'shameful' to have a woman as leader**. Some of these women have faced critique from such men directly; others have faced critique and undermining comments indirectly. Almost all shared stories of some men expressing that women cannot manage the responsibility of VT/WA, that they cannot manage other people, and that it is not proper for them as

men to be led by a woman. It appears that almost all women have faced such comments from at least some people in the community.

A few also mentioned how drunken men sometimes came into their office at night to offend and sometimes even touch them, which is a form of gender-based violence. Two women mentioned that such situations took place so frequently that they could not face it. One woman mentioned a man who kept bullying her, talking badly to her and about her, and explained how eventually she got the police to take action and make the man sign a piece of paper promising he will not embarrass her anymore.

*Hpone* is an important concept in Myanmar Buddhist communities. It is an abstract quality related to honour or esteem that all men are believed to possess that makes them spiritually superior to women. While certain women are also considered to possess *hpone* this is to a much lesser degree.<sup>45</sup> Previous studies have found that the concept of *hpone* forms a barrier to women leadership, with men invoking it in order to justify their view on women leadership. During the interviews, the concept of *hpone* was discussed with the women. However, it appears that none of the interviewed women consider it a relevant concept. Almost all, including in rural areas, said it is a traditional outdated way of seeing things, a “superstition,” which is maybe only relevant in “traditional” areas.

Three of the 15 women specifically mentioned **positive discrimination**. They felt that particularly the township administrators, but also higher-level people including their respective Chief Minister, gave them more attention because they are women. They felt that they had impressed these men being a woman in the position, convinced them of their abilities, and earned their respect and favor. They linked this attention to them getting more funds for their proposals and other requests.

### Other challenges

Given the position of VT/WA is an elected post only since the 2012 *Ward or Village Tract Administration Law*, it is interesting to take a look also at **more general challenges** experienced by the women in their role, unrelated to their gender. A few things were mentioned consistently.

Frequently mentioned challenges are quite general and relate to on the one hand being aware of all the needs in the community and the big expectations of the VT/WA of members of the community, and on the other hand having limited influence on the township administration and allocation of funds available for local development.

The feeling that the work is very difficult appears to be common amongst VT/WA. Data from the LGM shows that VT/WAs are often caught between the genuine demands and needs of their communities that they bring to the attention of the government at township level and the limited ability of the township government to address all issues at the same time, which is often blamed on the VT/WA by the community. In one meeting held in Pakokku with seven VT/WAs, they were asked to express their job satisfaction on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (very good). The average resulting score was 4.5 with none of them scoring above 6, indicating that their job satisfaction was indeed rather low.<sup>46</sup>

Some of the women also struggled with the **high demand and expectations from the township administration**. Some women seem rather stressed due to this, with a couple mentioning that when they first took up the position, they could not sleep. Others also mentioned the low level of reimbursement, and how it requires a big personal investment to be VT/WA.

45. Harriden, *The Authority of Influence*.

46. UNDP, 2014, *The State of Local Governance: Trends in Magway Region*, p. 92.

Some mentioned that they had challenges to **convince people to follow the law**, as they feel the township administration does not enforce the law equally for everyone. In general, they feel favouritism and corruption are problems, e.g. also related to the position of other unpaid or voluntary positions in village tract/ward level administration. For example, the position of the 10 HH came up. Given they are volunteers, not all of the 10 HH are equally willing to be actively involved in administration. It was explained that prior to 2012, it was more common for 10 HH to find ways to earn some income from their activities, which was an incentive for them, and that now without this incentive they can be less cooperative [see Box 10]:

#### Box 10: Fighting corruption

*At the beginning of my term, ten 10 HH head with support of the previous WA made a concern letter about me. Previously the 10 HH Head could get some income from the community, they had some incentive for their work. After 2012 the 10 HH Head are only volunteers and they are not supposed to get such incentives anymore. They don't like this so in my case they set up a fake letter complaining about me, about my performance, saying they want to resign, and threatened to send it to the TA and to Facebook and to all the social organisations. Eventually they did it. The TA then invited them to come to the office. I also come, followed by 6 mini trucks full of people to support me. We had a discussion. Not everyone fitted inside, but the community stood outside with banners. It was a difficult situation for me, especially because of Facebook, which made the gossiping a lot worse and more difficult to address directly. (WA in Magway)*

#### Key supporters

The women were asked about who were the key supporters in their work. Of the 7 that were in a family situation with husband and children, **5 mentioned that their husbands were great supporters**. This support was something that could also be observed during the research and film visits, with these men assisting in various ways. Two mentioned that after a period of conflict, their husbands had eventually accepted their work but did not really support them. Other family members, particularly sisters and children, were also frequently mentioned.



In the community, it appears the **respected elders** are generally the primary supporters, followed by the **clerk** and the **village tract/ward level committee members**. In some communities though, especially in richer urban areas, it appears that fewer community members are interested in supporting matters of ward administration, being busy with other things.

**Only one woman mentioned that other women were her key supporters.** In this village tract, a group of active women call themselves the “women fighters.”

### **3.2.4 Looking ahead: ambitions for the future**

#### **Ambitions for the future**

When discussing what they would like to do in the future, 7 women mentioned they would like to **continue their work as a VT/WA**, if the community still believes in them. They would like to do a second term if the community has trust in them and elects them again.

Five of these 7 women said they would even like to **grow professionally and take up a higher position in administration or as politicians**. They explained they would like to have more responsibility for a larger number of people. Three of the women mentioned that if possible, they would like to be the Township Administrator or something similar, but they realised that this is not possible. Four of them (therefore) mentioned they are considering going into politics, and becoming a member of the Regional or National Parliament.

It appeared education was a big determinant of how ambitious these women dared to be (see Box 11). Of the five women who would like to expand their leadership, 3 did not have a university degree and felt held back by that.

Interestingly, women’s advancement and promoting gender equality were not stated as ambitions for the future.

#### **Box 11: Moving forward**

*I would like to move into a position with more authority over the community, say township administration. However, I know that in the current system this is impossible. I also feel inferior because of my low education level and I don't dare to be too ambitious. Often there is the requirement to have completed matriculation or be a university graduate and I am not. But I am interested in politics and in community affairs. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*I would like to be a member of parliament. It might be difficult because of my education. Even if I cannot manage I would like to be in a position where I can defend people. I have no specific plans for the next elections. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

The **other 7 women expressed that they rather not continue the work as a VT/WA**. For 3 of them, this had to do with their age. They said they were feeling tired and wanted to retire. Also some other women expressed that the work was very difficult, and difficult to combine with other duties, and that they would like to do something else. Still some of the female VT/WA who wanted to retire from administration at the end of their current term said that if the community would so request, they would continue (see Box 12).

## Box 12: Changing paths

*If there is no electricity, water, roads, education, by the end of 2015 (noticeable improvement), I will continue to do my work as a VTA next year. Otherwise I will retire. I have no desire to get higher up in politics. (VTA in Yangon)*

*I don't want to continue this job much longer. I want to find a good successor. I would like to get more involved in religious affairs. (VTA in Kayin)*

*I am not per se interested in being WA again, but I still didn't find another suitable person (strong enough for this responsibility). If the community wants me to be WA again, I might continue. If I find a suitable person to take over, I would like to open an orphanage. I would like to remain independent and in a leading position. (WA in Chin)*

*I don't really want to continue, but the community wants me to continue. I don't like the corruption, and I have to spend all my own money, but I will persist for my people. No one else in this village is interested, so I will try my best. Maximum another 3 years I can do. (VTA in Kayin)*

## 3.3 Perceptions from the township administration, other VT/WAs, clerks and committee members and respected elders

### Perceptions of the TA

The Township Administrators were interviewed in five townships. They were asked why they thought the community had put its trust in these women, what their perception was of the performance, whether they noticed any differences between the style of these women and the style of men, and whether they thought it was important to have more women in village tract/ward administration.

Regarding the question why the respective communities had put their trust in these women, first mentioned by the TA was the women's **experience with social work**. Due to their social activities these women were already well known and respected in their communities.

Second, all the TAs mentioned that the **role of the husband** is very important. They stated that women need advice of their husbands, and also need their day-to-day support in order to be taken seriously by the community. They explained that while the women may be sociable and popular, especially those that have had less education need the guidance from their husbands. Generally, the TAs said the women need to **work together well** with the village tract and ward committees and respected elders to be able to perform their duties.

Another important reason mentioned was the women's level of **education**, and 3 of the 5 TAs mentioned the fact that the female VT/WA(s) in their township were **single** was a reason for them becoming and being a VT/WA. The community recognised that these women were qualified *and* that they had fewer household duties. Clearly, the idea of women being responsible for family duties and household work, while men may or may not support, is deeply rooted amongst both men and women.

One TA mentioned that while he often received complaints about male VT/WAs, particularly about alcohol abuse and harsh ways of solving conflicts, he had received few complaints about the two female VTAs in his township, who seem to be genuinely popular in their communities. Other TAs

mentioned similar things. They did mention that there might have been a few jealous or critical men that objected, but that overall the female VT/WA enjoyed large support and did their work very well.

Two TAs, when talking about the style of women, mentioned that women are **disciplined** (e.g. always on time) and make fewer mistakes, but they also work a lot **slower**. “Women are not the type that takes decisions easily - especially not difficult decisions” they said. The TA experienced both advantages and disadvantages in women’s way of handle their work.

When asked about whether it is important to have more women in village tract/ward administration, three out of five TAs clearly expressed that they think women can be very suitable for the job. Due to women’s experience with managing households, they can also be good at managing a community. They mentioned that men are more prone to drinking and engaging in conflicts. The two other TAs mentioned that at the end of the day, the job is simply more suitable for men, particularly because of the travel and the possibility of having to deal with violent situations.

### Box 13: Township Administrators about female VT/WA

*Out of 100 VT/WAs in this township, 1 is a woman. I arrived here after her election. I think she was elected because she is a former teacher, due to which she already won the trust of the community. She is very eager for local development. When the local development funds are allocated she is always requesting funds for her village tract. She can perform her duty very well because she has the support of respected elders, support committee and clerk. She can work equally as men. I don’t think the style is different. When they go into the fields she also always comes along. The low number of women VTA depends on the community, they choose them. Generally communities feel the job is more appropriate for men. Generally women are also busier with many other things.*

*VT/WAs have to perform duties 24/7. They have to deal with emergency, security, abnormal events, etc. The female VT/WA in my township are not very familiar with laws maybe because it is only their first term. They are not so competent and confident in their approaches to the administrative work. But the township administration is supporting them as necessary and it is not much of a problem.*

*The level of women participation generally is not satisfactory in this country. It is often the case that when a woman marries she resigns from other activities. Girls are not encouraged but rather discouraged from leading. Most Myanmar women tend to “self-sacrifice.” I can give you the example of my own daughter. I think women can contribute many things. Men and women have different views, and it is important to have those of women also. Sometimes women think better and faster. I think we have to encourage husbands to encourage their wives.*

*Generally, it is important to have more women participating in administration given their experience in leading households.*

### Perceptions of other VT/WAs

During the third phase of the Local Governance Mapping, the VT/WAs were asked “Do you think your job could be done equally well by a man or a woman?” Out of a total of 58 male VT/WAs who answered this question, 55% said no.



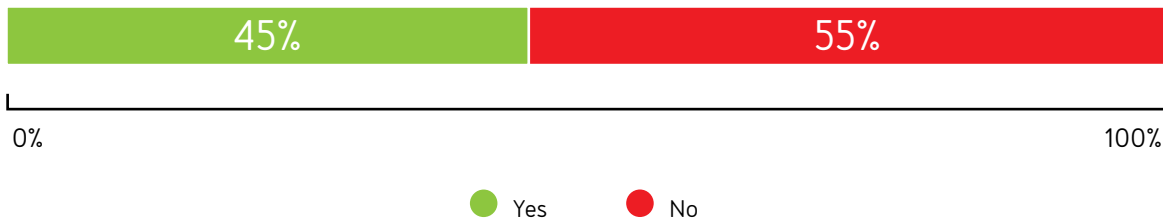


Figure 8: Percentage of male VT/WAs who think their job could be done equally well by a man or a woman

While they were not asked to provide reasons for their answer, they were asked: “What do you think are the reasons why there are so few female VTAs?” No answer options were provided, and the answers were clustered as per the categories in Figure 9. Several of the male VT/WAs stated that communities simply do not choose women for administrative positions, and/or that it is mostly men who are involved in key activities and that therefore men are trusted more for administrative positions. As can be seen, weakness of women was also emphasized in various ways, particularly related to their skills to pay attention, take decisions, and their physical and mental capabilities.

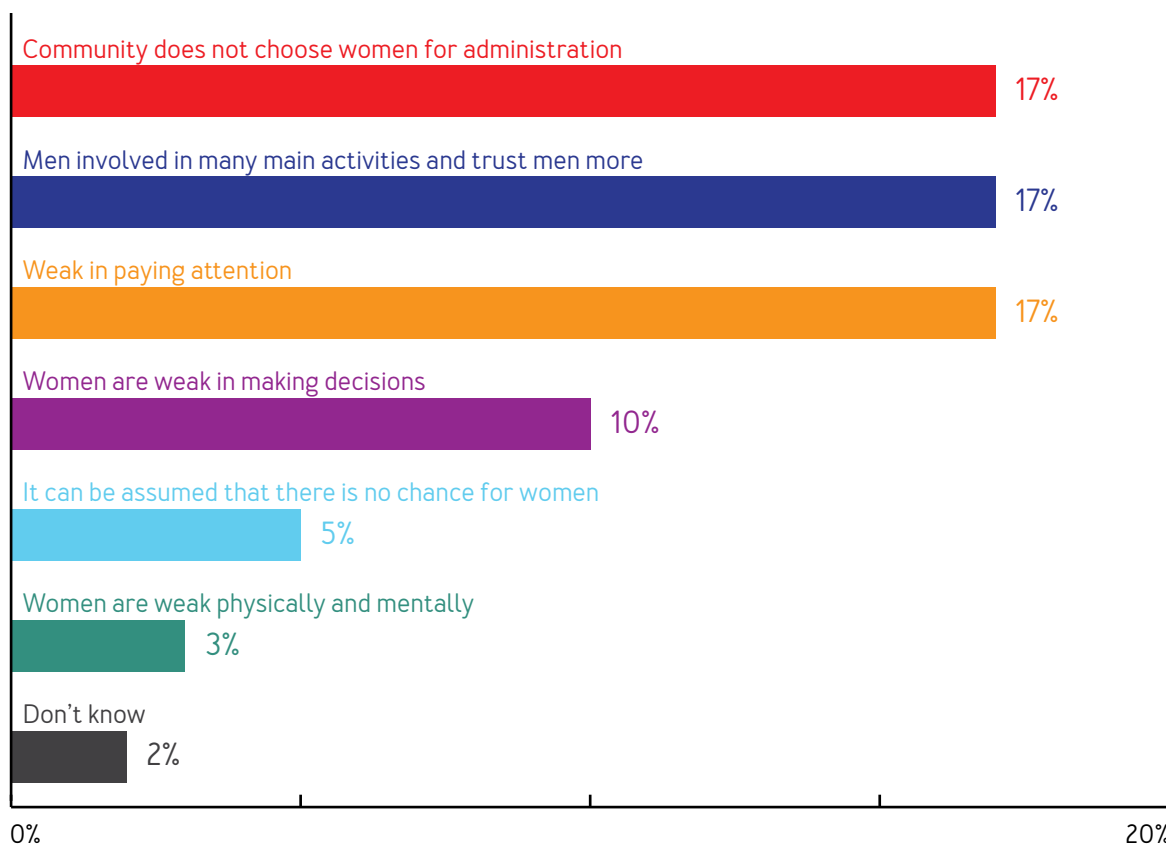


Figure 9: Reasons provided for why there are so few female VT/WAs (multiple answers possible)

### Perceptions of the village tract/ward clerk, VT/WDSC and respected elders

In some research locations, short interviews were also carried out with the village tract/ward clerk, with members of the Village Tract/Ward Development Support Committee (VT/WDSC), and with respected elders.

**Village tract/ward clerks** are key colleagues of VT/WAs, as they are to support the VT/WA with daily administrative tasks, together forming a key duo. Most clerks are from the same township and from the same village tract/ward even, but some also rotate. They have often been working for the township

for a large number of years already and have good relationships with the Township Administration. While up till 2010, men and women could be hired as village tract/ward clerks, since 2010 GAD rules state that only men can be hired. It appears the reason for this change is that the job is considered inappropriate for women. A substantial number of women appointed before 2010 are however still working as a clerk, particularly in Magway and Tanintharyi as observed during this research.

Perhaps due to their relationships with the township administration, and being men in low-level jobs themselves, some clerks were a bit critical of the female VT/WAs and stressed that due to the women's limited experience they are not the strongest leaders. At the same time, 2 of the 5 interviewed clerks stated they are very pleased with their female "counterpart" and they notice that the women are good at communication, do not drink and gamble, and take their job seriously, work very hard and are systematic. They compared their experiences with previous male VT/WAs they worked with who were often more busy with their business interests and friends. Two female clerks in Magway were interviewed, who were happy to work with a woman as it made communication easier for them. All of the clerks shared that they had caught gossips from some in the community that there should not be a woman in the position of VT/WA.

Similar comments were made by the **VT/WDSC members** and **respected elders**. As several of the women had been requested to work as VT/WA by respected elders, these generally took their role in supporting her very seriously, and were largely positive. Only in the few exceptional cases where a woman won the elections against the wishes of an established elite in the community, were they more critical. Unfortunately, the research did not look at respected elder's motivations to support or not support specific female VT/WAs, and to what extent respected elders steer decision-making of the VT/WA.



Chapter 4

# Strengthening participation of women in village tract/ward administration

This chapter outlines the female VT/WAs ideas on how to encourage other women to participate in local governance and take up leadership positions, and how to support them in their daily work.

## 4.1 Expanding the number of female VT/WAs

All of the female VT/WAs were keen to state that women participation in local governance is important. When discussing why, a number of reasons emerged, in line with the positive aspects of women's leadership style outlined in the previous chapter. Particularly, the interviewed women feel it is important that more women take up leadership positions in local governance, because **women do not drink, are not corrupted, are serious, and can take good care of a community on the basis of their experience with managing households** (Box 14).

### Box 14: Why should women be VT/WAs?

*I think that women are better at managing things. Men are only earning money, the wives are then taking all the decisions on how to allocate and spend the money. 50%/50% would be best because men can take decisions very fast, while women make decisions taking into consideration all points of views. [VTA in Tanintharyi]*

*Women can be very good as VTAs because they are more serious about their work. [VTA in Ayeyarwaddy]*

*I call myself a strong feminist. Women are the backbone of each family. Women have better management skills, at least within families and within the Church. They also know how to deal with men; the other way around is not the case. [WA in Chin]*

*Women should take up positions, because men drink. But when the women take the position there will be some criticism from men. Men criticise because they think it is shameful to have a woman leader. [VTA in Kayin]*

*I want more women to be in leading roles, because they would be less corrupted. Also usually when a household is run by a woman, it is much better organised than when a man is in charge. My husband is only interested in farming job, not other job. I have to lead. And at the VT/WA meetings, all other men VTA are always drunk. I would really like to encourage women. [WA in Kayin]*

*I am very passionate about fighting against discrimination. I don't want to accept original roles, like women preparing food etc. Men can also do this. Women should also get a chance to advance in their life. I would like to encourage other women not to spend all the time in their household role, but also to take part in administration and leadership. [VTA in Tanintharyi]*

*I have noticed that here are so many women leaders around the world. I would like to see more women leaders in Myanmar. [WA in Magway]*

*Now there is security and there are opportunities for women participation, but women are only slowly getting used to the idea. [VTA in Tanintharyi]*

But several of the female VT/WA also emphasized that education, being community-minded and skilful comes first, regardless of whether the person is a man or a woman. **“It is most important to have qualified people”** as one woman put it. Two women also emphasized that potential women leaders should not be too young, while another one emphasized that young women should engage more.

It appears that the women have **limited awareness** of the fact that gender balance in local governance is important for inclusive, responsive governance and development that benefits all in society.

### Perceptions on why other women are not participating in local governance amongst women leaders

In chapter 2, commonly agreed barriers to women’s participation in local governance in Myanmar were discussed on the basis of existing literature. The present study also explored what the respondents think prevents other women from participating in local governance, and what actions could improve the level of participation of women in governance.

In the existing literature, a number of **“external” barriers** are emphasized, including lack of education, lack of skills and experience, and lack of intra-household bargaining power. Lack of support from the family or husband and poverty were also mentioned as important factors.

Interestingly, the respondents focused a lot more on **perspectives and efforts of women** themselves. The female VT/WA mostly talked about the lack of interest amongst other women, and their lack of perseverance. Rather than reflecting on existing norms and attitudes, several of the female VT/WA criticized other women for their lack of aspiration. Having overcome obstacles themselves, the female VT/WA felt other women take the easy way, and are not brave. Box 15 provides illustrations of the VT/WAs views on why other women are not participating, including the view that women are not trying hard enough.”

#### Box 15: The female VT/WAs on other women

*For a single woman it is easier to take up this kind of job. For a married woman their husband is very important. They may criticize their wife for having a position higher than them. It is important that husband and wife have a good relationship. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*In Myanmar cultural context, women want to stay behind. They don’t have confidence to take part of administration. They don’t want to take a leadership role. This behavior is still there. Now there are some opportunities to get involved but women are not grabbing them yet. (VTA in Kayin)*

*There are deeply rooted social norms/traditional norms. Society mostly assigns household work to women, administrative work is for men. Because of these norms women are reluctant to work as administrators, and reluctant to work with so many men e.g. the police. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*Power relations and roles in the rural areas. Normally, men don’t let their wives have a leadership role in rural areas. Men make their women fearful and hold them back. Most of the women prioritise their house, husband, etc. Also women are very fearful of the police. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*Some women are interested in 10 HH positions, but not so much and no-one in WA. These are still the early stages of democracy/elections. (WA in Magway)*

*Generally, women in my village are not participating so much in local governance. They are afraid of confronting the KNU, DKBA and the Army. I believe that if I do the right things, even if I die, I can leave a good name. Other women don't think like this. Other men also don't think like this. (VTA in Kayin)*

*I think some women may be interested, but no one is as determined as me. (WA in Chin)*

*This kind of administrative work is generally very hard. It is hard work. Most women are not interested; it is not in their nature. Even though a lot of the women in this village are well educated, they are not interested in this kind of job. The girls in this village prefer to stay at home. They are not brave! (VTA in Kayin)*

*Because of my experience in social work I feel confident to do this job. Other women don't have the relevant experience yet so they don't have the confidence. This needs to grow slowly. (WA in Yangon)*

Probably as a result of the mentioned obstacles, **women in general have largely internalised not being suitable for leadership, and are not aspiring for such a role.** The prevailing patriarchal cultural norms of the local communities, male-dominated leadership styles and values, and deeply-rooted gender roles, influence the level of interest, motivation and confidence of potential women candidates. The traditional norms and attitudes combined with a lack of exposure and information seem to have produced a mind-set that discourages women's participation in governance and leadership in the community. Criticising this mind-set may not be the most effective way to encourage women to participate. Rather, as a first step towards empowerment, women should be made aware of social norms, attitudes and other structures in society that disempower women.

Another key reason for limited participation by women, according to the interviewed women, is that **most women are not aware that there is a chance for them to participate.** Particularly regarding the VT/WA position, women have not been aware so far that this is a position that is open to them (see Box 16).

#### **Box 16: Lack of awareness of the opportunity**

*First reason: in the past I think it was not allowed for the women to be the VT/WA or there was no space for the women/men didn't think of the possibility to appoint women. Second: women don't have enough confidence. (WA in Magway)*

*Most women didn't realise/don't realise they can be involved in administration. (WA in Magway)*

*Women don't know they are eligible for the VT/WA positions. They should start with knowing, so they can start wanting it. (VTA in Magway)*

*This is the first time that women can participate in the election, a lot of women didn't know. I think that at the next election there will be more women. (WA in Yangon)*

*The problem is lack of awareness; most women are educated, but they don't know they can participate. (VTA in Yangon)*

## Ways in which other women can be encouraged to participate

Key suggested ways to encourage women to participate in local administration included **awareness raising, education and training**, as well as **role models** and **mentors** for women VTAs and **networking amongst women** (see Box 17). First of all, women need to be made aware of the opportunity of becoming VT/WA or otherwise participating in village tract/ward administration, and then their confidence needs to be built.

### Box 17: Ways to encourage women to participate

*Women have to stick together and support each other, and together take the space that is now open to them. (VTA in Chin)*

*Their morale needs to be boosted by awareness raising, training. Their knowledge needs to be boosted of the administration issue. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*Perhaps it is not useful to focus on all the women, but together with GAD and existing VTA select the women who are interested, and build their capacity and confidence. In addition, opportunities should not only be for educated women but also for uneducated women. There are a lot of them, you shouldn't put them in a corner. E.g. not all ladies in the church are not educated but they are capable. Some people have talent. (WA in Chin)*

*There should be encouragement from the outside, like leadership training. They need knowledge and more awareness of opportunities. They need to be showed that women are also capable to do this, that they can do equally like men. CSOs can take a role in this, to raise awareness and confidence of women. Conduct trainings, and organise a field visit. (VTA in Kayin)*

*I am not sure how to interest women VTA to be the leaders. Try to raise their confidence by a women leadership training to raise their awareness of that they have more opportunities today and that it is time for them to take an active role in leadership. The first entry group should be the women's groups, like women affairs etc. as they are more likely to be interested. (VTA in Kayin)*

*Make an event/workshop to share the information with the women directly! Encourage women! Make a TV advertisement that shows women can be a candidate! (WA in Magway)*

*Mostly women have fear, are not confident. Women should focus more on the community and get the support from the community, and with help of the community enter the administration level. (WA in Magway)*

*It would help a lot if women would have a job (their joblessness makes them unconfident). If they make money themselves they would have more confidence. (WA in Magway)*

*There is one NGO that organises discussions about gender with women and with men. It helps a lot to have this kind of discussion with both men and women and challenge traditional roles. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*Not so many women are interested in the administration level. Other women should encourage and support. Active women are to take up mentoring and coaching roles. (WA in Yangon)*

*I would welcome training that can develop the capacity of women who are specifically interested in this kind of work. This would also raise their confidence. (WA in Yangon)*

It seems that several of the interviewed female VTIWAs did not yet seem fully aware of their own potential important role encouraging other women. But when discussing the impact they could have, many of the female VTIWAs were enthusiastic about taking an active role in encouraging other women to participate (see Box 18).

#### **Box 18: What I would like to do**

*I think I am leading by example. I know that several other women in the community want to be VTA like me but they are not confident enough. I would like to show them that it is possible. (WA in Chin)*

*I think that because I have done the job, more women will be interested. They should be made aware and encouraged. I am interested in encouraging other women. (VTA in Yangon)*

*There is an inactive women's group (Women Affairs Association) – there are members but they are not meeting - that I would like to support with concrete skills. From this group, women can then be selected that can take on further leadership training and roles. Also, when there is an opportunity, e.g. when a 10 HH is not performing very well and the community doesn't like him, I can appoint women 10 HH (I have the authority). I can also inspire other people to be candidates at the next elections. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*I would like to support. Maybe I can help by raising awareness among women. I think there are 1-2 women in this ward interested in leadership. I can encourage them to participate in the elections or take up other roles. (WA in Kayin)*

*I can raise awareness and educate. But it will be difficult. (VTA in Kayin)*

*I think I am having a positive impact. Some women have already said that next year they also want to be the candidate. I am also thinking about doing more promotion next year. I contacted ActionAid to give livelihoods training to women so they have better income and can be the candidates next year. (WA in Magway)*

*I always encourage women to read books, journals en magazines. Only when they are knowledgeable they will know how to participate, and have the confidence to participate. I am also always encouraging other young women to participate, and have offered my support to women who would like to take up jobs in local administration. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*I encourage mothers to support their daughters to become leaders. I also emphasise the need for women education, stressing it is not the responsibility of one household but of the whole community. Whenever I to a village I encourage the setting up of a library. I encourage women to be active. I also need to work with the entire community. There is a young woman in this village, in her early 20s, she is a graduate and speaks fluent English. We are expecting her to be a member of Parliament. All the women in this village are supporting her, nurturing her, for her to become a woman leader. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*



## 4.2 Support needs for current female VT/WAs

At the beginning of their term, VT/WAs receive 4 weeks of training at the township level together with all other VT/WAs in their township. Generally, this training **follows the list with key tasks and responsibilities of VT/WAs as outlined in the law**, discussing the detailed requirements for each task and responsibility. In addition, the VT/WAs are introduced to the various departments that they might have to call on in their work, e.g. Immigration, the Fire Brigade, Municipal Affairs, Health and the police. Other laws relevant for their daily work are also discussed. The training sessions are generally facilitated by the TA as well as by heads of township departments.

Most female VT/WAs said the training was very useful for them, and a good preparation for their duties. As one VTA put it: “There are 27 forms for the VTA to work on. During the training we learned how to work with the forms. Any VTA who can follow the instructions for these forms will be ok.” Another VTA mentioned that an important thing that she learned during the training was that she should work together with the respected elders, the support committee members and the clerk. Initially she thought she would be much more on her own in the job. Her comment might demonstrate the generally low level of understanding of local governance structures amongst the population, also testified by the LGM.<sup>47</sup>

Some said that they were still confused by the variety of forms and could have used more training on that. A few of the female VT/WAs were critical of the training and said that while it may have given them a good idea of the duties, the training gave them little motivation or skills.

Clearly, the existing VT/WA training is focused on the legal framework and responsibilities of VT/WAs, while paying less attention to skills that may help VT/WAs to carry out their responsibilities effectively. When discussing possibly useful skills trainings, the female VT/WAs mentioned a couple of topics most frequently: **project planning and budgeting skills** and **how to involve people** in that process, **conflict mediation and resolution, leadership and public speaking**, and **community mobilisation** (see Box 19). Also mentioned were English, computer skills, human rights, women empowerment and self-defense.

### Box 19: Support needs as expressed by the female VT/WAs

*The current training is mostly focused on administration. I would like to receive more training on management and on leadership. I would also be interested to receive training on how to empower women. I would really like to receive training. I want to advance further and I know I need skills. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*I would like to have training on planning, making a list of priorities for the community. If I would know how to make a very good plan, the plan would probably get more attention from the township. (VTA in Ayeyarwaddy)*

*I would like to learn better project proposal and project management skills, so I can deliver better results for the community. (WA in Yangon)*

*VTAs need mobilization skills; we need to know how to organize consultations, how to bring people together, and jointly analyze problems. (VTA in Kayin)*

47. See UNDP, 2015, *The State of Local Governance: Trends in Myanmar – a Synthesis of people’s perspectives across all states and regions*, section 3.3.

*I would like to learn management skills, human resources in particular. With that I mean training on how to unite and work with people. I would also like to learn better public speaking skills. I am still shy when I need to speak in front of the people, especially the respected elders. (WA in Magway)*

*I think it would be useful to have training in participatory methods/approaches and the role of the VTA. VTAs need to listen to the voices of the community, and represent the priority of people to the upper levels. VTAs are in the middle and they need to be well aware of their role. VTAs should for 50% represent the people, and for 50% the administration. Most VTAs would rather represent the community but it is not possible. Other things that are useful are English skills, computer skills. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

*I think all VT/WAs should have training on their role as representing the community, so that they do not just nod their heads to the authority. I also think female VT/WAs should be trained on gender based violence. There are a lot of rape cases in this area, but women don't dare to report and men usually neglect that it is happening. I think female VT/WAs could take an active role in this, and can really help victims a lot. (VTA in Tanintharyi)*

**It appears an expansion of the existing training curriculum for VT/WAs is worth exploring.** Ideally, a future curriculum would reflect thoroughly on the VT/WAs role of being an elected community representative, and being a consulting and executing actor, while teaching various relevant concrete skills. In addition, a future curriculum could pay more attention to gender aspects and dimensions of good local governance in the context of Myanmar's wider governance reform process. Follow-up trainings for VT/WAs during the duration of their service would also strengthen the effectiveness of VT/WAs as local leaders.



Chapter 5

# Concluding remarks

This research took place in very diverse locations, from remote areas of Northern Chin to conflict-affected areas in Kayin, to a busy township downtown Yangon. It took place under varying circumstances, sometimes in the company of support teams provided by the GAD while in other places in private. Some places the researcher visited shortly, while in others the researcher could stay for several days, observing how female local administrators carry out their day-to-day work.

Despite the variation, the 15 interviewed women clearly share certain characteristics, experiences and perspectives, which give a good impression of the current status of female local leadership in Myanmar and opportunities to strengthen and expand it.

**Altogether, the research on female VTiWA confirms that strong barriers to female local leadership exist in Myanmar, but also that these barriers can be overcome resulting in rather successful stories of female local leadership.** This success is recognised by the women themselves who appear more confident, more ambitious, and keen to encourage other women to participate in local governance. It is also recognised by the administration and a selected number of respondents in the community whose feedback on the female leaders was overall very positive.

Listening to the women and their observations of other women, one cannot deny the overall weak contestation of gender stereotypes in Myanmar, with society continuing to confine women to particular spheres and women largely accepting and internalising the related notions of inequality. At the same time, one is struck by the success of the women who do “break through” and are acknowledged as leaders, and their potential to stimulate new ways of thinking about the potential of women as leaders.

A significant motivational factor for this “break through”; for these women to contest the elections; was the support of respected male elders. Key factors for getting the support of these respected male elders as well as of the community discussed in this paper included previous engagement in social work or community affairs, family reputation and role in the community, education, as well as being single due to which women have more time to dedicate themselves to community affairs.

As such, there is clearly an opportunity to utilise the position of **respected male elders**, and work with them to actively encourage and mentor potential female leaders. Supportive husbands are equally important.

At the same time, existing women leaders taking an active role as female **role models** is key. During the research, women were asked if there were any role models that inspired their journey. The only well-known female role model sometimes mentioned was Aung San Suu Kyi; some other VTiWAs mentioned their mother or aunt. However, it did not seem to be the case that these figures had played an important role. Similarly, research by Oxfam, Trocaire, Care and ActionAid in Myanmar showed a clear absence of female leader role models for most of their women respondents.<sup>48</sup> It is generally agreed that role models play an important part in providing incentives and space for women to take up leadership positions. As noted in the 2012 report by the World Bank, exposure to female role models whose positions of leadership or power contradict stereotypes of women’s role can reduce the intergenerational transmission of gender norms.<sup>49</sup> When women discover that other women do not submit to prevailing norms, they feel more comfortable questioning those norms.

48. Roisin Furlong, (Oxfam, Care, Trocaire, ActionAid), 2013, *Women & Leadership*, p. 13.

49. World Bank, 2012, World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development, p. 33.

There is reason to be optimistic about women's future opportunities to participate in local governance in Myanmar. As more women participate and excel in local leadership, more role models will emerge who will become good examples for communities with little experience of previous female leadership in their area. However, as research by Oxfam, Trocaire, Care and ActionAid also explains, it cannot be assumed that simply by occupying a position in politics, women will automatically advocate for women's rights and encourage other women: "women who are currently leading in their communities, or who are in a position to inspire other young women, must be supported to see themselves as potential role models, and to have the tools and techniques necessary to actively and practically encourage other women."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the fact that several of the interviewed female VT/WA were critical of the lack of ambition of other women shows that female local leaders should be supported in analysing the influence of gender norms, and should be encouraged to be a role model and effective advocate of women's right. As such, it appears there is a need for training and networking amongst women leading on various levels and in various sectors of Myanmar society, with leadership stories being made more visible and accessible for a larger group of women.

**The Government of Myanmar has much to gain from actively promoting equal participation of men and women in local governance.** The VT/WA fulfils a key place in Myanmar's new local governance structure. Positioned in between the communities that now (indirectly) elect them, and the township administration who supervises them, a large degree of transparency of township administration proceedings and bottom-up participation by people is in the hands of VT/WAs. This tier being representative of all of Myanmar's population equally and effectively will greatly contribute to Myanmar's people-centred development ambitions.

The 0.25% of female representatives in village tract/ward administration is significantly lower than the 4% of elected representatives in the state and region parliaments, and the 2.4% and 7% of female elected representatives in the Union upper and lower houses<sup>51</sup>, but all figures are well below regional figures and international best practice. Myanmar's National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women calls for the Application of **quota systems** to guarantee women's political participation such as in the legislative, judicial, and executive bodies, in line with the commitments the Government of Myanmar made when signing CEDAW and in line with the provision for 'equal participation' in the 2008 Constitution. However, so far U Soe Maung, Union Minister at the President's Office, has rejected the need for quotas in Myanmar, claiming that they are unnecessary given that there is traditionally very little gender discrimination in Myanmar.<sup>52</sup>

Quotas have now been introduced in many countries around the world, and it is commonly agreed that they have a positive impact on women participation, not only through raising the number of women in government but also increasing women's experience and confidence to take on governance roles and increasing the political engagement of women constituents and citizens. Research shows that the countries that have the highest number of women in local governments or administration are the ones that implemented some kind of affirmative action measures such as gender quotas. In Asia, India is considered a case of success following the implementation of quotas in local government elections. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution adopted in 1993 reserved 33% seats for women in local self-government institutions such as panchayats and municipalities, which led to the creation of over 1,000,000 seats for women in local governments.<sup>53</sup> In ASEAN, Indonesia and the Philippines have now also adopted gender quota systems.

50. Roisin Furlong, (Oxfam, Care, Trocaire, ActionAid), 2013, *Women & Leadership*, p. 22.

51. The Irrawaddy, 4 February 2015, "Political Parties Pilot Gender Quotas".

52. Pyithu Hluttaw, 2013, see Sang Hnin Lian, 2015, "Gender Gap and Women's Political Participation in Burma/Myanmar", [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Women/Sang-Hnin-Lian-2015-Gender\\_Gap\\_and\\_Women's\\_Political\\_Participation\\_in\\_Myanmar-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Women/Sang-Hnin-Lian-2015-Gender_Gap_and_Women's_Political_Participation_in_Myanmar-en.pdf).

53. International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2010, "Women's Participation in Local Governments", p. 3-4.

As argued at the beginning of this paper, it is important that women have a chance to build up local level leadership experience as it is generally more accessible and can serve as a basis for higher-level participation. As such, considering gender quota for VT/WAs, as well for female members in the Village Tract/Ward Development Support Committee, the Township Development Support Committee, and the Township Development Affairs Committee, is well recommended. Such quota could be temporary measures; altogether they should be carefully designed to ensure maximum gains.

**Overall, awareness and understanding of gender and the importance of women participation and representation** in (local) governance needs to be raised in Myanmar, as well as **awareness of opportunities for women to participate** in local governance and decision-making, not only as Village Tract/Ward Administrator but also as a member of the village tract/ward and township level committees. Understanding what is currently regarded as 'normal' in Myanmar and consciously addressing those beliefs as well as promoting alternative visions for women's participation is believed to positively impact the sustainability of efforts and ensure that change takes place at a pace and in a manner that enhances social cohesion. Information also ought to be spread about the fact that both men and women are allowed to participate in elections and public affairs.

**In addition to awareness raising and training, international organisations can contribute with providing opportunities to build up experience with social work and local level leadership.** Experience with social work and local level leadership clearly have a big positive influence the confidence of women. INGOs and civil society organisations can also play a role by **supporting women candidates**. Organisations can help women candidates through public education campaigns, the training of women candidates and financial support<sup>54</sup>, although this also depends on the set-up of the next VT/WA elections, planned for early 2016.

Once elected, it appears that the one-month **VT/WA training** is an excellent opportunity to, in addition to teaching about laws and procedures, further develop the mind-set and skills of male and female VT/WAs. As one female VTA in this research said: *"The first training is VERY important to train the VTA about their responsibility, their role. At this point they are still like wax, they can be formed, they can be taught how they can serve the community."* An improved curriculum could serve to strengthen the important position of VT/WAs in general, particularly through trainings on leadership, community mobilisation, participatory development planning and conflict resolution, and it could also serve as a platform to engage these community leaders, including men, in discussions about gender.

54. In Haiti, for example, the "Elect Haitian Women" television and radio campaign was run by a local women's group throughout Haiti in 2010 to encourage voters to support women candidates, showcasing local women leaders and using slogans such as, "If we can run our families, we can run our country."



# Annex 1: Functions and Duties of the Ward or Village Tract Administrator

*Article 13. The Ward or village tract administrator shall carry out the following functions and duties in accord with the relevant laws, rules and procedures.<sup>55</sup>*

## Maintaining law & order, peace and security

1. Safeguarding the right of persons who live in the ward or village tract;
2. Security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquillity and carrying out the benefit of the public;
3. Carry out the functions and duties relating to disciplinary matters of the persons who live in the ward or village tract;
4. Informing and assisting the relevant Government departments and organisations in respect of revealing, informing and complaining, arresting and taking action of crimes and vices;
5. Arresting or causing to arrest the offender in person in respect of the offence which happened before him and informing to take action in such caught person to the relevant;
6. Arresting and informing [relevant authorities] to take action [against] notorious lawless persons and thieves who have not been caught in the very act;
7. Reporting to the relevant [authorities] of suspected strangers who do not live in the ward or village;
8. Examining from time to time the places needed for prevalence of law and order and upholding discipline;

## Registry functions

9. Compiling to register of birth and death, move for leaving and move for coming of the family and population list;
10. Receiving and granting the information of guest list for overnight guests from other ward or village tract, inspecting the guest list, and taking action if failed to inform the guest list;
11. Informing the relevant [authorities] of the entering and leaving of foreigner;

## Regulatory functions

12. Submitting the remark to the township administrator in respect of requesting the permit to hold ceremonies, festivals to entertain the public exhibitions, tournaments and traditional festivals and submit to take action if a festival or ceremony is held without permission or without following the prescribed terms and conditions (this with exception of ceremonies and festivals headed and organised by the Union, region or State Governments, Nay Pyi Taw Council or Self-Administered Division/Self-Administered Zone leading body or by any Government departments or organisations assignment by them);
13. On request, grant permits to switch on loudspeakers with stipulated discipline, taking action and informing to take action to the person who switches on loudspeaker without permission or that person who breaches the discipline;
14. Submitting to the relevant [authorities] with remark the requests to establish the business on billiard table and entertainment and recreation concerning the public like billiard table, and

55. 2012 Ward or Village Tract Law, official translation. Order of functions changed, language slightly modified and sub headings added by Gerhard van 't Land to show the continuum from the traditional law and order roles to the more contemporary development and information sharing roles.



taking action and inform [others] take action if opened without permission or without obeying the discipline;

15. Searching gambling houses or issuing warrant to search;
16. Arresting and informing to take action of the gambling in public place;
17. Prohibit the activity cause to disturb, endanger or injure the public or quarrelling or holding an unpermitted weapon and ammunition on the road and in public spaces and arresting or informing to arrest persons not following the prohibitions;
18. Carrying out in accord with the directive in preventing contagious disease, protecting fire hazard and extinguishing fire, obstruction from disturbance to the publics;
19. Trespassing on State-owned land, town land, village land, agriculture land, alluvial land, road land, forest land, village-owned firewood plantation land, pasture, village communal land and cemetery land without permission, prohibiting the constructing new collected house, forming new ward and village and constructing dwelling house and informing to take action if not obeyed;

### Development and information sharing

20. Maintaining irrigation canal, embankments, rivers, canals, water-courses, drainage works, wells and pools, mechanized wells, shallow wells dug by way of hand pressing and springs in the ward or village tract and informing to take action to the relevant of the destructions;
21. Helping and assisting in implementing the works relating to the rural development and poverty reduction;
22. Informing to the relevant [authorities] if the persons and animals cause contagious disease, prescribing the disciplines to rear animals systematically, prohibiting the killing of cattle without license to kill or not in conformity with the disciplines and informing to the relevant [authorities] to take action if not followed;
23. Inspecting boundary post or stone-pillars connected to land surveying posts in the ward or village tract and submitting the unusual situations arise along the boundary to the Township Administrator;
24. Administering the land of cultivation under the power conferred by any existing law;
25. Submitting to the relevant and carrying out in accord with laws of Town and Village Lands if the plots are placed fro the village lands and in the village lands;
26. Maintaining ponds and fish ponds, prohibiting the trespassers and fishermen in the ponds without permission and informing to the relevant to take action if not followed;
27. Carrying out the prevention in advance of natural disasters such as fire, water, wind, and earthquake and the relief and resettlement works if struck by the natural disaster;
28. Carrying out important and direct benefited work for local people with the approval of the township administrator if emergency situation arises due to the fall of calamities that currently injured the interests of the public;

### Other functions

29. Coordinating and assisting in the functions and duties of various departments at the level of ward or village tract;
30. Carrying out functions and duties assigned by the relevant Township Administrator in accord with law;
31. Carrying out functions and duties assigned by any existing law;
32. Collecting land revenue and Government loan.







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