

# WOMEN & EIA PROCESSES

A case study on gender aspects of EIAs  
in four Myanmar projects

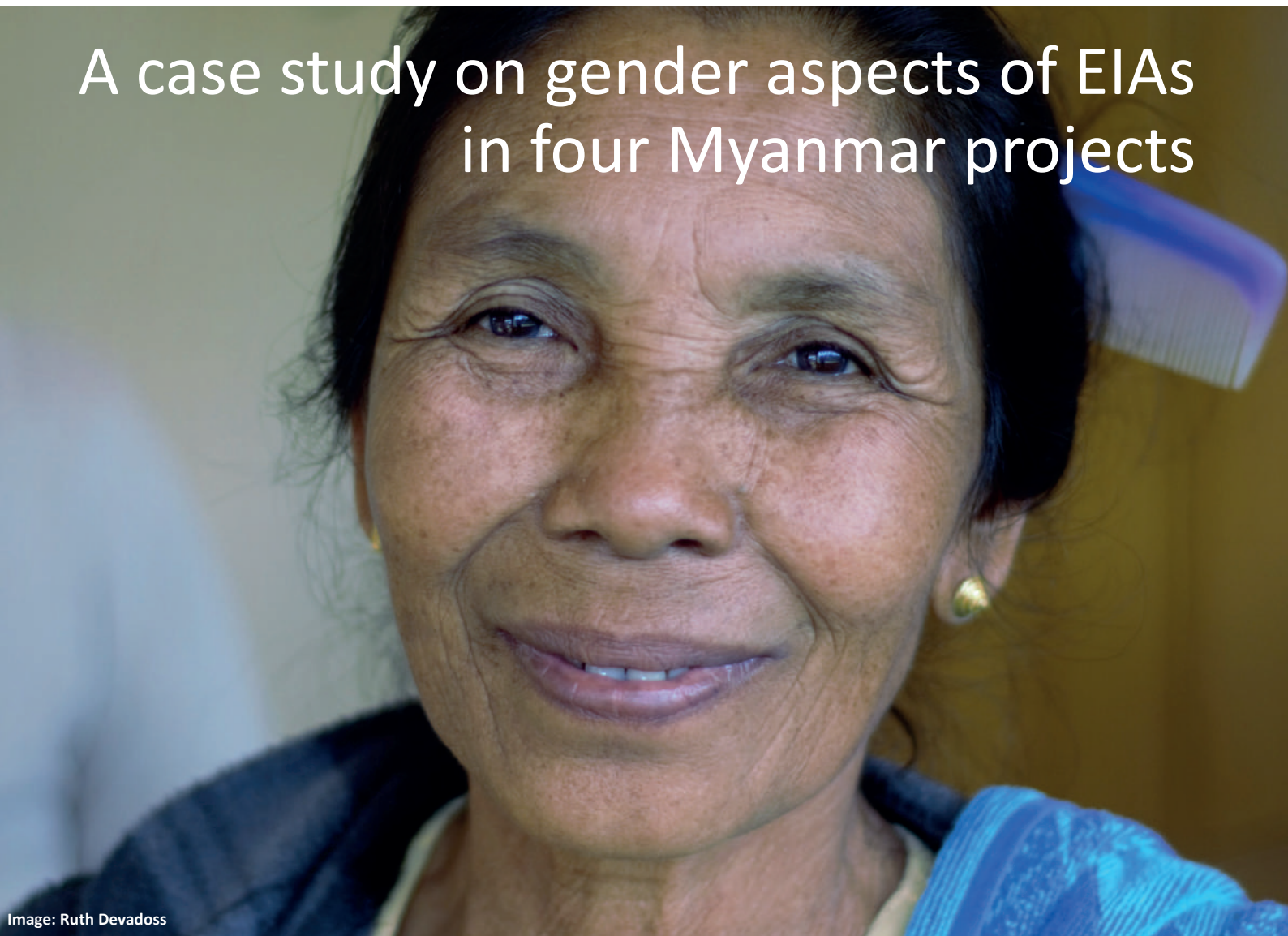


Image: Ruth Devadoss



Image: Letpadaung, Havilah resources LTD – ABN news



Image: Letpadaung – Lauren DeCicca



Image: Myitsone – International Rivers

This brief explores women's participation in Myanmar EIA processes through desk study of Myitsone, Letpadaung and Thilawa SEZ projects and through field study at the Upper Paunglaung Hydropower Dam (UPL). It examines constraints and benefits for women and the EIA process.

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is the evaluation of risks and impacts that might occur as a result of a policy, program or other major development intervention. EIAs consider the existing conditions of the biophysical environment, social, economic and other relevant factors and then predict possible outcomes that might occur after the intervention. EIAs can be used as a decision-making tool to identify risks, mitigate impacts and enhance positive outcomes. Major projects that necessitate an EIA, such as dams and mines, bring considerable change to affected local communities. These changes can be positive or negative and the effects of development are felt differently between men and women. It is therefore important for EIAs to address gender differences.

This project - undertaken in 2016- sought to understand how gender dimensions were considered in selected EIA processes in Myanmar. It asked:

- How were women incorporated into the EIA process?
- What constrains or enables women's participation?
- What benefits did participation bring to women?
- How can EIAs benefit from women's participation?

The national Myanmar EIA Procedure was approved by Parliament in late 2015. This is the first multi-sector standard for assessing and managing environmental and social impacts for the country. Prior to enactment of the EIA Procedure, development interventions were under-regulated and EIAs were completed for only some major projects. The 2015 Procedure requires all projects that will likely cause 'adverse impacts' to produce an EIA report and undertake consultation with stakeholders, community organisations and the local community. The Procedure requires that the proponent informs stakeholders about the project and considers the concerns of potentially affected groups. There is no legal requirement nor any informal recommendation to include women or any other specific social group (e.g. ethnic or marginalised groups).

Placing EIAs in the public domain remains limited in Myanmar, despite the procedural requirement to do so. Compared to other countries in the region, EIAs in Myanmar are an emerging standard practice for major projects, particularly for hydroelectric dams, resource extraction and significant infrastructure development.

## OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDIES

For this research project, Spectrum selected four sites based on the

availability of information, ability to safely access sites and stakeholders, and the existing knowledge held by the project team. Field research was conducted at Upper Paunglaung Hydropower Dam and desktop research methods were used for three other sites: Letpadaung Copper Mine, Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and Myitsone Hydropower Dam. All of the EIAs for these case studies were completed before the national procedures were finalised, guidelines released, and the 2015 democratic elections.

A total of 66 interviews were conducted, most of which were located in the Upper Paunglaung field site, and others included key informants for Thilawa SEZ. In addition to interviews, a literature review was completed that explains the contemporary gender norms in the country generally and also between the three main ethnic groups of the case study areas: Burman, Kachin and Kayin. The EIA reports were also reviewed as part of the literature review.

## FINDINGS

The four research questions were difficult to answer completely due to the restricted access to EIAs and the lack of gender focus in public participation practice. While each case study varied in terms of how gender was incorporated into the EIA processes, all cases



Image: Thilawa by Myanmar Thilawa





Image: Lepadaung – jumbo nytimes

demonstrated opportunities to improve performance.

### **How were women incorporated into the EIA process?**

The level of detail within the EIAs about the kinds of consultation and who participated varied between the case studies. During the EIA process for the Letpadaung Copper Mine and Thilawa SEZ, the total number of participants and the number of female participants were recorded. However, it was unclear in the reports whether or not women were able to express their concerns and inputs freely. In the case of Upper Paunglaung, women were sometimes present during public consultations but generally did not talk or provide input. It was conveyed through secondary sources and reports that Myitstone had no consultations at all. The EIA consultants for the Letpadaung EIA included female consultants in public consultations in an effort to make local women feel more comfortable to contribute.

### **What constrains or enables women's participation?**

There were several constraints that prevented the local communities, and especially women's, participation in consultation processes. Firstly, decades of military rule in Myanmar has left people fearful about speaking up about their concerns and worries. This

*'...women in the case study areas typically had lower levels of education and confidence than men, further preventing them from speaking about their concerns.'*

political legacy has imparted strong hierarchical administrative systems and social norms in the country. The EIAs for the case studies were completed during the military government prior to 2010 or during the transitional government between 2010 and 2015. Similarly, village leaders and other respected community leaders were not usually willing to share community grievances with the authorities for fear of the repercussions (Eg. Not being invited to future meetings).

Secondly, women in the case study areas typically had lower levels of education and confidence than men, further preventing them from speaking about their concerns. During research discussions, women at the Upper

Paunglaung field site area shared that they did not feel qualified to participate in the discussions or share their opinions. Some, but not all, women trusted their husbands to represent their views.

Thirdly, when project information was communicated to the communities, this was targeted at household leaders who are mostly men. Information was frequently not shared with the women and in only a few examples were efforts made to ensure that information reached women directly. In most cases, information about the project was handed to village leaders (all men) and then to the household heads (mostly men). Women discovered information from their husbands or neighbours. Almost all women learnt information about the project second-hand, which increased the risk of misinformation and misinterpretation.

Lastly, there are no explicit guidelines to incorporate women in public participation activities. Strategies to ensure women's participation are not routine practice and there is no policy obligation to include women in EIA processes.

### **What benefits did participation bring to women?**

EIAs in Myanmar to date have not typically made special effort to include women in public participation. The research team aimed to understand



Image: Myitsone (Mekong Eye)

how typically women could benefit, rather than explaining how women in the case studies did benefit. Discussions with women in Upper Paunglaung revealed that, on the selected occasions where women were able to participate in information sessions, they gained autonomy to express concerns, which in turn led to greater confidence and reduced perceptions of feeling marginalised and greater connection with the decisions that affected their lives. In order for these changes to be made and benefits felt, it is necessary to establish a supportive network where women feel safe to express their opinions openly without fear of repercussions. In Upper Paunglaung, women felt discouraged voicing their opinions because they were told that “they talk too much”.

Women in Myanmar typically manage the daily household needs so including them in the EIA process also benefits resource distribution and financial management for families.

### **How can EIAs benefit from women's participation?**

Engaging women in EIA processes, including participation during the community engagement phase, brings benefits that are broader than at individual levels. Entire households, communities and the EIA process itself can benefit by having a more gendered approach. Discussions with women and men in Upper Paunglaung revealed that

***‘Women tend to think more about the community as a whole, protecting physical environmental damage, their personal and family livelihoods, education...’***

each group holds different priorities and concerns.

Women tend to think more about their community as a whole, protecting physical environmental damage, their personal and family livelihoods, education opportunities for their children and concern about neighbours and friends in the community. Men tend to be more concerned with jobs and livelihood opportunities, compensation, and issues around their immediate family. When women, who are the primary caregivers and active members of the community are excluded from EIA consultation, the broader community is affected. Their opinions, values and ideas are absent

from EIA processes and planning for development solutions. The gendered differences in the worries of women and men reflect the need to consider a wide range of opinions during EIA planning and pre-project phases in order to identify and mitigate risks both for the community and also the project.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Engagement**

- Enhance awareness of gender issues in EIA participation: Informal social and cultural norms are developed over generations, which is often where gender inequality persists. Raising awareness of gender imbalances and especially gender issues in EIA participation is necessary in order to address gender-specific problems in impact assessment and risk mitigation.
- Expand strategic and targeted engagement with women: Addressing gender-specific issues in impact assessment processes requires specialised engagement techniques. The objective should be to ensure women are represented and participate in the EIA process by creating supportive environments for women to access information and provide feedback. Inclusive planning principles should be adopted to ensure inclusion of all social





Image: Thilawa – DVB

groups, including women, minority groups and vulnerable people. These groups are particularly prone to experiencing greater impacts of large-scale projects and resettlement processes than others<sup>1</sup>. All community members affected by the proposed project should have the same access to information, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age or ability. Efforts in including these groups should consider the following:

- Appoint female EIA consultants and translators to engage with the community
- Use existing organisations representing women or establish new organisations to communicate project information
- Ensure important information reaches all community members and do not rely on leaders or men to pass information on to others
- Hire experienced professionals to conduct social and gender impact assessments.

To ensure the above are possible, focussed and intentional capacity building will be needed.

- Make project level information available to all affected community members in a way that they understand: Greater transparency about project development and how the project will impact particular groups and communities

***‘Inclusive planning principles should be adopted to ensure inclusion of all social groups, including women, minority groups and vulnerable people.’***

is a very important good practice in EIA processes. Where there are gaps in national guidelines, international best practice can be referred to, particularly relating to public participation and consultation with communities. It is also essential that community members understand what is being communicated and using a range of methods to communicate is usually preferable, such as videos or cartoons.

## IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- Conduct a Gender Impact Assessment as part of the EIA process: Practice needs to go beyond engaging women in

engagement processes and deliberately consider gender impacts that emerge from consultation phases. Various international good-practice guidelines are available for reference, including several Oxfam resources about gender impact assessments in hydropower development, mining and extractive industries, Rio Tinto’s ‘Why Gender Matters Guide’, among others. Gender impact assessments give a voice to women, ensures gender is considered in risk management, can contribute to the promotion of gender equality and helps project implementers meet responsibilities to protect human rights<sup>2</sup>.

- Use information gathered during engagement to mitigate risks: The EIA needs to clearly identify how information gathered from affected stakeholders has been taken into account to mitigate potential risks and impacts resulting from the project.

## Policy

- Include gender dimensions in the EIA Procedures: The structural and institutional frameworks at the time of the study did not produce clear opportunities for women to engage with EIA processes. In conducting EIAs, project developers, consultants and governments refer to and rely on the policies, guidelines

1. Oxfam. (2013). *Balancing the Scales: Using Gender Impact Assessment in Hydropower Development*. Carlton.

2. Ibid.



and procedures of the country as their guide to implementing projects. Where procedures or laws are weak, the project outcomes, particularly the social consequences, are also weak. Including gender equality and clearly stating the importance of women's participation in the EIA procedure would assist project developers and their consultants to better address women's involvement, enhance understanding of gender-specific issues and improving the probability of mitigating gender-specific risks and impacts. In the absence of robust national

procedures, reference can be made to guiding international principles and best practice relating to gender impact assessment.

- Make EIAs available to the public: Publicly available EIAs can help improve EIA practice and reduce impacts for future projects because consultants and practitioners can identify gaps and opportunities from previous projects and apply them to their own project. Overall standards are raised when information is made publicly available. Given the early stage of EIA processes in Myanmar, it is important to remember that

improving practice will be an ongoing and evolving process.

- Further research: Ongoing research is required to review how more recent EIAs completed under the guidelines of the EIA Procedure incorporate gender dimensions into their impact assessments. Additionally, independent monitoring of the public availability of documents by sector and geographically will be important.

Refer to Spectrum's brief "*Women & Resettlement: A case study on gender aspects at the Upper Paunglaung Dam*" for further information about gender dimensions of resettlement processes.

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