

Case studies

1. Another first for women

Daw Mya is a mother of two children living in Kan Hla village and is one of the many women who attended training by Shwe Kanbawza, a CSO partner of the ECCSO project. The women in Kan Hla do not normally participate in town meetings, let alone trainings. Men usually work outside the house while women are alone responsible for all household activities, which leaves them little to no time at all to participate in other matters.

“I think women go unnoticed because of the unpaid care work” explains Daw Mya. *“To do so much unpaid care work is one of the reasons why women cannot participate nor lead in activities that will increase their capacity and make themselves more resilient.”*

The ultimate aim of this training was to build women’s confidence and leadership skills, in order to engage more in village politics and claim services from government departments. However, the training focused on giving women a better understanding of laws and regulations on land and property rights. The training included gender-sensitive approaches and encouraged increased participation by both men and women in discussing and addressing issues relating to gender within their community. *“Through Shwe Kanbawza’s training, my life has changed,”* said Daw Mya.



Another former training participant added that she particularly valued learning about women’s rights in relation to land ownership. *“[Following the training] I went to participate in a village meeting for the first time. The biggest challenge for me was to be able to speak up about what was needed in our village.”* Other women also started attending village meetings and speaking out about their priorities and concerns. Men seemed to be open to women’s participation and more willing to listen to their views. Women recognised the importance of their participation in village activities and decision-making. When asked what changes they wanted to see in their village the women’s response included the desire for female leaders, for awareness-raising on gender issues and more widespread training on land rights.

Daw Mya herself rose to the challenge. She nominated and was elected a 10-household leader, the first in her village. While this might not sound a lot, it does, in fact, hold great significance in a community where women rarely venture outside of the house. Becoming a 10-household leader provides the space for women to share their problems with her and for her to call for these problems to be addressed. It also provides a platform for addressing violence against women generally in her village. *“I can now recognize my capabilities and can find ways to overcome barriers and empower other women”* asserts Daw Mya. She is now part of a committee leading the land registration process.

2. Gaining street credence

FLAG works with street children and families living in the slums bordering Mandalay city. Many of these are migrants from other areas without homes, education opportunities and work. They are largely ignored by the local authorities and occasionally forcibly relocated. Aung Thu is the director of FLAG and one of only two staff. They work with volunteers on this somewhat controversial issue.



In July 2018 they received a sub-grant from the project and were able to employ two additional staff to provide child rights training to communities. As a result, they gained a degree of credibility with local authorities and are now invited to meetings at the township level. SKP, another CSO partner, was not successful in getting a sub-grant but then volunteered to help FLAG implement their sub-grant activities for the experience. FLAG has recently received funding from another source to expand their work. For an organisation that previously had no systems

and no support FLAG now have some funding and policies covering human resources, administration, finance and child protection. And above all, they now have credibility in their community.

3. Getting financial matters in order

Green Day Youth Network was only set up in 2016 and has three CSO members. The network is based in Tha Ton township in Mon State and has been providing after-school tuition to vulnerable youth attending Year 11 at the local school. They also organized a day in which the community collected rubbish from public spaces in an attempt to clean up the neighbourhood. Of the seven staff only the director, U Sein Pan, is over 30 years old and all have been working on a purely volunteer basis. Following training from the ECCSO project GDYN provided “echo training” to their community on human rights and gender-based violence, still on a voluntary basis.

However, in March 2018 they were awarded a sub-grant to enhance women’s participation and representation in peace process. While the project has gone reasonably well it highlighted GDYN’s lack of project and financial management skills and experience. Finance staff from CBI joined one of the mentoring visits and was able to coach staff on basic accounting methods. ECCSO project staff provided formats and guided them in report writing, in person and over the phone. Since that time the progress and financial reports have improved noticeably and the GDYN director claims that they now have the confidence to write reports unassisted.



4. Land registration; an act of empowerment

Kan Hla village is a small village located in Pinlaung Township of southern Shan State. In 2005 the state government officials built a dam that resulted in significant damage to the surrounding area and ultimately the uprooting of the entire Kan Hla village. The dam had caused adverse effects to such a degree that farms and homes across 23 surrounding villages were affected. The government accepted responsibility for the damages suffered by the 23 villages and provided financial remuneration, as well as 429 acres of land to Kan Hla village.



This however brought with it new problems. Without an existing system of registering land ownership, the 429 acres were allocated randomly and without documentation. The hilly region of Kan Hla meant that villagers were not even able to measure their lands properly. While it has been commonplace not to register customary-held land handed down from generation to generation, this new allocation of land was different.

Shwe Kanbawza (SKBZ) is a local CSO based in Pinlaung township, with five designated (mostly voluntary) staff and 16 volunteer community organisers. Their aim is to build a democratic society by encouraging the active engagement and participation of women and civil society organizations. They have, in the past, focused on women's empowerment through livelihood projects such as community rice banks and women's self-reliance groups, of which 34 now exist. In 2018 SKBZ was awarded a small sub-grant by the ECCSO project that allowed them to provide training to communities on the land laws of Myanmar, among other things. The trainings were designed to encourage active engagement of women by including issues such as women's rights, gender equality and women's rights to land ownership.



The training also stressed the importance of registering land as proof of ownership and protection against fraudulent claims from 'outsiders.' But the trainings themselves were not without their challenges. The villagers were concerned about the costs associated with land registration, land taxes that may then be imposed, and their general distrust and lack of contact with government officials. In the case of Kan Hla there was also the cost of having the land properly surveyed and a land ownership map drawn up. SKBZ worked with these concerns, maintaining its aims of increasing understanding of the laws and regulations on

land/property ownership, increasing engagement of local communities with government departments and the opening of lines of communication that set the way for future dialogue, information sharing and empowerment.

The people of Kan Hla finally decided to register their lands but did not have the knowledge or resources to have their lands surveyed. SKBZ approached the ECCSO for support and a contract amendment was granted to include the cost of the land survey. This survey has now been completed and the registration process is well underway. The new farm lands will soon be officially owned by the people of Han Hla village, many of whom will be women. Following the successful land registration in Kan Hla, other villages are expected to follow suit.

5. Bringing reconciliation through the backdoor.

Youth Strength Association (YSA) is based in Kyauk Phyu township in Rakhine State and is staffed by young volunteers. Its director, Win Thant Oo, is only 31 years old. In the wake of the communal violence that erupted in 2017, YSA began working with another international NGO providing much-needed assistance to mainly Rohingya communities displaced by the conflict. However, this led to a serious misunderstanding about their intentions and loyalties and they lost the confidence and respect of the local authorities and some within their own community. This was despite having successfully implemented a number of development activities in the area in the past. This tension escalated to the point where their office was physically attacked and had to be closed. Win Thant himself was forced to flee the state and set up a temporary office in Yangon.

However, YSA was awarded a consultation grant in 2018 from the ECCSO project to find out what the issues were among CSOs in the Kyauk Phyu area. Based on these consultations YSA developed a project proposal to enhance the communication and networking capacity of CSOs. The training that followed was based on a training that YSA themselves had attended as part of the ECCSO project. Local authorities, including representatives from the GAD, police, Dept. of Social Welfare and community leaders were also invited to join these trainings. Inadvertently, through this YSA was able to convince the authorities and local communities that they were not against the government or the majority population. They were simply concerned about the welfare of the marginalized and most vulnerable people, regardless of ethnicity or religion.



While it had initially been difficult to obtain permission for these activities, local authorities are now fully supportive of their re-engagement in the township. YSA have opened a new office in Kyauk Phyu and has been instrumental in improving the networking and cooperation among CSOs and between CSOs and local authorities in the area. Changing community attitudes is a slow and often dangerous process but it can (only) be done one step at a time.

6. Women working together

Dr Ei Ei Cho is the director of the WON Women's Group (WWG) based in Taungoo in Bago Region. She is the founder of what is a member of the national Women Organization Network which was founded by another woman, Daw Khin Oo Lwin, in August 2013. WWG has been working mainly with women, children and people with disabilities in the Taungoo region, providing training and awareness on women's and children's rights. They help communities deal with problems such as child abuse, violence against women, sexual abuse of PWD and human trafficking of women and minors. Staff will often accompany survivors of GBV to court or introduce them to lawyers who are willing to work pro bono. If they can't help directly WWG staff seek help from the relevant government offices. All the staff are volunteers and older women, drawn from Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu communities in the area. This diversity of beliefs within an organisation is quite unusual but allows them to gain the respect and confidence of different religious communities, and between communities. They have the understanding, sensitivity and trust to work in any community and are a shining example of interfaith dialogue and harmony. But they have been severely constrained by their lack of funds.



In March 2018 they were supported by the ECCSO project to conduct GBV awareness activities in conjunction with International Women's Day events in the area. Many of the women who attended these activities had been interviewed as part of community consultations WWG had undertaken in preparing their proposal for a sub-grant from the same project. As a result of these IWD activities, WWG gained the respect of local authorities and other local CSOs who then asked for more information on the basis and laws protecting women's and children's rights.

In July 2018, WWG was awarded a sub-grant to provide training primarily to women in four village tracts in Taungoo Township on topics such as women's rights, reproductive health, gender-based violence, human trafficking, sexual abuse of under-age girls and the various laws and conventions protecting women and children in Myanmar. Because of the religious diversity among the staff of WWG, they can present these often sensitive issues in a culturally acceptable way in churches, temples and mosques, and even during religious camps. Women in these communities now see WWG as a source of expertise in women's affairs and are coming to seek their advice or further information. They are also being asked by other CSOs to provide trainings on women's and children's rights to their staff.

WWG credit their success in getting a consultation grant and then the project sub-grant to the Project Design and Proposal Writing training they received from the ECCSO project. Before that they had much less idea about the nature and extent of the problems facing women in their communities but were a little overwhelmed by what they found out. Learning to use the Problem Tree gave them a way to make sense of what they were hearing and how these problems could be tackled. They have now developed a strategic plan and applied for registration of their organisation. They have improved their financial management systems and practices and developed basic human resource and administration policies to guide their operations. While funding will continue to be a big challenge for WWG, they have the trust and respect of their communities, and the demand for their services is only increasing.

7. The glass wall has finally been broken

Former Police Social Welfare Association (FPSWA) is, as the name implies, a welfare organisation set up to look after retired police personnel and their families in Lashio, northern Shan State. The chairperson is U Tin Win, a former policeman himself, and the staff of 15 are all volunteers; all retired police officers of whom five are women. Past activities have been funded through donations from their members and was limited to assisting with hospital or funeral expenses of former police, or education fees for their children. There was little understanding or interest in tackling the causes of these problems or in addressing issues facing others outside their own members. Duplicating their former work environment, the organisation was run in a very hierarchical manner, with rules and obedience of prime concern. They operated as a closed community within the community.



In 2016 FPSWA was invited to join the ECCSO project and began to attend trainings on the human rights-based approach, good governance, democratic leadership and decision-making, and even advocacy and campaigning. These ideas were a revelation and struck at the heart of their beliefs and practices. They had structure but not policies, were decisive but not systematic. Over time they developed administrative and financial policies, and clearer roles and channels of communication within the organisation. Their style of management also changed, leading to mutual respect between management and staff. FPSWA started to understand the role of civil society and how CSOs operate in a democratic society. They also began to realise that they had something to offer the community beyond just their members.



In July 2018 FPSWA was awarded a sub-grant to undertake a campaign against drugs, the major scourge for young people in their area. They conducted awareness raising sessions in schools, among farmers and with migrant families – groups that they knew were most vulnerable. Instead of using their power as former police officers to coerce people to attend these sessions they approached village leaders and asked for their support. They invited former drug users to address different audiences and engage in peer-to-peer education with current drug users. They are also liaising with the Dept. of Social Welfare in

the rehabilitation of drug addicts. They received such positive feedback from the community that they are now wanting to work more extensively with youth. There are however some within their organisation that oppose this expansion of their mandate, but they are in the minority. As U Tin Win said, “The glass wall between us and the community has finally been broken.”

8. What a difference a training make

Kantarawaddy Times is a member and beneficiary of the ECCSO project and focuses on connecting and sharing information between parliamentarians, government and local communities in Kayah State. They regularly host panel discussions and produce a journal with news and views from the area. This they initially published in Karenni language only, but this raised suspicion from others and they now distribute a Burmese version. When they lack funds to publish and distribute their journal, they disseminate the information via the internet and social media. As they work in areas controlled either by the government or ethnic armed groups, they are obliged to seek permission from both groups to share information outside their respective areas. So sensitive is the situation that some villagers are afraid to be seen reading the journal for fear of repercussions from one side or the other.

Naw Dway Eh Khu attended a training of Kantarawaddy Times in which journalistic writing skills were taught as part of number of activities funded through a sub-grant from the ECCSO project. She had previously been working in marketing but was looking for something more. The paper's editor encouraged her to try out as a reporter, but she lacked the confidence and knowledge of how to identify newsworthy events and of collecting the right information. During the training she participated in a panel discussion and mock interviews which built her confidence and she has since been reporting regularly for the paper.



One article reported on a plague of field mice that had invaded a village and decimated the paddy fields. Following her report Agriculture Department staff visited the village twice to inform the farmers on how to protect their crops from mice and insects. She also reported on an attempt by the military to take over land owned by local farmers, after which the military withdrew their claim. Her editor continues to support her and direct her towards stories of importance.

She has also learnt to listen to the community and report on issues that are important to them. Naw Dway Eh Khu has learnt that the media has a valuable role to play in connecting the community and the government. It can point out weakness or gaps in the services provided to communities and highlight areas that are being overlooked. Without the training this still fledgling reporter would be feeling unfulfilled in a marketing job and many villagers would be worse off by not having their story told.



U Thal Yal lives in Hpruso Township and is a Member of the Kayah State parliament, from the Kayah State Democratic Party. He participated in the panel discussion hosted by the Kantarawaddy Times as part of their journalism training. He was able to share information about the Vacant, Fallow, Virgin Land (VFV) Law and its protections for the community. During the discussion he also heard about land, agriculture and marketing issues being faced by farmers in his area.

On returning to parliament he raised three matters that he had learned from the discussion. Firstly, he lobbied state MPs to authorise the agriculture department to sell paddy seed to local farmers at a reduced price. He raised the issue of the overuse of fertilisers and was instructed to invite the farmers to visit the department's demonstration plots where limited use of chemical fertiliser is being practiced successfully.

He then raised the issue of markets. Farmers were taking loans through the Mya Sein Yaung project of the Department of Rural Development and from other sources but were forced to sell their crops immediately after harvest when the prices were lowest in order to repay their loans. U Thal Yal pushed for the government to set a rice guarantee that would allow the farmers to sell at a fair price. As the Mya Sein Yaung project is managed at the Union level of government, this suggestion was forwarded to Nay Pyi Taw where it is currently being considered.

Issues of land ownership were also raised in this meeting with state MPs. It seems that a private company had applied for land registration using the names of several individuals, but this land had been used by the community for generations. The State Minister of Agriculture was unaware of this case and promised to follow up. He did, and the company has since withdrawn their application in favour of the community. A great example of what can be achieved when communities, the media and the government work together.

However, Kantarawaddy Times faced delays in getting government approval for other activities covered by the sub-grant, something that is quite common in Kayah State particularly. As time was running out, they approached U Thal Yal for help. He facilitated the approval process and then participated in a number of other activities that saw the project through to a successful conclusion. He is genuinely concerned about the different issues faced by his constituents and has asked to be invited to join any further activities of a similar nature being implemented by CSOs in his area.

What a difference a training can make.

9. An awakening of youth in Rakhine

Humanity Youth Centre (HYC) was formed in Ponnagyun Township in Rakhine State with the aim of improving opportunities for youth in their area. Prior to the ECCSO project the organisation had no outside support and only offered English classes to young people. They were not well known and those that knew of them considered them lacking the capacity to provide anything more useful than these classes. How things were to change.

HYC has been a partner of the ECCSO project since 2016 and more recently a sub-grantee of the project. The objectives of their sub-grant was to create a network of village-based youth groups by building capacity and interest among young people. The activities targeted ten of the 25 villages in their area and involved trainings and the establishment of library facilities. Interestingly, the most popular topic in their portfolio of trainings was that of women's rights, a topic that was new to most youth in the area. The training was mostly held in the HYC office, inadvertently raising the profile of the organisation among the youth and local authorities. Budget restrictions meant that some participants paid their own way and there is now a list of interested people, both young and old, from outside the 10 targeted villages awaiting any future trainings. With the support of village leaders HYC was also able to host a Youth Forum in what is a rather insecure and potentially volatile region where young people were able to come together to express their needs and concerns and hear about possible opportunities.



Ko Aung Naing Lin, a member of the youth group formed in Let Wel Sar Taiké village, said *“Before I met and join in HYC activities, I did not lead on social issues in my village and, like my friends, I was not interested in working for the benefit of my community. HYC came and offered some training for youth; my first experience with such training. After that I participated in other village activities with friends from these trainings. With the help of HYC, painting classes have been set up for children and basic English training was made available for the first time in our village. Our youth group set up a self – managed library in our village. Some of my friends then went to the Humanity Youth Centre to learn how to improve on what we had set up.”*

Zaw Myo Oo is a member of a youth group set up in Inn Zone Pyin village. He said *“Before the training from HYC, I was a ‘lazy bones’ but now I think about my future and find ways to further my knowledge. After the HYC training I attended trainings provided by Search for Common Ground and want to be more involved in educating people in my village about development. I have a plan to provide English classes, to lend books from our library and instigate cleaning activities in our village. With my new knowledge and experience I now believe in myself.”*



As a result of their involvement in the ECCSO project HYC is now well known in their area and are being invited to local CSO meetings to discuss issues such as the servicing of IDPs in the state. They have received requests from other village leaders for similar trainings to be given to their youth. Participants of their trainings went on to attend trainings on peace and conflict mitigation by other EU-funded projects. Indicative of the trust built with local authorities, HYC was recently invited to provide English language training to staff of various government departments in the township.

10. Approaching gender equality through education and example

As with their neighbours, the people of Thar Yut village in Kayah State predominantly depend on the agriculture for their livelihoods and little importance is placed on education or unrelated knowledge. As a result many of the women especially are illiterate. Traditional customs and practices are strongly followed in the village, whereby women are not considered worthy of an education, do not inherit from their parents and do not participate in decision-making at home or in their community.

Kayan Women's Organisation (KyWO) is based in Pekon township in southern Shan State and was set up to address these very beliefs and practices, and to encourage more women to become more politically engaged. They work with women from all political parties as well as village women aspiring to enter politics. They have experienced opposition from some men who see them as challenging traditional role of women and yet, ironically, they raise money to fund their activities by making and selling traditional costumes.



KyWO is a partner of the ECCSO project but had previously received support from several other EU-funded projects. Their target is Karenni women both in Kayah and the neighbouring states but, due to the ongoing conflict, often find it difficult to reach those in more remote or insecure areas. While loosely affiliated with the ethnic armed forces, KyWO implemented a women's empowerment project in consultation with the Kayan National Party, the Kayah Democratic Party, village administrators, religious leaders and youth leaders. Activities included a Women's Leadership Training for women from the two Karenni political parties, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The project was made possible through a sub-grant from the ECCSO project.

After this leadership training, the Kayan Women's Organisation observed that women were participating more in social activities, and with greater confidence. The training was accompanied by a small village development fund that enabled women to take the lead in prioritising and implementing the activity in each village. Through this, the men in these villages gained an appreciation of women's rights and capabilities and are now encouraging women to join and speak up at community meetings.

In Saw Ton village for example, the living standard of people is very low, and the villagers had no reliable source of good drinking water. As a result, the standard of hygiene and health was actually falling. In the rainy season residents relied on the rainwater harvested from their house roofs but in the hot, dry season when water containers were dry, water had to be collected from an underground spring about four miles from the village. This task inevitably fell on the women and children.



After the training from KyWO, villagers recognised the burden being placed on the women and children in carrying water from such a distance every year. They gathered together and, with some support from the sub-grant fund, constructed a small dam to capture the water bubbling up from the spring. This they piped to a pond located in the middle of the village from which they can all now draw their drinking water with ease. In recognizing the burden that water collecting had been on the women, the men also began to show more respect; a direct result of the training provided under the sub-grant.

Women exhibit greater self-confidence, are now allowed and even encouraged to join in community meetings, and actively participate in village decision-making processes.

When women's rights are met, everyone benefits.

11. Learning to hold her head high

Ma Mann Sein is a woman, a healthcare worker and a single mother. Having tried unsuccessfully to make her marriage work she instigated a divorce from her husband, leaving her to care for their young son alone. She had had dreams of a happy family life but even the divorce did not deliver this due to the social stigma associated with divorce and a woman living without a male “protector”. She felt annoyed, depressed, dissatisfied and regretful. She faced expressions of pity or disparaging looks and disdain from neighbours every day, and often spent her nights in tears.

In December 2018 Ma Mann Sein attended a series of human rights trainings that dealt with women’s and children’s rights. These trainings were conducted by K’Cho Land Development Association (COLDA) in Min Tat township of Chin State and were supported by the ECCSO project through its sub-grant facility. This local civil society organisation was formed in 2014 with the aim of promoting women’s rights, democratic governance, livelihoods and health. The training and mentoring provided by the ECCSO project led to revisions to their constitution, development of a strategic plan, and improvements in their management systems. Because of their capacity and strong passion for the work, COLDA is now attracting interest from several donors.



This human rights training proved to be a turning point for Ma Mann Sein. In the training she learned that women have rights the same as men. She examined her feelings and decided that she would no longer wallow in self-pity or shame. She would make her own decisions and be proud of who she was. She changed jobs to one where she could provide more social support to people in need, she read books and tried to attend as many trainings as she could. She read more about gender issues, equality, masculinity and patriarchy, and gradually came to understand them.

Now she is ready to confidently pursue her career and be an active member of her community, often promoting healthy and more equal relationships between men and women. She explains that her “attitude and mind are now ready to fly, like a mature bird”. Her gentle singing the praises of women rights is already having an impact in her community. She has become a role model for women in her community constrained by local customs and who feel that they have no way to achieve a brighter future. Ma Mann Sein is now a source of strength, a hope and light for women who have failed, are failing and about to fail.....