

Tailoring a business skills training programme for self-employed women in coastal fishing communities in Myanmar

Elizabeth Matthews,¹ Me'ira Mizrahi², Celia Boyd,³ Leakhena Saroeurn,³ Khin Myo Myo⁴ and Naw May Lay Thant⁴

Background

Southeast Asian coastal fishing communities depend on what they can pull from the water as their main source of income. In Myanmar, small-scale fishing communities are typically characterised by poverty, low levels of education, ethnic diversity and a strong dependence on fisheries for food security and local livelihoods (Schneider and Thiha 2014; Mizrahi et al. 2019; 2020). An estimated 1.4 million people depend on marine resources in Myanmar, and 80% or more of annual income comes from wild-capture fisheries in coastal households (DoF 2017).

Women represent a significant component of Myanmar's fisheries sector, primarily in fish processing and market trade, and they often manage household finances. Yet these roles are generally underrepresented in the design of fisheries management strategies. Securing the participation of women

in fisheries management meetings is challenging due to long-established cultural norms and gender-based expectations. Women are frequently not involved in leadership or management decisions outside of the household. Recognising the significant challenges of overcoming gender inequality in fisheries, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has been working with Myanmar's Department of Fisheries to promote female representation in small-scale fisheries management. For example, in Rakhine State, WCS has made gender equality in co-management of marine areas a priority by promoting the need to have at least 50% female representation in co-management committees. This has been adopted by government partners and all co-management committees now require that 50% of their members are women. The facilitation process for the first coastal fisheries co-management area that was established at Kyeintali has also helped to empower women's active participation in project activities, strengthen their voices and representation, and has

¹ Wildlife Conservation Society, 2 Science Park Drive, Singapore 118222. Corresponding author: ematthews@wcs.org

² Wildlife Conservation Society, No 100 Yadanar Myaing St, Yangon, Myanmar. Corresponding author: mmizrahi@wcs.org

³ SHE Investments, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

⁴ Wildlife Conservation Society, Yangon, Myanmar

Myanmar. © Celia Boyd (SHE Investments)



built their confidence and leadership skills. This initiative to date is helping to demonstrate how gender equality issues can begin to be proactively addressed in the fisheries sector, and WCS continues to build this momentum through a new Myanmar-tailored Fisheries Business and Financial Management incubator programme.

Tools and methods

In this paper we describe how WCS is working with SHE (Support Her Enterprise Co. Ltd.) Investments, a social enterprise based in Cambodia that designs and delivers business “incubators” and “accelerators” for women,⁵ to design a programme for women micro-entrepreneurs in coastal fishing communities in Myanmar. SHE Investments takes a gender-focused and culturally tailored approach to offer business support services for women that are specifically designed for them. To do so, they directly address the specific barriers women face, and take into consideration gender-specific challenges, such as women entrepreneurs predominantly being “stuck” in the micro- and informal sector; lack of accessible and available business training; and a lack of time to be able to attend formal training. In Cambodia, one-third of SHE’s incubator or accelerator graduates have increased their monthly revenue by twice or more, with significant improvements also being seen in household savings, women’s agency and decision-making power within households and businesses, improved financial management, and increased presence of Khmer female leadership and role models.

SHE Investments is now working with WCS staff to design a similar programme for women in fishing communities along Myanmar’s southern Rakhine coast. To date, we have conducted an initial feasibility study that gathers the locally relevant information upon which we will design the training programme for women entrepreneurs. The feasibility study will be followed by a training of trainers and, finally, community implementation.

Results and discussion

To design the training programme so it was relevant to the women in Myanmar, WCS staff worked with the trainers from SHE Investments to better understand the local fisheries, the roles of community women in the fisheries, and the broader context and lives of the women themselves. Through an inhouse workshop, four female and one male WCS staff members, were led through a series of exercises to better describe how women operate within the fisheries sector in coastal communities. For instance, we know that women are involved in almost all aspects of the fisheries value chains in coastal Myanmar (e.g. processing, sales and marketing) (Table 1). In fact, the only area where women are not directly involved for both offshore and inshore fisheries sectors is fishing itself.

Women seldom, however, receive any assistance to participate in training sessions or to improve their livelihoods skills. In addition, the jobs that women undertake such as cleaning, cutting and sun-drying fish are regarded as low status, and of less economic value than those of men, which are more physically intensive and produce high economic returns (SEAFDEC 2020).

In order to tailor the training programme and make it as targeted and successful as possible (by finding the most relevant participants), WCS staff and female community leaders identified a set of key characteristics of the women in the communities. Several profiles of typical women from different backgrounds in the fishing communities were created by the staff who identified key characteristics. One initial profile is outlined in Table 2. This was further refined through consultations with local female community leaders to build a picture of the specific training needs.

The profiles that were developed will be used later to help staff identify who to target for the training courses. They were also developed to help WCS staff better understand the training needs and business operating issues from the point of view of potential participants to anticipate challenges and resources, workshop scheduling, and overall program and curriculum design.

Table 1. Identified gender roles within the fisheries value chain in Myanmar - From: SHE Investments & WCS (2020).

Offshore fishing							
	Preparation for fishing	Fishing	Fish processing	Wholesaler	Market sellers (both M/F, but mostly women)	End customer (wholesale & retail)	
Men	✓	✓				✓	
Women	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Inshore fishing							
	Fishing	Fish processing	Wholesaler	Freeze fish & export	Fresh fish processing	Send to wholesale & retail customers / transport fish products	End customer
Men	✓					✓	✓
Women		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

⁵ Business incubators and accelerators help female micro-entrepreneurs by providing services, such as basic management training, to help them succeed.

Table 2. One profile/archetype of a target woman to engage in the business and financial management programme.

Name and Profile	Behaviours	Personality
Name: Daw Thida Oo Ethnicity: Rakhine / Buddhist Age: 45 Job: Retailer (market seller) and housewife Note: <i>does not have a shop, she is selling around the villages, to individual houses, and to wholesalers</i>	Hardworking Helping local people Sharing knowledge to people who actually want to learn	Ambivert (between introvert and extrovert) Leader
Inshore Fishing	Goals	Motivations
Selling fish products like shrimp, crab and small fish Experience in buying and selling fishery products Kyeintali 6 family members Quotes "There is nothing I cannot do." "I can do it."	To be a successful business woman who has aspirations for sharing to other local women Have a better quality of life for her family Education & skills University education Language skills Computer skills She wants to update her financial management skills for her business	Achievement Family Money Pain Points Financial issues Worry at first Competition

The barriers to women who are trying to run small businesses in coastal Myanmar were identified through discussions with WCS staff, local leaders and women in the coastal villages WCS works in. The barriers identified for the southern Rakhine coastal communities include:

- Family issues such as conflict, disagreements between spouses, support from family to share in domestic responsibilities or in supporting women to attend training / run a business;
- Lack of problem-solving skills (e.g. "The business is going down; I have a lot of problems but I'm not clear what to do about them.");
- Low household incomes and poverty;
- Low profit margins and low-income business model;
- Lack of financial management skills;
- Lack of separation between household, family and business finances;
- Lack of awareness and skills about how to improve business management, grow the business, find new customers, etc;
- Managing staff;
- Lack of time; and
- Childcare responsibilities.

Following these consultations, SHE Investments produced a feasibility report that contains recommendations to help WCS staff finalise locally appropriate selection criteria, and a process to ensure the training programme is implemented successfully.

These include:

- Participants should already have a business, not just an idea, to ensure they have an operating enterprise that they can actively work on throughout the programme. Also, a preliminary list of non-allowed (black-listed) businesses was developed to be excluded from eligibility, including activities such as shark finning, fishing and sale of species identified as endangered or as critical to ecosystem maintenance, or any form of illegal fishing.
- Take steps to demonstrate that the programme is competitive and valued by participants. These could include:
 - Require women to apply to the programme (with assistance, if literacy is an issue) using appropriate methods (online, in-person, paper applications or over the phone);
 - Require participants to apply for a 50% or 100% scholarship (using a sliding scale to encourage women with higher incomes to decrease the cost for women on lower incomes); and
 - For women who do not pay any programme fee, consider asking them to submit a small deposit that they do not receive back unless they graduate from the programme.
- Participants should attend 80% of all workshops, including the first and final workshops, in order to successfully graduate from the programme.

Once the draft training session is designed, WCS female staff will be trained to deliver the course in coastal communities.



SHE Investments' careful methods to tailor their training programmes specifically to meet the needs of local women and to target the people most likely to use and benefit from the training, will maximise the potential for long-lasting success. Taking a "gender-focused and culturally tailored" approach to this training means designing business and financial management support services for women that are specifically designed for them. This means directly addressing the specific barriers they face, and taking into consideration gender-specific challenges, such as women entrepreneurs predominantly being "stuck" in the micro and informal sector; lack of accessible and available business training; and a lack of time to be able to attend formal training. Not only do these recommendations build on the feasibility study conducted by SHE and WCS, they also build on WCS's local knowledge from field staff already working with key stakeholders, as well as published reports from the International Labour Organization (see Nguyen and Simoes da Cunha 2019), which describes key barriers facing women micro-small entrepreneurs in Myanmar, such as a lack of access to business training and support, and gender-specific barriers such as a lack of time due to domestic responsibilities such as childcare.

Through this incubator programme, WCS has the unique opportunity to deliver tailored business training programmes for women in the communities we work with, to enable women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship, and consequently both social and economic impact for families and communities. By applying an additional conservation lens to its programming and support services, WCS is in a position to use best practice methodology from SHE, while also enhancing conservation efforts to ensure community livelihoods from existing industries that do not harm local environments and ecosystems.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deep gratitude to Daw Nwe Nwe Tun, member of Rakhine Coastal Conservation Association (RCA) and Daw Ni Ni Aung, Kyeintali Inshore Fisheries Co-management Association (KIFCA) steering committee member for sharing their valuable insights and experiences to the feasibility study. We are also deeply grateful to the women from Gonyinseik, Kanetthiri, Kadwe, Kanyin Chaung and Kyauk Sei villages, and Thayet Chaung Township in Dawei District for their time and insights during the feasibility study. Because of their contribution, this training programme will be meaningful, context specific and valuable to women working in Myanmar fisheries business. This work was funded through a grant from SwedBio at Stockholm Resilience Centre.

References

- DoF (Department of Fisheries) 2017. Fisheries Statistics 2017. Myanmar, Department of Fisheries.
- Mizrahi M., Duce S., Pressey R.L., Simpfendorfer C.A., Weeks R. and Diedrich A. 2019. Global opportunities and challenges for Shark Large Marine Protected Areas. *Biological Conservation* 234:107–115.
- Mizrahi M., Duce S., Khine Z.L., MacKeracher T., Maung K.M.C., Phyu E.T., Pressey R.L., Simpfendorfer C. and Diedrich A. 2020. Mitigating negative livelihood impacts of no-take MPAs on small-scale fishers. *Biological Conservation* 245, 10.1016/j.biocon.2020.108554.
- Nguyen Q.A. and Simoes da Cunha N.M. 2019. Extension of social security to workers in informal employment in the ASEAN region. International Labour Organization. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_735512.pdf
- Schneider H. and Thiha S. 2014. Socioeconomic baseline assessment Thayawthatangyi and Langann Islands Myeik Archipelago, Myanmar. Myanmar, Fauna and Flora International: 37.
- SEAFDEC (Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center). 2020. Practical guide for gender analysis in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Southeast Asia. Bangkok, Thailand. 64 p.
- SHE Investments and Wildlife Conservation Society Myanmar. 2020. Feasibility study: Supporting women's fisheries-based livelihoods through business and financial management capacity building, scoping trip report, 17–21 February 2020. 58 p.

