

Building The First National Network Of Rural Myanmar Women Farmers One Phone At A Time

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Myanmar is a country of mind-boggling statistics. A country of 53m people, in 2013 8m had a phone, just over 1m were connected to the internet, a SIM card cost over \$500, less than 1m had Facebook. By 2017, 33m had a phone, 26m were connected to the Internet, cost of a SIM card dropped to \$2, 15m had Facebook. A stark gender/geographical gap in terms of mobile phone ownership still prevails: 80% of urban dwellers own a phone versus 50% living in rural areas, 72% of males versus 52% of females owns a mobile phone. 60% of the population is still living in rural areas and over 60% of people living in rural areas is not connected to electricity; an income daily average for a farmer is \$3.5.

This is the inspiring story of a group of resilient rural Myanmar women farmers who decided to build the first nation-wide network representing the interests of rural women farmers one phone at a time.

The United Nations Development Programme in Myanmar had been supporting for over a decade several thousand rural women saving groups dotted across a huge geographical area of 14 Myanmar states. Despite these groups being centrally managed by UNDP, most of the rural women in this collection of virtually identical savings groups had little idea of each other and had hardly ever met anyone from outside their own savings group. The financial and political landscape before recent Government reform in Myanmar made it almost impossible for rural women to travel. 2011 saw waves of change with the first semi-democratic government formed followed in 2013 by the licensing of the first two international telecom operators. This meant leading members of the regional rural women saving groups could now travel, meet and discuss for the first time with rural women from other states. A desire to unite across the regional borders was born.

Women in Myanmar are severely underrepresented at all levels of public and political life, only 88 out of 6789 ward and village administrators are women. Emerging women leaders in rural areas in particular face significant barriers of overcoming restrictive social norms, lack of personal confidence and lack of role models that can help them succeed in taking up new roles of participation and leadership.

The question was 'How could these rural women become an effective organization sharing support for emerging women leaders across such large distances?' What these rural women of Myanmar did have was a solid vision to become the first nation-wide network representing the interests of rural women and extremely good local organization skills.

Strength

Though we are miles apart

All we start a journey with the same heart

Thet Thet Win

[Woman Poet, Leader, Founding Member of May Doe Kabar Network](#)

Using the human-centered design methodology, [a team of innovators](#) (young cartoonist, mobile app developers, development workers) patiently drew out what barriers stood in the way of uniting these two thousand savings groups by listening carefully to the rural women's stories. Ambition grew as rural women learnt of new technologies: mobile phones, Internet connection, access to knowledge, the ability to share information over long distance. One current and most prominent theme was the desire from the rural women of Myanmar to read the life experiences and achievements of other women, not just rural women but famous women, intelligent women, women leaders, women ground-breakers, the greatest women in the world. Rural women of Myanmar wanted to know what other women around the world had achieved and how it was done. The many barriers of little funds, opposition from men for women to be expanding their lives and cultural barriers of women travelling away from the home all still remained as issues not least how were these rural women going to afford a mobile phone if that is how the network of rural women was to be achieved. However, a core group of 15 rural women carried on with the [human-centered design process](#). Out from this eye opening process came two major things:

- 1) A mobile phone application co-designed and co-developed by the rural women themselves which aims to solve the problem whereby rural Myanmar women do not have enough access to knowledge resources, contacts, networks and mentors that fosters their economic empowerment and social standing in the community.

2) The second major achievement that arose out of the initial human-centered design workshops was a process of understanding institutional governance, how to design governance structures for a national organization, how to make governance work at every level of an organization, how to construct and implement governance to a level where a rural women's organization could be registered with the Myanmar Government as a national organization. The first ever nation-wide national rural women's organization in Myanmar, [May Doe Kabar National Network of Rural Women](#), was registered with the Myanmar government in November 2015 as an association of 31 rural women led CSO, with a core membership of twenty two thousand rural women and benefitting a total of hundred thousand rural people.

This newest national organization was registered with its very own bespoke mobile phone application [iWomen Inspiring Women](#) app connecting twenty two thousand rural women together in one network on one platform with its own bespoke psycho-social inspiration and knowledge capacity building methodology.

In 2015, 80% of rural women members of UNDP saving groups had never owned a phone, had never seen a mobile application and thought that Internet was an evil thing. Out of the 15 rural women who spearheaded the development of the network, only a handful had a mobile phone. Two years down the line, the recently formed nation-wide Governance strong network of rural women has brokered its first commercial deal with an international telecomm provider, whereby rural women members of the network can buy for the first time in their life a high quality mobile phone through a zero commission six month installment plan solving the smart phone affordability problem one woman at a time, solving the inspiration problem one woman at a time. [Solving the access to knowledge problem and the peer to peer support problem, one woman at a time.](#)

Technology, daily inspiration from women leaders, mobile phone application, Internet, institutional governance were all big words for the rural women of Myanmar at the beginning of this process. They are not big words now. They are daily life. [Myanmar rural women are leading the way, one phone at a time.](#)

Rural Women Let's Keep Working Together Without Feeling Small

"[...] As long as I live, I will always get up again and again whenever I will fall down. I will never give up. I can proudly say that I have become this kind of person. We are human beings, so we don't need to feel small and downhearted. Moreover, we have this iWomen App to let the world know us. We have technology in our hands now. We can share information and have opportunities to support the survivors of violence. We come to know how to establish linkages with networks, which can support us. As rural women are also humans among other humans living in this world, let's help each other to overcome challenges and work together for a brighter future without feeling small."

Nyo Nyo San, Rural Woman Leader, Board Member May Doe Kabar National Network

* A detailed assessment and evaluation of the iWomen Inspiring Women Project conducted by United Nations University will be available in September on the UNDP Myanmar website "[Sammia Poveda, E. Gatti, 'To Enable Positive Behavioural Change, Does International Development Needs a Structured Approach to Inspiration? A study of the iWomen Inspiring Women Project.'](#)", UNDP, United Nations University."