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A GENDER EQUAL RECOVERY & PUBLIC SPACE

The need for planning and designing safe public spaces to empower girls towards gender equality.

A study developed for:

DOH EAIN
renewing yangon

COVID-19 AS AN ALARM CALL FOR GENDER EQUALITY

UN secretary general urges governments to put women and girls at the centre of recovery and response

In March 2020, the UN Trust Fund conducted an emergency report estimating the impressively negative repercussions of lockdown measures for gender equality. Six months into the crisis, a second assessment indicates that movement restrictions and economic insecurity generated a rise in gender-based pressures. Far from being on the low, physical and psychological violence against women and girls seem to have spurred as countries exited lockdowns from the persistence of health, economic and security tensions.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

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Unlike previous economic crises, the Covid-19 crisis is set to negatively affect women more than men, resulting in a significant blow for gender equality. Usually carrying the highest burden of housework, women have been bearing most of the epidemic-related costs entailed by movement restrictions, school closures, and stay at home policies. It could result in a huge setback from the progress made over the past 30 years in the quest for gender equality. What could have been expected to be only a short-term phenomenon could result in a persistent step-back for gender equality and women's empowerment if efficient policies are not designed to empower girls and women.

THE SITUATION IN MYANMAR

Social distancing measures induced a stepback for gender equality
Lockdown generated a great harm for gender equality in Myanmar as it did for many nations around the world, with the country experiencing what the UN refers to as being the 'Shadow Pandemic'. Measures adopted to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak globally intensified all types of violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence (UNDP 2020). Discriminatory social norms have intensified, women being asked to take up the education of children with the closure of schools and prohibited from returning to work. The Covid-19 outbreak represents a major threat for gender equality in a patriarchal society like Myanmar despite its efforts to empower women, with public health measures leading to a huge stepback for girls and women's empowerment. Public spaces were already unfavorable for girls in Myanmar, Covid-19 only exacerbated this issue.

MYANMAR IS STEPPING UP FOR GENDER EQUALITY

A gender-transformative response
On 27 April, the Myanmar Government published its COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on its economy. This action plan gives a particular attention to gender discrepancies to avoid unintentional harm and not to worsen existing gender inequalities. Myanmar's recovery plan sets the gender-transformative change as a key priority of its recovery program, thus responding to the UN's call for nations to safeguard gender equality and to prevent discriminatory long-term effects from the crisis for women.

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CREATING SAFE PUBLIC SPACES FOR GIRLS

"Sexual harassment in public spaces is widespread and often normalised, taking place in crowded places or under the influence of alcohol consumption, sometimes reinforced by cultural values which celebrate hyper-masculinity." (European Parliament, 2018)

Safe public spaces are crucial to achieve gender equality and ensure women's empowerment. Although violence in the private domain is now widely recognised as a human rights violation, violence against women and girls, especially sexual harassment in public spaces, remains a largely neglected issue, with few laws or policies in place to prevent and address it (UN Women, 2020).

Covid-19 has exacerbated the need for safe public space as it disproportionately affected women's mobility, worsening public safety issues. As part of UN Women's Global Initiative for gender equality, urban planning was identified as a crucial element to achieve girls and women's empowerment.

HOW URBAN PLANNING CAN IMPROVE GENDER EQUALITY

UN Women's flagship initiative Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces was developed to empower girls and women in public spaces
Women and girls regularly experience sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence in public spaces – on the streets, in and around public transport hubs, schools, workplaces, water distribution sites, public toilets and parks. Reducing women's mobility, Covid-19 has disproportionately affected women by making public spaces more masculine than ever. Therefore, the provision of safe public spaces and safe transport are key elements to ensure women's wellbeing. Investments in public services, infrastructure and support services were identified as being crucial to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment by the UN Trust Fund. Public spaces represent key areas where inclusive social norms can be set and gender-based discrimination tackled.

URBAN PLANNING AND PUBLIC-SPACE DESIGN CAN CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW BEHAVIOURS.

Girls are much less likely to enjoy public spaces than boys after age nine (Valentine, 1989). This has to do with the social stigma and gender pressure that is exerted on girls from their youngest age, especially in deeply rooted patriarchy societies. Public spaces have the potential to change the spatial organisation in order to reflect changing gender roles in society. Safe spaces for girls are areas where they can enjoy the freedom of expressing themselves without the fear of judgment or harm, contributing to setting new social norms for their inclusion and empowerment.

DOH EAIN'S CONTRIBUTION

Doh Eain has been creating safe place for girls in Myanmar

In 2018, the participatory design practice based in Yangon was selected as part of the SPRING Accelerator helping businesses to empower girls. Doh Eain successfully developed a process for designing spaces with girls 10-19 and piloted it in two locations, a community library and community park. This initiative has received a great support and the spaces are still much enjoyed by young girls in Myanmar. This program shows the efforts that Myanmar is developing to empower girls and women. Doh Eain taught the teenagers how to refine their ideas, perform audits, budget, and prepare scale drawings. To develop this community engagement program, the organisation has worked for a year with local and international experts "to discover, test and develop our overall inclusive place-making process."

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The public spaces projects develop by Doh Eain aim to empower girls by building skills and confidence, developing a vision for a space in their neighbourhood and implementing their own public space designs. Safe spaces for girls and women are quickly becoming a priority for urban planning in Myanma. As gender equality is gaining more and more momentum, initiatives to transform the lives of adolescent girls and increase public safety for women now represent a crucial reflexion for cities to become more inclusive.

"THERE IS VERY LITTLE SPACE FOR GIRLS IN YANGON, NOW WE ARE CREATING ONE FOR THEM"

Ma Eaint Hmuu San, 13

SAFE PUBLICS SPACES FOR A GENDER EQUAL RECOVERY

The **insecurity of public spaces** for women has for long been identified as a key concern to achieve **gender equality**. Covid-19 has only **exacerbated** this issue by reducing the proportion of women in public areas. Indeed, women were **disproportionately affected** by Covid-19, having to **bear most of the epidemic-related costs** entailed by **movement restrictions**, school closures, and stay at home policies (Alonso et al. 2019, Alon et al. 2020).

In that sense, **public spaces** are crucial considerations for the **Covid-19 recovery** and even more considering the necessity to achieve a **gender equal recovery**. The **UN Women's Trust** has made public spaces a central element to its guidelines for equal equal societies. The initiatives developed by **Doh Eain** to complete pilot projects **empowering women and girls** are strong examples of how we can leverage public space for a gender equal recovery.

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