

Chapter 11

WOMEN LEADERS

*To be a woman leader,
as I learned in ARI,
is to help other women
also to come out from the
fearness of being a leader.*

*Now I am a farmer.
Then maybe I give the
knowledge of farming.*

*People will say,
'Ah someone, another
woman is the one who told
us,' so that one is leadership.
Now I can stand in front of
many women or even men.*

So I am a leader.

– MBUCHE SHEHE, KENYA

ARI's goal each year is that women participants make up at least 50% of its student body. Unfortunately, the institute has only been able to achieve this level of women's participation a few times. Many of the countries where ARI recruits are deeply conservative and simply do not view women as leaders. Some organizations will argue that it is a waste of time to send their female staff for leadership training, especially if they are single, assuming they will quit their job as soon as they get married. There have been cases where ARI has accepted a woman applicant and begun visa procedures and other preparations, only to have everything cut off by a father or husband who forbids her to leave. Since a woman is the traditional (and expected) caregiver of the family, it certainly is not easy for her to travel to Japan and be absent from her home for nine months. In addition, balancing her family and community involvement is a constant challenge. Despite these obstacles, ARI continues to work very hard to recruit women, and with good reason. Time and time again, its women graduates have proven themselves to be leaders beyond compare, as the stories of this chapter, and indeed throughout this book, demonstrate.

Strength in a Shaking Voice

NAW LEE MYAR · MYANMAR

What can you make with a handful of rice? If you are Naw Lee Myar and her church women's group you can make a two-story building. When they were in need of a training center and found the church had no funds for it, all the members of the group began to set aside a handful of rice each day as they cooked dinner. This rice was combined and sold, and within five years they had raised enough money for construction. Their building now serves as a meeting place as well as a facility to teach how to make the traditional textiles of the Kayah people, including wedding dresses.

At that time Myar was serving as the Women's Secretary for the Kayah Hpu Baptist Association (KHBA). Human trafficking was a pressing issue, and the greatest risk in her area was to young girls who wanted an education but lived in remote villages where there were no schools. The common practice was to arrange for them to board with a family in town within walking distance of a school. In some cases, however, these girls were deceived by their "hosts" who used them as domestic servants, or worse, forced them into the sex trade. Due to awareness programs conducted by Myar and other organizations, the villagers have learned to be more careful. Myar herself takes in several student boarders each year. Every night the house buzzes with children doing their recitations. Despite this success, however, the trafficking of human beings in Myanmar overall remains a grave issue. This is especially true near the border of China where another ARI graduate, Shwe Htwe, works. She gives counselling to Myanmar women who have been passed around as "wives" to Chinese men who want to have more children than allowed by Chinese law (recently changed from one to two).



MYANMAR Naw Lee Myar on her preferred mode of transportation

Myar is now serving as director for the Christian Social Service and Development Department of the KHBA. In this capacity, she organizes training and awareness programs for community and women's groups regarding issues such as water and sanitation, maternal and child health, women's empowerment, and malaria prevention. Additionally, with support from the US embassy, she is taking on the problem of unexploded mines left after years of armed struggle between the government and many of Myanmar's ethnic groups.

As Myanmar transitions toward democracy, it faces a major challenge to end nearly 70 years of fighting between the government and ethnic rebel groups. Recently ceasefires have been mutually agreed upon by a number of groups, including a 2011 agreement in Myar's own Kayah State. As a community leader, Myar was asked to participate in this peace process and took part in the Myanmar People's Forum, speaking about the human rights of women and children. She is grateful for the leadership skills she learned at ARI as they helped her engage in this important dialogue. Speaking in front of people is something that took a great deal of effort for her to develop. The first time she stood before her church women's group, she recalls, *"I very shake and I very afraid."*

One of the hardest and saddest events in Myar's life was her husband's death in 2002. Many told her that as a widow she

needed to stop her work and stay home, but she still felt called to serve. She continued her programs in the villages – with three children in tow. She says, *"When I speak in the front, the kids all come with me, so I have to carry [my baby] and stand in front of the people like that, because I don't want to give up."*

Polish What They Have

ROSE MATTU · TANZANIA

When Rose Mattu's son came to join a group eating breakfast in front of her house, he noticed the only available seats were next to women, so he headed off to bring himself another chair. *"Culture!"* muttered Rose as she watched, but she was not bitter. On the contrary, she is a woman of practical optimism with a quick and infectious laugh. Her 60 plus years of life have instilled in her the wisdom that, though culture does not change quickly, it does change. Through patient, persistent effort, the status of women in Tanzania has improved and continues to do so.

Now retired, Rose spent her entire career in education where she taught at all levels in the system, including as an agricultural extension officer. Her final and longest posting was as principal of the Sengerema Folk Development College. It was during this time that she attended ARI. As an educator with long experience in the traditional book-based setting of African classrooms, Rose