



Photo Credit: Catriona Knapman

Land governance through a different lens: Using Participatory Photography with Myanmar's female farmers



Catriona Knapman - February 2019

Participatory photography is an innovative way for researchers to understand the nuanced perspectives of vulnerable groups - **but what does it look like in practice?** In this information brief, we explore: **what** participatory photography is, **why** researchers might consider using this method, and **how** it can be applied. Using Land Core Group's (LCG) Land and Gender Project as a case study, we reflect on some of the lessons learned, and explore how this approach contributed to our key research findings on gender dynamics in rural Myanmar.

What is Participatory Photography?

In contrast to traditional methods shaped by researchers and experts, participatory research methods shift power to participants so that they can decide what information is shared, and how it is framed. As a form of participatory research, participatory photography (made popular by London-based charity, PhotoVoice) turns the lens around - giving cameras to those who would ordinarily be the subjects of photographs and allowing them to visually tell their stories.

Why use Participatory Photography?

Using photographs in research is a way to stimulate discussion and enable exploration of thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences. Photos allow participants with limited literacy skills, or low levels of confidence speaking up in meetings, to join discussions. By allowing participants to take their own photos, participatory photography encourages individual expression and creates spaces for voices from more marginalised groups, such as female farmers in Myanmar.

LCG's Land and Gender Project

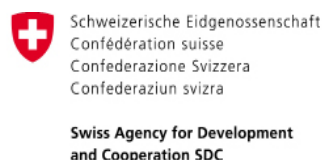
As changes to land governance in Myanmar begin to take shape, capturing and sharing women's perspectives is critically important as, despite the key roles they play on the land, their voices are often silent in land policy development and national debates.

Conducted in 2017, the aim of LCG's Land and Gender Research Project was to better understand the gendered dynamics of land governance in Myanmar.

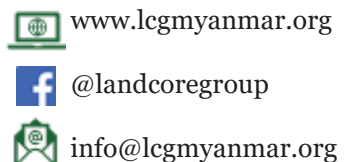
The project used a range of methods, including surveys and interviews and participatory photography across three sites: Kalay (Sagaing Region), Kawkaireik (Kayin State) and Dawei (Tanintharyi Region).

Coupled with other research methods, participatory photography provided a deeper understanding of women farmers' perspectives on their daily lives and roles, and their knowledge of the land. It also allowed us to capture powerful images and stories that can be used to strengthen advocacy as well as communication.

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Consent

In participatory photography, consent is needed at two different levels:

First, it is important to obtain participants' consent to participate, and for their images to be included as project outcomes.

It is important to allow participants to refuse the use of certain photos, or all their photos.

Second, participants are taught the importance of asking consent of the subjects in their photographs.

This is especially important if the images will be shared more widely and reflect sensitive issues.

Key themes from our analysis

- **Agricultural activities** featured prominently, as did details of **local beliefs** which determine women's roles. For example, pictures of mines which women were not permitted to enter because of beliefs that it will anger the mine nats.
- Women took pictures relating to **education**, for example, of schools and children in uniform.
- **Water sources and infrastructure** featured through pictures of bridges, roads, and water tanks or told stories about collecting and conserving water.
- **Religion** also played a prominent role, in pictures of shrines, pagodas and prayer meetings.
- While **family members** were in many of the photos, none of the participants presented a photo of her husband.

Putting participatory photography into practice

Operating in three field sites, we adapted a method taught by PhotoVoice to conduct a participatory photography project with groups of between six and eight women farmers. Working closely with partner CSOs in the field sites, we selected 19 women to take part, with an eye to capturing the experiences of a variety of ethnic groups, religions, ages and marital statuses.



Step One: Training

Firstly, participants attended a series of photography training workshops to develop basic visual literacy and camera skills. The focus was on building confidence rather than on taking 'good' photographs. We also explored the concept of consent— that of both participants, and photograph subjects.



Step Two: Taking Photos

Following the training workshops, participants used basic digital cameras to take photos based on suggested themes, including: 'a day in my life', 'past and present', and 'changes in my community'.



Step Three: Sharing and Collecting Data

We conducted feedback sessions to capture and explore the meaning behind women's photos, through discussions and unstructured interviews. In these sessions, we also supported participants to create personal photo essays. With permission, LCG recorded the discussions and selected ten photos per participant, 190 in total.

Outcomes

Through analysis and discussion we found important, and surprising, trends in participants' stories that challenged pre-existing ideas about women in rural Myanmar.

For example, women demonstrated detailed knowledge about traditional practices, livelihoods, and social changes in their regions. This contrasts with arguments that women are not knowledgeable, and should be excluded from decision-making and leadership positions relating to land in Myanmar. Stories where land was not only central to livelihood, but also to social and family life were also common. This stands in contrast to commercial valuations of land reflected in law and policy.



Photo Credit: Catriona Knapman



Photo Credit: Daw Sa Bel

Daw Sa Bel, Dawei: Handicraft skills of a woman

“This is the village administrator’s elder sister. Their family’s land was divided up and given to her younger brother, while she was left with nothing but the house... She also inherited the responsibility that came with it: looking after her elderly parents.

She makes clothing by hand, but only on a very small scale... She’s happy, but this little skill doesn’t earn her enough to properly take of her parents. She receives no financial support from her younger brother for their parents. This is a common problem throughout the village, and the women here suffer because of it. It’s almost as though it’s become a kind of tradition.”

Lessons learned:

We found five actions were key to the success of the project:

1. Creating a safe and supportive environment:

Facilitation is an important aspect of a participatory photography process. Building a positive group dynamic and developing an atmosphere of trust were both key to ensuring participants felt confident to share stories to accompany their photos.

2. Validating participants’ ideas: Some participants expressed ideas which reinforced discriminatory gender traditions. We found it important to encourage participants to be honest, and to validate their ideas even where they were contrary to our personal beliefs. This allowed the overall experience to be more empowering for participants.

3. Using images to develop creative play: We integrated play into the project by playing camera games, using dynamic icebreakers and doing some scrapbooking. This was an important part of the training, which helped to build trust and allowed the women to develop their confidence to participate.

4. Taking a structured approach to analysis: We sought to identify common themes and memorable stories, while representing the voices of the women. By taking the time to connect stories with quantitative data and other studies, we were able to distil findings from a large, and inherently subjective, data set.

5. Addressing subjectivity and bias: Analysis of photographs and stories can be inherently biased. To mitigate this possibility, we allowed space for the research team to identify our biases and add our own interpretations of the photos, based on our knowledge of land and gender issues in Myanmar.

Guiding Questions

What is in this picture?

Why did you take this picture?

How does this make you feel?

What is not in this picture?

Photo Credit: Catriona Knapman



Deih Boh, Kalaymyo: A mother's work for her family

"My mother plants crops in the forest and then harvests them in order to feed her children. I took this photo because I wanted to express what parents without an education have to do in order to look after their families."

"We've planted a lot of crops, including such crops as pineapples, so we have to go to work in the forest every day. When I look at this photo, I can feel the tiredness my Mother has to endure in looking after her children."



Photo Credit: Deih Boh

The role of participatory photography

Using participatory photography added a rich layer of individual experiences to our research, and provided an understanding of priorities, perspectives and lived experiences of the participants. Participants were also extremely positive about the experience; for many, it was the first time they had expressed themselves and shared their stories.

Participatory photography is a method which values process as much as outcome. To be effective, researchers must take the time to develop spaces for participants to share their stories with confidence and trust that, by engaging in the process, their voices may be heard.

To see photos from the exhibition visit:

www.flickr.com/photos/154354488@N03/albums/72157688368573125

Want to know more?

Contact catrionakn@gmail.com or info@lcmyanmar.org



Photo Credit: Par Thulai

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