



**The Republic of the Union of Myanmar**

**2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census**

# **Policy Brief on Education**



**Department of Population  
Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population  
With technical assistance from UNFPA**





## Key points

- (1) Literacy among young people (15 to 24 years old) is now high, at 94 per cent, but focussed efforts are needed, particularly in Shan and Kayin, to achieve universal literacy.
- (2) Among young adults, aged 25 to 29, nearly 3 in 10 (27.8 per cent) never attended school or failed to finish primary school. This provides strong justification for a policy to make primary school free and compulsory.
- (3) Many children do not start primary school at the correct age (age five). Informational campaigns will help, and an improvement in birth registration will assist in implementing compulsory schooling.
- (4) One in six children who should be attending primary school were not. Two-thirds had dropped out and one-third had never even started school. Possible reasons are the unavailability of schools nearby, and the involvement of children in economic activities, among others. A clearer understanding of the reasons is needed so that appropriate policies can be put in place to address both avoidance of school and dropout rates.
- (5) After age 11 school attendance declines from over 80 per cent to 35.9 per cent by age 16. This decline reflects high dropout rates at the end of primary school and at the end of lower secondary school. Attendance after the age of 11 is lower in rural than urban areas, suggesting problems of access to secondary schools that need to be remedied.
- (6) Women outperform men in university graduation and post-graduate qualifications. Opportunities for women to obtain employment in line with their high qualifications must be ensured.
- (7) Large inequalities in education exist. Children from poor families are disadvantaged and there are severe literacy and school attendance problems in Shan and Kayin. Increased educational investment in these two states and more generally in poorer districts will reduce inequalities.
- (8) At the national level, the slight decrease in the number of school-age children over the next few decades will help in increasing school attendance and the quality of education. However, because of migration and variations in fertility levels, some states/regions will see a rise in school-age numbers. Allocation of educational budgets need to take this into account.

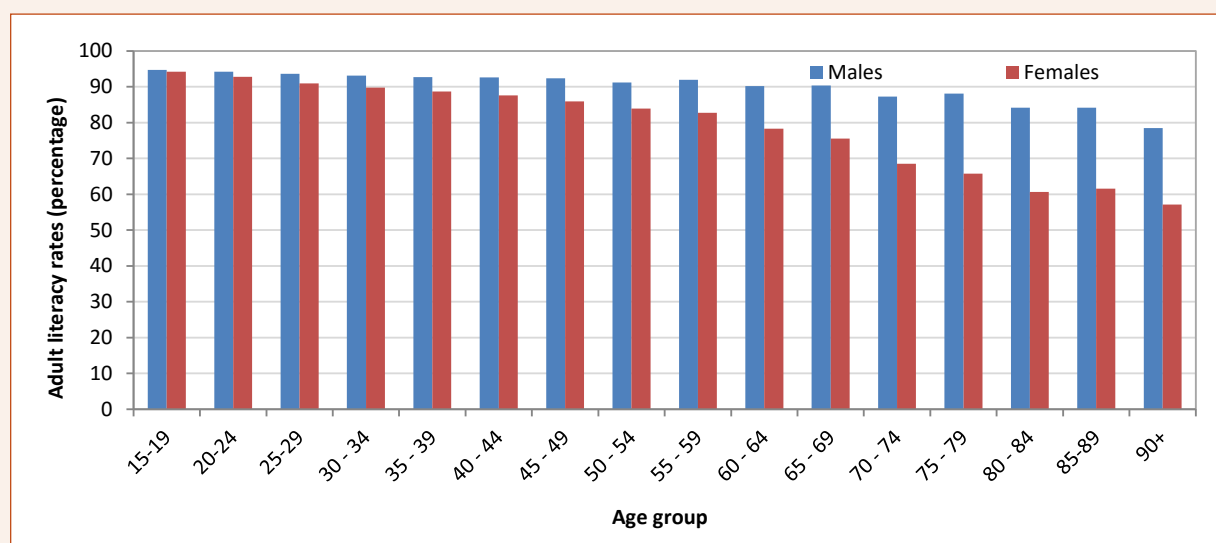
### **Great gains in literacy have been achieved but continued efforts are required to achieve universal ability to read and write among the young**

In today's world, the ability to read and write is an essential condition for full participation in society. Literacy in Myanmar has improved steadily and the gender gap has nearly disappeared. Among those now in their 70s, who were of school age in the 1940s, three-quarters are able to read and write. Among youth aged 15 to 19 years, the literacy level is 94 per cent. Among 70 year olds, only 67 per cent

of women are literate compared with 87 per cent of men. Among youth, the literacy levels of boys and girls are almost equal.

However, the achievement of universal literacy is not yet complete. 238,000 15 to 19 year olds are unable to read and write. Youth literacy lags behind the national average in Shan (77 per cent literate) and Kayin (87 per cent literate). In Shan, four districts record shockingly low youth literacy levels of below 50 per cent. Special efforts are clearly needed in these two states and particularly in Shan.

**Figure 1: Adult literacy rates by age**



Some of the disadvantages of illiteracy for individuals can be partially overcome if they live in a household with at least one literate adult. Half a million households, nearly all in rural areas, are disadvantaged by having no literate adult in the household. Close to half of these households are located in one state, Shan.

The key priority is to ensure that no child grows up without learning to read and write. This will require the effective implementation of a policy to provide free compulsory primary schooling. A reduction of adult illiteracy is possible through special campaigns but is a much tougher proposition, because older people are slower learners than children and may be less motivated.

### Progress in the educational levels of young adults has been uneven

Improvements in the educational levels of the adult population in the past 30 years can be assessed by comparing those aged 25 to 29 years with older age groups. Progress has been made but it has been uneven.

The proportion with no schooling has halved, from 20 per cent among 55 to 59 year olds to 9 per cent among those aged 25 to 29. At the other extreme, the proportion educated to post-secondary level has trebled from about 6 per cent to 16 per cent. Among 25 to 29 year olds nearly 24 per cent completed secondary school or had some form of tertiary education compared with only 10 per cent of those aged 55 to 59.

Progress has been less impressive at intermediate levels. Among 25 to 29 year olds, nearly 20 per cent did not complete primary schooling and a further 20 per cent did not continue with their education having completed primary schooling. Among these young

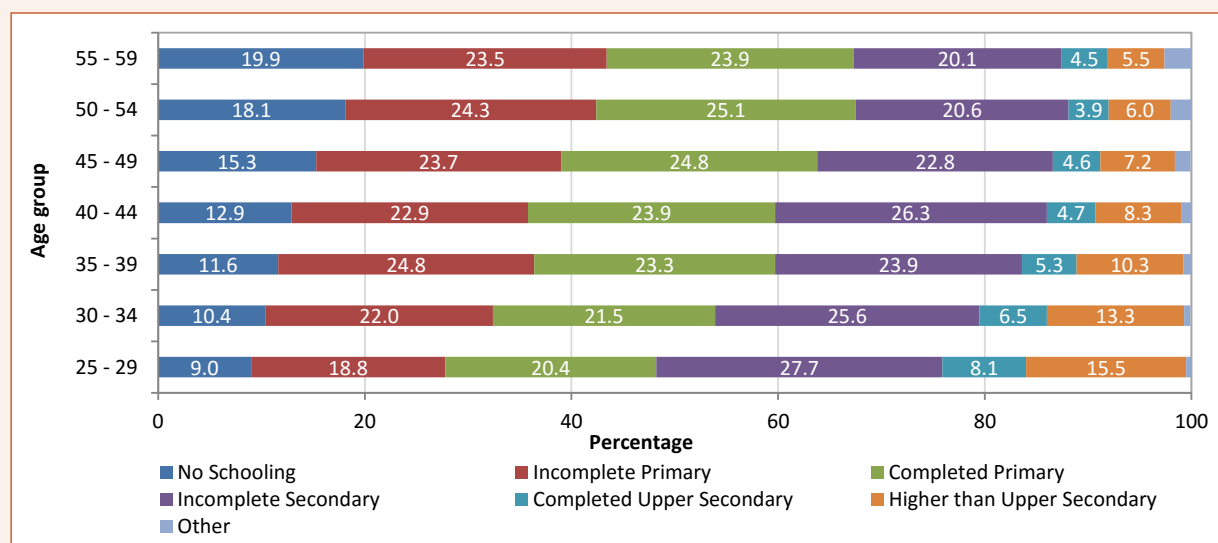
adults, half had no schooling or only had primary schooling. This figure of 48 per cent compares with 67 per cent who received primary schooling or less among 55 to 59 year olds; a somewhat disappointing improvement over 30 years.

Myanmar's future depends to a large extent on the education and skills of young workers. The good news is that nearly one-quarter of those in their late 20s have had at least 11 years of schooling and therefore should possess sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to contribute to the economic modernization of the country.

However, a larger proportion of young people, about 30 per cent, never attended school or failed to complete primary schooling. Their ability to absorb new ideas and technologies for improving agricultural productivity or for participating effectively in other sectors of the economy may be limited. Expansion of technical and vocational training for young adults might be considered to raise their skills for a modernizing economy. The acquisition of new skills should not necessarily end on leaving school.

According to one international comparison, the educational status of Myanmar's adult population lags well behind Malaysia and the Philippines, where those aged 25 years or more have over nine years of schooling, on average, compared with 6.9 years in Myanmar. But Myanmar's population is better educated than those in Cambodia (4.2 years) and Lao PDR (5.2 years). See Table 1 below.

**Figure 2: School completion rates by age**



**Table 1: Mean years of schooling among adult population aged 25 years and above, circa 2010**

Country	Mean years of schooling
Singapore	11.04
Malaysia	9.89
Philippines	9.27
Indonesia	7.96
Thailand	7.51
Myanmar	6.88
Lao PDR	5.18
Cambodia	4.18

**Source:** Lutz, Wolfgang, Butz, William and KC, Samir. "World Population and Human Capital in the Twenty-first Century". Oxford University Press, 2014.

### School attendance: significant problems of avoidance and dropout rates need to be addressed.

Among six year olds, who should be at primary school, only 75 per cent were at school. This low figure shows that there is a problem of late entry into school, which needs to be addressed. School attendance rises to 83 per cent among seven year olds and the level remains above 80 per cent until the age of 11. Though the official age for starting secondary school is 10, it is likely that many 10 and 11 year olds are still at primary school, either because they started school late or because they are repeating grades.

After the age of 11 school attendance drops steadily to 36 per cent by the age of 16. This decline reflects high dropout rates at the end of primary school and at the end of lower secondary school.

Differences between rural and urban attendance

are very small between the ages of 6 and 12. This similarity indicates good access to primary schools for rural children. But, after the age of 12, a gap develops with higher attendance in urban areas. Geographical access to secondary schools in rural areas needs further investigation and improvement.

Under the new education policy, five years of primary school will start at the age of six, followed by four years of lower secondary and two years of upper secondary, ending at the age of 17. The aim is to make primary school compulsory and free and to increase secondary school attendance.

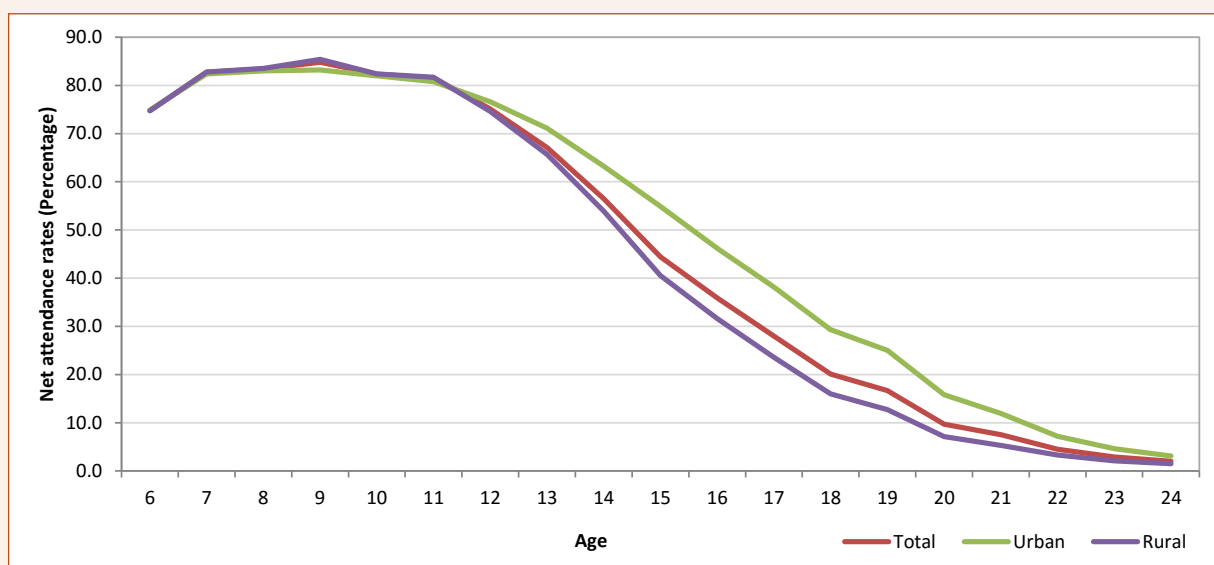
At the moment, some 16 per cent to 18 per cent of children who should be at primary school are not attending and the problem is just as serious in urban areas as in rural areas. The total number of non-attenders aged 7 to 11 (the main primary school age band) was 806,000. Of these, 544,000 (or two-thirds) dropped out and 262,000 had never even started school.

To achieve universal primary schooling, strategies for both those children who drop out and those who never attended will be needed. This will require understanding the reasons. The common reasons in most cases include costs, lack of interest, pressure from families to contribute to household budgets and help with domestic chores, and ill health.

Financial reasons may prove to be crucial. Children who never attended school tend to come from the poorest households. A little over 37 per cent of boys and 32 per cent of girls aged 10 to 15 years who were not at school were already working for the family or for a private employer.

Enforcing compulsory primary schooling and raising secondary school attendance may be easier to achieve if the needs of many families for children's

**Figure 3: School attendance rates by age**



contributions on family farms and for household duties are also acknowledged. Much depends on the length of the school day and perhaps some flexibility would help in rural areas to adapt school hours in seasons when agricultural work is most intense. To encourage secondary school attendance, financial help for the poorest families to reduce the costs of travel, uniforms and equipment should be considered.

### **Women are the high achievers at university: they need job opportunities to match**

Between the ages of 6 and 14, school attendance levels for boys and girls are almost identical. However, between the ages of 15 and 20, girls are slightly more likely to be students than boys. The difference suggests that more girls are progressing to university and college than boys. This impression is confirmed by the fact that, among 25 to-29 year olds, 17 per cent of young women have some post-secondary education compared with 14 per cent of young men. The greater participation of women than men in tertiary education is not a recent development. Similar differences are apparent among those aged 30 to 44 years.

Adult men are more likely than women to have received vocational training and possess a college or undergraduate diploma. But women are clearly the high achievers. Of the 1.9 million adults who are university graduates, 59 per cent are women and this figure rises to 63 per cent of the 116,000 with a postgraduate degree.

The reasons for this gender disparity are unclear. In many countries women are more diligent students, less likely to be distracted by pleasure seeking. The customary late age at marriage in Myanmar favours prolonged tertiary education for women and perhaps,

in a labour market that still may favour men, they may feel more need for higher formal qualifications than men. Whatever the mix of reasons, there is no policy issue here that needs to be addressed, except to ensure that young women have appropriate job opportunities. Societies benefit from an abundance of well-qualified women who hold high positions.

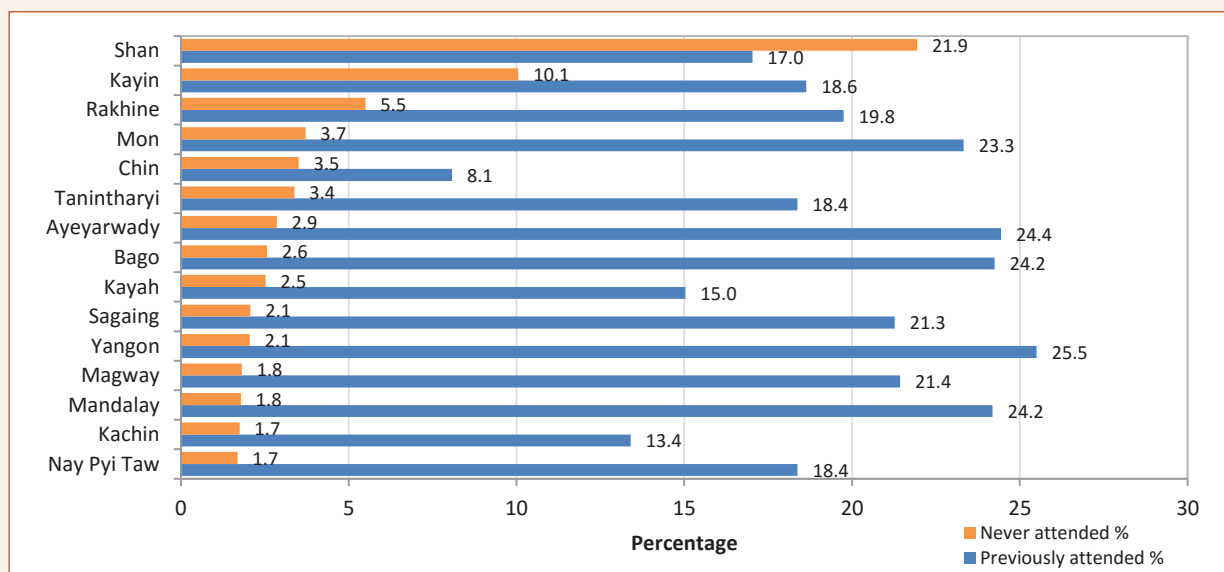
### **Children from the poorest families are at a big educational disadvantage**

A strong link between educational attainment and household wealth is apparent. Over 50 per cent of adults living in the wealthiest one-fifth of households had completed secondary school or attained higher qualifications and only 7.5 per cent had never been to school. By contrast, less than 4 per cent of those living in the poorest one-fifth of households had completed secondary school or had attained higher qualifications, while 30 per cent had never attended school.

This link between wealth and education is inevitable because education is the pathway to high-income jobs and prosperity. However, it is a concern that children from wealthy backgrounds have a large educational advantage over those from poor backgrounds. Among those aged 5 to 29 years, 38 per cent of those who never attended school came from the poorest one-fifth of households but only 8 per cent came from the richest one-fifth.

Ideally, progression through the educational system should be determined by ability and the application of children themselves and not by family background. Though this ideal can never be fully achieved, policies to make schooling opportunities more equal between the rich and poor are possible, for instance by investing more in education in poor districts than in richer ones.

Figure 4: School attendance by State/Region



### Some historic regional inequalities have been remedied but others remain

States/Regions differ greatly in the literacy and educational levels of the adult population. At the Union level 89.5 per cent of adults can read and write but the level is much lower in Shan (65 per cent), Kayin (74 per cent), Chin (79 per cent), and Kayah (82 per cent). Similarly, the percentage of adults who never completed primary schooling is highest in Shan (62 per cent), Kayin (57 per cent), and Rakhine (51 per cent).

Among the population aged 15 years and above, men are over 10 per cent more likely to be literate than women in Chin, Rakhine and Shan. In all states/regions, urban literacy is higher than rural literacy. This contrast is most pronounced in Shan, Kayah, Chin and Mon.

Much more relevant for today's policy is current school attendance. In the country as a whole, 73 per cent of children aged 7 to 15 years were attending school in 2014. Remarkably, the attendance level is

exceptionally high; 22 per cent in Shan and 10 per cent in Kayin. These high levels of school avoidance probably reflect a lack of access in rural areas. A programme to build new schools and to recruit teachers may be needed.

A comparison of adult literacy and education with current school attendance shows that remarkable progress can be made, as has happened in Chin and Kayah. It also reveals continuing disadvantages in Shan and Kayin which require special attention.

### Population trends will favour educational expansion

For the past 50 years, the school-age population aged 6 to 17 years old in Myanmar has been increasing, thus making progress more difficult. However, between now and 2030, this population is expected to fall from 12 million to 11.8 million and to 10.7 million by 2050. This fall provides a great opportunity to achieve universal primary schooling, to raise secondary school enrolment, and to improve the quality of teaching.

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