

# Reality or rhetoric: The role of education in achieving gender equality in Myanmar

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## Abstract

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres recently declared gender equality to be ‘the unfinished business of our time’.<sup>1</sup> Equality of opportunity, regardless of sex, seems a clear and accepted goal for policymakers. However, in most countries, progress remains slow. This report explores how, and why, some strategies for pursuing gender equality are failing to achieve progress.

For decades, education has been promoted as an invaluable tool for promoting gender equality.<sup>2</sup> However, research into education in Myanmar challenges this assumption. Women outnumber men at every stage of education, yet remain economically repressed and politically underrepresented. Our research explores why traditional education reform is failing the women of Myanmar. Through policy analyses and interviews conducted in schools, communities, and political arenas, we investigate the disjunction between increased participation of women in education and improvements in post-education outcomes. By affirming existing gender inequality, the current education system is creating an unbroken cycle of discriminatory attitudes and outcomes.

We recommend integrated reform of Myanmar’s school curriculum, examination structure, teacher training, and resourcing. By redefining children’s experience in school, Myanmar’s government can transform education into a tool to empower, not repress, the women it shapes.

*This research was conducted on an ANU undergraduate study tour to Myanmar in 2019. All views expressed are those of the authors.*

## I Introduction

Gender equality in Myanmar entails a complex interplay between historically embedded norms and contemporary outcomes. This report explores the relationship between education and gender equality in Myanmar through qualitative research conducted in Nyaungshwe Township in Shan State. We evaluated the accessibility, quality, and outcomes of education to determine whether the education system is failing to result in positive long-term development, and, if so, why. Through primary research and contemporary data, this paper resolves disparities in previous literature which displayed inconsistent accounts of the state of education in Myanmar.

This report begins by outlining Myanmar’s pedagogic history. We then examine the existing literature, analysing how our data corroborates or contradicts previous hypotheses. Our research identified four areas in which education is actively contributing to women’s economic and social disempowerment: a gendered curriculum, lack of teaching of transferable skills, opportunity cost of girls staying in school compared to their male counterparts, and bureaucratic barriers to implementing reform. Future reform should leverage existing high levels of participation by women in education to achieve cultural change

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Secretary-General declares “time is now” for gender equality, women’s empowerment, in remarks on international day’, *United Nations meetings coverage and press releases*, 8 March 2018, [www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm18928.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm18928.doc.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Azza Karam, ‘Education as the pathway towards gender equality’, *United Nations*, accessed 4 October 2020, [www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/education-pathway-towards-gender-equality](http://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/education-pathway-towards-gender-equality).

through curriculum reform, examination reform, teacher training, and work transition programs. This will lead to improved outcomes for women, creating a more sustainable future for Myanmar long-term.

## II History of education

Understanding the state of education in Myanmar requires close reference to its unique history. Prior to British colonisation, Myanmar’s education system was primarily administered through a predominantly male monastic education system.<sup>3</sup> Female education was considered ‘unimportant or, at best, secondary’.<sup>4</sup> In 1868, the new colonial administration introduced a co-educational system of secular schooling.<sup>5</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, female representation in educational institutions saw a dramatic growth. By the mid-twentieth century, Myanmar was regarded as having one of the leading education systems in South-East Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, the imposition of military rule in 1962 drastically reduced the quality of schooling.<sup>7</sup> Schools were starved of resources and curriculum reform replaced critical thinking with rote, military-controlled, learning. Throughout the regime’s rule, girls’ participation in education was low.<sup>8</sup>

In 2008, the newly formed government announced their intention to make quality education widely available once again. Article 28 of the new Constitution stipulated the Republic of the Union of Myanmar would ‘strive to improve education’<sup>9</sup> and ‘implement a modern education system’.<sup>10</sup> Between 2008 and 2013, a number of sweeping education reforms were implemented, including the ‘Higher Education Law’ and ‘National Education Law’.<sup>11</sup> Education expenditure more than doubled by 2017.<sup>12</sup> The number of girls in education began to climb, with current data showing women outnumbering men at every level of education.<sup>13</sup> Table 1 describes the 2018/19 data released by the Ministry of Education indicating higher levels of educational participation by women at every level of schooling.

Table 1: Table of education enrolment and completion rates, 2017/18.

Education indicator	Male (% total age population)	Female (% total age population)	Total (% total age population)
Primary net enrolment	97	97	97
Middle net enrolment	61	66	64
High net enrolment	41	50	46
Primary level completion rate	66	69	67
Middle level completion rate	74	81	77

<sup>3</sup> Martin Hayden and Richard Martin, ‘Recovery of the education system in Myanmar’, *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)* 2, no. 2 (2013): 47–57.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth King and Andrew Mason, *Engendering development: gender equality in rights, resources, and voice*, Policy Research Reports (The World Bank, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Hayden and Martin, ‘Recovery of the education system in Myanmar’.

<sup>6</sup> Hayden and Martin, ‘Recovery of the education system in Myanmar’.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Burma: Education for sale’, *Asian Human Rights Commission*, 21 June 2010, [www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-ART-063-2010/](http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-ART-063-2010/).

<sup>8</sup> Sara Olk, ‘Recent improvements to girls’ education in Myanmar’, *The Borgen Project*, 19 June 2018, [borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-myanmar/](http://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-myanmar/).

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Article 28(d) (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

<sup>11</sup> Union Parliament (Union of the Republic of Myanmar), *National Education Law*, Published Law No. 41 (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Olk, ‘Recent improvements to girls’ education’.

<sup>13</sup> Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring women, colonialism, and modernity in Burma*. Southeast Asia: Politics, meaning, and memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011).

High level completion rate	32	35	34
Primary level retention rate	68	71	69
Middle level retention rate	78	82	80
High level retention rate	77	89	83

Source: 'Myanmar 2018 education budget brief', Ministry of Finance and Planning (Myanmar) (Ministry of Education and UNICEF, 2018).

### III Secondary research

Policymakers worldwide generally assume that increasing the number of women in education improves post-educational outcomes, increasing labour force participation, employment, and improving political representation.<sup>14</sup> However, in Myanmar, the high levels of female participation in education outlined above coexist with systemic economic and political disempowerment.

An analysis of secondary literature showed a clear picture of the existing inequality. Labour force participation is 55 per cent for women, as opposed to 83 per cent for men.<sup>15</sup> A report by the McKinsey Global Institute found that when women do engage in the workforce, their employment is concentrated in lower growth sectors and lower-paying jobs, with 3.2 times more women than men in clerical or administrative support roles.<sup>16</sup> Even within the same industries, an Oxfam study found that women earned 20 per cent less than men for the same work.<sup>17</sup> For example, *The Irrawaddy* found the average daily wage for a male farm worker was 3,000 to 3,500 kyats, as compared with 2,000 to 2,500 kyats for a female farm labourer.<sup>18</sup> This is the case despite women typically spending longer in school and graduating with higher qualifications.

Recognition of these discrepancies began with a seminal report by the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development and UNICEF (the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) in 2012, which explored anecdotal evidence from parents describing cultural traditions surrounding gender.<sup>19</sup> The report proposed that the opportunity cost of paid labour for boys is higher than it is for girls, which leads to boys dropping out of school to pursue a more immediate income. A similar report by the Borgen Project asserted that higher education retention rates for women reflected the greater ease men had in finding employment, which caused them to leave schooling.<sup>20</sup> Finally, a recent report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes:

considering the gender parity in enrolment at the primary and secondary school levels and the larger proportion of women in higher education, the differences in the male–female labour participation rates and women's underemployment are concerns.<sup>21</sup>

The ADB called for more rigorous explanation and policy development to better optimise women's transition between education and the workplace, but made no specific recommendations to this effect.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, Save the Children (UK) and Qatar Government, *The central role of education in the millennium development goals* (UNESCO, 2010), [unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190587](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190587).

<sup>15</sup> *The global gender gap report*, Insight report (World Economic Forum, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Heang Chhor et al., *Myanmar's moment: Unique opportunities, major challenges* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Jodie Thorpe, 'Delivering prosperity in Myanmar's dry zone' (Oxfam briefing paper, 24 August 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Samantha Michaels, 'Myanmar women in agriculture face pay disparity, discrimination', *The Irrawaddy*, 30 August 2014, [www.irrawaddy.com/business/burmese-women-agriculture-face-pay-disparity-discrimination.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/business/burmese-women-agriculture-face-pay-disparity-discrimination.html).

<sup>19</sup> The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development and UNICEF, *Situation analysis of children in Myanmar 2012* (Nay Pyi Taw: UNICEF, July 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Oik, 'Recent improvements to girls' education'.

<sup>21</sup> Asian Development Bank et al., *Gender equality and women's rights in Myanmar: A situation analysis* (Mandaluyong City, Metro Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2016) 40.

<sup>22</sup> Asian Development Bank et al., *Gender equality and women's rights in Myanmar*, 201.

Ultimately, the existing secondary literature consistently fails to explain the paradoxical state of education and gender equality in Myanmar. By providing primary research and contemporary data, this paper aims to resolve this gap, answering the question: Why is education failing the women of Myanmar?

## IV Our research

Our research was conducted through qualitative data collection, primarily in Shan State. Data collection included interviews with a range of subjects, including families, teachers, and academics, and non-government organisations (NGOs). These were conducted through home visits, school visits, panel interviews with academics, and meetings with local politicians, community leaders, and international representatives.

### Research methods

Questions targeted each stakeholder's experience with education, with the aim of exploring implicit and explicit factors affecting the translation of education to long-term empowerment.

#### *Families*

Twelve interviews were conducted with families. Parents were asked about the availability of education, their perception of its quality, and any differences between current and their own educational experiences. Students were asked to discuss their experiences of education, barriers to attendance, and goals for the future.

Questions included:

- How important is education to you?
- What percentage of your income is spent on costs related to your children's schooling?
- Do you consider school to be affordable for your family?
- What career do you/your child want to pursue?

#### *Teachers*

Interviews were conducted with teachers from a primary school in Hsison and the Mudita Foundation (monastic educational institution). Teachers were asked to provide perspectives on girls' engagement in class, learning methods, and safety at school.

Questions included:

- How many girls leave school (for any period of time) to work? How many boys?
- How many students do you have enrolled at the school? How many regularly attend?
- How many teachers work at this school?
- Has the content you teach changed since 2008 and, if so, how?
- What are your thoughts on the current course content and teaching methods?

#### *Academics/policymakers*

Academics and policymakers from Taunggyi University and the University of Yangon were interviewed to gain an academic perspective on Myanmar's education policy. These interviews gave insight into the political landscape of educational reform, and the experience of those advocating for further changes.

Questions included:

- Why is the implementation of the 2012 Comprehensive Education Sector Review so far behind schedule?
- What is the greatest challenge facing policymakers in implementing these reforms?
- What feedback mechanisms are in place for staff and students to comment on these reforms?

- Do you see any gendered norms within tertiary education enrolment?

### NGOs

NGOs including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Gender and Development Institute, and ICEI (the Italian *Istituto Cooperazione Economica Internazionale*, or Institute of International Economic Cooperation) were interviewed about their understanding of recent policy reform and barriers to future development.

Questions included:

- What are the greatest barriers faced in accessing education?
- How does Myanmar's education system differ from others in South-East Asia?
- Is gender stereotyping present in Myanmar's education system and how?

## Findings

### *Access to education*

Consensus throughout interviews with teachers was that education was broadly accessible, particularly since primary schooling was made free in the 2010 constitutional reforms. However, many parents still reported financial barriers which prohibited access to high school. These included the cost of resources and the opportunity cost of lost working hours from their child while at school. Converse to secondary research outlined above, higher opportunity cost of education for boys meant they were more likely to leave school to join the workforce. Most parents believed the difficulty of financing education disproportionately affected boys, with boys more likely to leave school to support their families. Notably, lack of interest in education by children was cited as the predominant reason for dropping out, whether or not affordability was also an issue.

Even where education was accessible, higher levels of schooling were seen as a relative luxury and thus a low priority for poorer families. Despite valuing education 'very highly', parents self-identifying as of lower socio-economic status ranked stable income and access to food as being of greater importance than education. Those parents who attributed a high value to education, when asked why, reasoned that for girls a higher level of education was 'impressive', 'good for the family', and 'important for the future'.<sup>23</sup> When asked about their male children, education was 'sometimes helpful' if 'good for [a] job'.<sup>24</sup> Broadly, education for girls seemed to be valued as a social tool and class indicator, rather than a reflection of knowledge.

### *Quality of education*

Three main elements were discovered, within the education system, which separated and disadvantaged girls. Firstly, the curriculum itself was implicitly gendered. For example, an English workbook for kindergarten students depicted female illustrations alongside verbs like 'cook', 'clean', 'eat'.<sup>25</sup> Traditionally male activities, including farming and sport, were depicted with images of men.<sup>26</sup> From a young age, children are associating these actions and concepts with particular genders. Interviewees from the Gender and Development Institute and Norwegian Refugee Centre both reported that this gender stereotyping was commonplace in the curriculum across age groups.<sup>27</sup> Both groups expressed concern that exposure to this seemingly trivial stereotyping at such a young age provides the basis for children's world view.

Secondly, interviews indicated that the content learned in education did not contribute to the development of workplace-relevant skills. All respondents reported that, even at a tertiary level, the skills gained in education were rarely used in the workforce. Only two respondents worked in the

<sup>23</sup> Group interview with parents from Hsison, 29 June 2019.

<sup>24</sup> M Minn Thu, interview, 2 July 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Headmistress of primary school in Hsison, Southern Shan, interview, 1 July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Gender and Development Institute interviews, 15 July 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Gender and Development Institute and Norwegian Refugee Council interviews, 14 July 2019.

occupations they studied at university, both teachers.<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates how the skills students learn in school are not helpful to advancing graduates' careers or increasing income potential.

Instead, teaching staff encouraged students to look for employment based on their gender, as opposed to academic qualification. Interviews with staff members at schools revealed a focus on encouraging girls to pursue traditionally female-dominant industries like teaching. In contrast, the teachers felt boys were more suited to politics or management.<sup>29</sup> Promoting these ideas throughout the education system leads to the social conditioning of women that pushes them to pursue low-income careers.

Thirdly, as a consequence, higher education did not consistently correlate to a higher future income. For most low- to mid-socio-economic status families, occupations such as farming yielded the greatest returns. One parent stated she had a university degree in history but returned to farming for a higher salary. Respondents typically spoke of their time in tertiary education disparagingly, their expectation of future reward for their hard work unfulfilled.<sup>30</sup> Even when they possessed the qualifications of higher education, girls did not expect to receive higher incomes. This supported secondary research which reported extensive discrepancies in wage rates between female and male-dominated industries.

### *Effect of reform*

Questions with a policy focus were asked in each interview to gauge the efficacy of recent reforms. No parents interviewed were aware of curriculum changes having occurred. Responses from teachers often mentioned curriculum changes aimed at promoting higher level critical thinking skills but identified their lack of effect. However, no evidence of these changes was observed in textbooks, the majority of which were published before 2010. Furthermore, classroom observation revealed teaching which still centred on rote learning.

Local politicians and academics were asked about barriers they felt existed in implementing educational reform. These interviews revealed that a lack of adequate curriculum review system, and lack of regional nuance in educational administration performed by a central government, were central barriers to effective reform.<sup>31</sup> Besides Myanmar's Ministry of Education, there are 12 other ministries that are responsible for the provision of higher education.<sup>32</sup> Miscommunication between these ministries, and a lack of responsibility taken by any individual institution, was reported to create issues in policy implementation. One academic also raised the issue of competing priorities, as resources continue to be directed away from education due to a political focus on conflict resolution and infrastructural development.<sup>33</sup>

### *Summary of results*

Our results revealed girls consistently had equal access to, and high levels of participation in, education. However, this education was of low quality and perpetuated traditional social attitudes towards gender roles. Paradoxically, jobs which require higher education attract little prestige and are poorly paid. Careers which do not require university education, including politics and farming, attract higher pay and are typically male-dominated. These outcomes affected gender inequality by creating low-income, female-dominated industries, such as finance and teaching. This meant women's educational qualifications are not contributing to their long-term empowerment, or gender equality more broadly. These trends seem to remain from a historical legacy wherein professions such as law and finance were part of largely irrelevant institutions. With the rule of law controlled by an authoritarian power, and corruption rife in finance and administration, these roles were redundant.

This phenomenon has a dual effect. Firstly, it means the long-held belief that education results in long-term economic empowerment, in this context, is false. More insidiously, it means that the longer girls

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<sup>28</sup> Group interview with parents from Hsison; Celine Margontier-Haynes, 2 July 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Headmistress of primary school in Hsison, interview.

<sup>30</sup> Group interview with parents from Hsison; teacher from the Mudita Foundation (monastic school), interview, 7 February 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Managing challenges during Myanmar's transition, education reform and innovation conference, University of Yangon, 5–6 July 2019.

<sup>32</sup> 'Appendix 8.1: Structure of educational institutions in Myanmar', in *Dictatorship, disorder and decline in Myanmar*, ed. Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Canberra: ANU Press 2008), [press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p102401/mobile/ch08s08.html](http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p102401/mobile/ch08s08.html).

<sup>33</sup> Professors from Taunggyi University, interview, 30 June 2019.

remain 'stuck' in school, the less they are earning compared to their male counterparts. A high proportion of boys, typically in rural areas, drop out at the end of primary school to enter the workforce, often in a trade or on their family's farm. This creates an economic gap between the sexes before they even reach adulthood. Thus, the barriers to effective education in Myanmar do not lie in the issue of access, but rather in the quality of the curriculum. The need for policy reform predominantly centres around improving the quality of the curriculum, towards more vocational training.

Secondly, better job outcomes for women can be ensured by teaching of workplace-relevant skills, increasing the utility of higher education qualifications. This can be used to incentivise girls to pursue careers which use their educational qualifications, hopefully leading to increased prestige and greater income opportunities in these industries long-term.

## Limitations

### *Barriers to information*

One limitation faced was the lack of continuous data. A lack of data collection throughout the military-controlled periods in the latter half of the nineteenth century has resulted in little statistical understanding of education, gender equality, or the intersection of the two. Similarly, the lack of access afforded to NGOs and civil society organisations has resulted in a lack of comprehensive understanding of education throughout this time. This lack of comparable quantitative data makes tracking developments in education or gender equality difficult.

### *Subjectivity*

One limitation faced was the subjective nature of interviews and the value-based nature of our enquiries, including questions which asked respondents to define the importance they awarded to differing priorities. These value judgements are hard to measure and make comparison between respondents difficult. Furthermore, all interview subjects were aware of the purpose of this research project. Those who volunteered to be involved in the project were arguably more likely to be interested in education themselves. They may be families for whom education is valued highly and warrants discussion.

### *Translation*

The majority of interviews were conducted in Burmese and Burmese research assistants were used for translation. This process is subject to misinterpretation between all parties: researchers, research assistants, and interview subjects. Particularly as the assistants were untrained and inexperienced in professional translation, the internal biases of research assistants themselves may be evident in their translations. Further, their relay of relevant questions to respondents likely lacked appreciation for the nuances of the questions if they had been asked in English. Finally, aspects of an interviewee's response were sometimes repeated in order to better explain it in English. This had the effect of emphasising some aspects of a response, which may have affected how the overall response was interpreted.

## Addressing these limitations

Techniques were developed throughout the research project to maximise its reliability, accuracy, and validity. To minimise interpretative misunderstandings, multiple questions on similar subject matters were asked. If responses differed dramatically from the same respondent, it was clear one of these questions had not been understood. Similarly, the use of multiple data points, including teachers, parents, and students, on similar topics allowed discrepancies in perspective to be revealed where not based on facts. For example, the same question regarding the cost of schooling, directed to families versus politicians, has very different responses. This ensured these opinions were evaluated as perspective, rather than fact. Once identified, areas of high subjectivity could be examined further through secondary research and investigation of statistical data. Triangulation using mixed methods of primary and secondary data sources allowed claims to be more accurately verified.

## V Policy proposal

Our research found two main areas where social attitudes inhibit progress towards gender equality: the education system and the workplace. Sustainable improvement will require social change in both of these sectors. Analysis of the drivers of attitudinal change has been the subject of extensive research,<sup>34</sup> and a thorough list of recommendations in this regard will require further research.

The following recommendations target areas in which government policy has the power to effect substantive and lasting change. Through curriculum development, examination reform, and teacher training, the government can ensure children are exposed to a balanced and equitable understanding of gender roles throughout their schooling. This should be supported by updated resources, and gender sensitivity throughout the National Education Policy. These changes target the root cause of discriminatory attitudes to promote broader social change. This social change can drive development across multiple sectors, including gender equality and education, resulting in positive outcomes throughout.

### Recommendations

Our research shows that engendering sustainable social change requires more than just parity in educational participation. Improving outcomes requires thoughtful development of the education itself. Curriculum reform leverages existing high levels of participation in education to ensure improvements in post-education outcomes. This is necessary both to remove existing gender stereotyping and ensure that the education system fulfills its role as a place to learn work-related skills.

#### *Curriculum reform*

The curriculum, as it stands, focuses on rote learning, with emphasis placed on memorisation and repetition.<sup>35</sup> While this matches the current format of the national matriculation (end of high school) exam, it does not support learning of skills beneficial in the workplace. Instead, students fail to learn critical thinking skills or how to apply their knowledge in a real-world environment. In Brazil and Uganda, the expansion of subject choice and introduction of practical components to provide a more balanced curriculum has led to increased school retention and better educational outcomes.<sup>36</sup> This knowledge should be incorporated in education reform policies in Myanmar.

The establishment of the National Education Law (NEL)<sup>37</sup> in 2014 and the formation of the National Curriculum Committee (NCC)<sup>38</sup> in 2016 indicates the government has recognised the deficiencies in their education system, and steps are being taken to make this change. However, many of the weaknesses found in the Comprehensive Education Sector Review in 2012 (CESR), preceding these laws, have not been addressed in the NEL. Gender-specific recommendations made in the CESR, such as autonomous training programs which target professional development for women, were never adopted, seemingly due to lack of political will, despite their potential benefits.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, curriculum reform recommendations in the NEL remain years behind schedule.<sup>40</sup> Implementation of these reforms must be accelerated in line with those of comparable regional partners. However, better consultative mechanisms are required to ensure reform is effective. Lack of

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Rising tide: Gender equality and cultural change around the world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Headmistress of primary school in Hsione, Southern Shan, interview.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Herz and Gene B Sperling, *What works in girls' education: Evidence and policies from the developing world* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), 79.

<sup>37</sup> Union Parliament, *National Education Law*.

<sup>38</sup> *Globalization and living together: The challenges for educational content in Asia* (Final Report of the Sub-Regional Course on Curriculum Development, New Delhi, India, 9–17 March 1999) 136.

<sup>39</sup> Union Parliament, *National Education Law*.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Kean, 'Inside the National Education Strategic Plan', *Frontier Myanmar*, 29 March 2017, [www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/inside-the-national-education-strategic-plan/](http://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/inside-the-national-education-strategic-plan/).



collaboration in curriculum development has consistently antagonised student groups and staff unions.<sup>41</sup> Consultation programs should be established to facilitate more effective dialogue between the NCC, teachers, and students. Contributions from students and teachers would ensure that the new curriculum truly addresses existing concerns and works effectively to improve the current system. Reevaluating and reassessing the curriculum is the first step towards improving the quality of the education system and transforming it into a powerful asset. Implementation of these reforms will ensure Myanmar's workforce is able to remain domestically and internationally competitive.

### *Transition-to-work programs*

Transition-to-work programs should be developed to complement this new curriculum. Janet Raynor developed an effective mechanism for improving post-education outcomes for women in Bangladesh. The policies adopt transition-to-work programs with 'an agenda of empowering girls and women, rather than merely aiming to extend existing gendered roles'.<sup>42</sup> Raynor's research indicates that an effective transition from school to work ensures that participation in education translates to employment, and long-term empowerment. Similarly, transition-to-work programs can also increase the value of graduates with higher educational attainments to their potential employers. This works to raise the profile and prestige of sectors which require higher levels of education. In the long term, this can change social attitudes surrounding the value of education, leading to positive flow-on effects for those women who have gained high levels of education.

### *Examination reform*

Current legislation has not addressed the need for changes in examination format to accompany and support curriculum reform. The current system remains fixed on knowledge-based examinations which encourage memorisation, as opposed to learning. Curriculum reform must be reinforced through new examination policies. Examinations themselves must have greater emphasis on applied learning and higher-order thinking skills, to encourage students' development in these areas. Only then will there be changes in teaching styles and technique.

### *Resources*

Textbooks and teaching resources must be reviewed and modernised. Revising textbooks to reduce the gendered nature of content will assist in promoting more equitable attitudes and reduce gender stereotyping. This involves gender-neutralising examples that don't enforce gender roles, and promoting equality in all aspects of teaching materials. Some positive steps have been taken to review textbooks in urban centres; however, the breadth of this process needs to be extended to regional areas.<sup>43</sup>

### *Teacher training*

Curriculum and examination reform must be matched by training for teachers. This training should involve increasing teachers' understanding of their role in empowering women, and how existing cultural attitudes can be counteracted. For example, in Peru, teachers' 'low expectations of girls' was targeted as a way to combat a 'cycle of low achievement [in schools] which reinforces girls' low social status'.<sup>44</sup> Inclusion of diversity and inclusion training for staff at schools helped to regulate the gender stereotyping which had previously worked to deter girls from pursuing careers in high-income sectors.

### *Gender mainstreaming*

Finally, creation of a gender-specific advisory role within the National Education Policy Commission would ensure gender mainstreaming in policy development. Although gender-disaggregated membership within the board is unavailable, pictures indicate a vast majority of male members.

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<sup>41</sup> Nobel Zaw, 'Students protest education law in downtown Yangon', *The Irrawaddy*, 14 November 2014, [www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/students-protest-education-law-downtown-rangoon.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/students-protest-education-law-downtown-rangoon.html).

<sup>42</sup> Sheila Aikman and Elaine Unterhalter, *Beyond access: Transforming policy and practice for gender equality in education* (Oxfam, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> El Thae Thae Naing, 'Textbooks to get kids to "think for themselves"', *The Myanmar Times*, 1 December 2013, [www.mmtimes.com/national-news/8919-textbooks-to-get-kids-to-think-for-themselves.html](http://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/8919-textbooks-to-get-kids-to-think-for-themselves.html).

<sup>44</sup> Aikman and Unterhalter, *Beyond access*.

Secondly, gender awareness programs should be incorporated into existing teacher training programs, to ensure conscious promotion of gender-equitable attitudes in classrooms. This will allow the development of positive and empowering cultural norms throughout the current generation. These reforms will help to combat systemic discrimination in the education system, with the goal of creating broader social change.

## VI Further research

A wide array of policy reforms will be needed to effectively address the factors perpetuating gender inequality in Myanmar's education system. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop these recommendations in consultation with local authorities, these examples illustrate the breadth of reform which is required. Already, the government's desire to bring about change is evident. So long as this momentum is maintained, ongoing development of the education sector will notably affect the state of gender equality more broadly. The evolving nature of education in Myanmar warrants consistent objective reanalysis as new policies are implemented. The relationship between gender equality and education in Myanmar is heavily complex, and certainly a subject for further research.

## VII Conclusion

It is well documented that increased gender equity can aid economic growth and sustain peace. Gender equality is also widely regarded as one of the leading indicators of development.<sup>45</sup> However, education as a tool for empowerment works only if that education is informed and well developed. For Myanmar, traditional policy approaches focusing on achieving gender equity through girls' access to education are not working. The years Burmese women spend in school are limiting, not supporting, their long-term empowerment.

However, there are some positives. High participation in education can be used to encourage gender-balanced social attitudes in younger generations. A push for change must come from national and local levels, meeting in the middle to drive progress. At a grassroots level, the communication of new ideas must come from the teachers who are currently perpetuating old, sexist stereotypes. Nationally, the government should push to raise the status of traditionally female careers, by formally recognising these inequalities and publicly committing to creating change. In practice, these commitments can be operationalised through curriculum and examination reform, teacher training, and policies which improve the prestige and financial value of tertiary qualifications.

Myanmar's complex history presents a challenge to the accepted norms of development and gender equality. Inequality persists despite high levels of educational participation for women. Solving this paradox requires solutions appropriate to Myanmar's unique sociocultural context, using close investigation of in-country realities and the development of targeted solutions, as opposed to reform based on broad assumptions. Through curriculum and examination reform, teacher training, and work transition programs, Myanmar's government can capitalise on high enrolment and use education as a tool to actively empower, not repress, the women it shapes.

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