

Issues and Opportunities for Young Women's Empowerment in Myanmar

Sandhi Governance Institute

December 2018

Knowledge-Net for a Better Word

The East Asia Institute (EAI) is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea, founded in May 2002. The EAI strives to transform East Asia into a society of nations based on liberal democracy, market economy, open society, and peace.

The EAI takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This electronic publication of EAI intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes.

Unauthorized posting of EAI documents to a non-EAI website is prohibited. EAI documents are protected under copyright law.

"Issues and Opportunities for
Young Women's Empowerment in Myanmar"
ISBN 979-11-88772-42-1 95340

Issues and Opportunities for Young Women's Empowerment in Myanmar

Sandhi Governance Institute

I. Introduction

Background

Myanmar is now in democratic transition. Historically, women's participation in politics is weak in Myanmar. Since independence, a limited number of women have taken decision-making and leading roles. Military dominance in politics explains why Myanmar's politics are so heavily dominated by men. Gender stereotypes are culturally deeply embedded. The majority of the population, including women themselves, accepts these culturally dictated gender roles. According to the 2014 Myanmar census, women are over 51% of the population in Myanmar and over 52% of people who can work are women. However, about 50% of women in that group are unemployed¹.

In a country with more than 51% women, the parliament should have enough women to voice the needs and desires of women within society and the policies and laws should reflect the needs of both the men and women in the society. The National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won the 2015 general elections, and 13.7% of the parliamentarians who won were women. However, other political parties still have fewer women MPs or candidates. During the democratic transition and development efforts of the country, it is essential for women to be properly represented in all aspects of society, particularly in political and civil society leadership.

Structural barriers such as cultural constraints and the internalization of gender roles still limit women's options when it comes to taking part in decision-making and leadership roles. There has not been a favorable environment for women to take on leadership roles, and those who are motivated and interested in becoming leaders at different levels normally don't get support, from the family to the policy level. There have been limited opportunities for women. As a result, there are many 'capacity gaps': women are less likely than men to have an education; have more limited economic opportunities than men, including lack of access to capital; and in general lack access to information and the opportunity to learn how to become effective leaders. In addition, within political and civil society organizations themselves, there are generally very limited practical provisions or opportunities for women to engage in the confidence building necessary to take on leadership roles. As Myanmar progresses into a new period of political change, it is vital that more than half the population have adequate and confident representation in the country's leadership.

¹ The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, "Thematic Report on Gender Dimensions, Census Report Volume 4-J," August 2017.

As a training and research institute, Sandhi Governance Institute aims to understand the realities of women in the community, such as the current economic and social situations of young women, the relationships between education levels and social standards as well as economic opportunities in different areas of the country. In other words, Sandhi is exploring issues and opportunities for the empowerment of young women (between the ages of 18 to 35) who are potential leaders both in the political and the development sectors of the country. Thus, research on issues and opportunities for young women's empowerment was conducted by the training participants of Sandhi's women's leadership training for young women (from 18 to 35 years old) program. These participants come from political parties and civil society organizations and through this research they sought to understand how things are going with young women in their places of origin. In assessing the current situation, participants also looked for ways the young women in these communities can be empowered effectively, either by themselves or by local and international organizations as well as the government. This empowerment will contribute to the economic development of Myanmar in the country's transition to democracy. It is expected that this report, which reviews the findings on the current situations of young women in Myanmar and offers recommendations for how to empower them, can be instrumental for policy makers as well as international and local organizations that are interested in providing effective and substantive support to empower young women in Myanmar.

Research Methodology

Sandhi Governance Institute, as a training and research institute in Myanmar, has been providing women's leadership training for young women (from 18 to 35 years old) from political parties and civil society organizations for many years. In two recent evidence-based advocacy training courses as part of Women Leadership Program (WLP) organized in 2017, the trainer and training participants decided to explore issues and opportunities of young women in their own communities to design an effective empowerment program. Thus, survey questions and social research tools were developed in the training and social research on issues and opportunities of young women's empowerment was conducted. At the end of each Women's Leadership Training Program, training participants prepared reports and presentations in Burmese as a requirement to receive their six-week long training course completion certificate. Through two such training courses, Sandhi collected data from 628 women from all over the country on their socio-economic situations. The survey was intensive and provided much information that can be used to highlight at least a snapshot of the current socio-economic situation of young women in Myanmar.

This analysis report relied on three sources of information. They are 1) desk review 2) data collected by training participants from Sandhi's women's leadership training program (quantitative and qualitative surveys, focus group discussions, interviews and PLA research in two different towns in Yangon and Bago Regional Divisions) and 3) interviews by Sandhi's WLP staff with eight selected Women's Leadership Program alumni to understand the impacts of WLP training and the challenges and opportunities for women in their communities. Detailed activities in this research are as follows:

- 1) Desk reviews, which included information and reports on women in Myanmar.
- 2) Survey questions were developed together with the Women's Leadership Program (WLP) training participants from Batches 13 and 14 in an evidence-based advocacy training course. Survey questions were pre-tested with training participants and revised based on their feedback. When the survey was ready, they made appointments to meet young women in their native towns, and phone interviews were

conducted as well, largely with their friends, relatives and acquaintances. 628 women from thirteen states and regions in Myanmar were interviewed for the survey in 2017.

In addition, Batch 13 training participants made a field visit to Thonegwa township of Yangon Regional Division and Batch 14 participants visited Phayagalay village of Bago Regional Division to hold focus group discussions and to observe the situations of women in these areas. This also allowed them to practice their social research skills. WLP training participants also conducted face-to-face interviews with women in these villages.

- 3) Finally, the profiles submitted by the Women's Leadership training participants when they applied to join the training a few years ago were reviewed, and interviews were conducted with five selected training alumni who had since become MPs or CSO leaders as well as three women who were no longer active in the party or CSOs. These interviews are used as case studies in this report.

Data and information collected from these three activities were triangulated and key observations of the report are highlighted.

Scope of the Research

This report mainly focuses on the socio-economic situation of women, especially issues and opportunities for the empowerment of young women between the ages of 18 and 35; education levels and social status; economic opportunities and challenges; and opportunities for young women to take on leadership roles within the community.

Structure of the Report

The first chapter explains the background of this report, the research methods used, the areas and scope of research conducted, and the structure of the report. Chapter 2 describes the background information of the participants interviewed, their education levels, occupations and economic activities, and discusses the general situation of women in the locations where interviews took place, as told by the women interviewed. Chapter 3 presents economic and social trends in the locations where interviews were conducted, reviewing responses to questions regarding basic health, education and gender equality as well as common social problems. This section explores whether women face any barriers to participating in social and political activities as well as the leadership roles of women in all of these activities. Chapter 4 of the report highlights key issues and opportunities identified based on data and information collected in the research, and also discusses the results from the interviews held with eight young women who are alumni of Sandhi's Women's Leadership Program to include their changes and their views on issues and opportunities for young women in their communities. The last Chapter concludes with key observations and recommendations on the empowerment of young women for the relevant policy makers and organizations.

Limitations of the Report

It should be noted that this paper cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the issues and opportunities of young women in Myanmar. Firstly, most of the training participants in Sandhi's Women's Leadership Program are from ethnic and rural areas of Myanmar, and there may therefore be selection bias affecting the participants whom they interviewed. One significant bias is that they all are from political parties and civil society organizations and at least high school graduates or university students. So those they interviewed are mostly from their circles.

Secondly, the data collection period was limited and took place within six-week long training course. At the same time, most of the data was collected via phone through survey questions. Therefore, data received from the survey could not go much deeper in this paper and there should be further studies conducted to address some of the issues identified in this research. Further research would do well to address such issues as reproductive health and the migration of young women in some areas comprehensively.

II. Profiles of Participants Interviewed

Age Range of Participants

A total of 628 women between the ages of 18 and 35 from 13 states and regional divisions in Myanmar, except for the Tanintharyi Region, were interviewed for this survey. Sixty percent of participants interviewed were between 18 and 25 years old and 40% were between 26 and 35 years old.

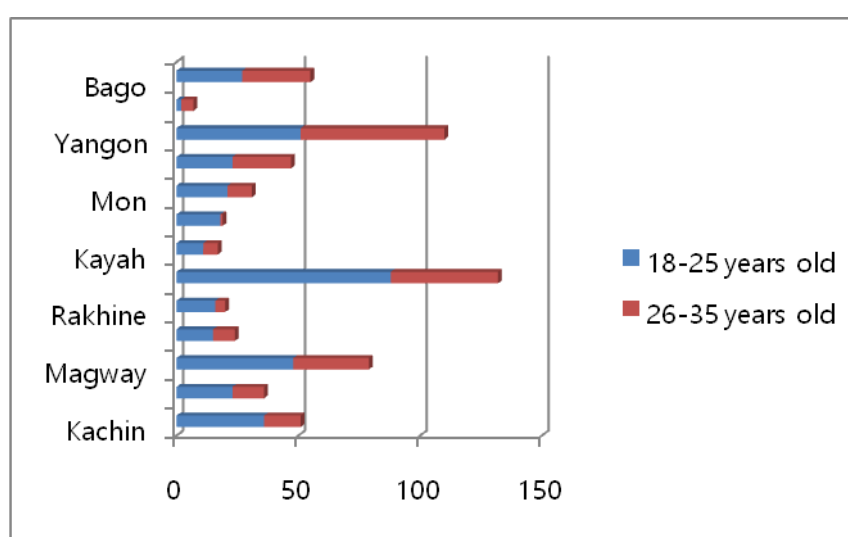
Figure 1. Map of the States and Regions of Myanmar and the Number of Participants Interviewed



Table 1. Number of Participants Interviewed

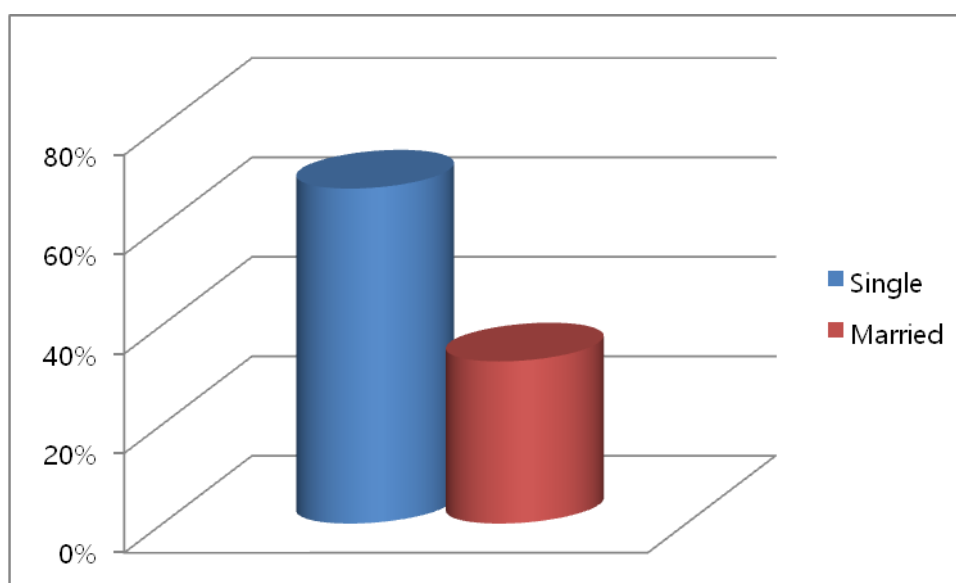
	Ka- chin	Sa- gaing	Ma- gway	Chin	Ra- khine	Shan	Kaya h	Kayi n	Mon	Ayey ar- wady	YAN - G0N	MD Y	Bago
18-25 years old	36	23	48	15	16	88	11	18	21	23	51	2	27
26-35 years old	15	13	31	9	4	44	6	1	10	24	59	5	28
Total number interviewed	51	36	79	24	20	132	17	19	31	47	110	7	55

The total number of participants interviewed in each state and region reflects the number of training participants of Sandhi's Women's Leadership Program Batches 13 and 14 except for the Bago and Yangon Regions. As WLP Batch 13 visited Thonegwa Township in Yangon Region and WLP Batch 14 made a field visit to Phayagalay Village in Bago Region, the number of participants interviewed in these two regions increased significantly because of face-to-face interviews held there. However, Shan State has three different parts – Eastern, Southern and Northern and many different ethnic groups live there. Therefore, Shan State has the largest number of total participants interviewed in the survey. There were no WLP training participants from Tanintharyi or Mandalay Regions in Batches 13 and 14. But some WLP training participants interviewed a few women from Mandalay and that's why only seven are included in the survey.

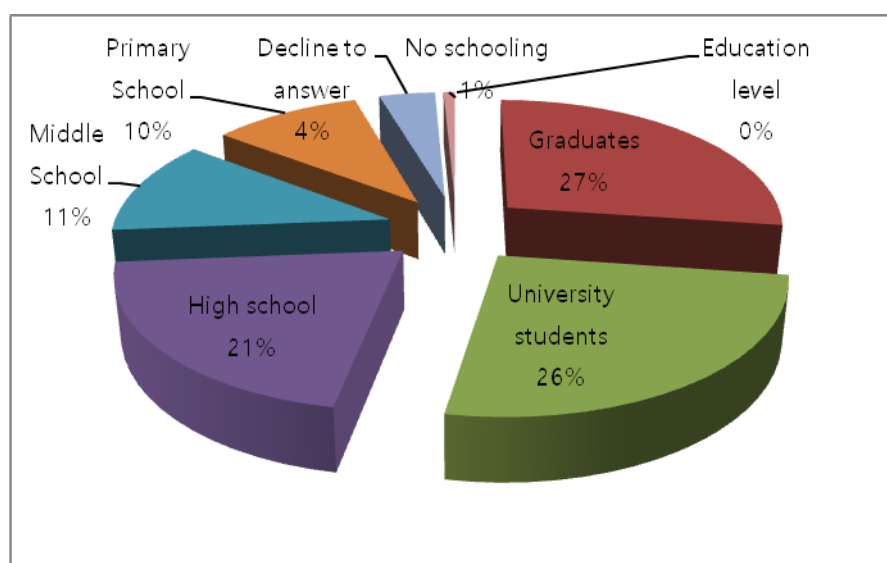
Figure 2. Number of Participants from Different Age Groups

Marital Status

Among the participants interviewed, 67% of participating women in the survey were single and 33% were married. Among the married women, about one third of them were under the age of 20 and they were from the villages that Sandhi's WLP training participants visited.

Figure 3. Marital Status of Participants Interviewed**Education Level of Participants Interviewed**

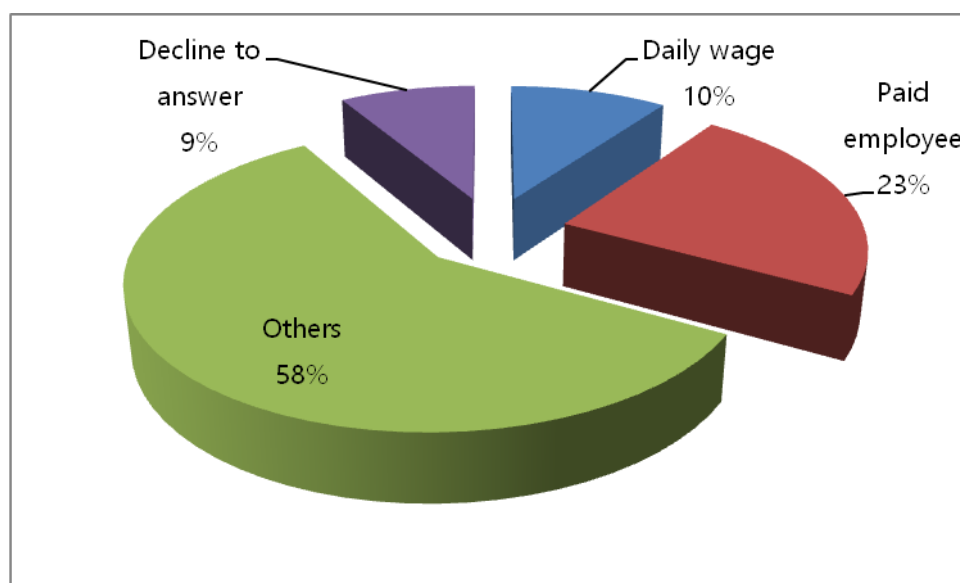
As this survey was conducted by participants in Sandhi's Women's Leadership Training program, most of the women in their networks seen in the survey were graduates or university students. Those who declined to answer and those who never attended school were mostly participants from villages in the Yangon and Bago Regional Divisions who were interviewed during field visits.

Figure 4. Education Level of Interviewed Participants

Occupations of Participants Interviewed

Among those who answered the survey, 23% were paid employees working in the government, private companies, banks, or garment factories. About 10% were working as daily waged staff on farms, at the market, or in their own houses making cheroots or engaging in other income-generating activities. More than half of those interviewed (about 58%) were vendors or working on their own farms or gardening. This is because most interviewees were from rural areas of the country. Many women in rural areas don't have many job or economic opportunities and they end up as dependents doing household chores at home.

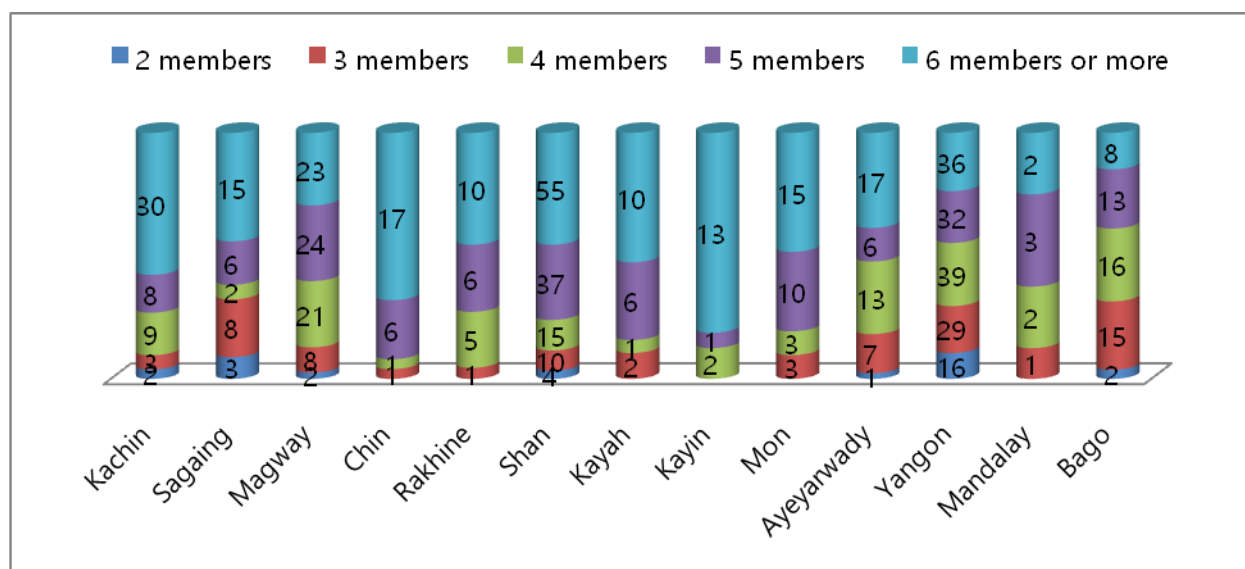
Fig 5. Occupations of Participants Interviewed



Household Size of Participants Interviewed

Among the participants interviewed, 45% from Shan State, 24% from Yangon Region, and 58% from Kachin State answered that they had more than six family members. In fact, 13 out of 16 interviewees (81%) in Kayin State had more than six family members. As shown in Figure 5, except for the Yangon, Mandalay, and Bago Regions, the majority of participants interviewed in remaining areas had six or more family members. Viewed by percentages, 81% (Kayin), 68% (Chin), 58% (Kachin), 52% (Kayah), 48% (Mon), 45% (Rakhine), 45% (Shan), 44% (Sagaing), 39% (Ayeyarwady), 29% (Magway), 25% (Mandalay), 24% (Yangon), and 15% (Bago) of participants interviewed had six or more family members. The average household size in all of the areas where participants were interviewed was six. The largest household within the communities surveyed had 15 members.

Figure 6. Household Size



One interesting finding of this survey was that the profiles of the participants are equally worth analyzing as the answers received from them.

III. Opinions on Situations of Women in their Areas

Women and Education

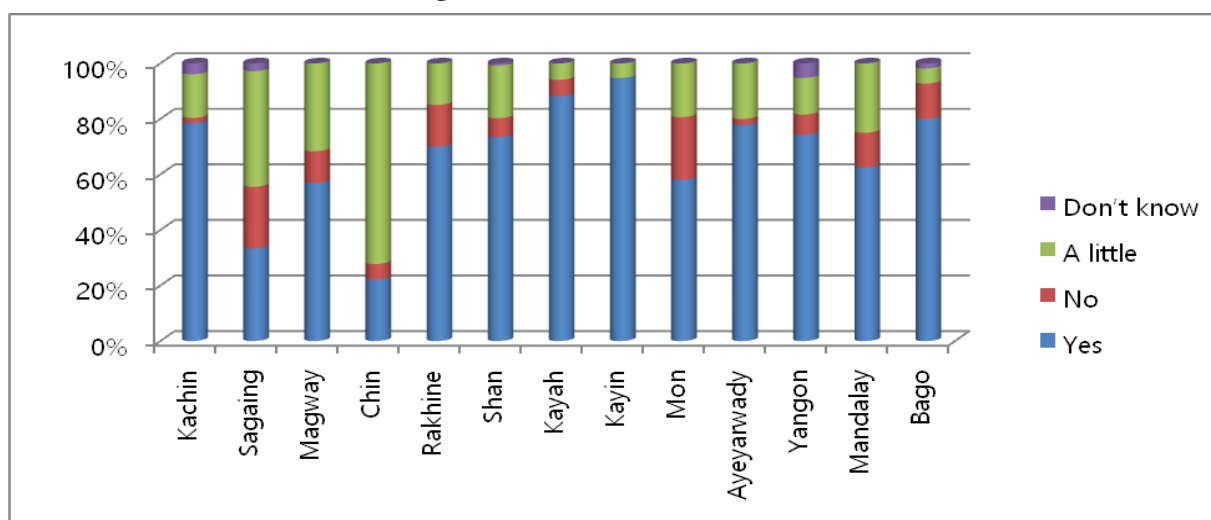
The survey given asked the following questions regarding education to understand if the women have access to education, the level of education of women in the areas surveyed, the usefulness of any education received in their daily lives, gender discrimination experiences within families, and the education system.

Educational opportunities for young women

Q. 1: Do women in your community have access to education?

Most of the participants interviewed except in Chin State stated that women in their community have access to education, referring to primary education. The education system in Myanmar does not discriminate against boys or girls in terms of access to education. However in Chin State, parents are uneducated and have little knowledge and they don't want to send their daughters to school according to the WLP training participants. The cost of education is relatively low, but for low-income families, girls have to look after their younger brothers and sisters at home and help parents with the household chores. That's why some parents decided not to send their daughters to school. About 20% of the women in Sagaing Region and Mon State answered "no" when they were asked if they had access to education.

Figure 7. Access to Education

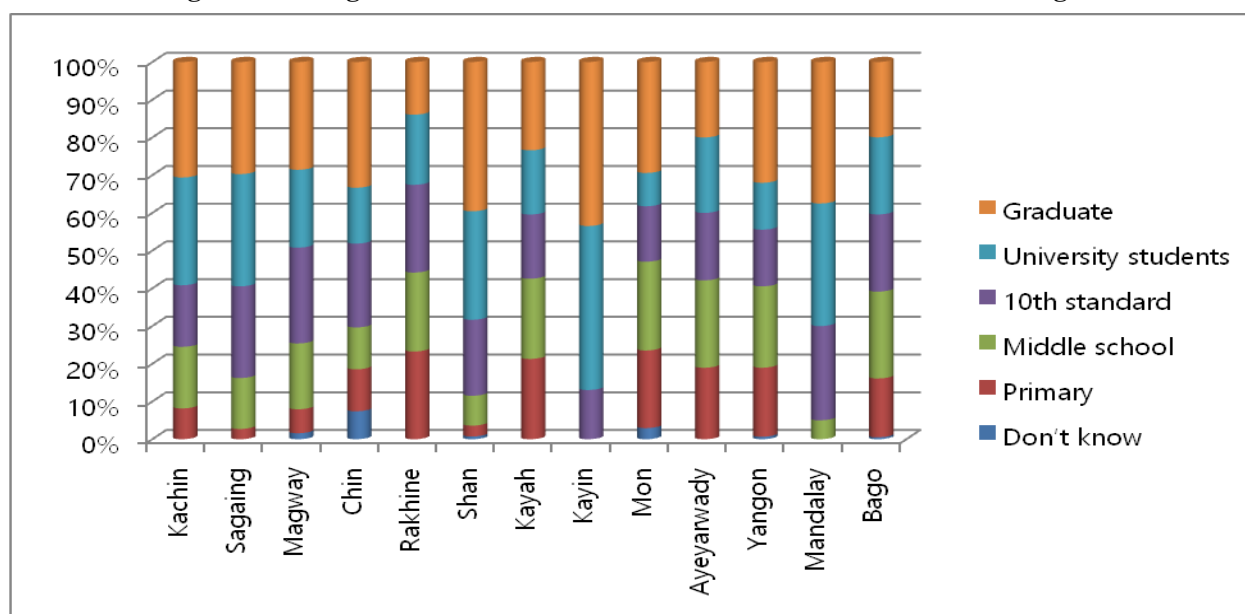


Average Education Level of Women in Areas Surveyed

This question was vulnerable to selection bias due to the characteristics of the interviewers. All of the interviewers had achieved at least the 10th standard in order to meet the selection criteria of Sandhi's Women's Leadership Training Program, and most were university students or graduates. Most of the women they interviewed were their friends from school or relatives. Thus when they think of the average level of education in their communities, most have at least reached the 10th standard.

According to the data, in Mon State, respondents answered that only 50% of women reach the high school level. In Yangon and Bago Regional Divisions, training participants made field visits to villages in the Yangon Region and to one big village in the Bago Region. In these villages, they conducted face-to-face interviews with housewives and other village women. Generally, according to the data from the Yangon and Bago Regions, about 60% had reached the 10th standard.

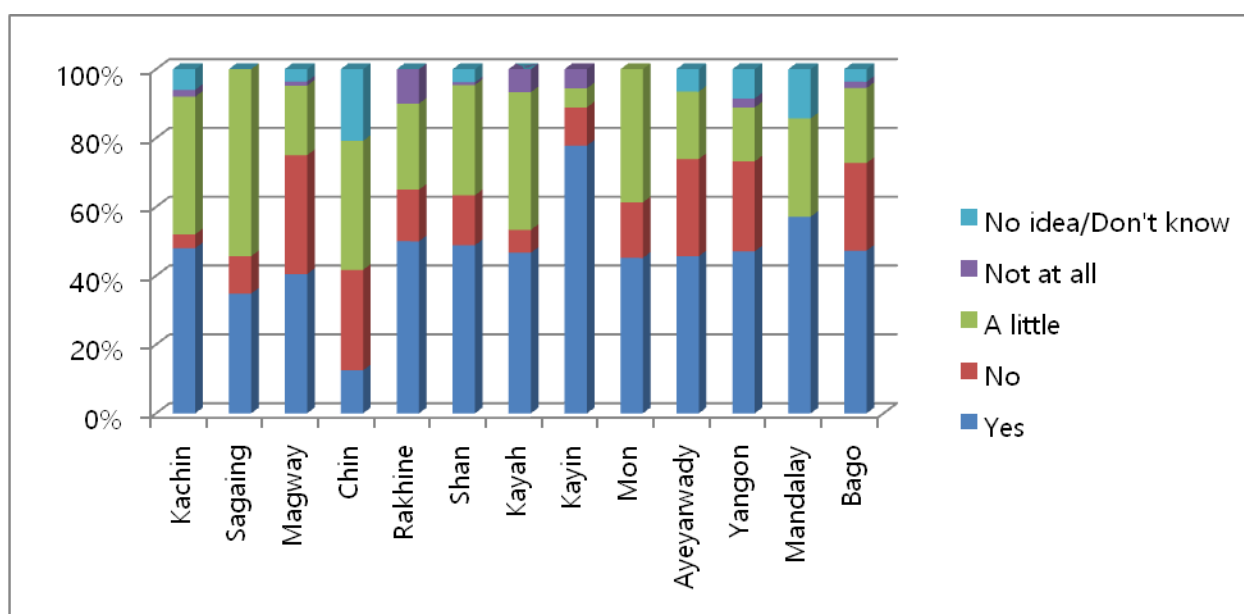
Figure 8. Average Education Level of Women in Interviewed States and Regions



Is the Education that you Earned Useful in your Line of Work?

Although there are many criticisms regarding the education system in Myanmar, many respondents in the survey, with the exception of those from Chin State, answered that their education was useful in their line of work. In Rakhine and Kayah States, about 10% or more answered that it was not useful at all. In Ayeyarwady and Magway regions, about 30% of participants interviewed answered that education was not helpful in their line of work. This is because they have either no job opportunities or no suitable job opportunities available after graduating. Many of the graduates in Myanmar face a reoccurring problem where employment rates are low for both men and women as a result causing a lack of employment or suitable jobs after graduation. In addition, parents don't want to allow their daughters to go to remote areas for work or study. As a result, some women graduates end up working in their native towns or villages doing whatever work they can get. Mostly, women become teachers because their parents feel that it is the most appropriate job for women.

Figure 9. Is Education You Earned Useful or Applicable in Your Work?



Gender Discrimination in Education

The survey included a question for respondents regarding whether they have experienced any form of discrimination based on their gender in the education system. Most of the respondents felt that there was no gender discrimination in the education system. In Mandalay Regional Division, only seven women participated in the survey. Three of these answered that there was no gender discrimination and four answered there was discrimination. That's why percentage-wise, over 50% of respondents feel discriminated against as shown in the graph. In a focus group discussion with the interviewers themselves in the pilot test process before the research, the WLP participants answered that they felt discriminated against in the university admissions process because girls need to get higher scores on the matriculation exam than boys to gain acceptance into many professional universities. Even in this situation, Census Report Volume 4-J Gender Dimensions mentioned that:

One of the more remarkable findings from the Census was that women's share of this more highly educated population was more than half (54.7 percent). Within this tertiary educated population, Figure 3.9

(of Census Report Volume 4-J Gender Dimensions) shows that women predominated among those that had completed a graduate degree (by a ratio of about 1.4:1), those that had obtained a postgraduate diploma (by a ratio of 1.6:1) and those with a master's degree or PhD (by a ratio of 1.8:1)²

Figure 10. Is There Any Gender Discrimination in the Education System?

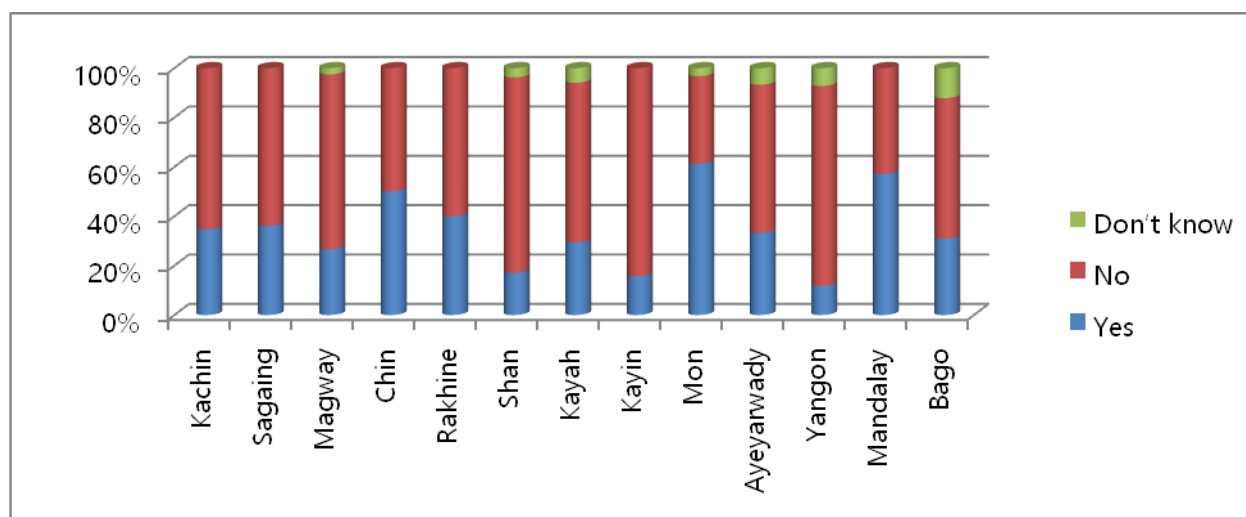
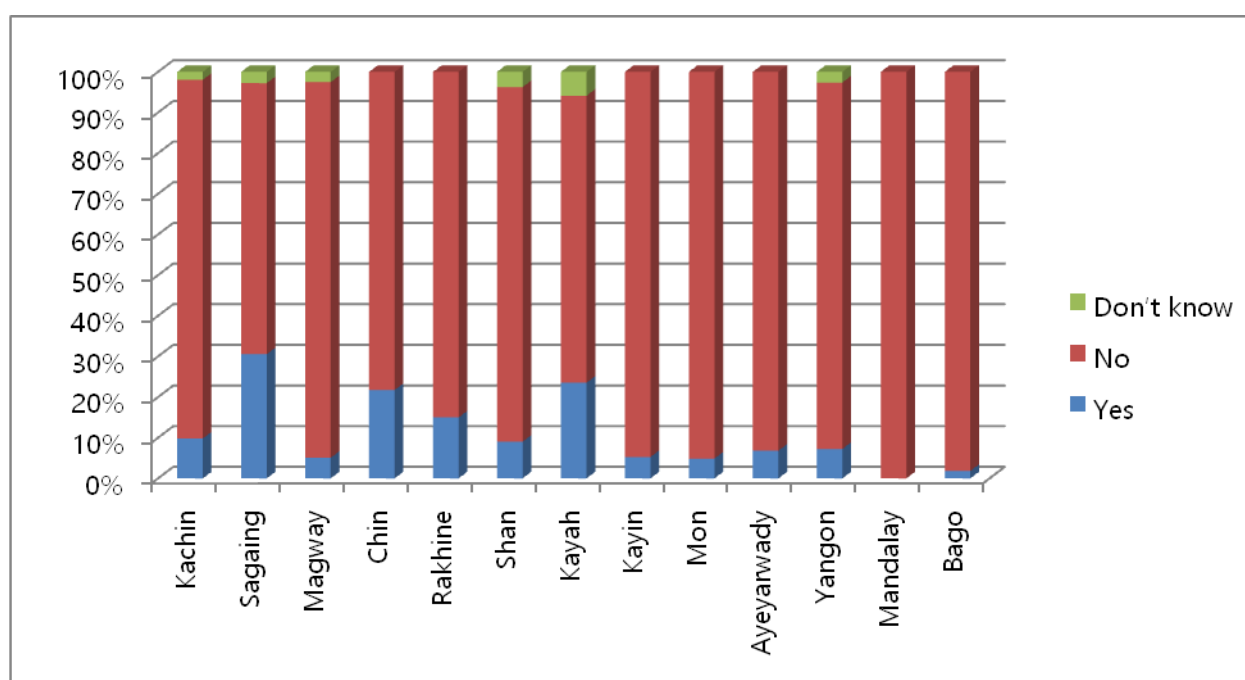


Figure 11. Do Parents Favor Sending Boys to School over Girls?



Less than 10% of the participants interviewed answered that they had experienced gender discrimination from their parents or at home and the rest responded that they had not faced any form of gender discrimination at school

² The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, Thematic Report on Gender Dimensions, Census Report Volume 4-J. Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population, With Technical Assistance from UNFPA, Aug. 2017: 92

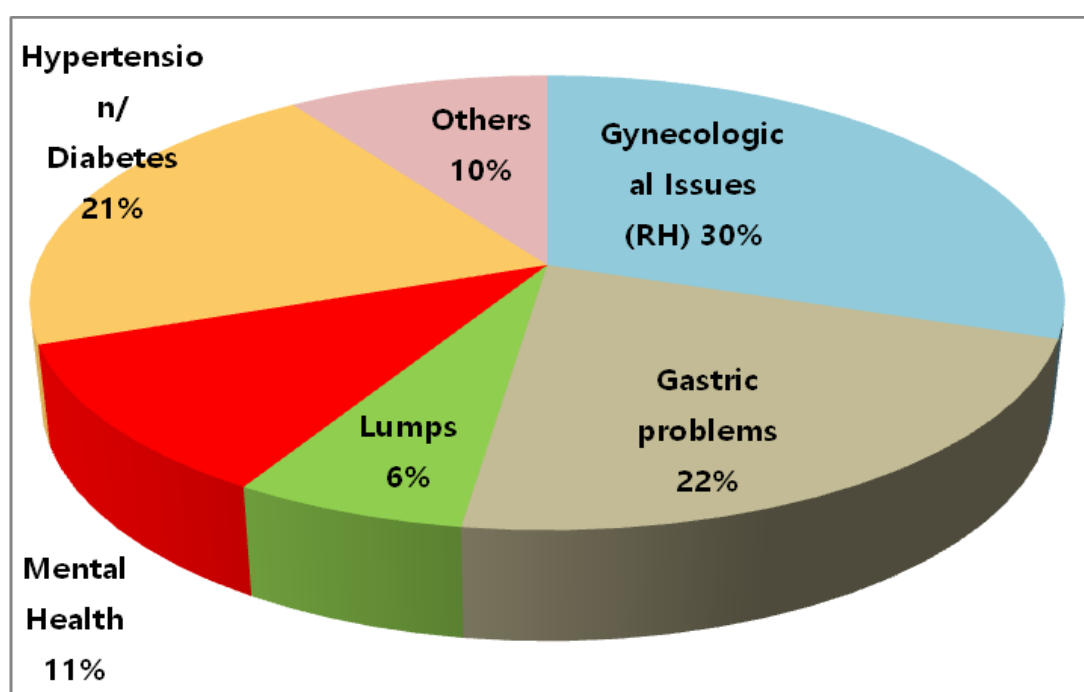
or in the school system. However, those who participated in focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews answered that parents could not send their children to school because of their economic hardships rather than gender discrimination. WLP training participants from Central Myanmar, Rakhine and Kayah States said that if the parents could afford to send selected children to school, they normally liked to choose boys with the belief that men were breadwinners of the family and women could depend on their husbands.

Women and Health

Common Health Problems of the Women in Areas Surveyed

For the health questions in the survey, WLP training participants brainstormed a list of common diseases in their communities among women between the ages of 18 and 35 in the survey design process. They were then asked to rank the three most common diseases in their communities named by individual training participants. The names of the diseases included in the survey questions are taken from the list made up of the most frequent answers given by the training participants during social research training. Interviewers agreed upon the list of common diseases seen in their communities in the design of survey questions.

Figure 12. Common Health Problems among Women in the Areas Surveyed

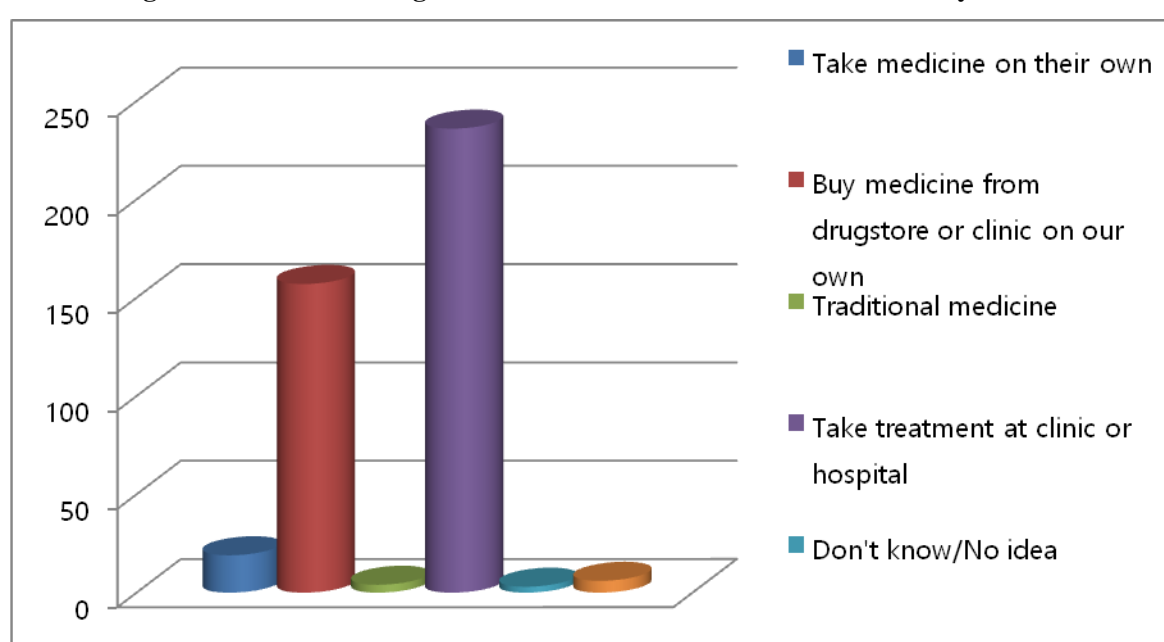


Within the age range of 18 to 20 years, the interviewees rated hypertension and diabetes as the most common diseases among women, and gastric problems were the second most common. Women also complained of gynecological health-related issues, mental health issues, lumps, and other health problems. Among women between the ages of 21 and 30 years old, gynecological diseases were very common. The second most common complaint was gastric problems, and the third was diabetes and hypertension. Other common health problems were mental health issues and lumps. The most common gynecological issues included menstrual pain, irregular

periods, and white discharge, especially among school-aged girls and young housewives. Women in the Sagaing region and Chin State answered that in addition to gynecological health-related diseases, hypertension and diabetes were very common. Together with these two diseases, obesity, hypoglycemia and high cholesterol have become more widespread. WLP training participants, as well as the women who participated in focus group discussions, reported that this is because their diets are heavy with salty food and their lifestyles are stressful and do not include physical exercise. Although many complain of gastritis, they normally experience abdominal pain due to irregular meals and only a few really have gastritis. Diseases in the category of “others” included runny noses, coughing, and colds.

Health Seeking Behaviors of Women in Communities Surveyed

Figure 13. Health Seeking Behaviors of Women in Communities Surveyed



According to the findings of the survey, 47% of women interviewed answered that most women in their communities seek treatment from clinics or hospitals if they were sick. Thirty one percent buy medicine at drugstores or clinics. However, participants from the focus group discussions said that women in some villages and towns only seek treatment in emergency situations. Normally, township hospitals don't have adequate supplies of medicine and equipment and they have to go to regional hospitals. According to the survey results, most of the women in Chin State take medicine on their own when they are sick. Women in Shan State don't use traditional medicine much. In Sagaing Region, there are many free dispensaries and people have better access to healthcare than before. However, some still take medicine on their own without consulting with healthcare personnel.

The Reproductive Health Knowledge of Young Women in Areas Surveyed

Respondents were asked whether or not they had knowledge of reproductive health. Only 36% answered “yes”

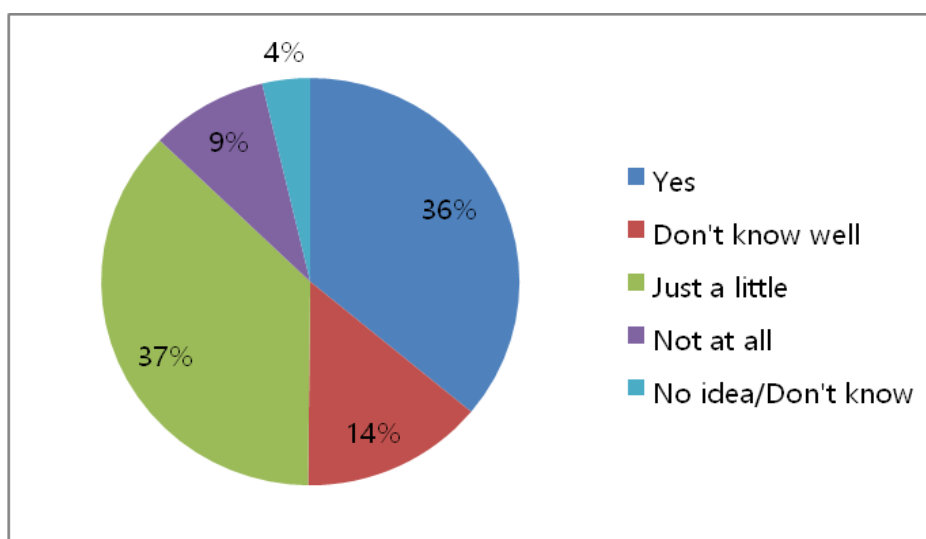
while 9% said “no”. About 37% answered that they know a little and about 25% responded that they did not know much. Four percent answered “don’t know or cannot answer”.

Women who are from cities or towns have the opportunity to acquire knowledge about reproductive health, but poor women in rural areas with no education have limited opportunities to receive reproductive health knowledge. Health-related NGOs and the Health Department usually provide reproductive health education to pregnant or married women, but young, single women are not invited to join reproductive health sessions with the assumption that reproductive health-related knowledge is more relevant to married women. Thus, single women don’t know much about reproductive health. Strangely, those asked in Chin State didn’t know anything about reproductive health. In Kachin State, respondents knew only about menstruation, but they lacked knowledge on topics such as birth spacing or other aspects of reproductive health. Some responded that they had reproductive health knowledge, but their knowledge was either false or limited according to the observations of the WLP training participants.

Marital Status of Women

Shan and Mon States, Ayeyarwady and Bago Regions have many women who marry at an early age, under 15 years old. Generally, the women interviewed responded that most women in their communities married at the age range between 18 and 25 years old. In Rakhine State, many women marry between the ages of 16 and 18 years old because their parents are economically poor and traditionally, parents like to arrange for their daughters to marry at a young age.

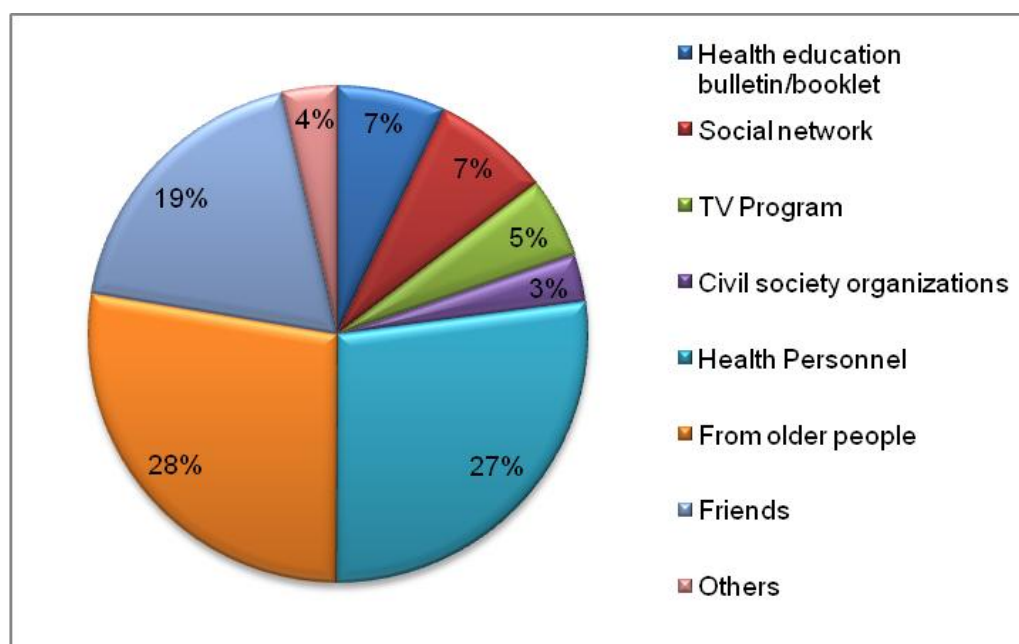
Figure 14. Do You Have Knowledge of Reproductive Health?



When women were asked how they get information on reproductive health, 28% answered that the information they received was from their seniors such as grandmothers, mothers, aunts or other seniors. Twenty-seven percent said that health personnel provided health information. Nineteen percent of the women interviewed got their information from health education bulletins or booklets. The remaining groups received information from their social networks, TB programs, and CSOs. Health information received from seniors can be questionable because

there are so many myths regarding reproductive health.

Figure 15. Where Do You Get Reproductive Health Information?



Women and Social Activities

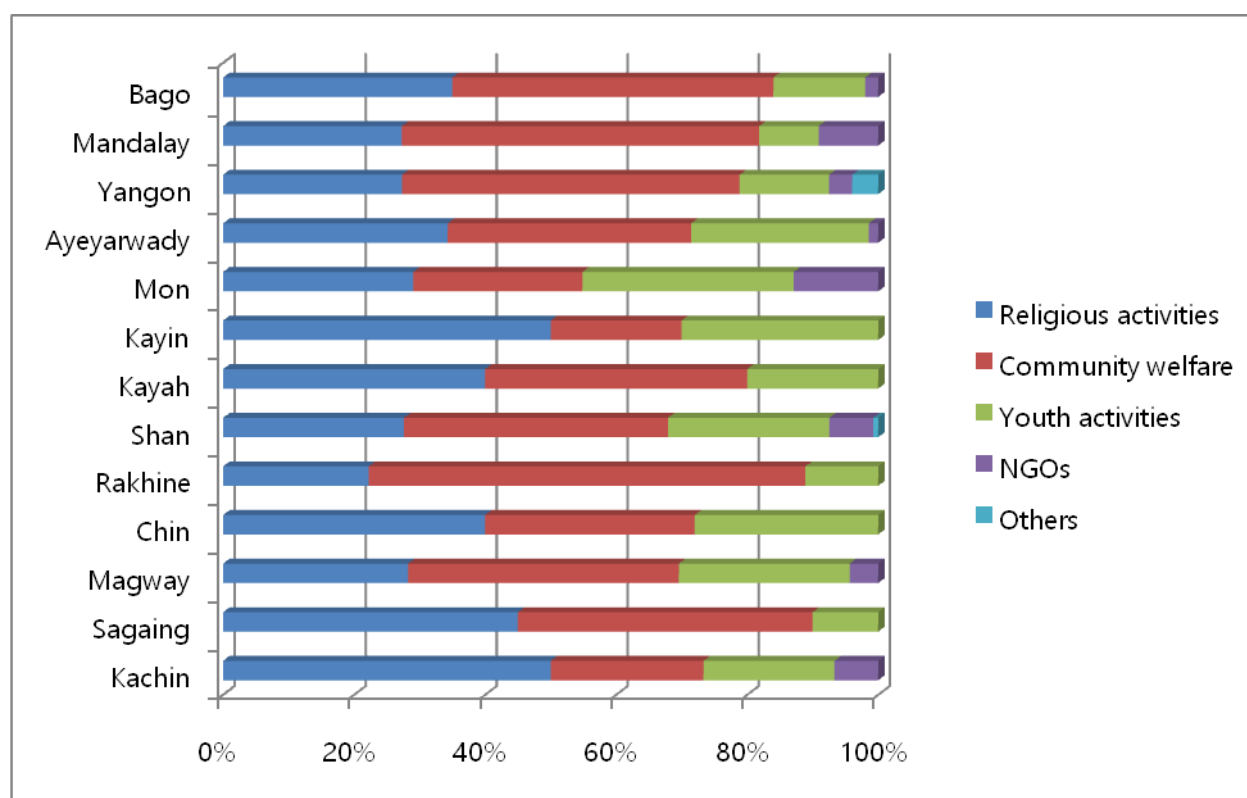
Traditionally in Myanmar, women are assumed to be the weaker sex and are discriminated against, regarded as dependents of men in the home as well as in society in general. The majority of people in Myanmar take for granted that the role of women is to bear and care for children, do household work, and support the whole family. In other words, society does not expect women to actively take part in activities outside the home. In a country like Myanmar where women make up more than half of the total population, it is very important to invite women's participation in political and governance processes. Without addressing the specific needs of women, it is difficult to make realistic policies for the whole society. The active participation of women outside the home is essential for Myanmar's democracy.

As shown in the chart below which illustrates survey data, most young women are active participants in religious and community welfare activities. Only a few young women are active in youth activities in the community such as funfairs, community events, garbage collection campaigns initiated by youth groups, road building, and others. In Mon, Kachin, and Mandalay, some of the women interviewed participated in activities led by NGOs in their areas. Interestingly, the women interviewed during our field visits explained that women participate actively in community activities such as ordination ceremonies or funeral services in the community by hosting people, cooking or providing necessary assistance for the events. They are happy to take on supporting roles in community events.

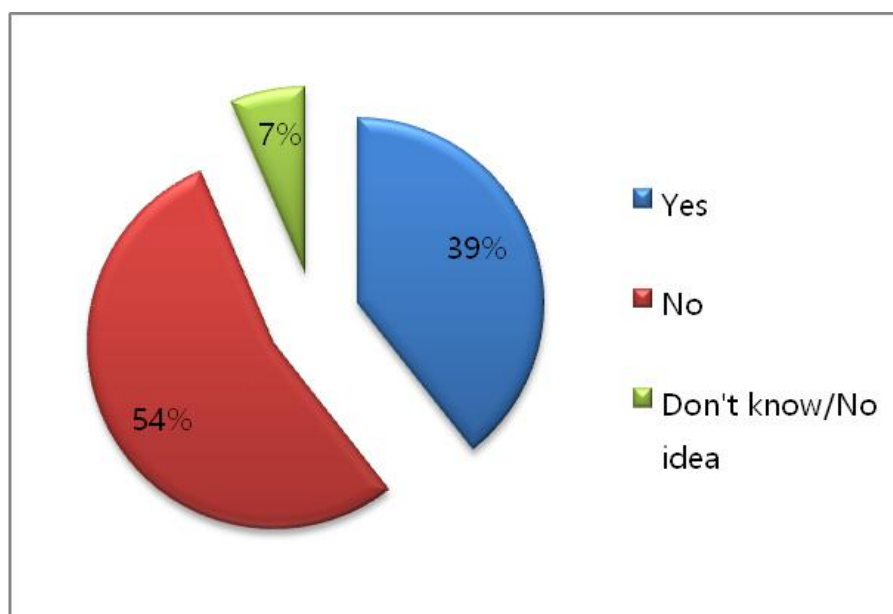
A natural follow-up question is what kind of leadership role they are taking. Thus, the next question asked in the survey was how many of the women surveyed take a leading role in these activities or community organizations. Generally, less than 10% of the women interviewed indicated that they had the chance to be

involved in a decision-making role for the activities. Respondents from Kachin, Rakhine and Kayah States estimated that on average, 40% of women in general took on a leading role. Women's participation is uniquely high in Kayin State. About 85% to 100% of women are community leaders in their areas. However, Kayin State is exceptional because of the ongoing presence of conflicts in the area. According to the WLP training participants, most of the men in the conflict affected areas of Kayin State have fled to the towns or migrated to Thailand, and women had to take care on all community activities including village head positions. Some also said that women's negotiation skills were much better and they could deal with different armed groups, including the military, well.

Figure 16. Types of Activities Women are Involved in Their Communities



Women were also asked if they experienced any barriers or challenges to taking part in social activities in their communities. More than half of the respondents answered that they did not encounter any barriers to taking part in social activities. Those who answered “yes” explained that because of their own busy schedules at home or economic activities, they did not have time to get involved in community events. A few answered that some men did not like women's participation in their activities. Many young women in Chin State go and work in other countries and they cannot participate in any social activities in their own communities. Women from Kayah State said that their participation is limited because they have domestic problems or their families do not allow them to take part in social activities, and they feel excluded in their own community according to the WLP training participants.

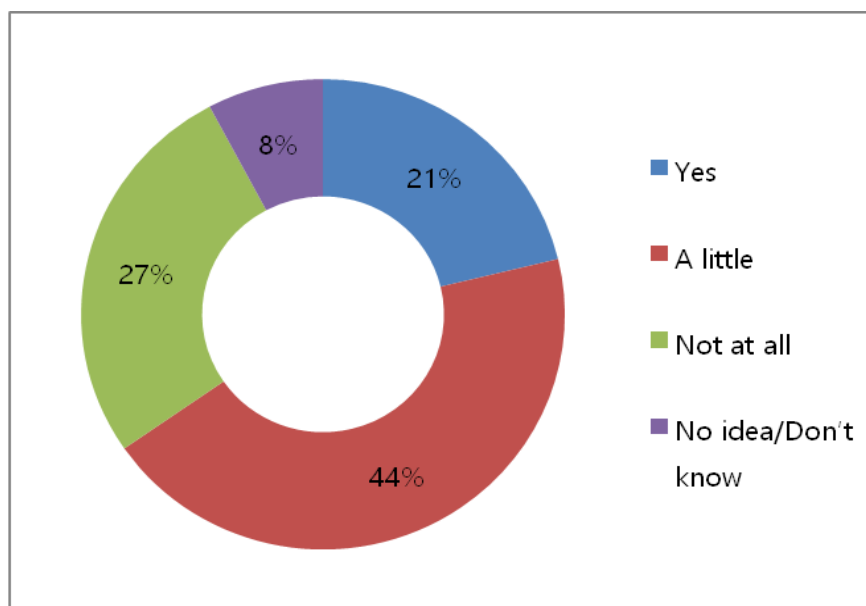
Fig 17. Are There Any Barriers Preventing Your Participation in Social Activities?

Women and Politics

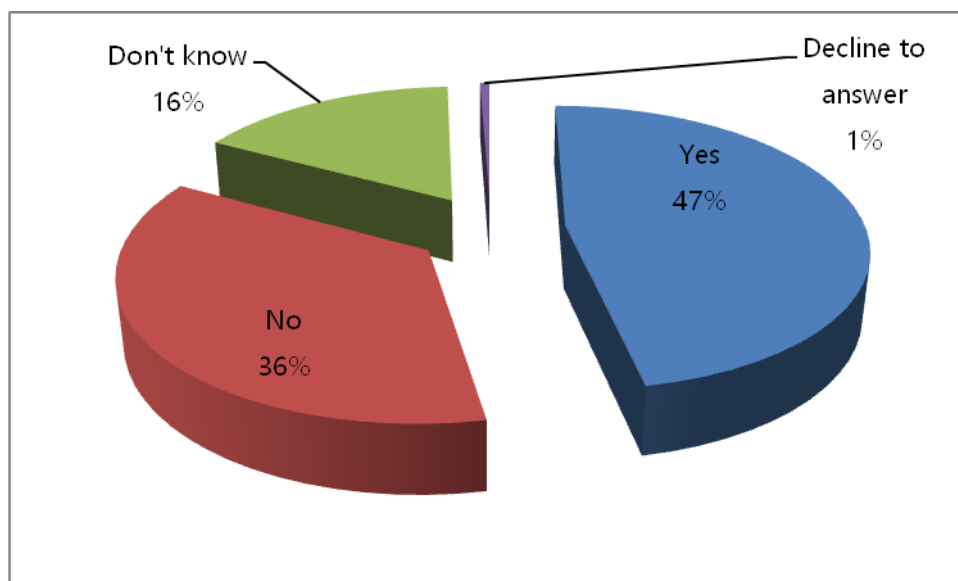
According to the 2014 Census, women make up 51.8% of the total population in Myanmar. However, women's representation in politics is very low in Myanmar. Even in the democratically elected NLD government, only 12.8% of Union-level Parliamentarians are women. Only one of 22 Union-level ministers is a woman: the State Counsellor. Only seven out of a total of 132 State and Regional-level ministers are women. At the township-level administration, there are no women township administration officers because they are appointed and not elected³. More and more women have become active in the ward and village-level administration in recent local elections. Women's participation is still very low in the peace process. Only 7% of women participated in the Union Level Peace Conference, and 17% participated in the 21st Century Second Panglong Conference. All of these figures show that women's participation is not encouraging in Myanmar, and gives rise to the question of why women's participation is so low. Two questions were included in the survey to understand if young women in Myanmar are interested in politics or not and if there are any barriers preventing them from entering politics.

Again, this question can have some bias because more than half of WLP training participants are from political parties. Some of the participants interviewed in the survey may be from political parties. However, when the profiles of women interviewed, there is no significant number of women from political parties. Only 21% of respondents answered that women in their community were interested in politics and 27% said "not at all". Forty-four percent responded that they were interested a little. Eight percent answered "no idea/don't know". The rest did not answer the question. Almost 60% of women respondents in Rakhine and Chin States answered that women in their community are interested in politics. About 50% of respondents in Yangon region also answered "Yes". Forty percent of participants interviewed in the Mandalay, Ayeyarwady and Sagaing Regions responded that women were interested in politics. Only about 10% of women in the village where WLP Batch 14 participants went for field research answered that women were interested in politics.

³ Latt, Shwe Shwe Sein, et al. Women's Political Participation in Myanmar, Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011-2016. The Asia Foundation and Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home), Apr. 2017.

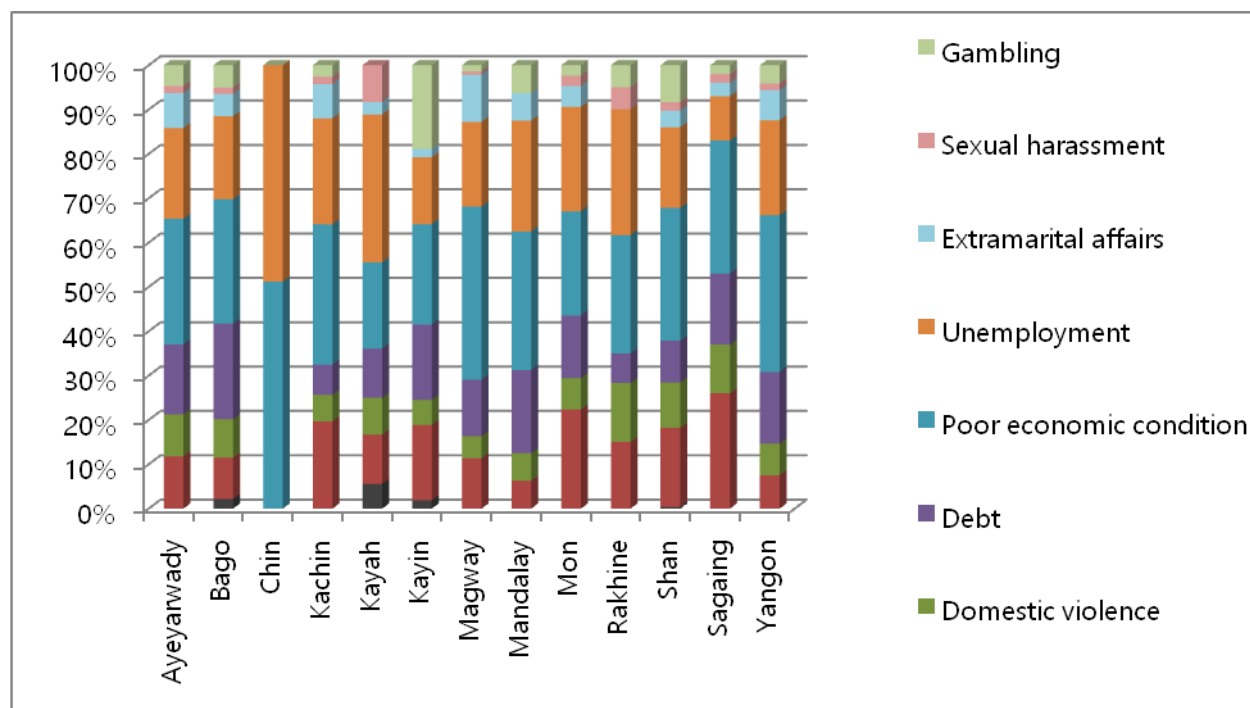
Figure 18. Are Women in Your Community Interested in Politics?

Forty-seven percent of respondents answered that they did have barriers preventing them from entering politics. Thirty-six percent answered that they did not face any barriers. Sixteen percent responded that they did not know how to answer. One percent declined to answer the question. During focus group discussions held during field trips, discussants were asked what major difficulties they faced in entering politics. The majority answered that family, relatives and communities did not support women who entered politics. They have a stereotyped concept that politics is not related to women. Those who stated they were interested also said that they did not have enough knowledge to get involved, and some had economic difficulties that acted as a barrier to their participation. Ethnic political party leaders moaned that they had a shortage of women members, let alone women leaders for their parties when women's groups called for women's participation in ethnic political parties. All of this data points to the conclusion that increased women's participation in politics will not happen in Myanmar naturally.

Figure 19. Do Women Face Any Barriers to Entering Politics?

Women and Social Issues

The survey included a question about social problems faced by women in their communities. Based on the social problems identified by the WLP training participants in the research design process, a list of social issues was prepared for the survey. The most common problem was economic hardship. More than 50% of the women surveyed responded that many of their problems were rooted in economic difficulties. Eighteen percent of women answered that they were in debt. Fifteen percent of women in Kachin State stated that domestic violence was the key issue for them. Twenty-eight percent of women in Bago Region and 22% of women in Mon State answered that one of their family members was addicted to drugs. When talking about economic hardship, WLP training participants and the women who participated in focus group discussions said that there were no economic activities in their communities and no job opportunities except for farming and animal breeding. In addition, there are many microfinance projects nowadays. Women said that they took loans from different microfinance projects without engaging in any economic activities and ended up heavily in debt. As a result of internet access, many women use social media and extramarital affairs have become common in many of the areas surveyed.

Figure 20. Common Social Problems of Women in Areas Surveyed

Interviews with Sandhi's Women's Leadership Program Alumni

Sandhi's Women's Leadership Program has trained 348 women from all over the country since 2012. Some have become political MPs, and some have taken leadership positions in their political parties or their organizations. However, not every alumnus has been a success story. Some are no longer active in their mother organizations or political parties. Some got married and ended up as housewives. To understand their stories, eight women alumni were interviewed about their activities after the trainings and their views on issues and opportunities for young women's empowerment to be included in this report as case studies.

These alumni included: two women who are regional MPs from the Ayeyarwady Regional Parliament; one who is an active NLD member and lawyer; a chairperson of Twante Township from the Kayin People's Party; and a Chin lady who is the founder of the Htar Nay Chin Women's Network. The remaining three who were interviewed are no longer active in their mother organizations. One is a Ta'ang (Palaung) lady who is now a civil servant in the Internal Revenue Department; one is a Muslim lady from Myeik running her own private school; and one is a Kayin lady who is an engineering student in her final year of studies.

IV. Issues and Opportunities for Young Women's Empowerment

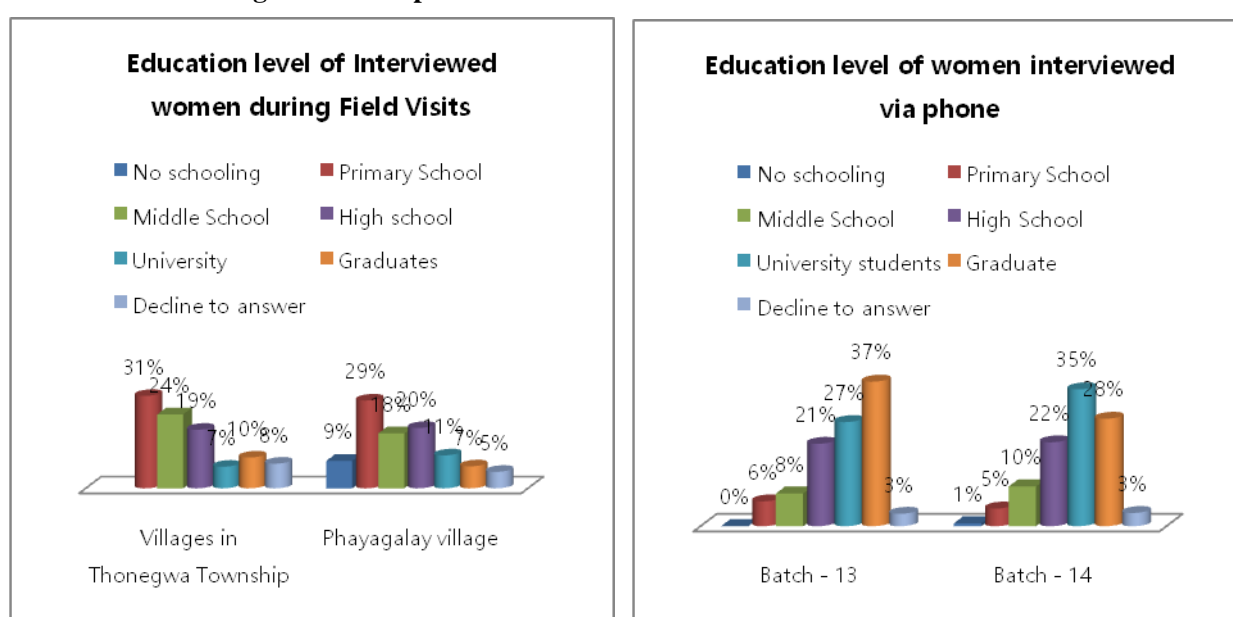
This section will present issues and opportunities for young women's empowerment in the areas surveyed based on the information and data collected in the research and in-depth interviews with selected alumni from Sandhi's WLP training program.

Issues Identified in the Research

Gaps between urban and rural women in Myanmar;

There are two significant education and marital status trends that emerged through the survey findings as well as the observations of interviewers. As discussed before, friends and colleagues of WLP training participants are mostly university students and graduates except for those in the Chin and Sagaing regions. The most significant difference is the education level of women ages between 18 and 35 years old in rural areas where Sandhi made field visits. In fact, both areas are only about an hour's drive from Yangon but according to the data, most of the women there did not finish primary school. The farther the villages are from the towns, the more education gaps become visible.

Figure 21. Comparison between Education Levels of Two Trends



As shown in Figure 7 in Chapter 3, 40% of women from the Rakhine, Kayah, and Mon areas reach middle school. In Chin State, most participants interviewed did not pass high school. Further study is necessary to understand the education gaps between the urban and rural populations of women in Myanmar. Poverty and limited access to education are the major reasons for leaving school at an early age. As this research was mainly focused for women, there is no facility to compare and contrast the education level of men in these villages.

Similarly, the average age of marriage of women in rural areas and urban areas is different. According to the data, about one-third of women interviewed during field visits were married before the age of 20. The interviewers observed that early marriages were more common in the remote villages they visited in Thonegwa Township, Yangon Region. WLP training participants from Magway and Sagaing regions also said that some young men in their villages married at a young age, around 14 or 15 years old. The average age of marriage for rural women is earlier than that of urban women. More than half of the women interviewed stated that women in their communities married between the ages of 15 and 18 years old.

The majority of women who participated in the research don't have paid jobs

Fifty-eight percent of the women who participated in the survey worked on their own farms, gardened, and many were vendors or casual laborers. A few of them worked in garment factories. In addition, about 20% of them ended up as dependents or housewives. Recently, machines are replacing manual labor in agricultural work and many women working as casual laborers on the farmland have become jobless. As a result, urban migration is becoming common in many areas of the country.

When women were asked if they knew any women who had migrated to other places in Myanmar or to other countries, more than 70% responded that there were many women in their communities who had migrated elsewhere. While women from villages in Thonegwa Township in Yangon Region rarely migrate and only a few men had migrated to Malaysia, women from Phayagalay village in Bago Region migrated to Thailand or Malaysia because of limited job opportunities in their villages owing to the mechanization of agriculture. Women in Kayin, Mon, and Shan Regions usually go to Thailand as seasonal workers. Migration trends, the vulnerability of migrant women, and the socio-economic situation of migrant women should be studied further.

Economic hardship and Debts

Among the issues faced by the women interviewed, the most significant and common complaint was economic hardship. Poverty is the root cause of many of the social problems experienced by these women in their daily lives. Many social problems are interrelated. Many women complained of a lack of job opportunities in the survey. Even to get a government job or jobs in private sector at places like banks or marketing companies, graduates need to pay money. In addition, the past legacies of the socialist regime and the military regime discouraged people from doing business and generally, people in Myanmar are reluctant to run their own businesses. Because of this, people lack the kind of exposure necessary to be able to understand the market of their products and how to produce marketable goods. With the aim of alleviating poverty in the country, the government allows microcredit agencies to offer microcredit loans to women. However, many women don't engage in economic activities and take loans to pay their expenses. This results in many women receiving loans easily without engaging in any economic activities and having debts everywhere.

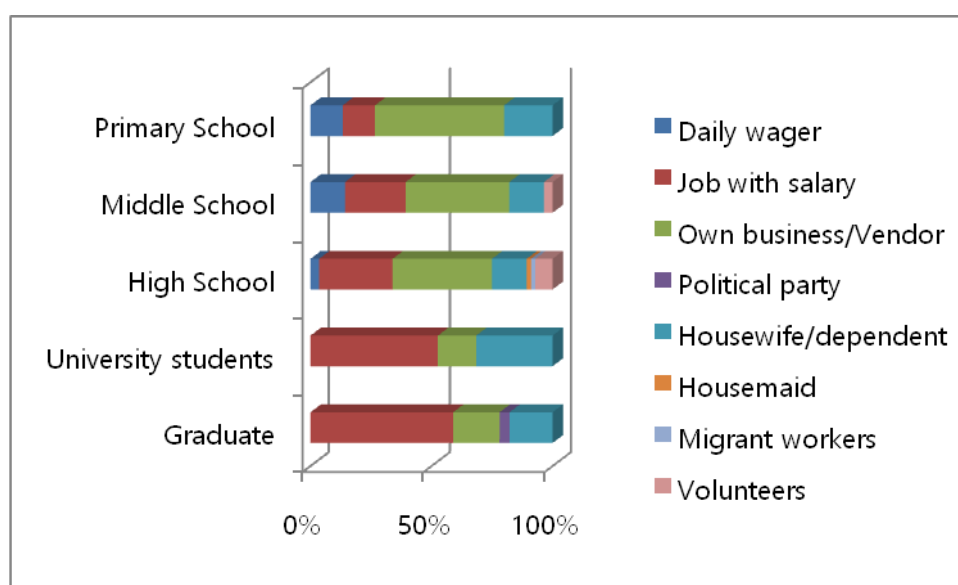
The relationship between education levels and social/job status among the women in the areas surveyed

Quality of education is questioned by a lot of people in Myanmar. The following chart shows the relationship between education level and social status of women in the areas surveyed using the profiles of the women interviewed. According to the survey, over 50% of women who were graduates had full time jobs as teachers, healthcare workers, engineers, physiotherapists, tourist guides, company staff or bank staff in their areas. Some also worked for NGOs. Twenty percent ran their own businesses. Some just farmed and some ran their own beauty salons or tailoring shops. Some worked as vendors. About 3% of the women surveyed were from political parties. About 25 % of graduates ended up as housewives or dependents. Some complained saying that they could not find a job. Some university students were distance university students and while studying, 40% of women were working fulltime as preschool teachers, teachers, agriculture department staff, or company staff. Compared to those who were graduates, almost 40% of them were housewives or dependents or responded that they have no job. One interesting observation is that some women who don't finish Myanmar government high school or middle school work as ethnic language teachers in ethnic regions and some work as volunteers in community-

based organizations. About 10% of women who only achieved a primary or middle school education work for a daily wage.

Interestingly, the chart below indicates that at least 15% to 25% of each category is composed of housewives or dependents. In other words, regardless of the education level women have attained, they tend to end up as housewives for many reasons. Women who only finished high school, middle or primary school work in garment factories, as sales staff, or as basic staff for the government or companies. In general, there is a direct link between educational attainment and women's jobs.

Figure 22. Relationship between Education Attainment and Job Opportunities



Reproductive health knowledge of young women is limited.

Only about 36% of the people interviewed answered that they had reproductive health knowledge. However, in focus group discussions with WLP training participants and women from the villages, they answered that they had knowledge on reproductive health but it was found their knowledge was neither correct nor proper. Access to comprehensive information on reproductive health is limited. The rest responded that they knew some or a little or nothing at all. Interestingly, both the government health department and NGOs in Myanmar target married women when they give reproductive health information in the communities. According to the WLP training participants from Kayah State, there are more health education sessions organized by the Department of Health in their state, but participants from the other states and regions did not report the same experience. In addition to the findings in the research, the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census highlighted the relationship between early marriage and education attainment in their Thematic Report on Gender Dimensions⁴. The report stated:

The age-specific fertility rates were highest between the ages of 20 and 34 years. Some births, although comparatively few, were to adolescent mothers (aged 15-19), and hence represented adolescent fertility.

⁴ Table 2.8 Percentage of Mothers by Age of Birth of First Child by Completed Level of Education, 2014 Census, Pg. 49, The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, Thematic Report on Gender Dimensions, Census Report Volume 4-J. , Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population, With Technical Assistance from UNFPA, Aug. 2017.

From the information collected in the 2014 Census, these young mothers are, by definition, married adolescents. This calls for a greater emphasis on family planning/sex education at primary and secondary levels of education given that such married adolescents are not likely to have attained levels higher than secondary level education. It should also be noted that such early births have an impact on the health of young mothers especially in terms of the possibility of birth complications due to their young age.⁵

Young women impose constraints on themselves that prevent them from taking part in community activities.

The data shows that 54% of the women interviewed didn't have any difficulties in joining social activities in their communities. In focus group discussions, women explained that they did not join social activities because they were busy with household chores and felt that they had no knowledge or capacity to get involved in such activities. WLP training participants emphasized the fact that they had difficulty recruiting new members for their political parties or organizations. A lack of confidence and motivation made young women impose constraints on themselves preventing them from getting involved in social activities in their own communities.

The percentage of women interviewed who indicated an interest in politics was low.

According to the survey results, only 21% of the respondents answered that they were interested in politics. Currently, many ethnic party leaders complain that they cannot recruit new members for their parties. According to the young women leaders interviewed for case studies, when they started, there was nobody who would support them but nowadays, they are trying to encourage women who are interested in politics. In addition to those who are already interested in politics, the 40% of women who said that they were interested in politics a little bit can be persuaded to become more involved.

The road to leadership for women is neither smooth nor natural.

Tradition and culture pose a large challenge for women who wish to become leaders. Tradition and culture shape the mindsets of people throughout society, and many don't easily accept women in leadership positions. The young women who participated in the interviews highlighted the fact that their road to leadership was not smooth or natural. They needed to win acceptance from their families, trust from their communities, and confidence from their colleagues. To earn confidence and acceptance, they had to prove their leadership skills while men didn't need to make this kind of extra effort to become leaders. In addition, women often don't support women leaders and even attack women who reach high positions. Some women have achieved leadership positions despite lacking the proper knowledge and skills, and have failed. Such experiences in the community also undermine other women's efforts to become leaders.

Nan May Myint Zu Oo (hereafter referred to as Myint Zu); a former member of the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party, **Mai Su Su Hlaing**, Founder of the Htar Nay Chin Women Network; and **Ma Tar Poe** from the Kayin People's Party agreed that the mindsets of people at community level should be changed. They don't easily accept women as leaders. Myint Zu also pointed out that a lack of financial support was another challenge for women. In addition, she said that unqualified women leaders could not lead properly.

⁵ Ibid.

“The first challenge (for women) to become leaders in the community is the mindset of the people. They think that men can be better than women as leaders because they think that men are more experienced as leaders. Some accept whoever is qualified. This is the first challenge women must face when they want to be leaders in their communities. The second challenge is a lack of financial support from their families. If they have children, they need time to care for their children. Some women in the community want to become leaders but they don’t have proper training and they are not successful in leadership roles. In some areas, women are leaders, but they don’t have proper training and they want to be leaders and work as leaders. But they don’t know how to act as a leader. It is a challenge. The third challenge is how to convince their families to accept them.”

Nan May Myintzu Oo, Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party member (no longer active because of her studies)

“Traditions and culture are very important in our country. Traditional beliefs are very dominant. Men traditionally look down on women. They don’t feel comfortable working under a woman. Women also don’t want to accept a woman leader in rural areas. These are the major challenges. At the community level, starting from ward in-charge to government officials, they all have a stereotyped concept that leaders should be men, not women. When a woman leader deals with the government officials, they treat us differently.”

Mai Su Su Hlaing, Founder of Htar Nay Chin Women Network

“One challenge is that people tend to look down on me being a woman and young compared to others. Some cannot accept women as leaders. Encouragement and support from the community are necessary too.”

Ma Tar Poe, Kayin People’s Party, Chairperson, Twante Township

Sweet Sweet Tar, an English teacher at her own private school, said that families don’t like it when women engage in social activities. She feels that commitment is very important and instead of waiting for opportunity to present itself, she believes in taking initiative on her own. **Su Su Aung**, an elected woman MP from Ayeyarwady Region, shared her experience of campaigning for office as a woman. She explained that when she and her other women friends were nominated as candidates, the party members were very suspicious of their performance. Another MP from Ayeyarwady Region, **Khin Moe Wah**, shared her experience of dealing with the government staff as an MP. In the beginning, there were some conflicts.

“Families reject women doing social activities. Senior people don’t want to listen to young women or give us due respect. They look down on us. Wherever we work, if we are committed, we have the opportunity to become leaders. There are some business opportunities that we can do on our own without waiting for the time when other people will give us a chance.”

Sweet Sweet Tar, Former member of Doe Myanmar - Women Rights Promotion Group, currently a women’s educator and English language teacher

“In 2015 elections, when the NLD party chose us, people around me and the party members did not trust us as they were suspicious of our performance because we were women.”

Su Su Aung, Ayeyarwady Regional Parliamentarian

“There are many challenges as a woman when dealing with government department officials. Gradually, I was accepted based on my performance. In the beginning, there were some conflicts.”

Khin Moe Wah, Ayeyarwady regional Parliamentarian

Phyu Sin Pwint, a former party member of the Ta’ang Palaung National Development Party, said that women were not supportive of each other and men undermined the capacity of women too. As a current government staff member, she feels that there is no gender discrimination in the public sector. As long as she passes the promotion exam, she can be promoted irrespective of her gender. However, she shared a story about Palaung Region from the 2015 general elections. People voted for a Palaung candidate and the daughter of a 2010 MP became an MP in their area. In fact, if other women had been brave enough to join the elections, they could have been elected, but no women tried it.

“Women attack a woman when she becomes higher up. Men thought that women couldn’t do it. In fact, women can also do it. In the department, they think that the assistant director position is for men, not for women. There is no discrimination in the government offices. If you pass the exam, you get promoted. In politics, there are more women MPs nowadays. Some men think that women are not qualified or confident like them. They think that women have no leadership skills. If they look at the qualifications alone of the women, there are more qualified women. However, for women, there are many challenges to becoming a political candidate. Family background looks very important. In our area, currently, the daughter of the previous election term’s MP is the Parliamentarian. People will vote for any Palaung candidate but other women did not join in the 2015 elections, maybe because they didn’t get support from their families or because they themselves didn’t want to.”

Phyu Sin Pwint, Former Ta’ang Palaung National Development Party member, now Staff of Internal Revenue Department

Under the new elected government, there are more opportunities for women to be leaders. One encouraging message was that all discussants felt that the situation has improved compared to the past. NLD party members felt that because of their leader, who is a woman, the attitudes of the people have changed greatly. Ethnic women leaders also said that they could prove their leadership capacity and gradually people accepted them. **Thin Thin new**, an active NLD party member, thought that there are more chances now for women to participate in political activities but also felt that women’s participation is still weak. Myint Zu said that women could now be elected as village or ward in-charges. Ma Tar Poe encourages women at the local level to participate in politics by showing women leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

“After 2016, there are more chances for women to participate but women’s participation is still weak, in my opinion.”

Thin Thin Nwe, Lawyer (as a profession) and NLD Party member from Patheingyi, Ayeyarwady regional division

“Now women have the opportunity to become leaders such as ward in-charges.”

Nan May Myint Zu Oo, Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party member (no longer active because of her studies)

“As there are more women leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, we can encourage women in the community to participate in politics.”

Ma Tar Poe, Kayin People’s Party, Chairperson, Twante Township

Mai Su Su Hlaing set up her own organization after she finished Sandhi’s WLP training course. She empowered women in her Chin community to become more confident in taking the leading role. From local to regional and national, she expects Chin women in her community can take on leadership roles. Thin Thin also shared how she tried hard to get acceptance in her own community in her profession as a lawyer and in her political party.

“There are some opportunities for women nowadays. For example, I finished the WLP training (at Sandhi) and formed a women’s network and CSO in my area. I gave training to other women in my community, and now they have become empowered. They are confident in speaking up regarding their needs and understanding rights from wrongs. Gradually, they have become confident enough to take leadership roles in their own communities. These women can become leaders from the local to the regional and the regional to the national level.”

Mai Su Su Hlaing, Founder of Htar Nay Chin Women Network

“I want to share my experience in three fields – in my community, in politics, and in the community of lawyers. In my community, after the new ward administrative person in-charge was elected, both men and women started to rely on me, maybe because I am a lawyer. They feel that my advice is useful to them. I become a dependable person in my ward. In my party, until 2017, only members from my township knew me. In 2018, I am known by both youths and senior people at the district and regional division levels. They treat me well as a respectable woman rather than a youth member of the party. Among lawyers, even the judges gradually came to know that I am active in politics. Any time a training opportunity arises, they send me as a person who can contribute.”

Thin Thin Nwe, Lawyer and NLD Party member from Patheingyi

Opportunities Identified

There is more peer support available for women who would like to become leaders.

These women leaders encourage other women to get involved in social and political activities where they live. However, they highlight the point that women have to prove their leadership skills and proper political knowledge. Their road to leadership is not natural. They need to prove that they are as capable as men.

“In Myan Aung Township, after I became a woman MP, other women felt encouraged and young women joined the party. When we joined the party with our own commitment, we got more criticism than support. Nowadays, there are many women who want to join the party and we try our best to support them. We try to be role models for them, and many more people have become interested in politics. In the past, there was no tradition of giving women the role of chairperson. In Ayeyarwady Regional Parliament, there are four women MPs and they all are

capable women who earn respect from the people. We are selected to study abroad. We get respect and as a result, we have become more confident too.”

Su Su Aung, Ayeyarwady Regional Parliamentarian

Phyu Sin Pwint encouraged women to read more and learn the constitution well. Women who want to be leaders must have leadership capacity. Su Su Aung said that commitment was very important. Acceptance and recognition from men are important.

“To become a qualified political candidate, women need to read more, should understand the constitution well and must have leadership capacity.”

Phyu Sin Pwint, Former Ta’ang Palaung National Development Party member, now Staff at the Internal Revenue Department

“First of all, to become a leader, women themselves must be interested in working. When they get recognition, there are chances to become leaders. As I myself am a woman, I support women who want to be leaders or anything else. Acceptance and recognition from men is important too. According to my experience, when they accepted that I had enough leadership capacity, they gradually accepted me as a leader.”

Su Su Aung, Ayeyarwady Regional Parliamentarian

Many organizations including Sandhi have been strengthening the leadership capacity of women in Myanmar

To address the shortage of women leaders in Myanmar, many international and local organizations have stretched their capacity to provide the greatest number of women’s leadership programs possible. In recent administrative bodies elections at the local level, more women ran for office and were elected as ward/village administrative in-charge, hundred-household or ten-household in-charges at the local level.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Myanmar is a country where women comprise 51.14% the total population of 52.89 million (2016 Census). Myanmar is currently in both a political transition to democracy and an economic transition to a market economy. A civilian-led elected government took power after the military ruled for five decades. In addition, women occupy about 13.7% of elected parliamentary seats (67 out of 591) at the Union Assembly and about 12.5% (79 out of 630) of the elected seats at the state and region parliament level. Five women ethnic affairs ministers were elected, representing 17.2% of all elected ethnic affairs ministers (5 out of 29) at the state or regional level⁶. Historically, this is a phenomenal achievement which significantly promotes participation of women in politics compared to

⁶ Latt, Shwe Shwe Sein. “Current Women's Political Affairs in Myanmar Parliaments.” Burma News International, Myanmar Peace Monitor, 8 Mar. 2017.

the decades under military rule. However, in a country where women make up more than half of the population, the targeted percentage of women's participation must be much higher than the current rate.

Ideally, women should participate equally in the country's policy making and decision processes. Women should be equally involved in each and every level of the governance structure to voice their specific needs and desires. Although many organizations in Myanmar have been working to promote the active participation of women in the political sphere and foster their economic empowerment, the active involvement of women themselves is essential. The following observations can be made based on the information generated through this research and the current political context in Myanmar related to women's empowerment:

It is essential to enable an environment for capable women to take on leadership and decision-making roles.

The country's democratic transition and economic development can't happen unless the active involvement of women is embraced in Myanmar. Their desires and needs can be different from those of men, and their voices must be heard in order to craft effective development strategies for the country. To make the matters worse, people in Myanmar used to have a phobia of the term "politics" because of the harsh punishments and oppression enacted against politicians and their families under the military dictatorship. Again, traditionally, women in politics were not easily accepted by their family members or society because of stereotypes about women's roles. Historically, women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles has been weak in Myanmar. As a result, society was not accustomed to seeing women as leaders. Although women make up more than half of the population in Myanmar, women's representation in political and governance processes does not exceed 20%. The Policy brief on Gender Dimensions produced by the UNFPA based on the 2014 Myanmar Census stated:

The Union level sex ratio is 93 males to 100 females. Despite this sex ratio women are underrepresented in the political sphere and the labour market.⁷

In these circumstances, women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles cannot happen naturally without deliberate actions taken by the government or society.

Myanmar society, in general, is gradually accepting women with leadership capacity and as a result, more young women are becoming interested in politics.

In the changing political environment, after seeing a woman leader such as State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, people have started to change their attitudes and accept women leaders more easily. At the same time, emerging women leaders at various levels have become role models for their communities and young women are becoming interested in participating in politics. Women with leadership capacity nowadays have earned the trust and acceptance of their communities and their organizations. Many Sandhi WLP training alumni from the NLD, ethnic parties, and CSOs have taken on decision-making and leading roles after they finished their leadership training. There are many success stories among the WLP alumni. Likewise, many women in NGOs are strengthening the capacity of women at the local level. Those women with leadership skills know how to climb up the ladder and there is a glimpse that with the support of these women, more and more young women can become

⁷ "Policy Brief on Gender Dimensions: 2014 Myanmar Population and Census", 2018. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, Department of Population, <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/publications/policy-brief-gender-dimensions?page=3%2C0%2C1/>.

interested in politics.

Women's empowerment is still an urgent issue in Myanmar's democratic transition.

Although positive changes in women's empowerment are seen as the impacts of the collective efforts of local and international organizations conducting leadership skills training, not many young women are ready to take this opportunity because there are no easy shortcuts for women to become leaders. Especially in ethnic political parties, women's groups advocate for a quota system to allow women to take on decision-making roles, but ethnic party leaders respond that they cannot even recruit enough women members, let alone give them leadership positions. It is true that the Sandhi Women's Leadership Program staff have had difficulty recruiting women party members from ethnic political parties and Sandhi alumni have also complained about this issue. Women's empowerment at the local level is urgent, and it is important to mobilize women to become actively involved in the political and economic transitions of the country.

According to the survey data, most of the women interviewed feel that women have equal access to education

Young women in general feel that there is no gender discrimination with regards to access to education in their communities. In some areas such as Chin State, parents don't send their children to school because sometimes, there are no schools in their villages and parents don't want the girls to go to other villages at a young age. Rather than gender discrimination, people in rural areas stated that parents did not send their children to school because of economic hardship. However, if they can afford to send only one or two, they tend to give priority to boys, reasoning that boys need to make money for their families but girls can be fed by their husbands.

Many women in Myanmar still lack knowledge regarding reproductive health, and there is no comprehensive strategy to provide proper sex education particularly in rural areas.

Common health problems among young women in the communities we surveyed included reproductive health-related issues. Most women don't have proper reproductive health knowledge and they don't receive proper comprehensive sexual education at a young age. When INGOs, local NGOs and health departments offer reproductive health education, single women are excluded. In some ethnic areas such as Kayah State, women have begun to say that they are receiving proper health education from the local health department, but little is known about the prevalence of this health education throughout the rest of the country.

Recommendations

As women make up half of Myanmar's population, women should have fair representation in policy making processes to reflect the specific needs, desires and voices of women. Gender equality is very important in democratic governance. If women feel marginalized in the public sphere and administration, the policies and laws of a country cannot be conducive to sustainable development of that country. Without the promotion of women's participation during the transition, the process cannot be inclusive and the results cannot reflect the needs of half of the population of the country.

Therefore, it is the high time for policy makers to create an enabling environment for women to be able to participate in the country's development activities and for women themselves in Myanmar to actively get involved in the country's transition to democracy and a market economy. The findings of this research indicate that the

majority of women show at least some interest in politics (21% answered that they were interested in politics and 44% answered that they were a little interested). Besides, the research demonstrates that the most challenging issue for women in the areas surveyed was economic hardship.

Thus, this report concludes with the following actionable recommendations to address the issues faced and highlight the opportunities for the government to create a clear and comprehensive policy to embrace women's participation in public sphere and administration.

The Government of Myanmar (GoM) shall urgently create an enabling environment to promote women's participation. The GoM shall -

- Establish temporary special measures to welcome capable women to join in politics. Reserved seat quotas can guarantee a minimum number of women in legislatures. The quota can be established at around 30% in the initial stage;
- Review policies and laws which do not favor women's participation in public sphere and administration;
- Allocate a significant amount of the budget, at both the national and regional levels, for women in rural areas to be economically and socially empowered and support vocational and business skills training which really can generate incomes for grassroots women.

In addition to creating an enabling environment, the Ministry of Health and Sports shall –

- Focus on giving reproductive health education to women both in school and in communities using language they all can easily understand.

At the community/local level -

Women's organizations or emerging women leaders shall –

- Provide substantive support to young women who are active by organizing gender awareness or women's rights workshops, special talks, and exchange programs to share their issues and challenges and brainstorm possible solutions;
- Share useful knowledge and skills they are interested in. Potential young women leaders can be identified and referred to leadership skills training programs organized by international and local organizations; and
- Provide gender sensitivity workshops or talks to targeted stakeholders.

Last but not least, young women themselves need to take a more active role in their community development. Active and potential women leaders like those who joined Sandhi's Women's Leadership Training Program can be change agents to mobilize women in their communities to be more active in public spheres. Ultimately, women can also be empowered by supporting each other, sharing their knowledge and skills, and exchanging ideas among young women to create networks. ■

References

Discussion paper (May, 2016) Bridge, GEN & Oxfam! Gender equity in political participation

မင်းဆု ဘိုဏာ (ဇူလိုင်လ) The Asia Foundation! မန်မာ့အလင်းစာပေအဖွဲ့အစည်း၏ အချက်အလက်တို့သည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအတွက် အလားအလာရှိသော မဟာဗျူဟာ

The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. “Thematic Report on Gender Dimensions, Census Report Volume 4-J.” Unpa.org, Aug. 2017, myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/4J_Gender_Dimensions.pdf.

Latt, Shwe Shwe Sein, et al. Women’s Political Participation in Myanmar, Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011-2016. The Asia Foundation and Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home), Apr. 2017.

This series of reports was compiled as a part of the “Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society in Myanmar Year Two” program. The research for these reports was conducted entirely by EAI’s partner think tanks in Myanmar, including Sandhi Governance Institute, Open Myanmar Initiative, Yangon School of Political Science, Yone Kyi Yar Knowledge Propagation Society, Salween Institute for Public Policy, Another Development, and Naushawng Development Institute.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

This publication and other EAI reports can be found on our website, [EAI Working Papers]. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the East Asia Institute.

For inquiries:

Kyong Jun Choi, Executive Director

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 107) choik1@eai.or.kr

Typeset by Hyungang Park, Research Associate

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr