

## 2 Gender & Education



Ideas, expectations, and rules based on gender play a major role in governing men and women's behaviour and opportunities. However, in Myanmar, gender inequality has not historically been acknowledged as an issue of concern. [Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices, and Gender Equality in Myanmar](#), illustrates how social and cultural norms carry ideas about different roles and worth for men and women that impact their ability to live full and productive lives. The report examines historical narratives and contemporary cultural and religious views of women in Myanmar, and describes in detail stereotypes and perceptions of women across various sectors. The study is based on data gathered from 543 women and men in seven States and four Regions of Myanmar between September 2013 and May 2014.

This special interest brief highlights some of the key gender issues within [education](#). Other special interest briefs in the series include sport, health, the media, and the economy. The Full Report and Summary Research Papers are available from [www.raisethecurtain.org](http://www.raisethecurtain.org).



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**RAISING THE CURTAIN:**

Cultural Norms, Social Practices and  
Gender Equality in Myanmar

# Gender & Education



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## Gender and Education in Myanmar

Education is critical for the development of Myanmar. Often when gender equality in education is discussed, issues around gender parity - the ratio of boy to girl students – take centre stage. In Myanmar, official figures – linked to reporting on Millennium Development Goal 3 - support the achievement of relative gender parity in primary education but little is known of gender parity and a range of other equity issues in local contexts, informal education, or specific sectors. A focus only on gender parity in primary education ignores more complex and salient issues and limits the scope of public debate about gender and education.



Fig 01 : Illustration from Grade 5, English Language Textbook

In this study, the education system emerged as one of the most powerful socializing agents with regards to gender norms, with norms perpetuated through educational materials and teachers.

Norms which set men out as leaders and breadwinners, and women as homemakers, are used in various contexts to promote educating men over women. Myanmar's education system reproduces these gender norms, depicting boys and men as: tough; externally oriented; focused on production; intelligent and responsible for national affairs. Girls, on the other hand are portrayed as: quiet and well behaved; focused on reproduction; family oriented and modest. Vocational training continues this pattern of socialization as it prepares boys and girls for a gender segregated labour market.

Obvious and consistent patterns of gender stereotypes were found in school textbooks, particularly related to future occupational choices and opportunities. In a review of text books from Grades 1-7, including the subjects of Myanmar, English, History and Geography, boys were seen in active roles such as playing sports and climbing trees, while girl children were typically depicted helping their mothers and studying. In Grade 4 English language textbooks on occupational choices, no less than 16 different occupational roles were associated with men (soldier, doctor, sailor, shopkeeper, tailor, gardener, farmer, engine driver, fisherman, workman, baker, fireman, postman, bus-driver and policeman); while only two were associated with women (nurse and policewoman), in addition to one girl, who was described as a pupil.

Another example is the Poem 'Our responsibilities', in Grade 2 Myanmar Language Textbook, and illustrated in Figure 2. The poem's character and format resemble the Buddhist-derived precepts for behaviour (for example, for parents, children, husbands, wives, and so on), where normative behaviour tends to be framed around 'duties' and 'responsibilities'. In this way we can see how norms around 'appropriate' gendered behaviour (through occupational choices) are established in an authoritative way.



Fig 02 : (above, left) Poem 'Our responsibilities', in Grade 2 Myanmar Language Textbook

Teaching is among the few available professional opportunities for women, especially outside of bigger cities. Being a teacher is a respected position, and one that allows women to have a professional career without having to risk breaking gender norms. Education specialists described how teachers, who may not have had opportunities to question and explore gender norms, contribute to socialization of stereotypical gender norms among the future generation.

Gender norms were believed to impact on school attendance, retention and performance. Internalized gender norms related to family obligations, may impact on girls' decisions to drop-out. One girl child specialist discussed a pattern observed with regards to girls' desire to support the family, which would often mean sacrificing their educational opportunities.

Threats of harassment and violence against girls (real or perceived), also impact on decision-making related to school retention. Improvements in infrastructure and perceived safety can have positive effects for girls' schooling. Using a gendered lens to understand the reasons why girls and boys drop out of school in different contexts is an essential key to unlock the problem of poor school attendance and performance.

The findings pointed to a cultural shift in terms of upgrading the value of girls' education over time, though girls' education was still considered lagging behind boys. As women's contributions to the family income gains importance, particularly for poor households, one line of reasoning suggests that education is something girls need to make themselves competitive in the labour market, and to make up for their perceived physical weakness. Across Myanmar, education of women (and men) was still largely calculated in terms of its instrumental value – i.e., what can be achieved by having an education – and weighed against other goals such as job opportunities and marriage prospects. This demonstrates that in many areas, education for girls is not considered inherently valuable or a fundamental right.

## Steps to Transform Inequitable Norms in Education

- Engage male and female teachers in efforts to transform gender norms and stereotypes, and ensure gender awareness is included in teacher training in both formal and non-formal education.
- Ensure gender is mainstreamed in reforms of pre-service teacher education, and in reforms of teaching methods and content in both higher education and basic education.
- Give in-service teachers and community teachers the chance to discuss and reflect on gender norms, including deeply held norms at a personal level, and provide practical tools that they can use at school, using a peer education format.

- Review all teaching and learning materials with a gender lens. Ensure future education materials do not reinforce stereotypical gender norms but address boys, girls, men and women as equally able to participate in all spheres of life, with equal opportunities.
- Ensure realistic opportunities for girls and boys to exercise different and non-stereotypical occupational/study choices.
- Challenge gender norms in non-formal education and vocational training by creating environments where everyone is able to choose according to interest or talent.
- Consider 'supply' and 'demand', so that choice of vocations that challenge gender norms can be practically applied in the labour market.
- Bring together a broad range of stakeholders, including education practitioners, employers, policy makers and students, for constructive dialogue and programming aiming to challenge gender norms in occupational choices.
- Give teachers the chance to make a difference. With fewer tasks, more teachers, different training materials, sufficient time, and autonomy, teachers will be able to play a key role in shifting stereotypical gender norms. Budget and instructions that focuses on this component are essential.
- Ensure that the development of education laws and policies address gender inequalities as called for in the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR)
- Ensure the development of an overarching education law is in line with the Government's international commitments (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, Beijing Platform for Action) and national commitments (National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women [NSPAW 2013-2022]).
- Develop a comprehensive, inclusive, national education policy, so that all children, youths, adults in Myanmar are able to enjoy their



rights to a quality education, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social or economic status, geographical location, religion, and disability.

- Ensure that gender is mainstreamed in the development of specific education policies such as inclusive education; non-formal education; and language of instruction.
- As called for in the NSPAW, ensure that research and surveys are collecting data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and location.
- Engage civil society in a comprehensive review of educational materials with the intention of producing school materials that are free from gender bias.

## Take Action to Advance Gender Equality

- Challenge donors, policy makers, businesses, unions, and development organizations to commit to gender equality in a practical and meaningful way. Highlight the deep roots and far reaching impacts of gender inequality and advocate for the use of a gendered lens on all developmental issues.
- Re-frame gender equality from a 'women's issue' to an issue of political advancement and democracy for all.
- Broaden the base in gender equality work from the circles of current activists, and engage men and women of different socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, ethnicities, locations, sexualities and abilities.
- Begin discussions of gender inequality around tangible and specific issues in peoples' lives. Look at the impact at both individual and collective levels.
- Work towards re-claiming and re-valuing cultural and religious texts that promote an attitude of questioning and exploration rather than blind following, and those that have to do with social responsibilities. Use cultural and religious frameworks to advance a gender equality agenda.
- Be aware of culturally accepted forms of address and interaction. Approach change through constructive dialogue rather than through confrontation.
- Be practical and issue based. Address the issue of 'how to' in the work towards mainstreaming gender.



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- Equip yourself with up-to-date and reliable information about gender issues in different sectors, and be ready to provide concrete information in order to be taken seriously.
  - Identify and target the 'agents of change' in a given situation, for example, people with gender awareness and inside knowledge of a particular field; power holders with a sympathetic ear; teachers, health care personnel; religious leaders; journalists; parents, children and friends.
  - Reflect on the gendered aspects of norms that influence you in your own life and begin to make change happen there, not just in your professional role.

The Gender Equality Network is a diverse and inclusive network of Civil Society Organisations, INGOS, and technical resource persons working to facilitate the development and implementation of enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realisation of women's rights in Myanmar. To find out more about GEN, take a look at our facebook <https://www.facebook.com/genmyanmar> or email [gen.myanmar@gmail.com](mailto:gen.myanmar@gmail.com)



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