



**The Republic of the Union of Myanmar**

**2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census**

# **Policy Brief on Fertility and Nuptiality**



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





## Key points

- (1) One million children were born in 2013. This number provides an indication of demand for reproductive and child health services.
- (2) Between 1970 and 2000, the level of childbirth decreased by 50 per cent, resulting in proportionately more working-age adults and less children in the total population. This change is beneficial to the economy and the advantage can be magnified by investing heavily in education, health and economic opportunities, especially for young people, women and girls.
- (3) Myanmar now has a low fertility rate: many women are having no more than two children. Well educated women, free of childrearing responsibilities, represent a huge but untapped resource for the country. Policies to encourage women to contribute more fully to the country's economy should be a priority.
- (4) Only 50 per cent of women aged 15 to 64 years are economically active compared with 84 per cent of men, despite the fact that women's educational attainment is higher. The decline in fertility means that women have more opportunities to work outside the home than in the past. Policies to encourage women to join the labour force are imperative.
- (5) The majority of women now have two or three children. However, women who have received no schooling have, on average, nearly four children, while those with a college education have only one child, on average. The influence of education on childbirth is largely caused by the low use of contraceptives among poorly educated women, rather than by differences in the desired number of children. Improvements in family planning information and services are needed.
- (6) The safest age for a woman to have a child is between 20 and 34 years of age. In Myanmar, the risk of a mother dying as a consequence of pregnancy or childbirth is two times higher at ages 35 to 39 and three times higher at ages 40 to 44 than between 20 and 34 years. Childbirth at these older ages should be discouraged.
- (7) In comparison with other Asian countries, Myanmar has an exceptionally large number of women who never marry. It is important to find out whether or not this is a cause for concern. Further analysis of 2014 Census data will reveal more about the situation of this group.
- (8) Women are much more likely than men to experience widowhood. The main reason is the exceptionally large difference in life expectancy between men and women. Men are twice as likely to die between the ages of 15 and 60 as women. Life style factors such as alcohol abuse and smoking may be a cause, and this requires urgent attention.
- (9) A total of around two million women are widows; four-fifths aged 50 years or over. Most have children who can offer support if needed, but 240,000 have no children. They are a potentially vulnerable group and further analysis of the 2014 Census data is recommended to find out more about their living arrangements and level of poverty.

## Fertility

### a. Total number of births

About one million women had a child in 2013. Close to 490,000 people died in the same year and about 120,000 left the country. Myanmar's population is therefore increasing by 500,000 per year.

This simple figure of a million births per year is useful in several ways: it shows the need for antenatal and obstetric care, which currently requires substantial investment to achieve universal coverage; and it also prescribes the number of immunizations required. Currently the 2015 Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey estimates that only 55 per cent of children receive all basic vaccinations.

Looking a few years to the future, the number of births per year, minus the 7 per cent of children or more who will die before their fifth birthday, will determine the number of children entering primary school and assist in planning for the number of teachers, and teaching and learning facilities required.

### **Childbearing at different ages**

Figure 1 shows the number of births in the 12 months prior to the 2014 Census per 1,000 women in a particular age group. Two rates are shown; one for all women and the other for married women only. The rate for all women is low in teenage years because only a minority of women are married. It then rises

and remains high before falling at age 35 and over.

This pattern is welcomed because childbirth at ages 20 to 34 is less risky for the mother than at younger or older ages. Census results suggest that the risk of death from a pregnancy or birth is almost two times higher at ages 35 to 39 than at ages 20 to 34, and three times higher at the ages of 40 to 44.

The age pattern of marital fertility rates is very different. The rate is highest for the minority of teenage girls who are married, and declines steadily at older ages. For such girls, their education may be shortened and their lives put at risk from giving birth at such a young age. Policies to deter early marriage are likely to be the most effective. A step towards this, would be to introduce a legal minimum age for marriage, as exists in many countries.

### b. The total fertility rate

The most common of all measures of fertility, the total fertility rate, represents the average number of children that would be born to a woman during her reproductive age span (15-49 years). The total fertility rate in 2014 was 2.5 births per woman. This means that if childbirth remains the same, most women will have two or three children, with fewer having less or more. Is this too high or too low? There is no simple answer. Opinions vary among economists, politicians and others regarding the optimal level of fertility for a country.

From the perspective of a child, however, a small family is better. Children with fewer siblings tend to receive better education and health care than those with more. A powerful argument can be made for small families, for instance two children, because a well-educated and healthy population is the one of the key components for national prosperity and success.

The perspectives of parents themselves are a key consideration. Ideally parents should be able to choose how many children to have and when to

have them; children by choice not by chance. The MDHS indicates that 76 per cent of all couples want to avoid further childbirth for at least two years but that only 52 per cent of all couples are using a method of contraception. The wide gap between these two figures implies that many pregnancies are unintended. Further strengthening of family planning education and services is required to help couples achieve their reproductive needs.

### c. Fertility trends and the demographic dividend

In the late 1960s couples were having, on average, over five children. In the next 40 years, family sizes decreased, and by the start of this century, the average had fallen to 2.5 children. Since then it has remained stable.

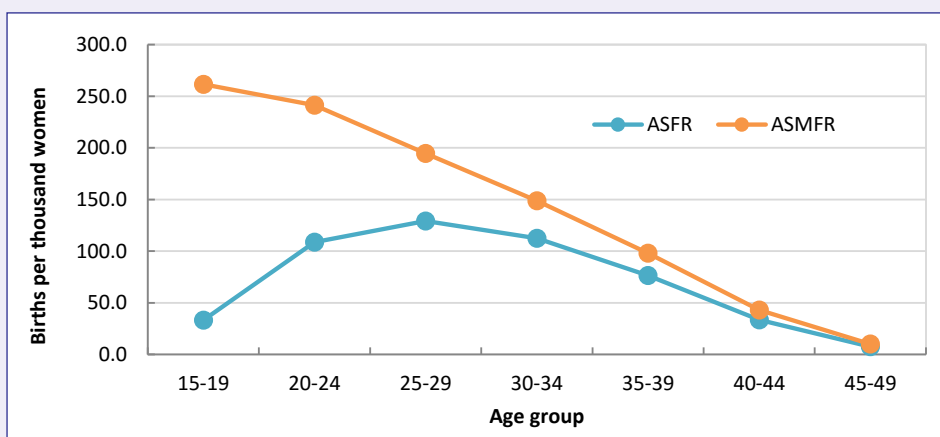
This historic decline has had a favourable influence on the age distribution of the population. In the 1970s, the dependency ratio was 82, meaning that the number of children aged under 15 years and the number of older people aged 65 and above was 82 for every 100 individuals in the working-age group of 15 to 64 years. By 2014, the dependency ratio had fallen to 52. Fewer dependants and more workers represents a boost to the economy.

Projections based on the 2014 Census suggest that the dependency ratio will remain low and favourable for the next few decades before rising as the number of elderly people increases. It is important that Myanmar takes advantage of the remaining decades of demographic opportunity by investing in education, health and economic empowerment for all sectors of society particularly boys, girls and women.

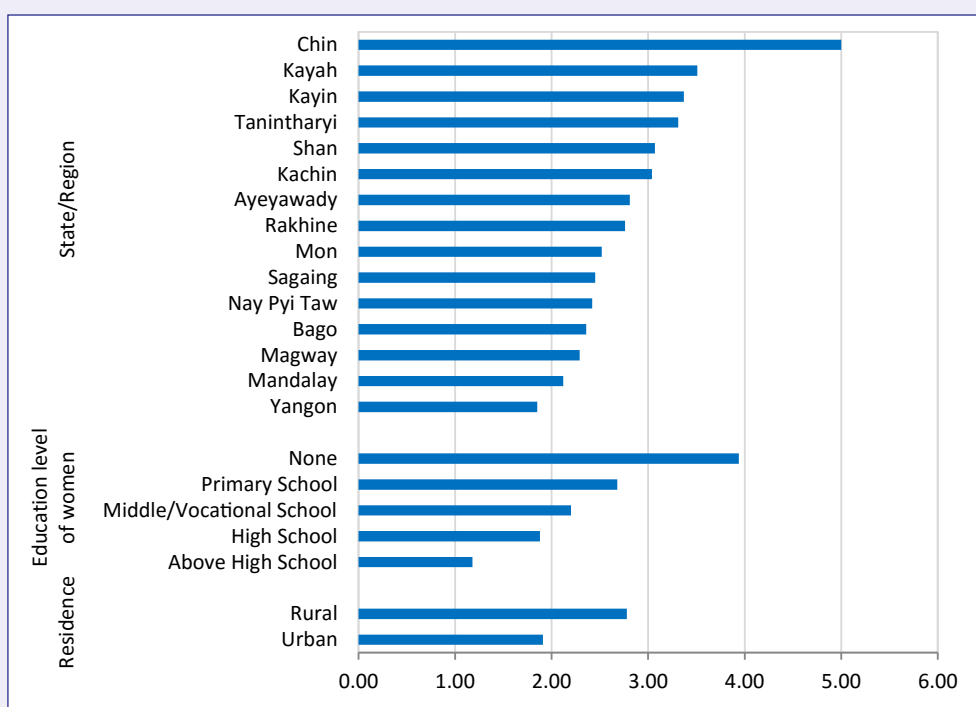
### d. Fertility differences

Differences in childbirth are shown in Figure 2. Women's education is the decisive factor. Total fertility falls in a regular pattern from 3.9 births among those who had never attended school to 1.2 births among the minority who had progressed beyond high school.

Figure 1: Age-specific fertility rates for all women and for currently married women



**Figure 2: Total fertility Rates, by region, education and rural-urban residence**



Delaying marriage or not marrying among the better-educated is part of the reason for these very large differences. However, when looking at marital fertility rates, appreciable differences remain.

Clearly, poorly educated women have issues with contraception. Lack of access to family planning services, insufficient knowledge about family planning methods or fear of using them are all possible reasons for low use. It is important to learn more about these barriers and address them. A failure to do so could result in an increasing divide between the rich and poor. Low educational attainment goes hand in hand with poverty, and a family with a large number of children makes escape from poverty more difficult.

Figure 2 also shows regional differences. The small population of Chin stands out as having exceptionally

high fertility of five births per woman, followed by Kayah, Kayin and Tanintharyi where the total fertility rate is between 3.3 to 3.5 births.

Regions with high fertility are often less developed, illustrated by levels of education, high mortality rates, and poverty. Chin fits this description but it is less clear that the other regions with high fertility are disadvantaged in the same way. Further investigation is needed to fully understand spatial variations in childbirth.

At the international level, Myanmar's total fertility rate is similar to the average for developing countries. However, Myanmar ranks higher than other more developed countries in the region, including Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore and the average for South East Asia. (see Figure 3)

**Figure 3: Total Fertility Rates, Myanmar and other countries**

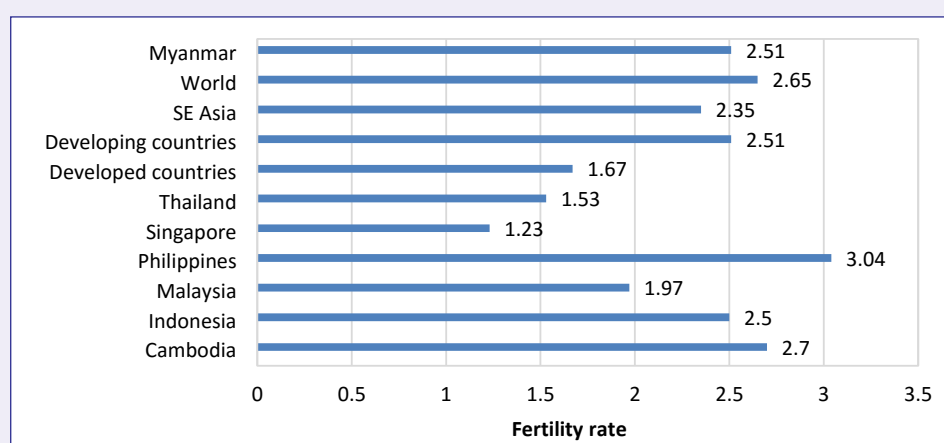
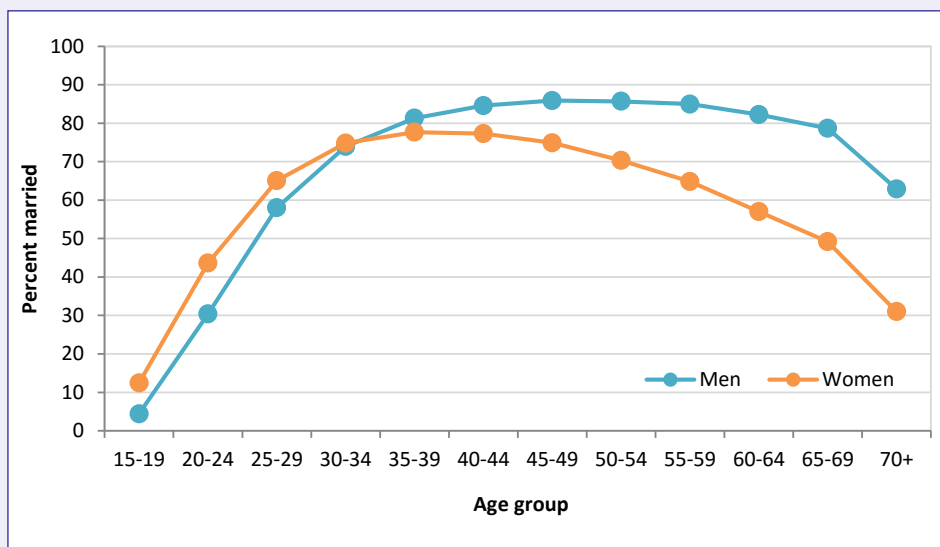


Figure 4: Percent of men and women who are currently married, by age



## Marriage

Marriage implies living together, pooling of resources, and the start of socially permissible childbirth. In Myanmar, the average household size is 4.4 persons, suggesting that most households consist of a nuclear family, parents and children only, rather than an extended family containing other relatives.

In the 2014 Census, persons were classified into five categories according to their current marital status: single (i.e. never married), married, widowed, divorced or separated, and renounced.

### Current marital status

Among the total population aged 15 years and above, 59 per cent were married, 31 per cent were single, 7 per cent were widowed and 3 per cent were divorced, separated or renounced. However, these figures vary by age and differ between men and women, as shown in Figure 4. Very few men (4 per cent) aged 15 to 19 were already married. The proportions of married men rise steeply reaching 81 per cent by their late 30s and remain over 80 per cent until the age of 70 years and over after which they drop to 63 per cent. Between 35 and 70 years of age, four out of five men in Myanmar have a wife.

Women aged 15 to 29 years are more likely than men to be married. This simply reflects the fact that they marry earlier than men. Among men and women in their early 30s, the proportions married are equal for both sexes, at around 74 per cent. In contrast to men, the proportions of women married start to fall

at age 50 and fall more steeply after this age. For those in their 60s, 54 per cent of women are married compared with 81 per cent of men, a large difference. Among those aged 70 or more, only 31 per cent of women are married compared with 63 per cent of men. It is clear that women are much more likely than men to live for longer periods without a spouse. The reasons and implications are considered below.

### e. Remaining single: a matter of choice?

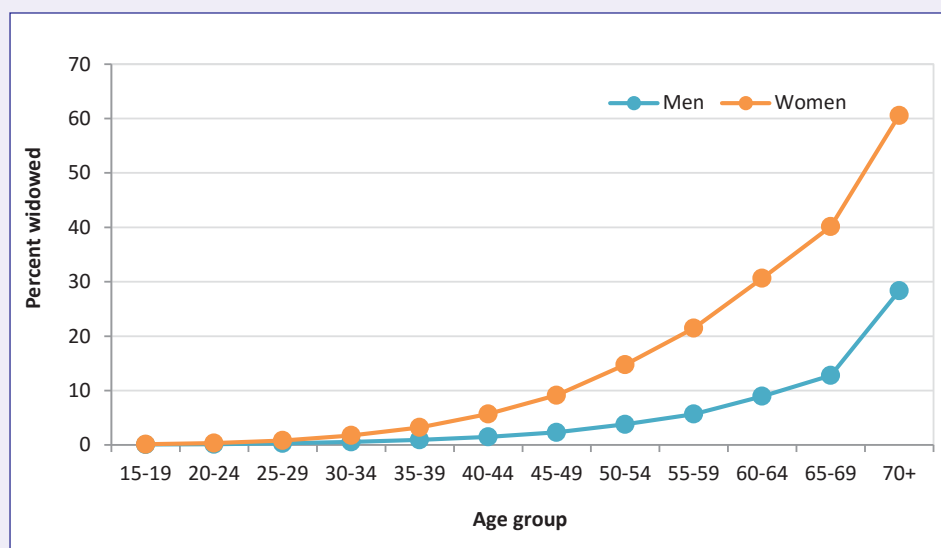
Women are more likely to remain single throughout their lives. For instance, at ages 50 to 54, 12 per cent were still single compared with 7 per cent of men. As marriage for women after the age of 50 is rare, most of these 12 per cent of women will remain single for the remainder of their lives. This level of never married is exceptionally high. Among 15 Asian countries with recent census data, only Singapore records a higher level of never married women aged 50 to 54. Comparison of 2014 Census data with earlier information shows that the proportion of women who never marry has been rising in Myanmar since around 1960.

Is avoidance of marriage by women a matter of choice or does it reflect an unsuccessful search for a suitable husband? The 2014 Census cannot provide a direct answer to this question but much can be learnt about the situation of older single women by examining their level of education, their employment and occupation, and their living arrangements. Further exploration of Census data is a priority.



continued

**Figure 5: Percent of men and women who are widowed, by age**



#### **f. Widows, a vulnerable group?**

Among women in their forties, nearly 1 in 10 is a widow, rising to 1 in 6 for women in their 50s and 1 in 3 for women in their 60s. Among those aged 70 years and over, the majority of women, 6 in 10, are widows. The figures for men are much lower, for instance only 1 in 10 men in their 60s have lost their wives. The main reason for these large differences is that men die at younger ages than women. The difference in life expectancy is nearly 10 years, an exceptionally wide gap. An additional possible reason is that men are more likely to remarry than women.

In most Asian societies, widows are a vulnerable group. The husband is typically the main bread winner and the loss of a husband may result in poverty.

The 2014 Census shows that there is a total of almost two million widows. Four-fifths are aged 50 years and over. As noted above, the majority (87 per cent) have at least one living child, but that still leaves over 240,000 with no child to offer support. Further analysis of the 2014 Census data cannot reveal the number of widows who receive financial support from their children but it can determine with whom widows live, how many have disabilities, how many are working, and the level of deprivation of this group.

#### **g. Comparison of the characteristics of husbands and wives**

On average, women marry men who are nearly three years older, but there is a wide variation in relative ages. At one extreme, 21 per cent of women have a younger husband. At the other extreme, 30 per cent have a husband who is five or more years older. Marriage to a younger man is particularly rare in

Rakhine. Marriage to a much older man is particularly common in Chin, where 44 per cent of wives have a husband who is at least five years older. It is also common in Shan.

The single biggest difference between husbands and wives is economic activity. Less than 1 per cent of husbands are inactive compared with 58 per cent of wives. Economically active wives are also more likely to be self-employed and family workers than husbands (72 per cent versus 56 per cent), and less likely to be wage earners in the public or private sector (25 per cent versus 35 per cent).

These marked contrasts raise an important strategic issue. Myanmar has a long tradition of providing girls with almost equal educational opportunities as boys. For instance, among those now aged in their late 40s, the gender gap in education is narrow: 20 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women had received at least a high school education. Education has improved in the past 20 years and the gender gap has disappeared. Among today's 20 year-olds, 32 per cent of young men and 33 per cent of young women have received a high school education or above.

In countries where women have many children, it is inevitable that few will have the opportunity to work outside the home or family farm. But Myanmar now has low fertility: many wives are not having more than two children. Well educated women, free of childrearing responsibilities, represent a huge but untapped resource for the country. Policies to encourage women to contribute more fully to the country's economy should be a priority.

**Note:** The analysis in this policy brief does not cover the non-enumerated populations. Some populations in three areas of the country were not enumerated. This included an estimate of 1,090,000 persons residing in Rakhine State, 69,800 persons living in Kayin State and 46,600 persons living in Kachin State (see Department of Population, 2015, for the reasons that these populations were not enumerated). In total, therefore, it is estimated that 1,206,400 persons were not enumerated in the Census.



The Republic of the Union of Myanmar

# POLICY BRIEF ON FERTILITY AND NUPTIALITY

FERTILITY RATE = AVERAGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN TO EACH WOMAN BETWEEN 15-49 YEARS OF AGE

## FERTILITY AND POPULATION

Fertility rate 2014



**2.5 BIRTHS PER WOMAN**  
Regional differences  
5.0 Chin  
1.8 Yangon



**1 MILLION**  
children were born in 2013

Myanmar's population is increasing by  
**500,000** per year\*

\* Births less deaths and migration

## FERTILITY AND OPPORTUNITIES

1970



decreased by 50%

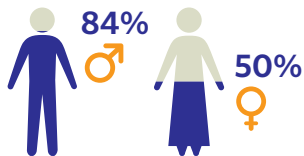
2000



THIS CHANGE IS BENEFICIAL TO THE  
ECONOMY AS THE PROPORTION OF THE  
WORKING-AGE POPULATION INCREASES

ECONOMICALLY  
ACTIVE

15-64 yr olds



Married couples

ECONOMICALLY  
INACTIVE

1% of head couple husbands  
were reported as inactive



Economically active wives are  
more likely to be self-employed  
and family workers  
**58%** of head couple wives  
were reported as inactive

♀ Decline in fertility  
+ higher educational level

▶ OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN TO  
JOIN THE LABOUR FORCE

▶ ECONOMIC BENEFITS  
FOR MYANMAR

## CHILDBIRTH AND AGE



Risk of a pregnancy-related death increases  
with age but is highest for teenage girls

15-19

>

20-34

<

35-39

<

40-44

Least risky age for  
maternal mortality

## MARRIAGE

Average household size 4.4



Age 15+ ▶ 59% of the total population were married  
31% single  
7% widowed  
3% divorced/separated/renounced



Marry earlier than men  
but overall fewer women  
get married

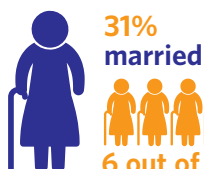
▶ 12% of women  
aged 50-54 never married

Exceptionally high for Asia  
only Singapore has a higher  
percentage of never married  
women aged 50-54



## WIDOWHOOD

70+ yr olds



2 million widows

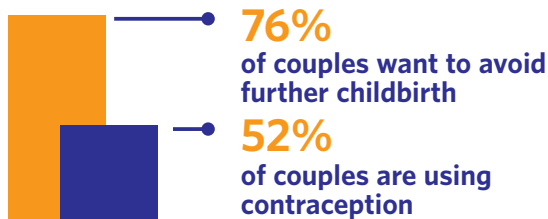


4/5  
are 50+ yrs old

240,000 with no child to offer support

► Women are more likely to be widowed because men die almost 10 years younger

## CONTRACEPTION\*



► **BIG GAP** implies that many pregnancies are unintended



## POLICY OPTIONS

### Reducing mortality



► Make substantial investments to ensure **universal coverage** and in particular antenatal and obstetric care



► **Prevent early marriage** to reduce high chance of teenage mothers dying  
► Consider introduction of legal minimum age for marriage

### Economic opportunities

► Develop policies that **encourage women to join the labour force**

► Make improvements in **family planning information and services** to empower women to work as well



### Family planning



► **Educate** about family planning services and contraception methods, in particular women with a lower education

\* Data from the Myanmar Demographic Health Survey, MDHS

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