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Myanmar landscaping report

SPRING

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About SPRING

SPRING is an accelerator working with growth-oriented businesses on innovations that can transform the lives of adolescent girls aged 10-19 living across East Africa and South Asia. We work with world-class experts to support these businesses to create innovations with purpose and commercial potential.

About SPRING's Girl Landscaping

Between February and May 2018, SPRING conducted a landscaping study to explore the lives of adolescent girls in Myanmar. Employing a range of qualitative and participatory approaches, the research endeavoured to complement insights from earlier literature reviews. The resulting report represents this effort to understand girls' lives in context – through their eyes and their aspirations. While rich in detail and grounded in locally led research, as with any research it cannot definitively capture and represent all the experiences of the numerous and diverse girls living in Myanmar. Nonetheless, we hope that by listening to girls and their parents, this report can provide a window into girls' lives and be a catalyst for future work to understand girls, meet their needs and support their aspirations.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Girls in Myanmar today are growing up in a very different country from the one their parents grew up in. The opening of the economy in 2011 brought new products and new visions of what girls need and should be. The lifting of censorship in 2012 allowed new modes of expression about society and gender. The liberalising of the telecommunications sector in 2013 opened new channels for social interactions and influences. And the dawn of democracy in 2015 elected a woman – Aung San Suu Kyi – as the de facto leader of the country.

These socio-political milestones have not brought the opening, lifting or liberalising of the lives of women and girls in the country, however. On the contrary, in many ways, girls' freedom is increasingly curtailed, with parents fearing new threats to their daughters' safety from the introduction of 21st-century culture and technologies.

The following key insights summarise the findings from qualitative research with Myanmar girls aged 10-19, and with the parents of girls that age, as well as a light-touch literature review that informed the primary qualitative research design. This research was intended to inform identification and support of market-based solutions beneficial to girls. Research was conducted with 190 girls and 72 parents, using participatory qualitative research activities that included drawing, mapping, ranking and scoring activities. Participating girls came from various rural, peri-urban and urban communities: some were still studying; others were out of school. The richness of these discussions is reflected in the body of the report which follows.

1. **Girls' freedom of movement beyond the home is tightly controlled because wherever there are men is considered unsafe.**
   - These rules extend to a friend's house, a relative's house, a monastery and the work place (particularly travelling to and from it).
   - Girls are expected to 'wear safe' (a Myanmar idiom for dressing conservatively) to proactively protect themselves from older boys and men.
   - The threat of the outside world is emphasised by news stories (through TV and newspaper), community gossip and billboards. Girls' parents often enforce curfews through corporal punishment.
   - The most common dangers which girls report facing were verbal harassment and groping.

2. **Mothers are the main mouthpieces and preservers of social norms for girls. Unlike boys, girls are expected to be modest, chaste, domestic and studious.**
   - Homework and housework duties leave in-school girls with little free time; out-of-school girls often have even less, balancing work and domestic duties.
   - Corporal punishment is a socially-acceptable mechanism for parents, aunts and uncles, teachers and employers to enforce behavioural norms on girls. This is tied to broader domestic violence against women.
   - Elopement is seen as an escape by younger girls who feel trapped at home; older girls face the hardship of caring for children under a

husband's control. Spontaneous marriages that quickly end in divorce are relatively commonplace.

- Young, in-school girls often dream of professional careers that will elevate them above these demands; older, out-of-school girls are largely resigned that their futures will mirror that of their peers.

3. **Domestic and sexual violence is widespread in Myanmar, and all forms of violence against women are accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity.**
   - There is a strong association between reporting violence and experiencing stigma within the community.
   - There are limited measures for the protection, counselling and care of survivors, such as trauma counselling, medical care, shelter, economic support and legal services.

4. **Strong cultural norms influence the health of girls and women.**
   - Norms regarding menstruation, chastity, women's reproductive roles and domestic responsibilities critically impact the health of girls and women by limiting their access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and the ability to make decisions about their own bodies.
   - Strong taboos surrounding the discussion of sexual and reproductive health issues result in very low levels of basic knowledge. Girls who are aware of contraceptives find it difficult to access them due to these taboos.

5. **Menstruation brings shame, discomfort and unhappiness to almost all girls.**
   - Girls describe feelings of impurity and embarrassment while menstruating.
   - Menstruating girls must follow strict behavioural guidelines, including not washing their hair, not playing outside, not eating spicy food and not eating tea leaves. If not followed, girls fear that their fertility will be damaged in some way.
   - Menstrual irregularity is thought by some to cause illness or even death, as is white discharge. In most cases, these are entirely natural processes.

6. **Girls' health anxieties are driven by insufficient and inaccurate information. TV and family members are the most trusted sources of information.**
   - Along with menstrual pain, teenage girls' greatest health concerns are heart disease and HIV/AIDS, the latter of which is believed to be contracted by working at massage parlours or karaoke bars.
   - These perceived risks are not founded on the experience of girls' peers, but on sensational news stories and community gossip.
   - A girl's main source of information on health topics is her mother. Although her father is most likely concerned and aware, he is unlikely to become directly involved.
   - Most girls trust TV as a source of information on health and well-being. Some older girls access health information through social media, although this is only trusted if provided by a doctor.

7. **Among out-of-school girls, garment-factory work is considered a 'ticket to eat'.**
   - Factories are seen as female-dominated safe spaces, often with transport provided.
   - The work is seen as less physically demanding than other jobs girls have access to, such as rubbish collection and child care
   - Even more prized than work in a garment factory, according to many girls, is being a home-based seamstress – so that they never have to leave the house.

8. **Few unmarried girls can freely decide how to spend the money they earn. What little is left after supporting their household is often held in savings groups with friends.**
   - Such savings groups usually involve the daily pooling of several hundred Myanmar kyat (MKK[1]) per person, which is distributed on a day-by-day basis between members in turn.
   - Married girls have much more agency and do not need permission to buy items such as clothes or shoes.

9. **Girls and parents value girls' education though competing priorities – such as the need to earn, to care for relatives or to marry – force many to drop out.**
   - Parents hope their daughters will stay in school as long as possible, but the need to add another earning member to the family often pushes girls into work early.
   - Girls know that dropping out of school is a huge disadvantage; all younger drop-outs desire to return to education.
   - As well as having fewer job prospects, less-educated girls are less respected by their future husbands and in-laws.

10. **Unlikely to own her own phone, a girl's online access is usually through the handset of her sister, mother or aunt.**
    - Fathers are likely to limit girls' access to the internet, believing it leaves them vulnerable to elopement, trafficking or drug abuse.
    - Girls primarily use time on phones to call friends or keep in touch with family.
    - Few of the girls with whom we conducted research have Facebook accounts or use the internet.

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[1] 1 MMK = 0.000640739 USD (October 2018)

II. INTRODUCTION

Between January and March 2018, SPRING conducted a landscaping study in Myanmar to explore adolescent girls' lives. The objectives of the research were:

1. To generate information that, together with secondary data, could help the SPRING team design a curriculum to support businesses to better understand girls as their 'target market' and;
2. To surface inspiring and actionable insights that would bring girls' worlds alive for SPRING-supported businesses so that they could design better products, services and opportunities to bring about positive change in the lives of large numbers of adolescent girls.

Research focused on understanding different girls' lives in context, with a focus on earning, learning, saving and keeping safe. This report is an overview of the findings, together with insights from secondary research conducted earlier to inform the focus of primary research.

This report has 10 sections, including executive summary, introduction and conclusion. Section III describes the approach to the research, methods, and site and participant selection. Sections IV to IX present the primary research findings, referring to secondary research where appropriate. Section IV, 'Roles, norms and institutions', explores some of the normative pressures and incentives impacting girls' development. It looks at girls' personal experiences at different stages of adolescence, social norms and expectations, girls' aspirations and the barriers to, and enablers of them. Section V explores perceptions of health, comparing the concerns of girls with more general findings about women and health in Myanmar. Section VI discusses both girls' and parents' views on safety and mobility, their experiences, and how they constrain or enable girls' wider ability to obtain access to opportunities and services. Section VII discusses the economic and financial lives of girls' lives, focusing on earning, savings and spending. Section VIII examines education, aspirations, barriers and constraints. Section IX looks at girls' access to, and use of, technology. Conclusions are presented in Section X.

III. APPROACH TO RESEARCH

1. Research methods

This research was informed by SPRING's learning, earning, saving and keeping safe framework[2], and by a thorough literature and secondary data review conducted in late 2015. The secondary research served to inform SPRING about what was known about adolescent girls in Myanmar to identify gaps that our primary research could help fill.

Participatory tools included mini-workshops, where girls engaged in a range of interactive activities (described briefly in Box 1). We also used traditional qualitative methods, including focus-group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with girls, mothers and fathers; and we conducted some pair interviews with girls. Finally, researchers spent a day with a girl in each site to observe and learn about her activities and interactions, resulting in six deep-dive case studies.

> **Box 1: Participatory research tools**
>
> **What is it like to be a girl:** This activity explores what girls think, feel, say and do using a fictional 'girl like them' that they create together.
> **Path of aspirations:** The path of aspirations is a personal activity done by girls to explore their future aspirations, and what barriers and enablers they see to achieving these.
> **Mobility mapping:** This activity is used to gain an understanding of where girls spend time, with whom, what types of activities they do and when/where, and how they identify safe versus less/not safe spaces.
>
> **Source and use exercise:** There are multiple aims of this tool, including learning about:
> * sources and amounts of money girls have;
> * how regular and safe the sources are for girls;
> * uses of money and the decision making associated with it; and,
> * savings – where girls save, how much and how often, and what they are saving for.

For interviews, discussions and activities, girls were grouped according to age cohorts (10-13, 14-16 and 17-19 years), whether they were in or out of school, and whether they were married. All parents who participated in the research had at least one daughter between the ages of 10 and 19. Girls and parents did not take part in more than one type of qualitative exercise, with the exception of mini-ethnographies. Girls for deep-dive case studies were selected from mini-workshops, FGDs, and semi-structured and pair interviews.

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[2] The SPRING Accelerator was designed to support businesses in 9 countries of East Africa and South/Southeast Asia to develop and scale products, services or business models that could benefit adolescent by helping them to learn, earn, save, or stay safe/healthy. These four impact categories were identified by SPRING as being critical to a girl's life course, and as preconditions for economic and broader empowerment.

2. Research sites

Figure 1: Map showing the locations of the four research sites
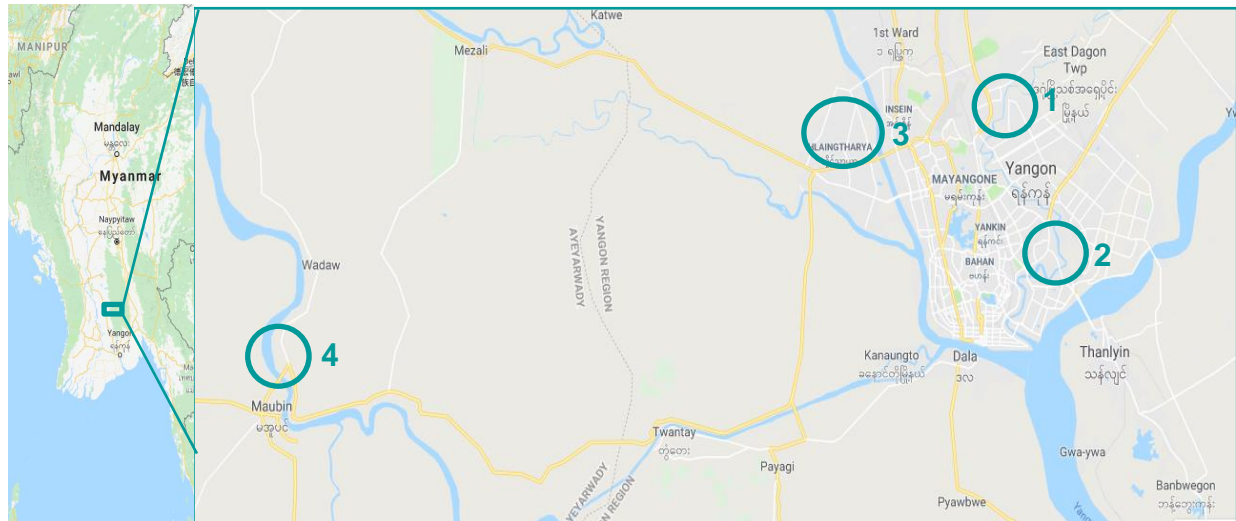
Myanmar is divided into 15 states and regions with Yangon region having the largest population, followed by Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Shan and Sagaing. These five states account for almost 60% of the total population. Most of the population live in rural areas.

The Myanmar research covered four townships in two regions (as numbered on the map above):

1. North Okkalapa township (pilot site) – Yangon region, peri-urban
2. Thaketa township – Yangon region, urban
3. Hlaing Thar Yar township – Yangon region, peri-urban
4. Maubin township – Aeyarwady region, rural

These four locations were chosen both because they represent geographically diverse populations and also because of their appeal to businesses. Table 1 presents a brief description of each research site.

Table 1: Description of the research sites

SITE NAME	SITE AND POPULATION DESCRIPTION[3]
1. North Okkalapa township	Previously a satellite town to Yangon, the peri-urban North Okkalapa township is now an urbanised part of the city. Residents here have a range of occupations from manual labour to professions, such as doctors. People are predominantly of Bamar ethnicity and Buddhist by religion. The population of 333,300 is not fully connected to Yangon's electricity grid and sewer system so power outages are common.
2. Thaketa township	The urban Thaketa township is the smallest and densest township of the study. It is in the eastern part of Yangon and close to the city centre. Thaketa is comprised of middle-class and working-class communities, many of whom are factory workers or administrative staff. The population of 220,6000 is predominantly Bamar Buddhist.
3. Hlaing Thar Yar township	Hlaing Thar Yar, a peri-urban township with around 690,000 residents, grew from the industrial zone (one of the largest in the country) which was founded outside Yangon in the 1980s. This consists mainly of garment factories and other light industry, which attracted migrant workers from across the country. The culturally and ethnically-diverse population grew further after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 when high numbers of Kayin internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved in.
4. Maubin township	Maubin is a rural township in Ayeyarwady region, 65km east of Yangon. It lies on the west bank of the Irrawaddy river. Maubin houses communities of Bamar Buddhists and Karen Christians, many of whom work in farming, manual labour or local shops and trade. The population is around 314,000.

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[3] Figures sourced from Myanmar's 2014 National Census and township data from https://data.humdata.org/dataset/population-and-housing-census-of-myanmar-2014, with additional context from www.wikipedia.org

IV. ROLES, NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

1. Overview of secondary data

The lack of secondary data makes it difficult to apply many internationally-used gender equality indicators to Myanmar, complicating the evaluation of girls' and women's circumstances. Data that is available indicates that lives of girls and women in Myanmar are strongly influenced by social norms. [4] Social norms convey understandings of different functions and values for women and men, which contribute to poor outcomes in women's lives with regard to health, livelihoods, safety and other areas.

Although the political and economic changes that followed the formation of a quasi-civilian government in 2010 had the potential for creating new opportunities for both women and men, existing social norms, which delineate the social spheres available to girls and women, have limited the ability of girls and women to take full advantage of the new opportunities in contemporary Myanmar (Gender Equality Network, 2015).

Women and older girls in Myanmar are considered the 'bearers of culture'. Gendered norms for girls and women are based on politeness, tenderness and modesty; girls and women who deviate from this norm are criticised and shamed. Social norms and practices are strongly influenced by religion which views men as spiritually superior to women. Women's lesser value is linked to perceptions of the impurity of women's bodily functions, such as menstruation and childbirth (Gender Equality Network, 2015). Women's sexuality is controlled by norms of purity and modesty and governed by connections to men; women are expected to dress according the 'proper' dress code, which signifies chastity. They are criticised and scrutinised when they fail to conform to these ideals (Gender Equality Network, 2015).

Gender relations are deeply embedded in cultural beliefs and practices. These views are passed down through generations making them hard to question. Traditional culture significantly influences attitudes toward women in non-leadership roles: there is social acceptance that women oversee the household while men are leaders in familial and social spheres; as carers, women are expected to support men in these roles (decision-making roles are discussed in more detail in Section 4.3). Subsequently, the unequal status of women and men has contributed to practices of son-preference, bride price and unequal inheritance rights (ADB at al., 2016; Gender Equality Network, 2015).

The remainder of this section presents discussions of social ideals and expectations (4.2), key life-stage characteristics (4.3), the prevalence of corporal punishment (4.4), girls' aspirations (4.5), cultural expectations and importance of girls' personal appearance (4.6), and relationships and marriage (4.7).

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[4] Behaviour that a group of people deem to be 'a typical action, an appropriate action, or both' (Paluck and Ball, 2010).

2. Expectations

Girls' lives are strongly circumscribed by 'proper behaviour': by what they should and should not do. Conversations with Myanmar girls and their parents suggest that rules for girls and young women are numerous.

The lists below present the 'code of conduct' for girls in Myanmar as described by girls and their parents. These rules were found to be remarkably similar for girls of various backgrounds. Being educated often came high up on the list. One mother described the ideal girl in her community thus: *'Yu I's an outstanding student who should be imitated by other girls. She never fails any subjects in university and she behaves well.' (Mother, rural).*

Figure 2: 'Code of Conduct' for girls in Myanmar

DO…	DON'T…
✓ Obey parents	✗ Don't laugh loudly
✓ Be polite	✗ Don't have a boyfriend / more than one boyfriend
✓ Be educated and clever	✗ Don't meet or travel with boys
✓ Be gentle	✗ Don't use rude words
✓ Cook well	✗ Don't run around
✓ Talk quietly	✗ Don't be aloof
✓ Do household chores	✗ Don't wear short skirts
✓ Have long hair	✗ Don't wear red lipstick
✓ Be good to your husband	
✓ Change the Buddha flowers every morning (except during menstruation)	
✓ Be honest	
✓ Have a good personality	

Women, particularly mothers, were found to be the gatekeepers of social norms. Girls almost always attributed the rules they had been taught to their mothers, or in some cases to grandmothers and aunts. Mothers often shared that they must push their daughters to be diligent and perform well at school. Maternal pressure also came with greater intimacy and affection between mothers and their daughters. For two girls who had eloped, it was their mothers to whom they most wished to return. In some cases, this combination of a mother's control and intimacy drove separation from men and boys, even within the family.

Fathers were described as stricter when it came to policing interactions with men from outside the family, particularly boyfriends. A group of fathers in an urban area shared that they worried about their daughters because no one could be trusted around a girl, and that every boy or man might potentially harm her: *'When a girl goes out, her*

father worries a lot because nobody can be trusted around a girl. We suspect that every boy or man might harm a girl.' (Father, urban).

Unlike in South Asia, brothers were not given the responsibility of ensuring that their sisters uphold norms, though some parents reported that brothers are protective of their sisters. Social norms were also said to be commonly reinforced by teachers at school, who reportedly beat girls for under-performing academically and for 'poor behaviour'. Female teachers – *sayamas* – either in school or private tutoring, were identified as the most common source of inspiration and positive role-modelling by many girls.

Girls are told by parents and other adults that, if they do not follow rules for proper behaviour, they will have 'bad husbands' or their lives will be 'ruined'. Several girls voiced a fear of being shamed for not meeting social expectations. Some believed that other parents might warn their children to stay away from them and they did not want to be the subject of gossip.

The consequences of failure to meet expectations were expressed in the most extreme terms by a group of 14-16-year-old girls from a peri-urban community with a high migrant population. When asked what the consequences of not meeting expectations were, they suggested that people would look down on them, they would face the threat of being trafficked as sex workers, and their lives would be destroyed. A group of mothers also linked failure to adhere to social norms with becoming a sex worker or a drug addict.

A high premium is placed on being well-educated and an urban group of girls over 17 explained that they couldn't achieve the expectations of an ideal girl because they had already dropped out of school (at their parents' request) to carry out housework. Girls shared that the easiest way to meet social expectations was through education, without which girls felt ashamed. *'It's easiest to meet expectations through education. If you're not educated, you're looked down on and you feel shy. You might even think of drinking poison [suicide] to escape those feelings.'* (13-year-old, out-of-school girl, rural).

3. Life stages and daily life

There is scant secondary data about the transition of girls through different age groups or how girls in Myanmar spend their time.

Generally, girls aged 10-13 attend middle school, grades 6-9. Fewer girls from rural and remote areas transition to high school (grades 10-11), compared to urban girls (ADB et al., 2016). This period marks the onset of puberty and girls' mobility is often curtailed to protect their reputations and their sexual purity. Girls are expected to perform domestic duties in the family household.

Despite the gains in educational attainment, significant gaps remain in girls accessing quality education, particularly girls from remote, multi-ethnic areas where schools are located at a distance and the Myanmar language is not spoken. Rural girls are more likely to be out of school by age 14 (ADB et al., 2016). Across Myanmar, 90% girls aged

15-19 are literate with 70% having attended secondary or higher levels of education.

Most girls aged 17-19 years still live at home with their parents, as the median age of marriage is 22 years. Some attend post-secondary education and many girls are engaged in some form of work, such as agricultural, factory or domestic work (Gender Equality Network, 2015).

There is a prominent gendered division of labour in Myanmar, represented as: hard work for men and light work for women; as well as outside and productive work for men, and inside and reproductive work for women. The Gender Equality Network (2015) states that the norms that place men as breadwinners and household leaders are central to understanding gender relations in Myanmar; men's work is regarded as more valuable with regard to status and income compared to women's. The inequality in work is reflected in different wage scales and the listing of women as dependants on family registration cards (Gender Equality Network, 2015). An Oxfam study of women in agriculture in six villages of the central dry zone in Myanmar found that women earn 20% less than men when performing the same tasks (Oxfam, 2014).

A large share of Myanmar's population does not have access to electricity (Pascale et al., 2016), and most households rely on solid fuels, such as wood and charcoal, rice husks, diesel lamps, batteries or candles. Most rural households (86%) use firewood as their main fuel for cooking and 26% use a candle as their main source of light (MoHS and ICF, 2017). Girls and women thus spend significant amounts of time looking for firewood to meet cooking and heating needs. Of our qualitative sample, rural working girls had the longest working hours, both at home and in the workplace, as well as the least free time.

Discussions with girls and parents, as well as observations during deep-dive case studies, reveal a starkly gendered division of household labour, with girls doing all housework (cleaning, washing, cooking, caring for children and the elderly), while boys are required only to perform occasional physical labour, such as carrying water. None of the girls interviewed expressed resentment towards their parents for making them perform domestic work due to an ingrained belief that housework is a daughter's responsibility. Girls are expected to master domestic skills so that they can manage a household when they are married. Boys' performance of domestic tasks is seen as disrupting gender norms.

Parents who were interviewed suggested that this is the right way for things to be – because this is how things have always been: *'It is a duty of a girl to do housework, such as cooking, washing and cleaning. It is not a duty for a boy, as those tasks belong to girls. We are used to this culture because it has been accepted since many years ago.'* (Father, urban). Men who were interviewed expressed shame at being asked to do housework as a boy. Some suggested that these tasks were aligned with boys' and girls' relative value, with boys seen as being above menial tasks, such as handling dirty clothes: *'A boy shouldn't touch or wash his sister's clothes because he is nobler.'* (Father, urban).

4. Punishment

Corporal punishment was freely discussed by all respondents from all backgrounds and is seen as socially acceptable. Girls from all age groups recounted being beaten – mostly by their parents, but also by grandparents, teachers and employers. This usually involved being hit with a stick or hand. Some forms of punishment were more severe, particularly among younger girls: one recounted having a pin pushed through her lip and two girls reported having their heads held under water.

Corporal punishment was most often prompted by girls arguing or disagreeing with their parents, having a boyfriend, coming home late in the evening, fighting with siblings or neglecting their household duties. Teachers or employers, on the other hand, beat girls for underperforming: one 17-year-old girl working in a footwear factory reported that her employer hit her with a stick when she made mistakes.

For the most part these punishments make girls feel unhappy and fearful. It also alters their behaviour, as they work to conceal boyfriends or cover up mistakes. Despite this, some rural girls see corporal punishment as a fair mechanism of discipline; they described their parents as 'clever' for discouraging bad behaviour in that way.

5. Career aspirations

While 10-13-year-old girls enthusiastically described their aspirations to become doctors or teachers, for many 14-16-year-old, out-of-school girls, talking about their aspirations was an emotional and challenging part of the research discussions. They described coming to terms with the contrast between their dreams and realities. In many cases, there was a disparity between girls' dreams and the aspirations of their parents.

Some girls described tactics to navigate this, including one whose grandmother wanted her to become a government employee – a role in which she herself had little interest. She therefore resolved: '*I think I will have to try my best in whatever I learn, to prove that I am really good at those things [my studies], so that my grandma won't push me again to take a government job.*' (17-year-old, in-school girl, peri-urban).

Other girls were just quietly defiant: '*I want to be a singer because singing is my hobby. But my mother laughs at me when I tell her about my dreams for singer. I told her that it is not coming yet, but it can be possible in the future. Who knows?*' (14-year-old, in-school girl, peri-urban).
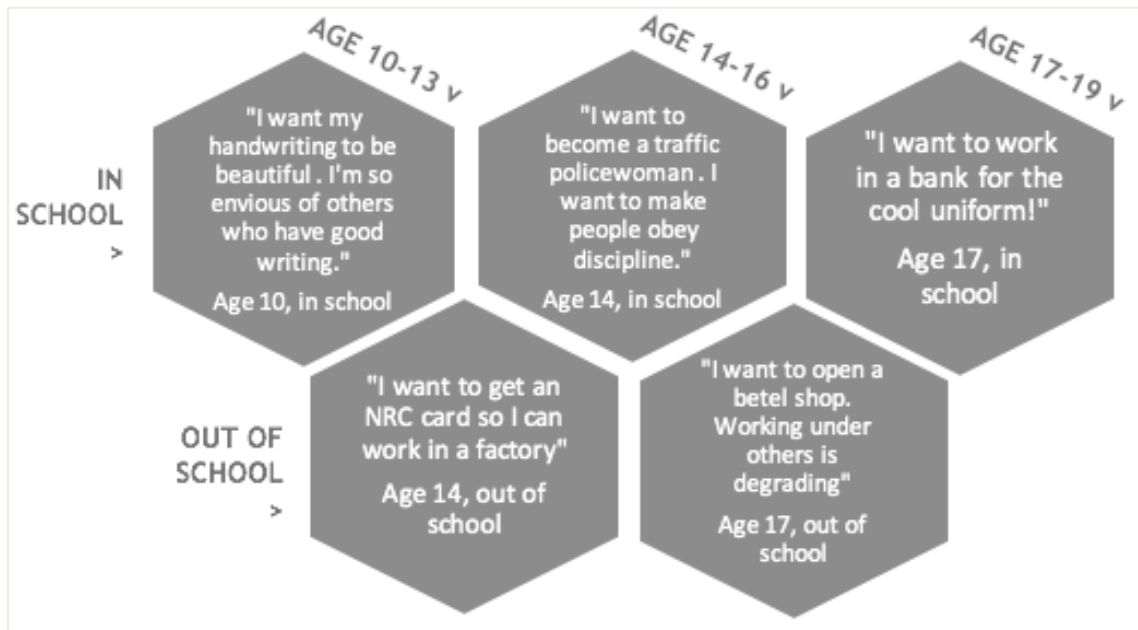
"Who knows?" was a more common sentiment among younger, in-school girls. An out-of-school girl's dreams often closely reflected the lives of the women and older peers that surround her. Rarely did out-of-school girls articulate an aspiration that went beyond what they had seen in their local communities.

Many girls who were no longer in school expressed the desire to work in a garment factory. Sewing skills were seen as *tamin san a meh*, literally 'a ticket to eat rice'. Safe transport, however, was seen as a barrier. Girls from urban areas were afraid of being groped, having untrustworthy taxi drivers and pick-pockets. As a solution, girls

suggested that there be separate buses for students and girls who work; that bus drivers limit the number of passengers according to bus capacity; and that there be more lighting on the route between their homes and bus stops. As an interim solution, others aspired to learn tailoring or to run businesses from their own homes, thereby avoiding the need to commute. For the most part, girls were resigned to the fact that a bus commute was an unavoidable risk that must be taken to earn money in a 'good' job, such as garment-factory work.

The alignment of career aspirations with immediacy of earning was strongest in older girls who had left school. When younger and in school, girls hope for jobs or achievements that are aligned with their interests or personalities and which might require training or qualifications, such as being a policewoman. On leaving school, however, girls generally no longer feel able to pursue a career with delayed earning potential. The quotes in graphic 1 illustrate this re-calibration of aspirations, moving from girls who were in school to those who were not.

Graphic 1: Girls' aspirations

IN SCHOOL >

AGE 10-13 ∨
"I want my handwriting to be beautiful . I'm so envious of others who have good writing."
Age 10, in school

AGE 14-16 ∨
"I want to become a traffic policewoman . I want to make people obey discipline."
Age 14, in school

AGE 17-19 ∨
"I want to work in a bank for the cool uniform!"
Age 17, in school

OUT OF SCHOOL >

"I want to get an NRC card so I can work in a factory"
Age 14, out of school

"I want to open a betel shop. Working under others is degrading"
Age 17, out of school

Some professions are widely agreed as undesirable both by girls and their parents. For urban and peri-urban communities, these include working in bars, where both girls and parents believe girls will be harassed by men or contract HIV/AIDS; and for rural communities, working in the city of Yangon, where people will assume you are a prostitute. A handful of girls suggested that this kind of gossip was an obstacle to their success, and frustrated and distracted them.

6. Appearances

During puberty girls often develop aspirations to be beautiful. Respondents described how cosmetics become indispensable. This was recognised by girls and parents alike, although framed in different ways. Parents were clear in their anxiety and distaste for girls beautifying themselves. Generally, parents preferred girls to present themselves

in a traditional Myanmar way: without make-up, and with shoulders and knees covered by a *longyi* and blouse: '*Problems come to poor families and to girls wearing short dresses.*' (Mother, peri-urban). Several fathers nervously described how teenage girls use more make-up and become more flirtatious as they get older: '*If she uses her money to make herself more beautiful, it is not good. It could lead her to becoming damaged.*' (Father, rural).

Many parents believed that this was different from their own experiences of growing up. One urban father explained how he thought that girls today are more grown-up than girls in previous decades, owing to a broader worldview attributable to TV and the internet. They worried about the risks of a 'foreign' style of beauty – which resembles western or Korean aesthetics – in contrast to the esteem and safety of a traditional, Myanmar version.

When asked to draw a girl 'just like you in your community', almost all groups drew a girl in traditional Myanmar blouse and *longyi* down to her ankles, with long hair, full, red lips and *thanaka*[5] on her cheeks. Around half the girls interviewed – particularly the younger ones – were excited to become more beautiful as they got older. They aspired to bigger breasts and longer hair so that they would be envied by other girls. Cosmetics and beauty were things which girls in all groups thought about and spent money on. The other half of the girls resented the physical changes brought on by puberty, associating them with ugly aspects of adulthood or shame and fear of being thought of as sexually active outside of marriage.
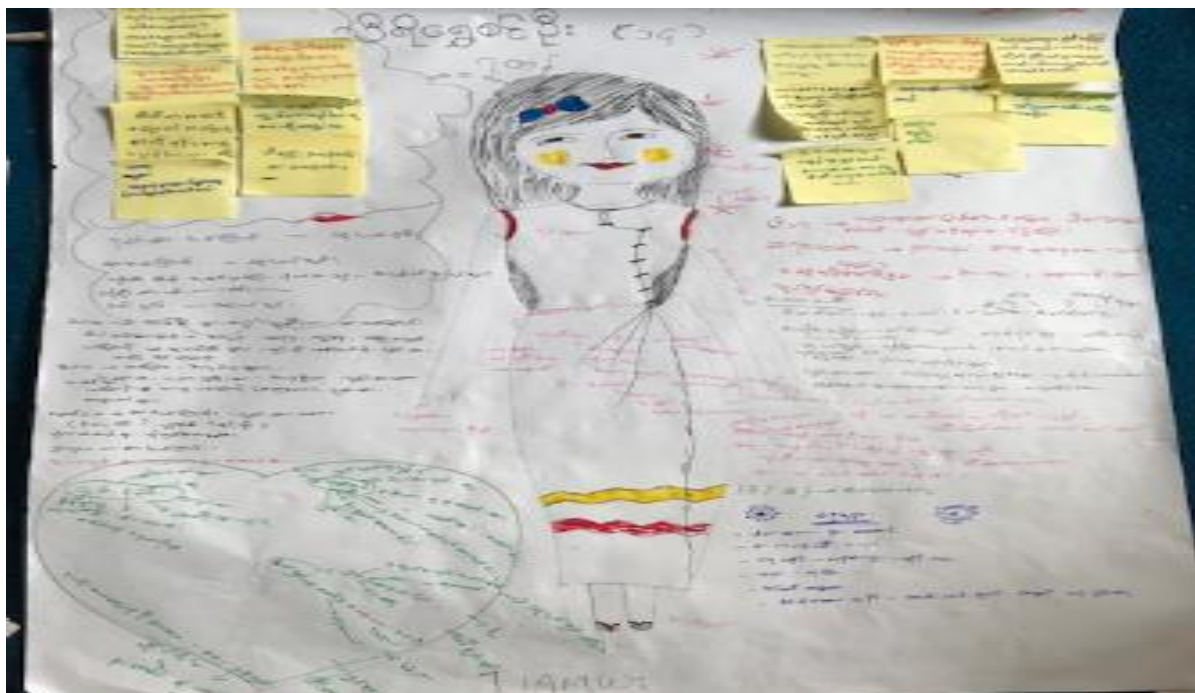
Caption: A girl 'just like you'

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[5] A natural, pale-coloured paste made by grinding a moist piece of sandalwood with on a stone, which is most commonly worn on the cheeks and elsewhere on the face by children and women.

7. Relationships and marriage

The 2015-2016 DHS data indicates that 13% of girls of aged 15-19 years are married, while only 5% of boys aged 15-19 years are married. Early marriage increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, which profoundly affects the health and lives of young women (MoHS and ICF, 2017). The median age of first marriage for women in Myanmar is 22.1 years, with rural women marrying at 21.3 years and urban women at 24.5 years. There are variations according to region and state with women from Mandalay and Yangon regions marrying at 24 years and women from Shan and Rakhine States marrying at 20 years (MoHS and ICF, 2017).

Table 2: Expected marriage age

	Girls: out of school	Girls: in school	Parents
Urban	14-18	13-19	20-25
Peri-urban	18-19	15-16	15-17
Rural	14-16	14-16	22-30

Girls and parents differ widely in their opinions of the right age to marry: from as young as 13, according to some in-school urban girls, up to 30 years of age, according to rural parents. Most commonly, girls expected to get married at 14-16 years of age while parents generally expected girls to be older, although in the peri-urban sample girls' and parents' expectations were relatively well-matched. No clear patterns of expectations distinguished those in school from those out of school, or between locations with the exception of the peri-urban parents' sample.

In conversation with girls, it became evident that some parents thought girls married too early and that, if they waited longer, they would be more mature in handling children and family income: *'In reality, the average marriage age is 15-17, have a baby at 17-18 and get divorced at 19. But they should get married at 25, when they are mature enough to handle the family and manage their income.' (Father, peri-urban).*

Parents often described the appropriate time for marriage as being when a girl 'can think well'. Some parents used more practical guidelines for suitability: *'My mother told me that if a girl can do mushing chillies well, she can get married.' (18-year-old, in-school girl, peri-urban).* One group of mothers linked marriage age with their daughters' careers: they suggested that a young woman should marry at 22-25, having started her career two years before. A group of fathers suggested that the longer a girl studies, the later she will get married and the more respected she will be by her husband. Another father believed that more employment opportunities would help to prevent early marriage, as it would occupy girls' minds and time.

A recurring narrative across all groups was that girls eloped to escape parental controls and punishments for rule-breaking, often for having a boyfriend and staying out late with him. In many cases, this was suggested to be a spontaneous affair: 'I was going to be late home, so I eloped instead,' was an oft-told story. For some out-of-school girls, it was felt to be their best prospect. *'I got married at 17 because of*

financial hardships and family problems. Living at home made me so distressed that I found my own escape. (17-year-old, out-of-school girl, rural). I got married at 15. Mum started following us while we were dating and I was so afraid that I ran off with my boyfriend. Now I already have one kid.' (17-year-old, out-of-school girl, rural).

Usually girls live with their husband's family once they have married. A few rented their own house, or part thereof, and it was rare for couples to continue living with the wife's parents.

Box 2: Escaping through elopement

At 17, Cho has already dropped out of school, got married and had a child with her husband. Her marriage was an elopement, triggered by the tight control of her parents, aunts and uncles. They would always blame her for problems and shout at her –but she had no power to talk back or explain herself. *'When I was 14, I fell in love with my husband.*

One day he encouraged me to run away –so I followed him.' As a young married woman, Cho feels she has the confidence to stand up for herself and express her opinions. She stays at home caring for the baby, and there is too much housework to spare her any time to earn money. But in the future Cho wishes she could be rich so that people will no longer look down on her.

Only a handful of girls participating in this research were married. Most of them were very clear on the troubles and new restrictions girls face after marriage. For some out-of-school girls, early marriage caused numerous additional difficulties and presented obstacles to self-improvement. Others described how the community gossips about who is getting married and how her husband controls her. Aware of this, a group of in-school girls explained that they had purposefully avoided marriage, having learned from their married peers – many of whom were already separated.

Some fathers described the struggles that marriage would bring for their daughters: hard domestic work, bullying from husbands, pregnancy and caring for children while still young themselves. *'We always try hard for our children to be educated, but then some get married before they sit their exams. We are heart-broken. (Father, rural).* **They** *suggested that: At this age, girls get married in the morning and divorced that same night.' (Father, peri-urban).'*

While some peers suggested girls could avoid early marriage by obeying parents and teachers, and exercising self-control, one 18-year-old girl from the same community suggested a simple solution to these fathers' heartbreak: *'To address early marriage, parents need to trust their own children. My friends got married because their mums controlled them too much – so they just found an escape from their lives.' (18-year-old, in-school girl, rural).*

V. BEING HEALTH'Y

1. Overview

There is little national data available on the health and well-being of girls aged 10-19 in Myanmar. We know that their life expectancy at birth is 67.46 years, which is the lowest among all ASEAN countries. Nationally, 6% of girls aged 15-19 have had at least one child; the highest percentage, 11%, occurring in Kachin, Chin, and Shan states (MoHS and ICF, 2017). The maternal mortality rate is far higher than regional averages, with 282 deaths per 100,000 live births (Department of Population, 2014). Only 16% of girls aged 15-24 have comprehensive knowledge about HIV/AIDS and 23% of girls know where to source condoms (MoHS and ICF, 2017).

Strong social norms impact the health of girls and women, including those regarding menstruation, chastity, women's reproductive and child-bearing roles, and their inferiority to men in the family hierarchy. The consequences include limited access to sexual reproductive information and health services, the prevalence of violence against women and girls who fail to conform to socio-cultural norms, and the implications for maternal and child health (Gender Equality Network 2015).

Social taboos limit information-sharing about sex and sexuality, contributing to misinformation and knowledge gaps around sexual and reproductive health (The Three Millennium Development Goal Fund, 2016). These taboos also impact health outcomes directly, as many girls and women feel uncomfortable sharing their health problems or seeking medical care for fear that their reputations may be compromised (Gender Equality Network, 2015). Women are discouraged from speaking openly with husbands and families about sexual matters due to the strong stigma associated with sexual behaviour and are as a result reluctant to seek knowledge about reproductive health from health care workers.

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[6] WHO Myanmar statistics, http://www.who.int/countries/mmr/en/

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Girls and women in remote areas have reduced access to basic health care services, leaving many of their reproductive health needs unmet. Absence of health care or low-quality health care results in a high risk of unplanned pregnancies, sexual and reproductive morbidity, and sexually transmitted infections (ADB et al., 2016; AGIPP, 2017). Adolescent girls and unmarried women find it difficult to access contraceptives and have limited knowledge about sexually transmitted infections as health professionals are reluctant to ask unmarried girls and women about their sexual behaviour (ADB et al., 2016). In Mandalay City, financial barriers are identified as a disincentive to accessing reproductive health services among youth; the cost of contraception also hindered usage among poorer sections of youth (Thin Zaw, 2012). Also, in Mandalay City, young women are more likely to get married or be sexually active at a younger age due to lower incomes and/or unemployment. A higher education level among young women reduces the chances of early sexual debut (Thin Zaw et al., 2013).

Women in conflict zones[7] are especially affected by lack of access to health care, particularly maternal health care. Although health care is free in government-controlled areas, the cost of transportation to hospitals or clinics is too high for most women (Trocaire, 2017). In addition, women in conflict zones often distrust the advice and treatment given by government health workers. There is very little data related to mental health in Myanmar, however, a rapid assessment of girls and women living in conflict zones highlighted the critical need for mental health and psychological support services (ADB et al., 2016). Girls and women in conflict zones suffer from trauma, depression and other anxiety-related problems which tend to go untreated (Trocaire, 2017).

Knowledge about the causes of HIV transmission and methods of preventing it is important for reducing the risk of young people contracting HIV. Only 16% of young women aged 15-24 has comprehensive knowledge[8] of HIV/AIDS, with 23% of young women knowing where to source condoms compared to 42% of boys (MoHS and ICF, 2017). Girls and women living in Chin state have the least knowledge about the preventative potential of using condoms and limiting sex to one uninfected partner (MoHS and ICF, 2017). Rural women (16%) are less likely than urban women (30%) to have accepting attitudes towards people living with HIV/AIDS, and women in urban areas (28%) are more likely to have had an HIV test and received their results than women in rural areas (13%). Women in Rakhine state are least likely to have had an HIV test and received their results (8%) (MoHS and ICF, 2017). Other data from the World Health Organization, however, suggests that HIV-testing rates may be much lower in fact: in 2014, 2.8% of women aged 15 years and older had been tested; compared to India with 4.1% of women 15 years and older; and Nepal with 0.6% of women 15 years and older (WHO, 2016).

The remainder of this section discusses the health concerns, myths and misconceptions shared with us during our research (5.1), girls' menstrual health (5.2),

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[7] The conflict zones are Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine states where different ethnic nationalities have been fighting with the central government over self-determination and equal treatment (Khen and Nyoi, 2014). Recent census data indicates that 3.3% of Myanmar's population live in Kachin, 6.2% in Rakhine, and 11.3% in Shan (Department of Population, 2014).
[8] Defined as knowing that both condom use and limiting sexual intercourse to one uninfected partner are HIV-prevention methods, knowing that a healthy-looking person can have HIV, and rejecting the two most common local misconceptions about HIV transmission (MoHS and ICF, 2017).

and sexual initiation, pregnancy and abortion (5.3).

2. Concerns, myths and misconceptions

Among the girls with whom we spoke, menstrual pain was the primary health concern followed by HIV/AIDS, stomach pain and heart disease. Girls interviewed were concerned about cancer, primarily breast cancer, but also cancer more broadly. Interviewees also voiced concern about white vaginal discharge, fever and anaemia. Smaller numbers of girls also talked about acne, headaches, body pains from hard work and sore eyes. These ailments were mentioned alongside far rarer conditions, including Japanese encephalitis. the H1N1 flu virus, hepatitis, kidney disease, tuberculosis and elephantiasis.

While many girls showed themselves to be proactive and sensible about their personal health, they revealed a number of important misconceptions, particularly about sexual and reproductive health (Box 3).

Box 3: Concerns and misconceptions

'Breast cancer can happen if you wear a tight bra, or if you put money in your bra.' (14-year old, out-of-school girl, rural).

'Chemicals in sanitary pads can cause cervical cancer. '(17-year-old, out-of-school girl, peri-urban).

'Girls are normally weak and can be scared easily if they have heart disease.' (14-year-old, in-school girl, rural).

'Working at KTV [karaoke bar] can cause HIV/AIDS.' (17-year-old, in-school girl, peri-urban).

'My friend told me she had started her period. She got it in grade 7 and she said that, if a girl has no menstruation, she can even die. So, I was praying to get it soon – but it only came in grade 10.' (18-year-old, in-school girl, rural).

Cases of misinformation were often localised, as were disproportionate fears concerning certain health issues. For example, heart disease was a great concern of girls of all ages in rural Maubin; although a serious health concern, it is not likely to affect girls. There was extreme anxiety about white discharge shared by all groups in urban North Okkalapa; while white discharge is common, these girls believed that this was an extremely serious condition and warranted concern about cervical cancer in Hlaing Thar Yar. The localisation of these health concerns suggests that a girl's perceptions of risks to her own health and well-being are heavily influenced by prevailing beliefs in the area.

Most girls across all age cohorts obtained information about health from their family, or members of the immediate community. Within the family, they spoke almost exclusively to female members about changes, such as menstruation, or to be taken to the doctor when in pain. Though many fathers demonstrated sound knowledge of their daughters' health concerns, they agreed that discussing them was the mother's responsibility. Some mothers admitted to misleading their daughters about health

issues in order to keep them safe, such as telling daughters they could get pregnant by holding hands with a boy.

Girls did not always regard their mothers as reliable sources of health information, particularly with regard to menstruation. In some cases, their advice was constricting, with restrictions placed on movement, eating and other daily habits while menstruating. Secondary data shows that cultural taboos around girls and women touching water during menstruation can contribute to infections and health problems (Gender Equality Network, 2015). Adolescent girls face increased risk of gender-based

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Box 4: Health-related anxieties

Lat Lat, age 11, lives in North Okkalapa. Her father is a travelling salesman and her mother sells vegetables in the market. Most of Lat Lat's time is spent at school or cycling 20 minutes to her friend's house. She likes playing there, because they can climb up to high places – which isn't allowed at her own home.

One of Lat Lat's major health anxieties is HIV. She hasn't heard of anyone living with HIV in her area, but she does know that you should not touch another person's blood to avoid it. She tries not to get bitten by mosquitoes to avoid getting dengue, which she knows is common in children and means they have to stay for a long spell in hospital. Lat Lat also believes if a boy touches a girl's menstrual blood, that girl can get pregnant, so menstruating girls must stay in the house. She hasn't started menstruating yet, but she was warned of this by her mother, who is her main and trusted source of information. Lat Lat knows that the older girls in ninth or tenth grade have boyfriends, but she isn't sure whether they have had sex or not.

Lat Lat is confident that she will continue school until graduation, and it's her ambition to become a teacher. She doesn't tell her father if she fails exams because she knows he will hit her. She only confides in her mother.

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violence and other challenges arising from menstrual hygiene when water, sanitation and hygiene facilities are not available at schools (Gender Equality Network, 2015).

Not all girls relied exclusively on female family members for health information. Older girls (those over age 17) from rural areas said they had also accessed information through Facebook, TV and newspapers. TV and newspapers were thought to present more reliable information than social media, as they were seen as government-sanctioned and produced by an official organisation: in peri-urban Hlaing Thar Yar, a number of girls (in and out of school) had seen a video from the NGO CARE about early marriage and its impact on health and well-being. There was also a contrast in the information sources of girls in and out of school. Regardless of where girls lived, in-school girls reported that they could access health information from their teachers; and out-of-school girls more frequently described relying on NGOs or doctors.

Doctors were cited as trusted sources of health information by most groups of girls. Several girls described how their mothers sent them to the doctor if they suffered severe menstrual pain or menstrual irregularity. These girls referred to doctors as individuals whom they knew personally, rather than referring to institutions, such as hospitals or clinics. Such places were only mentioned in the context of extreme health

conditions like blood cancer, abortion and debilitating menstrual pain. This suggests that these girls, particularly those aged 16 and less, rely upon localised health care.

Caption: Mothers and girls in peri-urban Hlaing Thar Yar rated the relative importance of their information sources on the four health issues which most concern them; mothers and friends took the largest shares.

3. Menstrual health

Apart from some of the youngest respondents, the vast majority of girls participating in the research had begun menstruation, and for almost all of these girls, menstruation was a great frustration and obstacle to happiness. Girls' displeasure with menstruation was tied both to the physical discomfort their bodies suffer, and a widely-held sentiment of being 'dirty'. Many girls feel ashamed when they are menstruating and used self-hating language to describe their feelings. Many girls avoided using precise language in research conversations (see Box 4).

Box 4: Experiences with and feelings about menstruation

I knew it [menstruation] had started when I woke up and it hurt too much. I told my mum and she told me how to behave. She gave me paracetamol and bought sanitary pads for me. I feel that I am not clean. (14-year-old, in-school girl, rural).

I got it [menstruation] when I was at school. My sister bought pads for me because I was so shy. I don't want to be a girl. (14-year-old, in-school girl, rural).

Mom told me to restrict my food and not go outside when I have my period, because it's not suitable to be seen by boys because I am dirty. (10-year-old, in-school girl, rural).

All girls over 14, in all locations, voted menstrual pain, menstrual irregularities and even normal menstruation as being in the top 3 of their greatest health challenges. In one case, menstrual pain was the only health issue which a group of mothers thought affected their 10-19-year-old daughters. Only one girl and one mother reported that menstruation was not problematic.

Many girls cited white discharge as a recurring concern, particularly in the urban area of North Okkalapa. Given that white discharge is generally healthy, especially before a girl begins menstruating, the degree of concern was unexpected. Other menstrual taboos are believed to result in dire consequences, as illustrated in Box 5.

Box 5: Menstruation – taboos

In Myanmar culture there are many things which a girl cannot do during menstruation. The list includes:

- ✖ Wash hair
- ✖ Spend time with boys
- ✖ Play or run around
- ✖ Eat pickled tea leaf   Consequences:
- ✖ Eat spicy food   Period will stop &
- ✖ Eat mango   girl could fall ill or die
- ✖ Eat guava
- ✖ Eat sugar cane
- ✖ Go outside (rare cases)

Though girls are frustrated by these rules, they accept them as necessary.

Almost all the girls interviewed used sanitary pads while menstruating, though a few in rural areas use cloth for reasons of cost. In urban Tha Kay Ta, most girls reported using 'Eva' brand sanitary pads; whereas in rural Maubin, it was 'SHE' – a brand which is cheaper, thicker and less discreet (in terms of rustling).

4. Sexual initiation, pregnancy and abortion

Secondary data shows that on average women are more likely than men to have their first sexual experience after marriage (MoHS and ICF, 2017). For rural women, the median age at first sexual intercourse is 21.7 years compared to urban women whose first experience occurs at the median age of 25 years. There are regional variations to the median age, with women in Shan and Rakhine states having their first sexual intercourse at 20 while the median age for women in Yangon and Mandalay regions is 24 years (MoHS and ICF, 2017).

Early pregnancy was rarely mentioned in conversations with girls and their parents. In urbanised areas, teenage pregnancy rates are low at 3% in Yangon, while in the rural Ayeyerwaddy region, it is 6% (DHS, 2016). Overall, 6% of girls in Myanmar have given birth by the age of 19, of which 18% are among those with no education, 9% among

those with primary education and 3% among those with secondary education (DHS, 2016).

The median age for childbirth in Myanmar is 24.7 years. This varies according to region, with women in Rakhine and Shan states giving birth at 22.6 years and 22.8 years, respectively. (MoHS and ICF, 2017). In Myanmar, it is considered a married woman's duty to have children and preventing pregnancy can be seen as disrespecting that obligation. In Southern Chin state in particular, women face enormous social pressure to have many children, and many women have high-risk births without a trained birth attendant (The Three Millennium Development Goal Fund, 2016).

Caption: A 19-year-old mother with her 18-month-old baby boy. Though she spends her days at home with him now, she hopes to return to work as he grows up.

Abortion was only mentioned a handful of times during discussions with girls and parents, and was presented more as an ailment or sickness than a medical choice. One 17-year-old in a peri-urban area knew of a girl who had become pregnant: *'Her boyfriend told her to do an abortion. After they finished the abortion, she died in the*

night'. Some fathers suggested that early marriage and abortion are caused by financial difficulties, as well as drug usage. Due to women's and girls' inability to discuss matters related to reproduction, many women are forced to seek unsafe abortions when unwanted pregnancies occur. Despite abortions being illegal, adolescent girls are often pressured to undertake high-risk abortions due to the social norms related to sexual relations before marriage (ADB et al., 2016).

VI. MOBILITY AND SAFETY

1. Overview of secondary data

Safety is a significant issue for girls and young women for whom gender and age-related norms are restrictive. Rural girls and young women generally have limited mobility due to societal norms that discourage them from participating in activities outside the home, and that are also due to real and perceived threats of violence. Research indicates that domestic and sexual violence is widespread in Myanmar, and all forms of violence against women are accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity. Threats to women and girls are just as real – if not more so – inside the household as outside of it (ActionAid, 2014). As seen in Section 4.4, girls frequently experience corporal punishment at home, school and in the workplace.

DHS data indicate that 15% of girls and women aged 15-49 have experienced violence since the age of 15, and 9% had experienced violence in the 12 months preceding the survey (MoHS and ICF, 2017). The prevalence of spousal violence (physical, sexual or emotional) declines with women's age: 28% of women aged 15-19 experienced some form of spousal violence, compared to 20% of women aged 40-49 (MoHS and ICF, 2017). In a study in Mandalay township, 69% of married female respondents had experienced one or more incidents of domestic violence perpetrated by their intimate partners in the 12 months prior to the interview; of these, 69% had experienced psychological abuse and 27% physical assault (ADB et al., 2016). In another study in Yangon, 19% of women had directly experienced violence and 53% of women knew of women who had been abused by relatives or neighbours (ADB et al., 2016).

In Myanmar, 22% of girls and women aged 15-49 who have experienced some form of violence from anyone sought help from family members or support services, and 37% of women have never sought help or told anyone about the violence (MoHS and ICF, 2017). Public awareness of the nature and impact of domestic violence is low and there is a cultural acceptance that it is a family matter (ADB et al., 2016). These factors create and perpetuate the culture of silence, and violence against women and girls is socially legitimised with few perpetrators facing punishment (ADB et al., 2016). Furthermore, there are few options available to women experiencing domestic violence other than returning to their parents; this was considered a more likely option for women if her family had approved of the marriage (Gender Equality Network, 2015). There are limited measures for protection, counselling and care, such as trauma counselling, medical care, shelter, economic support and legal services (ADB et al., 2016).

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The risk of violence against women and girls increases in conflict contexts, such as Kachin, Kayin, Rakhine and Shan states. Reports of violence against women include allegations of gang rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by armed forces and non-state armed groups. Most cases go unreported with the majority of survivors remaining silent due to shame or fear of being shunned by their communities (Trocaire, 2017). In a male-dominated society, girls and women are held responsible for sexual violence experienced in the home and community. A study of women in Kachin suggests that many women experience fear and panic attacks when they see soldiers in cities or near IDP camps. The study also highlights that approximately 50% of sexual violence cases were reported by girls under the age of 18.

Girls and women living near conflict areas face greater risks of human trafficking, which has become widespread and acute in Kachin, Northern Shan and Palaung states (AGIPP, 2017). Although trends in human trafficking in Myanmar remain significantly under-researched, anecdotal evidence suggests that girls and women experience high levels of vulnerability and are usually trafficked for labour purposes and/or sexual exploitation (ADB et al., 2016).

Secondary data shows that girls and women in conflict areas of Myanmar experience restrictions on their freedom of movement in public places. For example, adolescent girls in an IDP camp in Kachin have limited mobility as they experience the potential threat of rape, sexual assault and the risk of trafficking (IREX, 2017). Women's movement in social spaces is curtailed due to the threat of violence, particularly from the military in conflict areas, and the government also restricts international travel for girls under the age of 25 as a means of addressing the trafficking problem (OECD, 2017). As a result, girls and women in conflict areas are forced to remain at home or in the camps as it is considered too dangerous to move outside (Trocaire, 2017).

This remainder of this section explores perceptions of girls' safety (6.1) and the impact that this has on their freedom and mobility (6.2).

2. Perceptions of safety

Feelings of safety differ between girls of different ages. In general, 10-13-year-old girls described feeling more unsafe in day-to-day life than older girls, though these fears were not tied to any specific event or situation. Younger girls were primarily worried about any possible interaction with male strangers. The least physically harmful, but most relentless, threat was verbal harassment from boys; all the girls interviewed – and all of our Myanmar researchers – bemoaned this daily occurrence. There were numerous cases of harassment and verbal abuse from men and boys on the street even during the short transect walk for this research.

Another level of concern for the young girls interviewed was fear that a male stranger might steal their money. Girls also feared that they might themselves be stolen through human trafficking. Rumours of kidnapping through 'touch medicine' (*tot say*) – whereby a girl is drugged and made compliant through a touch on the arm and must follow her toucher's bidding – were shared in North Okkalapa. These stories are common across Yangon and possibly in other areas.

The perception of the high risk of human trafficking on the streets of Myanmar is reinforced through a number of channels. Girls reported hearing of human trafficking through friends and neighbours, as well as TV and newspapers. Although they do not always use these news sources themselves, they explained that older family members would share these accounts with them.

Cautionary messages are communicated directly by INGOs, who sponsor large billboards showing distressing images of girls and young women being abused by strange men (see photo 'anti-trafficking billboards'). The United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons suggests that limited data exists on the scale of trafficking in Myanmar, but that young women and girls who are unemployed or on low incomes are particularly vulnerable (UN-ACT, 2014). In 2017, Myanmar's Ministry of Home Affairs recorded 897 cases of rape of girls under age 16, with particularly high rates in urban areas. The primary data suggested that girls experience a sense of insecurity driven by widespread awareness of this kind of threat, and that this contributes significantly to parents imposing greater restrictions on their daughters' freedom of movement.


Caption: Anti-trafficking billboards

Girls aged 14-16 were concerned with cases of crime and extreme danger which they linked to specific locations: robberies were often thought to occur at the bus stop, and girls were of the opinion that murders happened in crowded urban areas. These girls also worried about being trafficked and suggested that this was most likely to happen at the market, pagoda, cinema or in a park. Girls perceived themselves at high risk of being raped in isolated places, poorly-lit spots, places with drunk men present or anywhere outdoors at night or in the early morning.

Girls – particularly those in early to mid-adolescence – were also concerned about being groped or physically harassed on the street or by men known to them, like the older brother of a friend. Girls over the age of 17 had a greater sense of security than younger girls. Their longer list of safe places included the beauty salon, cold drinks shop, friends' houses, relatives' houses, market, minimart, pagoda, park, snack shops and supermarket. These older girls nonetheless expressed concerns for their safety in crowded places, such as buses. Although human trafficking was rarely mentioned, they were concerned about verbal abuse in open public places where there were often men fighting, drinking or taking drugs.

3. Freedom and mobility

There is a widespread belief that inappropriate dress or behaviour increases the likelihood of sexual violence (Gender Equality Network, 2015) and that cultural requirements for women and girls to act and dress in particular ways lessen the threat. The social requirements that prescribe the appropriate and acceptable ways that girls and women should behave constrain their access to health services, educational opportunities, and sexual and marriage choices (The Three Millennium Development Goal Fund, 2016).
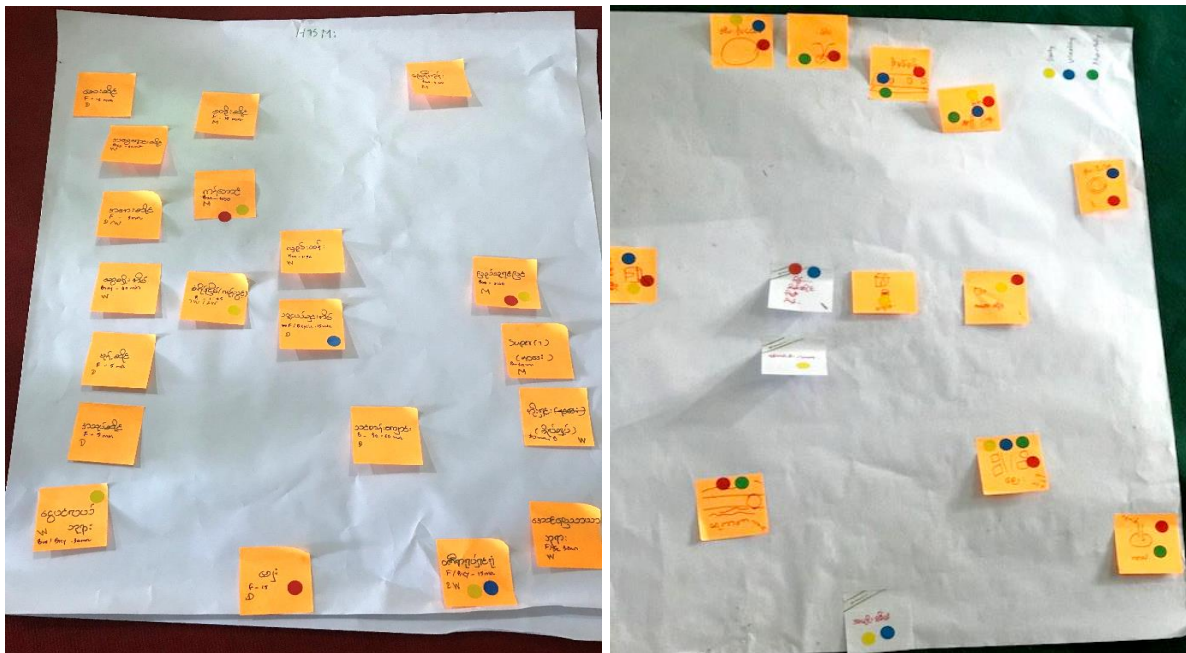
Caption: Mobility maps 'in the red': younger urban girls (right, age 10-13) used a red dot to mark almost every place on their map as unsafe, whereas older peri-urban girls (left, age 17-19) marked only two.

While concerns about safety varied most between girls of different ages, our research revealed that actual mobility varied most with girls' rural or urban location. Urban girls were more mobile than rural girls across all age groups. Some destinations, such as university, tuition or place of work, required travelling by bus which was usually seen as unsafe. Urban girls also described going to some places which simply don't exist in rural areas, such as clubs, fashion shops and supermarkets. Older girls in both urban and rural areas have more mobility than younger girls, and their daily activities take them further from home for university or work.

The secondary data showed that in some states the safety of girls travelling to and from school is a concern. In Kayah state, girls going to school encounter men who pose a risk to their security and human trafficking is a significant threat for adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2016). In addition, girls in Kayah encounter problems when going to the toilet at school. Girls need to seek permission from the teacher as they must be accompanied for safety due to the distance of the toilet from the classroom.
The most common four places which girls talked about visiting on a weekly basis were the market, snack shop, pagoda and park. All girls from the peri-urban and culturally

diverse township of Hlaing Thar Yar reported that the market is unsafe because people may steal their belongings in the crowd. Most girls in all locations believed the market was unsafe because they could have their pockets picked, be groped or kidnapped. Only several older out-of-school girls and university students from rural Maubin and urban Thaketa thought markets were safe as they had acquaintances there and visited often with family or friends.

Caption: Adolescent girl on public transport

Small snack shops are often located close to girls' homes, meaning most feel safe to go there. Girls described snack shops as familiar places which were usually frequented by women. They went there happily with friends. Yet some rural girls and some urban 10-13-year-old girls thought snack shops were not safe because boys would undoubtedly tease them there. At nights, they also found there to be a risk of kidnapping.

Almost all girls agreed that parks are unsafe because of the threat of groping, rape, kidnapping or other encounters with alcoholic or abusive men and boys. Some 17-19-year-old girls in school suggested that parks might be safer when busy so that they

could seek help if anything happened. They suggested that more security staff be placed around the park, and that alcoholic drinks should not be permitted. The park was also identified as a venue to meet boyfriends. Some girls thought the pagoda was safe because it is a religious place, close to home and which they often visited with friends. Enhancing this sense of safety are security personnel and CCTV. Nonetheless, most younger girls and several older girls in urban areas still had concerns about poor lighting and the risk of being kidnapped or bitten by dogs.

The primary data revealed that by far the greatest influences on a girl's mobility, far exceeding her own choices, were restrictions placed on her by parents. For almost all girls, parents controlled their movements in terms of timing, destination and whether they travelled alone or accompanied. Parents almost never allowed daughters to go outside at night alone or with boys, and 9pm was an often-mentioned curfew. Several places were largely black-listed, including the cinema, park, club, guesthouse and massage parlour. This does not mean that girls do not go to those places, but that going there required secrecy on their part. Fears around the threat of going out in public were highest in the peri-urban area of Hlaing Thar Yar where there is a high proportion of migrants.

Particularly in urban areas, parents suspected that their daughters left the house to spend time with their boyfriends. Parental anxiety about girls' safety was sometimes aligned with girls' own fears, concerned as they are with rape, kidnapping and traffic accidents. Fathers' fear for their daughters appeared pervasive:

'I don't even let my daughter go out with her friends because we don't know what will happen. If she wants to go out, she can go with a parent. I'm worried that she'll meet a boy on drugs, and he'll trap her … We always have to care for them, like a growing flower.' (Father, peri-urban).

'Going out with friends (especially with male friends) is not appropriate for girls at all.' (Father, rural).

'Girls are not safe nowadays because even close relatives, such as brothers and uncles, cannot be trusted. Even the monastery is not safe for them because there are monks.' (Father, urban).'

For many parents, controlling girls' clothing was important for their safety, in light of changing fashions: *Girls are wearing shorter and shorter clothes,* one father said.

Box 6: A father of four who is worried about safety

Ko Htwe has four daughters, aged 17, 13, 8 and 5 months. He lives in a peri-urban community, working as a mason.Even before Ko Htwe's daughters were born, his concerns for their safety began: After getting married, I was going out with my wife by bus. I saw a man who was trying to touch a woman's body. After that I realised that the bus is not a safe place for girls.

Conservative dressing, he believes, is the easiest way for his daughters to stay safe: 'My daughters don't wear short skirts. So it isn't difficult for them to meet the community's expectations.'

Ko Htwe regrets, however, that life is difficult for his eldest daughter who had to drop out of school in second grade due to the family's financial problems.

VII. EARNING AND SPENDING

1. Overview

Given gender parity in primary and secondary education and a greater number of women accessing higher education than previously, continuing disparities in labour-force participation rates are worth examination. The likely reason is social norms, which depict the primary role of women as mothers, rather than active participants in the economy. Further, there is limited data on the gender differences on access to economic opportunities, making it difficult to assess where girls and women are employed in the Myanmar economy. Despite the parity in education the 2014 Myanmar Census indicates that 50.5% of women participate in the labour force compared to 85.2% of men (Department of Population, 2014). Young girls are generally expected to stay at home after graduating from school. Women are pressured by social norms to prioritise care-related duties in the family, rather than their careers (DFAT, 2016).

Women and girls are more likely to be under-employed and more likely to be in vulnerable employment. A large proportion of women and girls work in the informal economy, with more rural women tending to work for themselves compared to urban women. This type of work is characterised as vulnerable employment due to inadequate earnings, low productivity, lack of social protection and challenging work conditions. This informal type of work is generally associated with the selling of goods related to the agricultural sector, including prepared meals, snacks, and woven products and also the selling of the services required by other community members, such as tailoring, retail and mechanical repairs (ADB et al, 2016).

The available data indicates that there are differences in wages earned by women and men, with women receiving less than men doing the same type of work. Legislation in Myanmar guarantees women and men equal pay, but women generally receive 70-80% of the rate paid to men (USAID, 2015).

Alongside paid work, women have the primary responsibility for domestic and care work, including gathering firewood and water, meal preparation, and looking after children and elderly family members. Research undertaken in Shan state highlighted the limited available time for women to rest and sleep due to their high workload compared to men; women in states such as Shan are often forced to remain at home to focus on family, thus limiting their opportunities to earn an income (Win Myo Thu, 2012).

The remainder of this section discusses girls' work and financial lives: earning (7.2), spending (7.3) and saving (7.4).

2. Earning

At a national level 45% of girls aged 15-19 are engaged in the labour force (Department of Population, 2014), particularly as domestic agricultural labourers (ILO, 2015), The work girls perform can include planting, weeding, transplanting, harvesting and post-harvest activities (ADB et al., 2016). There is no information about the

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incomes of adolescent girls in agriculture, but women's earnings in the sector are generally 20% lower than men's (ADB et al., 2016). In Myanmar, agriculture is the largest employer of women workers, with 51% of the female population working in the sector (ADB et al., 2016).

Many girls and women migrate from poor, agricultural areas to the cities to work in factories, including garment factories. In a 2016 study of the garment industry, around a quarter of female workers reported they had started work between the ages of 14-18 (Impactt, 2016). The study indicated that most female workers believed that their wage was not enough to cover basic needs; did not believe the wage was fair compensation for what was demanded of them; and many said the work did not reflect their skills (Impactt, 2016). Furthermore, being a female migrant under the age of 16 increased the likelihood of girls being subject to exploitative employment practices (USAID, 2016).

In our primary research, most out-of-school girls started to work between the ages of 13-15 years. Many aged 10-13 years reported having peers who worked. For working girls, the main sources of income are:

- assistant in a beauty salon
- cleaner
- factory shifts
- helping at home for pocket money
- making handicrafts at home (such as clothing accessories and flowers)
- housemaid
- waitress in a restaurant
- sales girl in a shop
- sewing

In addition to the jobs above, 14-16-year-old girls described taking less well-regarded work as masons and rubbish collectors (to sell reclaimed materials to recycling units), which only those from poorer backgrounds would accept. Girls beyond high-school graduation said that they hoped to take professional jobs in future, whether as teachers, office staff, nurses or traditional healers. Table 3 presents the types of work that in-school and out-of-school girls in different cohorts reported that they and their peers tend to do.

Table 3: Types of work that girls tend to do

Jobs (F) = formal work (IF) = informal work	Locations (urban, peri-urban or rural)	Age 10-13	Age 14-16		Age 17-19	
		In school	In school	Out of School	In school	Out of School
Agricultural jobs (IF)	*All*					■
Assistant in a beauty salon (F)	*All*	■	■	■	■	■
Domestic cleaner (IF)	✘ *Not in urban*	■	■			■
Rubbish collector (F)	✘ *Not in rural*		■	■		
Factory worker (F)	✔ *Most in peri-urban*	■	■	■	■	■
Earning by helping others (IF)	*All*	■	■	■		
Making handicrafts at home (IF)	✘ *Not in peri-urban*	■		■	■	■
Housemaid (IF)	✔ *Most in peri-urban*	■	■	■	■	■
Working in a karaoke bar, restaurant, bar (F)	✔ *Most in peri-urban*	■	■	■	■	■
Mason/road worker (F)	*All*			■		■
Office staff (F)	✘ *Not in rural*				■	■
Sales girl in a shop (F)	✔ *Most in rural*	■	■	■	■	■
Selling food (IF)	✔ *Most in rural/peri-urban*		■	■	■	■
Sewing (IF)	*All*	■	■		■	
Tutoring (IF)	*All*				■	■
Waitress (F)	✘ *Not in rural*			■	■	■

Earning opportunities in peri-urban and rural areas were surprisingly more varied than in urban areas. Jobs, such as working in a karaoke bar, factories, as domestic cleaners or as vendors of groceries or household items, were frequently mentioned by rural and peri-urban girls, but very rarely by girls in urban areas. This might be due to the more formal nature of the opportunities available in a dense, urban environment, which makes this work less accessible for girls and young women.

The table above also suggests that job diversity increases with a girl's age (from nine different job types at age 10-13, to 12 job types at 17-19); and formal work is more varied among out-of-school girls than in-school girls. This is in accordance with girls' accounts of their day-to-day lives, where girls who were still studying did not have the time or flexibility to commit to formal employment, so were more likely to take informal work at home, on their farm, on a market stall or a house nearby. It was found to be common for girls to combine their schooling with earning in this way. Out-of-school girls were more likely to move to a formal place of business, such as a factory, shop,

salon or restaurant, to earn money. Secondary data suggests that girls' and women's limited mobility in social spaces impacts on their access to markets, relevant business information and networks for their economic advancement (DFAT, 2016).

The four most common sources of income among the girls interviewed were working in factories, selling food, working as sales girls and pocket money from parents/relatives. Girls from both rural and urban areas worked in factories, predominantly making garments, with earnings higher in urban areas than in rural areas. All girls interviewed from urban areas thought that the factory was a safe working environment because buses were specifically provided to ferry them back and forth. Moreover, girls and parents agreed that one could make money in a factory with little physical exertion. Some girls in rural areas, however, thought there were risks associated with factory work, including accidents with heavy machinery. In rural areas girls working in factories reported earning about 94,000 kyats ($62) a month, while in urban areas it was about 138,000 kyats ($91) a month.

Some girls interviewed spoke about selling foods, such as vegetables, fruit, rice, flowers, etc. Most thought selling was not a risky source of income. A few girls from the rural area said there was some risk of unknowingly selling stolen goods and thereby getting into trouble. Girls selling food in rural areas earned roughly 109,000 kyats ($72) a month, while in urban areas this was about 138,000 kyats ($91) a month.

Being employed in sales was mentioned by many older, rural girls. It was regarded as requiring less effort than other means of earning money, although earnings were likely to be low in rural areas. It was also in rural areas where girls had the greatest concerns that their goods might be stolen; that they might make an error in accounting; or that illegal goods would be traded behind the store. For door-to-door marketing jobs, urban girls emphasised that they might be groped, harassed, assaulted or raped. In rural areas girls who worked in sales earned about 94,000 kyats ($62) a month, while in urban areas this was closer to $100 a month.

Most girls received pocket money, primarily from their parents but also from relatives in some cases. The approximate amount (200-500 kyats or $0.15-0.45 per day) didn't differ greatly between urban and rural areas, although out-of-school girls usually received more than those in school, often for their greater contribution to the household budget.

Some jobs were considered better than the four mentioned above: among them were sewing, which could generate income from the safety of the home, office work and jobs as teachers, doctors and engineers. Likewise, some jobs were regarded as unappealing and stigmatised, such as working in restaurants and massage parlours or being a sex worker. In each of these jobs there was the high perceived risk of being raped and contracting HIV/AIDS.

3. Spending
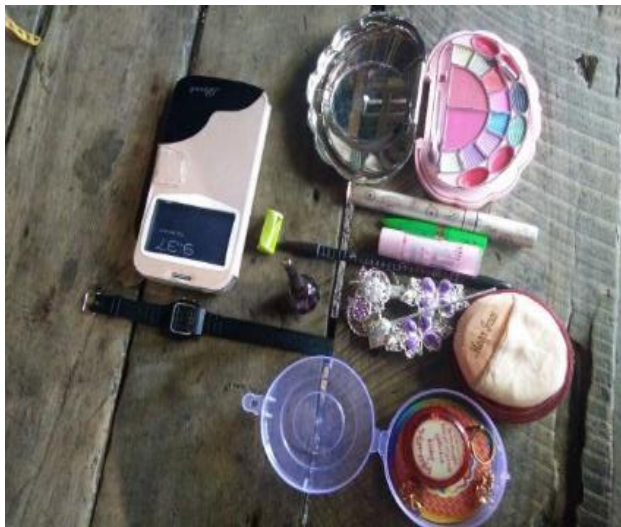
Caption: The personal possessions of a 16-year-old girl living in rural Maubin. She no longer attends school, so makes sure to save enough from her earnings to buy cosmetics.

Caption: 14-year-old girls allocate play money to simulate their weekly spending.

Across all age groups in our sample, girls spent by far the largest share of their earnings on their families, either by giving money directly to their parents or, as older girls did, by buying household necessities. In general, the older the girl, the more diverse her spending. The average amount of money spent per month also increased as girls grew older. The table below shows these trends.

Table 4: Girls' average monthly spending on various items in kyats

Items	10-13-year-old girls	14-16-year-old girls	17-19-year-old girls
Clothes	10,000	4,700	15,833
Cosmetics	3,125	2,813	6,500
Paying family's debts		12,500	
Hair		1,500	3,000
Household necessities		37,571	57,333
Given to parents	20,250	30,000	40,000
Phone bill		7,000	12,000
Gifts and donations		1,700	4,800
Sanitary pads	500	625	1,117
Saving	5,000	10,667	11,667
Stationery	2,200	2,500	5,000
Shoe	1,500	2,563	4,267
Snack	9,000	6,017	13,617
Socialising		3,000	13,250
Transportation		8,000	15,000

The research indicates that 10-13-year olds primarily spend their money on snacks, cosmetics, sanitary pads, school stationery, shoes and clothes. They gave the largest share of earnings to their parents, as well as saving a portion. The 14-16-year-old cohort also spent money on household food, phone bills, presents and donations, socialising with friends and transportation. Repaying debts also emerged as a significant expense at this age. Disaggregating the data by schooling status (see Figure 3) shows that phone bills and transportation were expenses only for out-of-school girls from urban areas.

Figure 3: Comparing monthly spending for girls in and out of school (age 14-16)
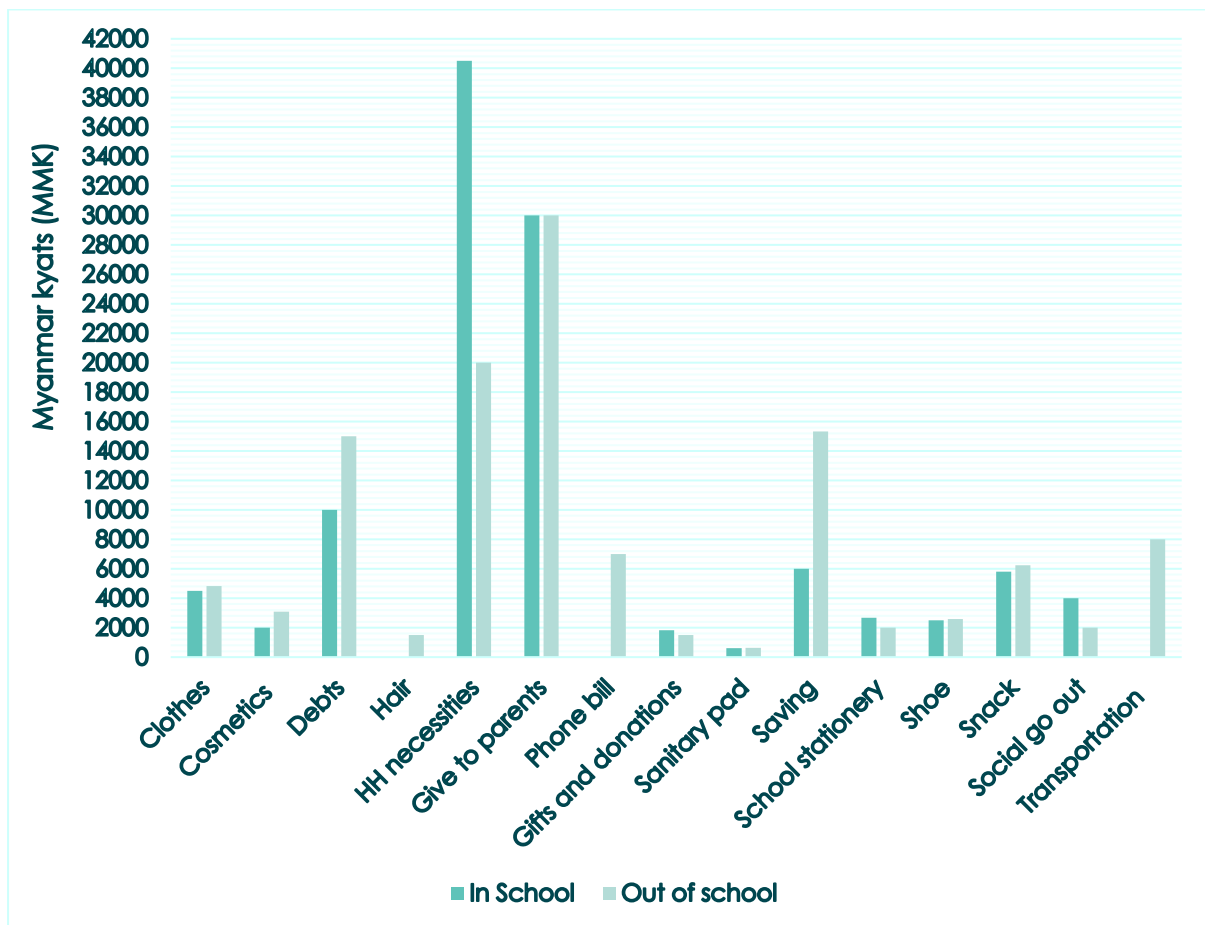
Such spending patterns were not necessarily out of choice: few unmarried girls freely decide how to spend the money they've earned, whereas married girls reported having more agency. Primary data indicated that most unmarried girls needed their mothers' permission to buy items deemed non-essential, like clothes and shoes, but they could manage small amounts of pocket money (a few hundred kyats per day) for snacks and some cosmetics. A few out-of-school girls said they sometimes made small purchases like cosmetics, clothes and snacks without their parents' knowledge, using money they'd borrowed from friends – or stolen from their parents.

At 17-19 years of age, the girls interviewed were spending much more money than younger girls, primarily on household necessities such as food and medicine. They spent very little, in comparison, on themselves. See Figure 4.

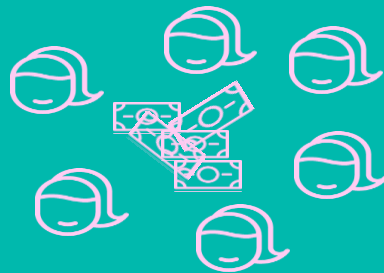**Figure 4: Comparing spending by girls in and out of school (age 17-19)**
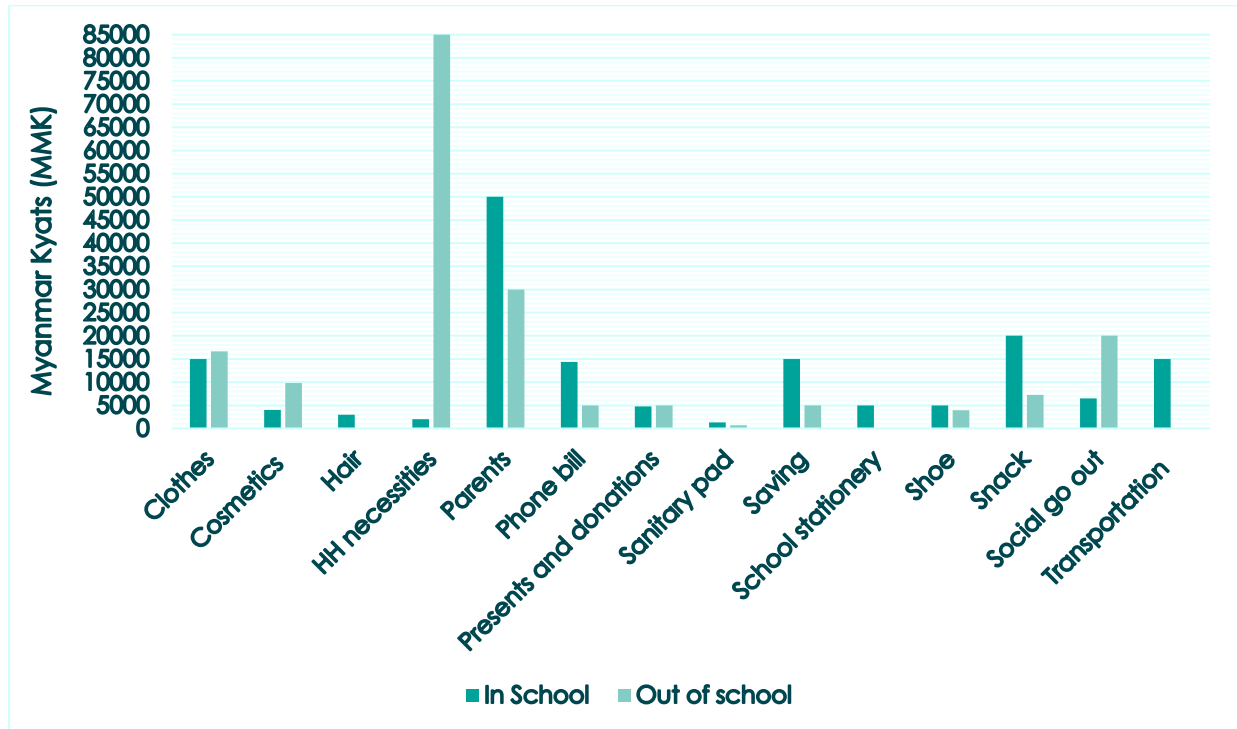
Owing to the financial stress on most families, girls carefully prioritise how to spend their money. All girls, in and out of school in both rural and urban areas, prioritised the purchase of household necessities. Many also spent a significant amount on cosmetics and accessories. In-school girls gave higher priority to school stationary, whereas out-of-school girls would rather spend on shoes. Girls from urban areas were more likely to prioritise debt repayments and travel costs than rural girls.

4. Saving

Almost all girls reported setting aside some of their money as savings, despite very low daily earnings of several hundred kyats. Among the girls interviewed, the savings almost exclusively took the form of informal savings groups which are a common feature in Myanmar. A few salaried girls had bought small items of gold as a form of saving, but none used formal banking or financial institutions. The average amount saved saved saved was higher among older girls, with more money at their disposal but was not found to differ much between rural and urban areas.

> **Box 7: *Ngwe su a phwet* – 'We save together'**
>
> Saving groups are common among girls and young women in Myanmar, even with the smallest amounts of money. A group might consist, for example, of six friends. Each has a number, and each contributes a small amount each day. The group's total savings for each day are then taken by one member, according to her number.
>
> Monday = #6
> Tuesday = #3
> Wednesday = #2

In many cases, these savings were a mechanism for delayed expenditure. Some girls recognised that saving was necessary to pay school fees or buy stationery, meaning that in-school girls often had to save yet more to buy clothes or phone credit. Girls did not express much feeling around their saving activity, seeing it as routine money management, which did not concern their parents.

VIII. EDUCATION

1. Overview

Myanmar has achieved parity in enrolment for girls at both primary and secondary levels. The literacy rate among girls aged 15-19 is 90.2% compared to 91.5% among boys, and 70% have attended secondary or higher levels of education compared to 91.5% among boys (MoHS and ICF, 2017). However, significant numbers of school-aged children do not attend class in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar where the quality of education has decreased. In 2009-2010, 57% of girls and 49% of boys were out of school in Rakhine state (AGIPP, 2017).

Despite the gender parity in enrolment rates, disparities exist across regions, states and ethnicities. Boys and girls are equally likely to stay in school until the final year of secondary school, with girls more likely to achieve better results in the Basic Education High School Examination and more likely to continue to higher education (Hayden and Martin, 2013). Hayden and Martin (2013) argue that girls remain in the education system longer than boys due to the limited opportunities for paid employment when they stop studying. Children from rural areas, in particular from poorer households, are least likely to complete school to the final year (Hayden and Martin, 2013). Girls and boys in rural areas are less likely to transition to secondary schools than urban children, due to the poorly staffed and resourced schools available (UNICEF, 2016). UNICEF reports that girls often miss school when they are menstruating due to lack of sanitary

disposal options or the pain experienced (UNICEF, 2016). If families cannot afford to send children to school, some encourage both girls and boys to drop out to look for work. Prevailing gender norms also influence parents' decision to prioritise a boy's education over a girl's, if families can afford to send only one child to school (AGIPP, 2017).

Attitudes about how boys and girls are expected to behave are reinforced by teachers. Gendered perceptions of girls as studious, hardworking and not needing to play, compared to boys who are perceived as playful, lazy and not good at school, are perpetuated in the classroom (UNICEF, 2016). A study in Kayah state highlights that the expectation that girls will be hardworking and studious at school are not matched by expectations that they will therefore become leaders at community or state levels; leadership qualities were seen to be more prevalent among boys (UNICEF, 2016).

Gender stereotypes about the appropriate behaviour of – and work for – girls are reinforced in educational materials and teaching pedagogies. These influence the types of work girls do when they leave school (Gender Equality Network, 2015).

Decisions about girls' school attendance are strongly linked to their family's economic situation and reinforcement of gender norms. While educating girls has become more acceptable, traditional norms of girls becoming housewives after marriage are still prevalent. Girls' transition rates to employment after graduation are low and they have limited access to informal and vocational training (ADB et al., 2016). Moreover, schools located far from home pose potential dangers for girls going to and from school (Gender Equality Network, 2015). Adolescent girls face increased risk of violence and other challenges at school over menstrual management where water, sanitation and hygiene facilities are not available (ADB et al., 2016).

This remainder of this section explores education as it is experienced by girls both in and out of school, looking at factors determining access to education (8.2), opinions on schooling (8.3) and vocational training (8.4).

2. Girls' access to education

Caption: In-school girls

Almost all the parents interviewed hoped that their daughters would be educated until graduation, and almost all girls hoped for the same. Nonetheless, financial challenges often prevent girls from completing school. This is rarely owing to the costs of school fees (comparatively low in Myanmar), but rather to the lost potential earnings. Low household incomes, combined with family debt and the large number of children to care for, are factors which draw girls out of school whether they want this or not. Sometimes, out-of-school girls attributed prohibitive financial problems to domestic issues, such as divorce, illness or death in the family: '*My mother and father divorced. I don't have a place to live, as both of them married again and live with their new partners. So, I stay with my grandmother, and she told me to leave school and find money.*' (19-year-old, out-of-school girl, rural).

In cases where girls themselves chose to quit school, the girls' 'choice' in the matter was not always clear. One father's daughter didn't want to continue education because she wasn't performing well in class and did badly in her exam: '*She told us that she wanted to drop out from school, and we let her. Because our family needed a person to help with housework, as most of the children are married and there is no one to do the housework.*' (Father, urban).

Girls are the assumed care-givers for sick family members and younger siblings, alongside doing the bulk of housework. Some girls, therefore, must pause their education to take care of a relative but are then too demotivated to return to school because they have fallen a grade behind their friends. One girl described having to stop education for two years to care for her father in hospital – and then never going back (see Box 8, below).

Box 8: From classroom to street-cleaner

13-year-old Swe Swe lives in Hlaing Thar Yar, an industrial peri urban community on the edge of Myanmar's capital, where she works as a street-cleaner, collecting old bottles and aluminium cans.

Swe Swe had to drop out of school in 5th grade when her father had an accident and was hospitalised. While her other family members were busy continuing to earn money, she had to care of him for two years. She fell behind her classmates and, by the time her father had recovered, Swe Swe was too behind in her studies to return to school. This makes her deeply unhappy. I am envious of my niece who is the same age as me. Now she is already grade 6, but I had to drop out because of family difficulties.

After her brother moved away for work and her older sister took a job at a garment factory nearby, Swe Swe now labours alongside her mother as a street-cleaner. They wake at 6am for breakfast, and work from 7am. She has an hour-long break at lunchtime when she plays with her friends – it's her favourite part of the day – before returning to work for the afternoon.

One cart of rubbish earns 5,000 kyats ($3.50) at the shop and Swe Swe and her mother can make 10,000 kyats on a good day. Although she feels safe on the streets alongside her mother, the lack of schooling is a challenge: '*My mum doesn't know how to read, and I only know how to calculate. I'm weak at Burmese and English. So, when my father can't come with us for work, we have a very difficult time.*'

Swe Swe admits that these frustrations make her angry, and she hits her younger sister when she's out of control. Swe Swe's father hits her mother when he feels out of control too, which upsets Swe Swe. She is therefore determined that her sister should not suffer the same as her: '*I want to support my little sister who has dropped out of school in second grade. I want to make sure she gets back to school this year.*'

The family debts are a worry though, and Swe knows her parents often struggle to pay the rent on their home. They rely on her older sister to pay the monthly rent of 35,000 kyats ($24.50), while the rest of her salary is saved for her sister's wedding.

Swe Swe can always trust her mother for support. She confides in her about the bullying she suffers, and her mother in turn discusses the difficulty of paying rent. Her neighbour, Aunty Sabe, is another of Swe Swe's greatest supports, as she gives advice, as well as oil and rice when Swe Swe's family have nothing left to eat. Swe Swe's friend visits her each Saturday to teach her Burmese language which she hopes will help her to achieve her goal of working in a garment factory when she is old enough.

The pressures described by the girls and parents in primary research were borne out by the secondary data findings. A Gender Equality Situational Analysis suggests that gender dynamics are interlinked with socio-economic status with regard to educational attainment; in 2009-2010 there was very little difference between boys and girls from urban areas completing school, apart from at high school where more girls completed. In poor rural households, there was a modest disadvantage to cohorts of girls completing primary school (girls 71%; boys 77%), with fewer girls transitioning to middle school (girls 64%; boys 69%). The literature found that in poor households girls may be forced to stay at home to do domestic chores while parents are working away from home and the distance to school may force girls at puberty to stay at home for security reasons.

Among girls in school, extra-curricular tutoring was almost universally believed to be a prerequisite for academic success. Tuition was mentioned in all locations, most often by girls over 14, as a means to achieve the prestige of being well-educated. Nonetheless, girls also mentioned the benefits of tutoring in the context of their parents' financial struggle to afford it: '*I want to be in a good class at school, with an A, B or C ranking. But even though I'm studying [at school], my parents can't provide tuition for me, so I can't reach a well-ranked class.*' (10-year-old girl, rural).

In some cases, girls felt further disadvantaged if they could not afford tuition as teachers would hold it against them: '*Some teachers discriminate against the poor students who don't take tuition classes with them. They don't invite those students to join some school activities.*' (14-year-old girl, peri-urban).

Families paying for tuition mentioned the challenges of finding the money. For one urban girl, this involved relying on wealthy family members who had emigrated from Myanmar; for two peri-urban families, tuition involved smaller amounts, but required dedication from both parents:

'*If I want to get tuition, my mum has to contact my grandmother (who is living in Chin state) to ask for my tuition fees. If grandmother agrees, she contacts her sons (my uncles), who are living in the United States) and persuades them to provide tuition fees for me. And then I can attend my tuition classes.*' (17-year-old girl, urban).

'*I give my daughter 500 kyats per day for food at school, and 300 kyats per day for snacks at tuition. So, I told my daughter not to follow the others who call on her to play, but to study hard – because there is no real happiness in finishing at grade 11. Try to pass grade 11 and there is more happiness in university life. I only tell her that because I want her to pass the exams. My husband is dedicated to her tutoring too – he always collects her after class.*' (Mother, peri-urban).

A number of girls, from age 10 onwards, complained that their home environment was difficult to study in. Densely populated areas are noisy with traffic, pop music and announcements over loud-speakers (religious and otherwise). Girls found it hard to concentrate on their homework in such conditions and worried their grades would suffer. Added to this were parental demands that they do household chores, again interrupting their studies. *Sometimes, finances are not the main problem. Our parents themselves have to encourage us in our studies*. (14-year-old, in-school girl, peri-urban).

3. Opinions about education

In Myanmar, being a 'perfect' girl is closely tied to being educated. Most parents see education as facilitating higher earnings which could in turn support the family. Some linked education with more respectable job status and financial independence.

Most parents interviewed saw nothing short of university education as 'enough' education, though many were resigned to the fact that their daughters would get less. The majority of out-of-school girls from both rural and urban areas sincerely wanted to go back to school. Several out-of-school girls described feelings of hopelessness and depression due to staying at home all day. *'I want to go back to school so I am no longer depressed among these neighbours. I want to be educated.'* (17-year-old, out-of-school girl, peri-urban).

Some parents thought a girl's education was less important than a boy's because, once she had married, they would lose the benefits of her education to her husband and his family. Other parents argued that girls needed more education in order to avoid the heavy manual labour which only boys can manage. Overall, most parents agreed that being educated would save their daughter from being looked down upon by her husband or in-laws. She would also be better equipped to manage family finances and marriage.

Similarly, girls linked graduation from university with a good job and good earning potential: it is easier to get a job after university graduation, many urban girls believed, because most job advertisements now require that. The more common appeal of education among rural girls was to avoid the shame of dropping out. They were anxious not to be looked down on by others, and not to wound their parents' pride. *'I admire a girl from my neighbourhood who is already graduated. I want to be like her because my life would be better than it is now. I could earn more, and people would not look down on me.'* (16-year-old, out-of-school girl, rural).

When asked about who has supported their educational endeavours, no out-of-school girls were able to answer. In-school girls, however, described how parents, relatives and teachers had enabled them to keep on learning. Parents, in particular, were recognised as having supported them financially and emotionally.

4. Vocational training

Beyond formal academic education, several vocational classes offer important support for girls' careers. Most often mentioned in the primary data were courses in languages and computer skills. Yet extracurricular learning was not discussed by rural girls, who reported that they cannot access such training in their townships. Older girls in urban areas, particularly university students, had the highest demand for extra training in languages, management, accounting and computer skills, and they allocated time to this each week accordingly.

For out-of-school girls, training opportunities usually focused on less professional skills such as sewing. This was a popular option among both girls and parents in urban and

rural areas. *'Even if a girl isn't educated, she should do some vocational training like sewing so that her life won't finish within narrowed society.'* (Father, rural).

The secondary data shows that there are limited informal education opportunities for children who have dropped out of school. Girls and women have limited access to vocational training and extension services; however, there are limited opportunities for this training more broadly. In 2013, only 11% of households at a national level received any vocational training or extension services (ADB et al., 2016). Gender norms continue to influence the courses and training that girls and women take, encouraging female engagement in occupations such as sewing. There is limited information on school-to-work transitions – what the routes, opportunities and barriers are.

IX. USING TECHNOLOGY

1. Overview

This section explores how girls in Myanmar use technology and looks at their experience of a growing telecommunications sector. Since 2011, there has been increasing demand for information and communication technology (ICT), with some 83% of households owning mobile phones (IREX, 2017). While 78% of mobile phone owners have smartphones, mobile data is expensive and underused, particularly by women and rural users.

As of February 2018, the Ministry of Transport and Communication reported that SIM registration is 105% of the national population, with 54 million registered phones.[9] The increase in access has led to the emergence of private ICT training facilities in urban areas. Despite these improvements, Myanmar is ranked 135th out of 139 countries on the World Economic Forum's Network Readiness Index[10] (World Economic Forum, 2016; IREX, 2017). This is due to factors including: affordability, lack of local-language content, low user skills, digital safety concerns, lack of reliable cellular coverage in conflict areas, and low connectivity speeds in most areas.

Girls and women are 28% less likely to own a mobile phone than men, with the mobile phone being the primary means of accessing the internet (IREX 2017). This gender gap in ownership is higher among lower-income households (GSMA 2015). Girls and women experience disparities in digital skills and use when compared to the male population. There is limited understanding about the internet for both men and women, with women's understanding based on their use of Facebook, chat applications or on hearsay (GMSA 2015). Women and girls are less likely to have unmonitored access to ICTs as these are deemed either a distraction or a threat to their security.

A study on the gender digital divide in Myanmar highlighted that gender norms

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[9] Telenor, 'Realising Digital in Myanmar', p.3, https://www.telenor.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Telenor-Realising-Digital-Myanmar-Report-06-February.pdf

[10] The World Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Index measures how well an economy is using information and communications technologies to boost its competitiveness and well-being. Networked readiness shows whether a country is ready to take advantage of the benefits of the transition to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

regulate the levels of uncensored information and contacts outside the sphere of familial control. Study participants raised concerns about the dangers of online dating, photo sharing and social media connections with strangers; these safety concerns were associated more with young women's ICT access than young men's who were perceived as having no safety concerns (IREX, 2017).

Girls learn about ICT at school only if it supports subjects that are considered appropriate for girls and women, such as administration and accounting. This limits girls' access to, and development of, ICT skills. Girls and women are less likely to use mobile phones for livelihood-related purposes; the primary use is for listening to music (IREX, 2017). As 70% of Myanmar's population is rural, there are distinct benefits from ICT access and digital skills for agricultural livelihoods; rural girls and women's access, skills, and use of ICT can positively affect their income and livelihood opportunities.

The remainder of this section addresses girls' access to phones and the internet (9.2) with a brief discussion of girls' television-viewing habits (9.3).

2. Accessing phones and internet

The primary data revealed that few possessions were more coveted than a mobile phone, and this was primarily for access to Facebook. Facebook was spoken of synonymously with the internet because it was the only website that all the girls knew. Young girls are generally less concerned with their place in a broader social spectrum, whereas older girls are keenly interested in accessing the networks and content which they know Facebook holds.

While phone ownership was found to be very low across all the girls interviewed, young or in-school girls were particularly unlikely to have their own phone. Most girls buy their first phone with their first salary. Another common option is for a girl to share a phone with her husband when she marries. The amount of money which girls reported spending on air-time increased with age: from 1,000 kyats ($0.70) per month at age 16; to 6,000 kyats ($4) per month at age 18 in rural areas; and 10,000 kyats ($7) per month in urban areas.

Most girls with whom we spoke reported that their father, or both their father and mother, owned a mobile phone. To access a phone, young girls usually borrowed the device of their older sister, mother or aunt. This borrowing was found to be almost exclusively from older female family members. In some families, particularly in the rural areas, this was not an option, as the family didn't own a handset. One group of 14-year-olds described a way around this: the girls stole money to buy a phone and then pretended that they accidentally found it.

For the most part phone usage was very basic: phone calls and Facebook. For girls using borrowed phones, their activity was often restricted to calls which were necessary or logistical, such as with teachers or neighbours. The whole family might share one phone in this way. Other girls were allowed to borrow a phone for calling friends or for listening to music. Girls in rural areas almost always referred to simple keypad phones, which facilitate no sophisticated phone usage. In the predominantly rural state of Kayah there are mixed levels of mobile-phone ownership among adolescents, with equal numbers of boys and girls owning handsets. Most do not know

how to use the phone to access the internet and many had not heard of Facebook; their chief use of the phone was to listen to music or take pictures (UNICEF, 2016). Both girls and boys did not have credit to make calls and did not know how to send text messages (UNICEF, 2016).

In rare cases where a girl shared a smartphone with her mother, they also shared a Facebook account; only a handful of girls had their own Facebook account. One girl used an English-language app, 'Teen Love Story Game', which helped her to improve her English but she was an outlier both for having installed an app other than Facebook (which is pre-loaded on most family phones); and because such sophisticated usage remains beyond the reach of most girls (there is no word for 'app' in Myanmar language). *'I wish to have a mobile phone for playing games in the summer holidays, and I would also like to take photos when we visit pagodas. I've seen people taking photos with their phones and I'm so envious of them.' (16-year-old, in-school girl, rural).*

Parents reported that their daughters used phones for much more than this, including accessing Facebook, watching movies and playing games, but only older girls in university who owned a phone themselves described this more complex usage. Older girls reported accessing instant messaging apps such as Viber and having multiple SIM cards. One 17-year-old girl had a different SIM card for each boyfriend.

'A SIM card per boyfriend' was exactly what a number of parents worried about. They feared that girls would be lured into elopement by a man through chatting online or might have an affair or watch inappropriate materials. Fathers were particularly vocal in their belief that this was inevitable, which was usually based on urban legend but sometimes on experience. '*My daughter got married at 17 years old. Her husband is from Yay [in south of Myanmar] and they met on Facebook. Then they dated at the Super One Shopping Centre for about three years. We didn't know about it. Then one day, they just ran away.*' (Father, peri-urban).

Mothers expressed similar concerns for their daughters' virtue: '*Just using a phone [for calls] is good, but surfing the internet is not good. I heard that girls fall in love through the internet, and that one girl was murdered by that boy [she met online].*' (Mother, peri-urban).

Some parents were worried about girls being distracted from their studies. The restrictions on mobile-phone usage for girls were much stricter than those placed on male children in the households, as reported by the parents.

While younger girls said that they would not use the internet as a source of information for issues around well-being, girls over 17 years old do with caution. Overall, they see the internet as untrustworthy, though they might make an exception if the page is written by a doctor For health issues, such as abortion and HIV/AIDS, one group of interviewees placed social media next to TV as a 'semi-important' source of information, after friends and family.

Box 9: A mobile phone as a matriculation gift

When she matriculated high school, Zarchi's father was so proud that he gave her a mobile phone. Now that she is 18 and at university, Zarchi uses her phone for calling friends, messaging them on Facebook and for reading the news. This adds up to around two hours a day on her phone.

The apps installed on her phone are Facebook, Facebook Messenger, an English-Myanmar dictionary and an app for photos. To keep in touch with friends on different mobile networks, Zarchi has two SIM cards – one for Telenor and one for Ooredoo – which cost her 5,000-6,000 kyats every month. This means that Zarchi ends up spending all her earnings and pocket money, without saving anything.

Zarchi feels relatively independent and trusted by her parents. Nonetheless, she still has to tell them every detail about where she plans to go before they give her permission.

3. Watching TV

During the primary research, while radio was only mentioned by two girls, TV was referred to by every group. This finding is supported by a recent study which finds that TV is the most popular and trusted source of information in Myanmar; and that Myanmar's rapidly changing media landscape has seen younger people gain more frequent access to a wider range of platforms (including TV, internet and mobile phones) since 2013 (BBC Media Action, 2017). TV was often mentioned alongside Facebook as a source of shocking new stories about human trafficking, forced labour, domestic violence and rape. Information about human trafficking was associated with TV by girls of all ages and in all locations.

TV is thus a highly-regarded source of health information. Some 14-year-old girls also watch a TV chat show, *Khit Thit Pyo May* – meaning 'Modern Young Woman' – to access get information about menstruation and white discharge. It is shown by state broadcaster MRTV4.

The TV set is usually family-owned and girls watch it together with relatives when they return from school or work. 14-year-olds in the rural area described watching TV as an essential part of their Sunday afternoons, when they watch it for hours. Others use a mini laptop to play films – girls in rural areas described going to DVD rental shops to watch movies in the evening. Nonetheless, the girls do not own or control this device either. Only some peri-urban university students reported owning a laptop, which they had received as a gift from a family member abroad.

X. CONCLUSIONS

Research findings suggest that girls in Myanmar have little control over their day-to-day lives and find it hard to fulfil their aspirations. Restrictive, traditional social norms continue to be pervasive, and family livelihood needs often have a stronger claim on girls' efforts than fulfilment of their personal interests. Those in positions of power over girls – primarily their parents, but also teachers and employers – are driven to keep girls on this path (often through beating) by fears for girls' safety and social status, as well as for the family's well-being. This overwhelming top-down control in turn determines how girls earn, spend and save their money, as well as how they use technology, and how they enter relationships.

Yet girls in Myanmar should not be portrayed as powerlessly resigned to this fate. Many girls recognise that their society is changing, as they are exposed – albeit, perhaps, on a borrowed mobile phone – to 'new' ways that women can work, dress, have a family, and be respected and independent. Girls work long hours at school and in tuition – alongside performing many domestic chores – in order to pursue a better adulthood than their mothers have had. Those with less confidence in academic success often elope to claim their independence. While this leads to further unhappiness for some, others feel free and optimistic.

Tireless dedication to homework and housework, or elopement: these paths to an independent future are fraught. There is clear need for girls in Myanmar to have access to more opportunities which support and encourage their personal, individual development. Such opportunities might be environmental: in the form of safe public spaces in which to relax or meet their peers; or risk-free routes and transport with which to access a greater range of jobs and chances to learn. These opportunities might be inter-generational, helping parents and their daughters to break the cycles of fear for girls' safety, cycles of frustration and domestic aggression, and cycles of misinformation around health. Such cycles are most often perpetuated by mothers.

Finally, these opportunities might be aspirational, by enhancing girls' exposure to relevant and motivational female role models, and practical information with which they can independently unlock their own potential. The provision of these multi-tiered opportunities relies on the collaboration of public institutions (particularly schools) and services, civil society, the private sector, religious leaders and policy-makers, who can together dismantle the structural discrimination which stunts the flourishing of Myanmar's girls and young women.

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About SPRING

SPRING is an accelerator working with growth-oriented businesses on innovations that can transform the lives of adolescent girls aged 10-19 living across East Africa and South Asia. We work with world-class experts to support these businesses to create innovations with purpose and commercial potential.

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