

The situation of older people in Myanmar

A summary report (Revised 2014)



The ageing of Myanmar's population

As in other countries across Southeast Asia, the number of older people in Myanmar is increasing rapidly, having virtually quadrupled over the past 60 years. Moreover, the proportion of the population that is 60 years and older is increasing. This trend is due mainly to a decline in the number of children per family and also to improved life expectancy. Currently older people account for about 9% of the country's population.

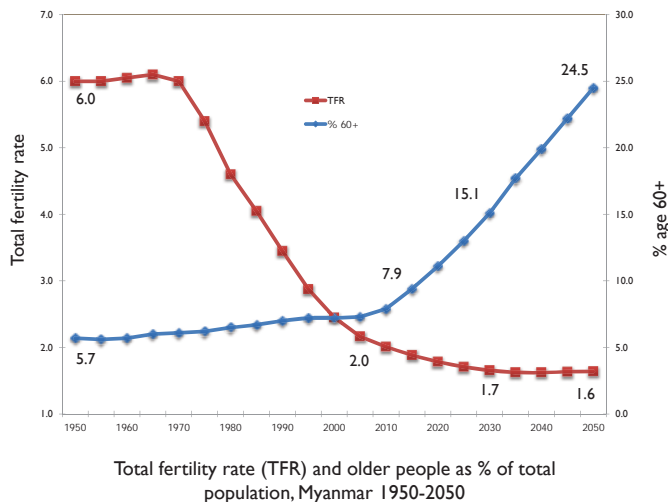
This proportion has grown at a gradual pace over the past 50 years but will accelerate rapidly over the next four decades. According to UN projections, by 2030

this proportion will rise to 15% of the population, and by 2050 older people¹ will comprise a quarter of Myanmar's total population (*see figure next page*).

Not only is the older population growing faster than the overall population, but the highest growth rate will be among those in their 70s and 80s. Because women tend to live longer than men, there are more women than men in the older population, particularly among the very old. Women already account for about 60% of people aged 80 years and older in Myanmar, and this share is expected to be even higher by 2050.

¹ 'Older people' refers to persons aged 60 and older.

Myanmar's fertility rate will continue to decline and population ageing will accelerate sharply



Source: United Nations 2010 Assessment (medium variant)



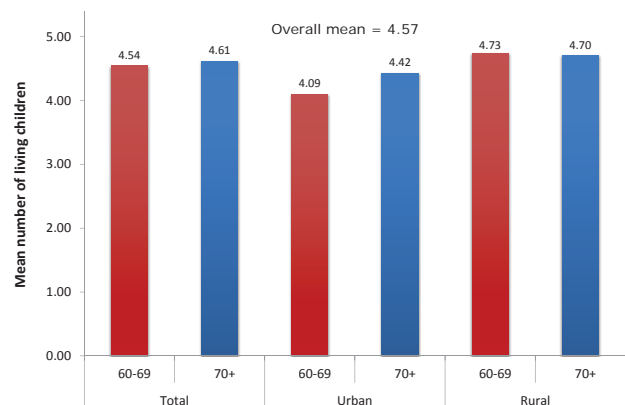
Social characteristics of older people

In old age, the spouse or adult children are usually a vital source of material and emotional support. Because the majority of them are widowed, older women must rely more heavily on their children, while most older men are still married. This difference is because men tend to die at a younger age and are often older than their wives. Based on the survey, overall almost 40% of older people are widowed and only modestly more than half (54%) are married.

Older people today have an average of about four to five living children (*see chart*). But fertility rates in Myanmar have already fallen to two children per woman, so older people in the future will have fewer children available to give support. A small decrease in family size can already be detected among older people in their 60s compared to those 70 and older, especially in urban areas. Three-quarters of older people have daily social contact with friends, neighbours or relatives who live nearby in addition to any contact with their children.

Only a third of older people have completed primary school or attended any further education. Moreover, more than a fifth have no formal education at all, and men are almost twice as likely as

Older people today have an average of more than 4 children, but family sizes are shrinking



Number of living children by age and area of residence

Source for this figure and all figures below: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar
Note: Living children include own biological children plus adopted children and stepchildren that the respondent helped raise.

women to be fully literate. This limited ability to access important information may be further compromised by older people's limited use of other forms of mass media.

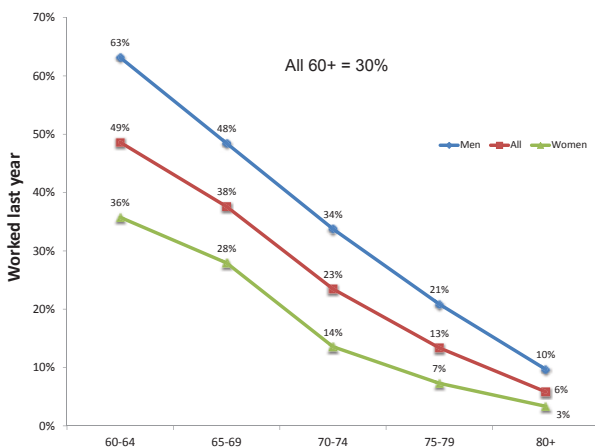
Religious practice is a central part of daily life for many older people regardless of their age, gender or where they live. Three-quarters of respondents prayed or meditated daily and 95% did so at least once a month. Almost 80% of older persons participate at least occasionally in community or religious ceremonies.

Economic activity and income

The vast majority of older women and men (94%) have been economically active during their lives. Of these, about 60% were primarily engaged in agriculture, either as farmers or agricultural labourers. About 10% engaged in non-agricultural labour and about the same percentage were formally employed, both more common among those living in urban areas.

Despite the natural reduction in economic activity with age, 30% of older people remain economically active (this excludes unpaid housework). While almost half of those aged 60 to 64 years had worked during the previous year, only 6% of those 80 years and older had worked (*see figure below*). Men are more likely than women to remain economically active in all age groups, and older people in rural areas remain economically active for longer than those in urban areas.

Older men and women work less as they age

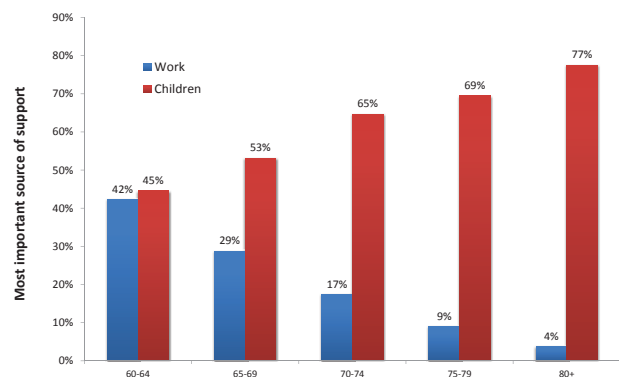


Percentage that worked during the past year, by age and gender

As income from work declines, support from children becomes more significant. Over 80% of all respondents receive some material support from their children. (Material support includes goods as well as cash.) Children are the main source of support for almost 60% of all older people, especially for those 70 years and over. Nevertheless, for

almost a fourth of older people income from their own or their spouse's work was still their main source of support. As the figure below illustrates, older people in their 60s are much more likely than those over 70 years old to say that their own or their spouse's work is their main means of support.

As they age, older people increasingly rely on children instead of work for support



(Main source of support (work compared to children))

Pensions are very rare. Among older people in rural areas, only a few percent reported any income from a pension, compared to about a fifth of urban residents. Men are almost twice as likely as women to have any pension income. Almost no respondents reported any welfare support from government or non-government agencies, highlighting the rather nascent stage of welfare systems for older people in Myanmar.



Material well-being

In the absence of comprehensive social protection, older people's household situation and income are vital components of their material well-being. In terms of income and assets, older people, especially those in rural areas, can be described as generally poor.

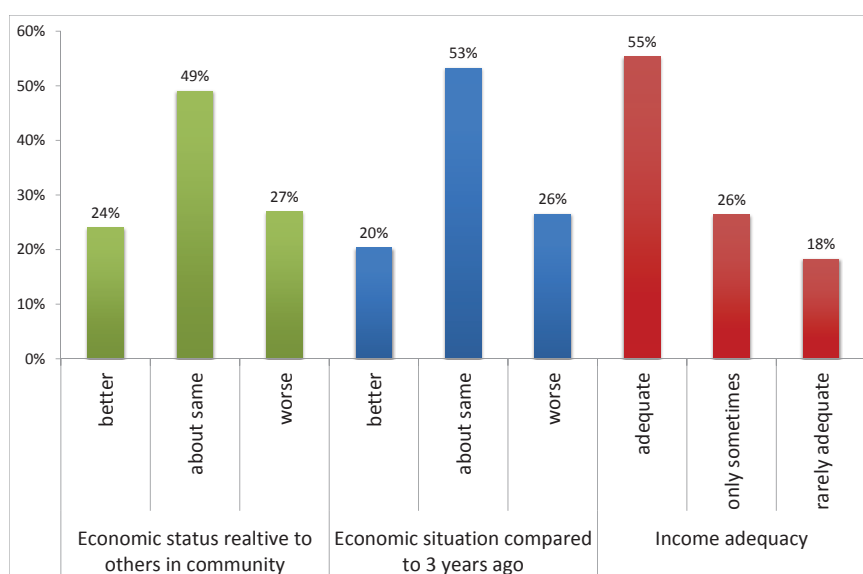
A large proportion of Myanmar's older people live in houses made with non-permanent materials. A third of older people live in homes without electricity, including almost half of rural older people. Over half of older people (56%) have no running water, and this situation is particularly common among rural residents. On average the homes of

older people have few possessions. Almost half have no radio, almost a third have neither radio nor television and remarkably few have electrical appliances, despite the fact that two-thirds have some access to electricity. Over 40% of older people own some land and almost as many own livestock (cattle, chicken, ducks). Land and livestock ownership is more common among older people in rural areas than in urban areas.

Older people in Myanmar typically live in low income households. Almost 10% report that they live in households with a monthly income of no more than 25,000 kyat, or less than US\$1 per day

as of mid-2012. Overall, just over 60% of older people report that their household has a daily income of no more than US\$3 per day. Less than one in five older persons has savings in the form of money or gold, and the most common reason for saving is for emergencies. However, they are twice as likely to have debts as savings, and debt is more common among rural than urban elders. Only 55% of older people feel that their income is regularly adequate to meet their daily needs (*see figure*).

A majority of older people feel their income is not adequate and has not improved



Self-assessed economic status and income adequacy, persons 60 and older



Most older people are surrounded by family and others at home and live in households that average between 4 and 5 members. Approximately 80% live in households with three or more persons. While only 5% of Myanmar's older people live on their own, the chances of living alone increase with age. Living alone is more common among women than men, reflecting the greater likelihood of women to be widowed.

The majority of older people in Myanmar (86%) live in households of more than one generation, and are thus potentially able to benefit from exchanges of material and emotional support. More than three-quarters of older people live with at least one of their children (*see figure*), and 95% of those with children have at least one child living in the same community. Thus the vast majority

have a child near enough to provide assistance if an urgent need arises. Half of older persons live in households with at least one grandchild, but 'skip generation' households, in which older people live with only grandchildren, are rare.

Among older parents who do not live with a child, almost half have a child next door, almost three-quarters have a child in their village or ward, and over 80% in the same township. Among the small but potentially vulnerable group of older people who live alone, most are not completely isolated from family: 80% who are not childless have a child living within the same village or ward.

Most older people live with or near their children

	% live with at least one child (co-resident)	% live alone	% live only with spouse	% live alone or with spouse only
Total	77.5	6.7	6.0	12.7
Age				
60-64	75.3	5.5	8.1	13.6
65-69	77.4	5.6	7.3	13.0
70-74	80.0	6.8	5.4	12.2
75-79	79.1	7.0	3.7	10.8
80+	77.4	10.1	2.9	13.0
Gender				
Men	80.0	3.7	9.3	13.0
Women	75.7	8.9	3.4	12.4
Area of residence				
Yangon & Mandalay cities	81.1	4.0	5.4	9.4
Other urban	77.1	5.6	5.2	10.8
Rural	77.0	7.5	6.3	13.7

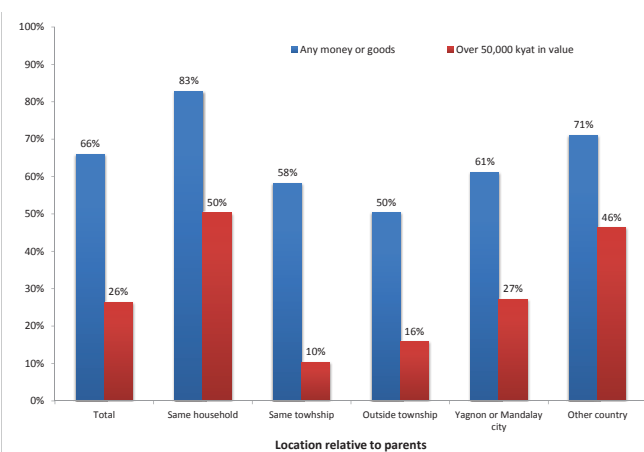
Selected measures of living arrangements, by age gender and area of residence



Family support and exchanges

Older people receive substantial support from their families and also contribute significantly. Overall, two-thirds of adult children gave some money or goods to their parents in the previous year and fully a quarter gave larger amounts, worth over 50,000 kyat or about US\$ 60 (see figure). While children who live with their parents are most likely to give such support, children living in Myanmar's two main cities or abroad give larger amounts than children who live closer because of greater earning potential.

Two-thirds of adult children provide money or goods to their older parents



Percentage of children that gave material support to parents
Note: Material support consists of money or material goods

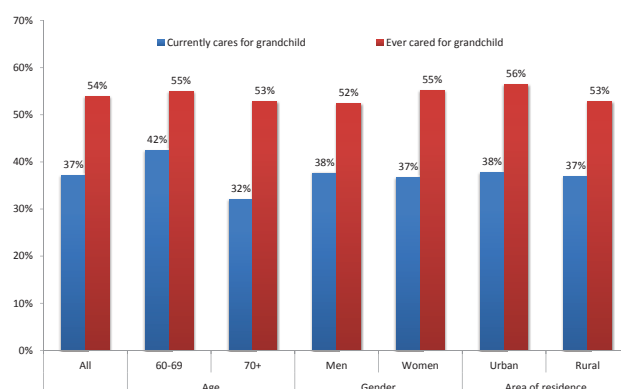
Over 40% of adult children assist their parents with economic activities such as farm work or business. Frequent help of this type is more likely to be from children living in the same household (67% of them) than those who lived in the same township but not in the same household (6%).

Daughters are the main care providers for about half of older people who receive help with daily living activities and when sick or injured. Among older couples, wives are often primary caregivers for husbands, but husbands are less likely to provide this care to wives. While grandchildren are less likely to be main caregivers, they play a significant role in providing secondary assistance.

Intergenerational support is clearly reciprocal in Myanmar. While receiving help from family, older people also contribute substantially to their household. Over half who live with children give economic support to their household, and in a third of cases this amounts to half or more of the household's total support. Adult children also benefit from significant contributions to housework and house maintenance by older parents who live with them.

The majority (87%) of Myanmar's older people have grandchildren and many help in caring for grandchildren, often enabling adult children to engage in economic activities. Over half of older people, regardless of age, gender or area of residence, have provided care for a grandchild for at least several months (see figure), including 13% who provided grandchild care for absent parents. In most cases of grandchild care the parents meet the main costs, but it is not unusual for grandparents to contribute or even take major responsibility for the grandchild's financial support. Older people with these care responsibilities largely enjoyed the experience; only a small minority considered grandchild care to be mostly burdensome.

The majority of older people have provided care for their grandchildren



Grandchild care by grandparents aged 60 and above, by age, gender and area of residence

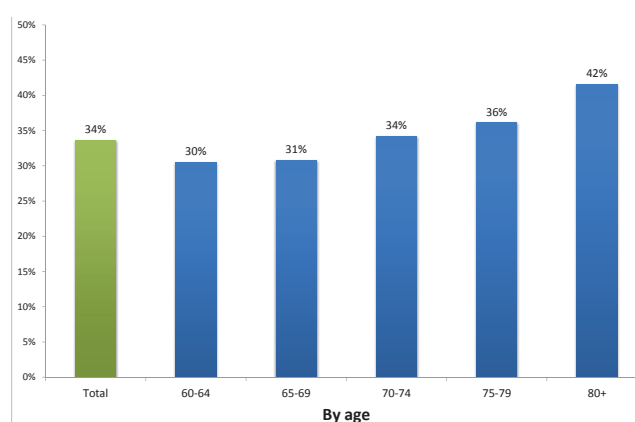
Health can greatly affect quality of life, physical independence and financial security. Only a third of older people in Myanmar say that their health is good or very good, and the likelihood of reporting good health decreases substantially with age. While over 40% of those aged 60–64 feel their health is good or very good, among those aged 80 and older only half that level (22%) feel the same. Moreover, the proportion of those who report poor or very poor health almost doubles when comparing those aged 60–64 to those aged 80 years and older. Women are more likely than men to report problems with virtually all aspects of health addressed in the survey.

Over a third of respondents reported having an illness or injury in the previous year that prevented normal activities (*see figure*), with an average length of incapacity of about 10 days. This was more likely among persons aged 80 and older (42%) than those in their 60s (30%). Overall, close to 15% of older people indicated problems with hearing and nearly 30% with sight. Across all age groups, those who wore spectacles reported better vision than those who did not, suggesting that access to eyeglasses could substantially reduce sight problems.

About half of older people reported limitations with at least one of five basic physical movements such as lifting and climbing stairs, and over one-fifth reported difficulty with at least one of five common



Injury or illness interfered with the daily routines of more than a third of older people in the previous year



Percent who were ill or injured during the past 12 months preventing normal activities, by age

activities of daily living such as standing from lying and using the toilet. Again differences are most pronounced with age: respondents 70 years and older reported more than three times as many serious limitations with physical movement and daily living activities as those in their 60s. It can be expected that with a rising proportion of persons in their 70s and older, the need for caregivers will increase substantially in the future.

When ill or injured, 37% who sought treatment went to a private clinic or hospital, while about 58% utilised one or more government health services. A relatively small proportion (11%) consulted traditional healers or quacks. Of those who sought treatment, just over one-fourth felt that they needed additional treatment that they could not afford. Those who received treatment from the private and major government facilities were more likely to be satisfied than those who went to government facilities at local level. Only 12% of older people had received a general physical examination in the previous three years, and those who did so were more likely to live in urban areas.

Conclusion

Many older people in Myanmar remain active and independent. They work for income or else provide help around the home and with grandchildren, thus allowing their adult children to be economically more productive. However, many others are vulnerable and need assistance, especially as they reach advanced years.

Currently and in the past, the family has been the bedrock of care and support for older people, reflecting the strong cultural tradition of respect and filial responsibility for parents and elders. Typically, besides spouses, family refers primarily to the adult children of older people. In general, this system of family support is crucial, usually efficient and reflective of Myanmar's strong cultural traditions of respect towards parents and elders.

This is not to deny that gaps exist within the system including situations where children or family members do not provide adequate care or support.

Such situations can be due to neglect but probably more commonly arise when severe poverty afflicts both parents and their adult children and limits their ability to assist one another. Moreover, unavoidable demographic trends pose serious challenges for the future, especially the inevitable decline in family sizes and likely increased migration of adult children as the economy expands and changes. In addition, although small, the proportion of older persons who have no children will likely increase.

What Myanmar needs is to expand creative ways for government and empowered communities and civil society to help fill the gaps created by changing family structures. The predictability of the demographic changes that lie ahead and the extensive information provided by the Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar provide an opportunity to build an evidence-based system of social protection that embraces the older population. This opportunity should not be missed.



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