



IREX



BEYOND ACCESS
Making Information Work For Everyone

Women and Digital Skills: What's Driving Myanmar's Growth



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“ Myanmar needs to overcome traditional values. Girls need to learn how to defend themselves and learn to be independent. Traditional values teach young women to not speak out against violence against women. I try to raise awareness among my friends about how to defend themselves when they’re being harassed, such as using whistles and shouting. But my friends make fun of me because they believe women should be quiet and try to walk away from the situation.



— Interview with Girl Determined ”

Summary

Myanmar's rapid growth in access to mobiles — with household ownership increasing by 46% in just one year — brings with it new economic, social, and educational opportunities. But this growth also brings a risk of deepening existing inequalities. Although mobiles will become even more affordable and mobile broadband coverage will continue to improve dramatically, access alone is not enough to ensure that all users will benefit.

Like in many countries, one of Myanmar's most pressing digital divides exists between women and men. In addition to a 28% gap in access to mobile phones, subtle gender-based differences in acquisition of digital skills and perceived benefit of technology are detrimental to women's full participation in development processes. Women have greater demands on their time, and less flexibility and mobility to use internet and computers in places like cyber cafes and teashops. They also have fewer opportunities to learn and share technology and internet with their peers, often limiting their awareness of the benefits of digital access and skills. These challenges multiply for women at lower income levels, in rural areas, and in ethnic states where communities experience the largest infrastructure gaps and lowest literacy rates.

The impact of these gender differences on women and girls' educational and employment opportunities in particular is not recognized, with serious consequences for Myanmar's growth and stability at a critical time. These differences are widely perceived to be normative and personal choices, making them even more difficult for individuals and institutions such as donors, NGOs, and government to address.

Women represent untapped potential to drive Myanmar's growth, but they need access to appropriate technologies and skills to participate fully. Although institutional reform

“Opportunities for technology training are not available for everyone. Getting access to the training centers is a challenge because they are expensive. Some libraries provide opportunities for training, but the number of libraries [equipped for training] is limited for Myanmar's population. They aren't able cover everyone.”

-Interview with Girl Determined



and new infrastructure investments are underway, they cannot keep pace with the rate of change. Young women need access to alternative avenues for skills development.

To understand these potential avenues for skills development, IREX conducted a study on the mismatch in skills and opportunities that young women in Myanmar now face in order to develop recommendations for civil society, government, and donors on how to address this widening gap and promote inclusion. As part of this research, IREX also produced a Problem-Driven Political Economy Assessment of the Gender Digital Divide in Myanmar.

Summary

Findings

Recommendations

Early adolescence is when stereotypes about technology are being ingrained and resulting career decisions made



1



Initiatives to expand technology and internet access must **target young women** with skills and support services

Local and relevant digital skills training is not available to most young women in Myanmar



2



Local and relevant **training and services** must be offered in places that are safe and convenient for young women.

Young women are missing the fundamental soft skills such as leadership and communication that are vital to succeed in the new economy



3



Implementers should **consider gender norms** and **integrate soft skills** into digital skills curricula

Lack of functional literacy is a disproportionate obstacle for women to participate in the information society



4



All stakeholders should drive the creation of **local language content** that is relevant to women's needs & interests

Summary

Characterizing Myanmar's gender digital divide

Women in Myanmar face a 30% wage gap, stubborn occupational segregation, and limited opportunities for public participation at all levels.¹ They are 28% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and are often expected to earn an income in addition to managing the home.² Outside the home, women are generally not able to use computers and internet at public access points like cyber cafes and teashops, as those spaces are typically reserved for men. As a result of these barriers, women broadly have reduced digital skills and limited awareness of the benefits of digital skills – and so they face similarly limited access to new opportunities compared to men.

Although girls complete primary and secondary education at higher rates than boys, they face specific educational, employment, and entrepreneurial barriers. Females must score higher on university entrance exams in certain fields; employers can specify “men only” in job ads; and land titles list females only as dependents, restricting access to finance for women-owned businesses.³

Different groups of women experience significant variations in opportunities and constraints. Lack of technology access, skills, and relevant online content disproportionately affect rural and ethnic minority women due to higher rates of female illiteracy in multilingual areas. Women in isolated and conflict-affected areas face constrained mobility, particularly at night, which further hampers their employment and skills training opportunities.

“ Almost all tour operators are women because it is a sedentary job. They do daily typing, calculating tour fares. However, tour guides lead groups. Maybe 80% of tour guides are men because they are active travelers and they can lead the group. The man's nature is going to adventure and to lead.

— Interview with female travel agency manager ”



¹ Urbano, M and T. Dickinson, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Women and the Economy in Myanmar: An Assessment of DFAT's Private Sector Development Programs*, 2016.

² LirneAsia and MIDO, 2016 confirmed that, despite an increase in ownership among both women and men, this 28% gap has persisted since the team's initial research in 2015.

³For example, entrance to the Yangon Institute of Technology requires a score of 396 for women and 380 for men. See Urbano, M and T. Dickinson, 2016.

Summary

Women lack confidence in their digital skills and do not always understand the benefits of technology access

The constraints that women face lead to a lack of perceived benefit on the part of young women and lower confidence in their own digital skills when they do use technology. While those with higher household incomes are more likely to invest in purchasing a phone, they still are unable to benefit fully from ownership when they are not aware of its benefits and when they are not equipped with the skills they need to realize those benefits.

Perceived benefit is even more important for young women with lower incomes. Their families will only invest in technology tools and internet access when they understand how access can help their children benefit from new educational opportunities and increased income when they start working. Gender norms deeply influence the perceived benefit of technology access. Because of these norms, young women and their champions often embrace greater limitations on women's income and educational opportunities than required by law or available locally to their male peers.

While most respondents believed that Myanmar has achieved gender equality, young women tended to lack confidence in their own digital skills and generally rated men's skills as more advanced. When asked who they would go to for help if they had a problem with their phone or computer, young women — even those participating in digital skills training programs — said they would seek the advice of men in their 20s. Female respondents of all ages said that men are inherently more creative problem-solvers with strong hardware skills, while women are more likely to doubt their abilities and avoid trying new things altogether for fear of breaking a device. Some attributed these differences to personal choices and interests. Women are more interested in fashion, for example, so they are better at decorating PowerPoint slides. Men are more interested in technology and gaming, so they are better at troubleshooting or developing new software.

Coupled with low confidence, this fixed concept of gender roles creates even more barriers for young women to develop the skills they need to drive Myanmar's development and growing economy.





Detailed Findings



Detailed Findings



1

Early adolescence is when stereotypes about technology are being ingrained and resulting career decisions made

It is not enough to provide adult women with skills and support services. During adolescence, interventions have the greatest potential to impact women's lifelong access to opportunities.⁴ At this stage, young women and their families are making decisions about education and future employment, while expectations about roles in family and society are becoming fixed. Without these interventions, young women risk losing out on the necessary skills.

In Myanmar, initiatives that serve adolescent girls are especially important. Youth dropping out at this stage face restricted career choices and no possibility of later attending university. Young women find that their decisions about education, employment, and family are often significantly influenced by older (often male) family members. But with the right support during adolescence, young women can develop new perspectives on their own capacity alongside new, concrete skills they need to pursue their goals.

Families de-prioritize education because the current system does not develop skills that employers value

School completion rates are relatively low for all Myanmar youth. **Of the nearly nine million students who attend school, less than 300,000 make it to Grade 11.** Only 30% pass the required matriculation exams to attend university.⁵ Safety concerns for girls, coupled with attendance costs – for fees, books, clothing, and transportation – mean families often remove children from school after the primary level so they can tend to family obligations.

Families deprioritize education, especially in rural areas, because Myanmar's current curriculum does not equip youth with the skills they need to earn or increase an income. In a 2014 survey, nearly 60% of employers reported significant skill gaps that lead to worker shortages, especially in hotels, restaurants, services, and manufacturing. The worst worker shortages were in Information and Computer Technology (ICT) jobs, but soft skills are also lacking, particularly analytical thinking, creativity, and initiative.⁶

Despite low overall university attendance, families who can afford it often prioritize university education for daughters because it is often more difficult for women to find jobs that do not require an education because of their perceived physical weakness.⁷ Combined with perceptions about women's family obligations, social restrictions on traveling long distances, and very real safety concerns – especially on urban public transit or over long distances in rural areas – women who want to earn an income need every advantage to be competitive. Still, a generation of adolescent girls will enter adulthood with their educational needs unmet, particularly girls in rural communities with the greatest need.

⁴UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2011 Executive Summary: Adolescence An Age of Opportunity*, 2011.

⁵Myanmar Ministry of Education, *National Education Strategic Plan 2016-21*, 2016, p 100.

⁶Masato Abe and Margit Molnar, *Myanmar Business Survey 2014: Survey Results*, (n.p.: OECD and UNESCAP, 2014), p 9.

⁷Ibid., 94.

Detailed Findings

Young women are seen as needing more guidance in order to make sound decisions

In Myanmar, young women are often seen as requiring guidance from older, and often male, relatives in order to make sound decisions. Older family members often strongly influence young women's decisions about their futures, and young women themselves welcome this guidance without thinking critically about their own goals and opportunities. A second important impact – one that is especially relevant in the digital world – is that harassers or potential attackers perceive young women as easier targets.⁸ At the same time, young women may be perceived as inexperienced, unable to respond to potential threats, and unlikely to report their attackers to appropriate authorities.

Despite valid safety concerns, these perceptions minimize young women's power and inherent value in directing their own lives and contributing to their communities. And because of these perceptions, Myanmar's young women face restricted mobility in both the physical and online worlds, with less control over how, when, and why they use technology tools or develop digital skills – and less incentive to pursue new opportunities.

// Say there are five people in a family. If two family members get phones, those people will be men. Since parents are afraid of cybercrime for young women, they restrict their access. — Shwe Inle Self Reliance Township Leading Group //



⁸Interview with Girl Determined volunteers and staff

Detailed Findings



2 Local and relevant digital skills training is not available to most young women in Myanmar

While women in Myanmar are 28% less likely than men to own mobile phones,⁹ they also have fewer options outside the home to access technology and build digital skills. This is particularly true for young women. Schools are not equipped with technology, so girls reap few practical benefits even though they matriculate at slightly higher rates than boys. Employers do not prioritize technology training for new staff, expecting prospective employees to develop those skills elsewhere before seeking employment. Young women are left with few options – chiefly private training centers, which pose significant cost and mobility barriers, especially for girls in rural areas.

Because of these barriers, many women are not aware of the benefits of technology access and skills, so they do not prioritize access for themselves or their daughters. Women also face significant time burdens. They are often responsible for monitoring the family budget, earning an income, and managing the household. With these strains on their resources, it is particularly important for women to see concrete benefits from their investments in developing their skills.

Mobile phones and data are becoming more affordable, but are still out of reach for many

Access to technology itself requires a financial investment. Phone owners spend an average of 105,000 MMK (87 USD) to purchase a mobile handset, but median monthly household incomes stand at at 200,000 MMK (144 USD). Phone owners spend an average of 7,494 MMK (5 USD) per month on top-ups.¹⁰ And digital skills courses at private training centers cost from 30,000 MMK (22 USD) in small cities like Taunggyi to 70,000 MMK (50 USD) in Yangon.¹¹ These investments are impossible for many women working in Yangon's factories who earn about 80,000 MMK (58 USD) per month.¹²



⁹LIRNEasia and Mido, *Mobile phones, Internet, information, and knowledge: Myanmar 2016*, 2016.

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Focus group discussants and interviewees who said they had enrolled in these courses were asked how much they paid

¹²International Labour Organization, *Internal Labour Migration in Myanmar: Building an evidence-base on patterns in migration, human trafficking and forced labour*, 2015

Detailed Findings

Women face more limitations on their mobility compared to men, reducing their options for public participation and skills development

To ensure that she would be able to participate in IREX's focus group in Nyaung Shwe (Shan State), one respondent had to travel for five hours by boat and spend the night at a friend's home. She would have had to travel another hour by road to reach the nearest city – in an area where cars, taxis, and public buses are not generally available.

This one woman's experience illustrates a challenge faced by the 70% of Myanmar's population residing in rural areas. Millions cannot access the skills building opportunities they need without incurring significant costs and taking time away from income-generating activities to travel to cities. These challenges are only magnified for women, for whom restricted mobility further limits public participation.

Women in rural communities and ethnic states face social limitations on their attempts to enter the public sphere, constricting the distance they travel and limiting their choice of mode of transport. Women tend to use the most basic, least expensive, and slowest means of travel because they undervalue their own time, restricting their physical and social mobility.¹³

Women in urban areas face a different set of challenges, as they are more likely to have to walk or use public transportation to carry out their responsibilities. Harassment on public transit is an everyday prospect, particularly on crowded city buses.¹⁴ These crimes often go unreported due to a broad culture of silence around gender based violence in Myanmar. In interviews, respondents reported that harassers believe young women are easier targets because of their perceived lack of experience and cultural norms around women's roles. Families are reluctant to permit young women to travel as freely as young men in order to protect them from very real dangers. But these limitations also restrict young women's access to new educational, employment, and skills-building opportunities.

// Males are learning digital skills from their peers and do not feel like they need to go to private training centers. But culturally, girls stay at home and do housework. If they exchange knowledge with their friends, they will share household-related skills, unlike boys who can go to internet cafes and learn tech skills.

— Adolescent female, Yangon **//**



¹³Asian Development Bank, *Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Myanmar: A Situational Analysis*, 2016

¹⁴Htet Khaung Linn and Eh Hser Wah, "Solutions elusive as traffic jams Yangon," *Myanmar Times*, 2016.

Detailed Findings

Women's mobility limitations extend to the online world

These mobility limitations extend to the virtual world as reports of online harassment and cyber abuse mount in Myanmar.¹⁵ Research in 2015 from LIRNEasia and GSMA revealed that security and harassment was one of the top five barriers to mobile ownership and usage, and of particular concern to women.¹⁶ This concern does not seem to have been alleviated since the research was conducted. Virtually every IREX key informant raised cyber security for women – and especially young women – as a serious concern that justifies limiting or substantially moderating internet access. In some cases, these concerns reflect gender norms that regulate acceptable levels of exposure to uncensored information and contacts outside the control of the family.¹⁷

One of the strongest themes to emerge during focus group discussions was the dangers of online dating, photo sharing, and social media connections with strangers. Respondents told stories they had heard of young women they knew “disappearing” from their families when they ran away with men they had met online. Other female respondents said they had received phone calls and Viber and Facebook messages from men they did not know. One group of young women enrolled in university said they prefer to use Instagram instead of Viber or Facebook because boys will not bother them there. Several educators lamented security risks related to low levels of digital literacy among women, only 13% of whom can locate and adjust account or application settings on their mobile phone.¹⁸

// Even one of our members receives harassing messages from random men. As an older woman, she knows not to respond. But younger girls often do not know better. //
— Nyaung Shwe Women's Group



¹⁵ Ei Cherry Aung, "As tech spreads, Myanmar women become victims of 'revenge porn,'" *Myanmar Times*, 2016.

¹⁶LIRNEasia and Mido, 2016.

¹⁷IREX, *A Problem-Driven Political Economy Assessment of the Gender Digital Divide in Myanmar*, 2017.

¹⁸LIRNEasia and Mido, 2016.

Detailed Findings



3

Young women are missing the fundamental soft skills such as leadership and communication that are vital to succeed in the new economy.

Technology skills alone are not sufficient for young women to take advantage of access to technology or new digital skills. They need soft skills like leadership, problem solving, and critical thinking in order to build their confidence and succeed in the workplace. This is true regardless of their occupation, education, or other future plans. The demand for soft skills will only increase as Myanmar's workplaces continue to modernize, but young people do not have opportunities to develop these skills in school or any other venue, causing a gap between employer needs and what prospective employees can offer.

For Myanmar's youth – especially young women – higher-order thinking skills like critical thinking are fundamental to manage the flood of information as internet access continues to expand. But these skills are not currently taught in school. Age and gender both influence how socially appropriate it is to ask questions instead of passively receiving information, which makes it even more important that young women learn higher-order thinking skills. This is vital not only to complement their digital skills development (i.e. troubleshooting, setting up accounts, helping others), but also in applying those skills in real-world settings at work, home, and school.

A positive self-concept (including self-confidence and self-efficacy) is also critical for young women, particularly when it comes to technology, public participation, and negotiating with family for control over important life decisions. Broadly, key informants insisted that women have the same opportunities as men and that they are at least as good as men at technology, and even better than men at using productivity software such as the Microsoft Office suite. But follow-up questions yielded a somewhat different picture, one that reflects lack of confidence and gendered perceptions around technology use.

Female key informants said they are afraid to use apps or press the wrong buttons on their phones for fear of breaking them, echoing research findings by the GSMA focused on mobile use by women in Myanmar.¹⁹ One adolescent focus group respondent – said to be the most tech-savvy in group of friends – does not use Facebook because she is afraid she will break her phone if she tries to create an account. Instead of risking damage to her phone, she said she would wait for her older brother to return from a trip.

Another group of adolescent girls said that women are better at software used in offices (like Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word), but that men are better at advanced technology, hardware, and creativity and problem-solving in general – and this coming from a group of young women who have both public and private access to laptops and internet in addition to mobiles. Teachers at the private KMD technology training center in Taunggyi (Shan state) observed that young women tend to enroll in basic computer literacy courses, whereas young men tend to enroll in more advanced courses and focus more advanced skills like coding, software development, and design.²⁰

Critical Soft Skills for Youth

- ✓ **Critical thinking**
- ✓ **A positive self-concept**, including self-confidence and self-efficacy
- ✓ **Social skills**, including resolving conflict and teamwork
- ✓ **Communication skills**

Source: Child Trends, Workforce Connections - Key "Soft Skills" that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields, 2015.

¹⁹GSMA, *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low and middle-income countries*, 2015

²⁰Since technology training is not available in most schools, students depend on private training centers that offer courses for a fee.

Detailed Findings



4

Functional literacy is an obstacle to women's participation in the information society

Even if technology tools and internet were made available and affordable in the country's most remote areas, millions still would not be able to participate fully in the online world. Without core literacy skills, young women cannot navigate menus on their mobile phones, comment on the news on their Facebook feed, or share advice in an online women's health forum.

While Myanmar's official national literacy rate stands at 89.5%, literacy and numeracy pose substantial barriers for those residing in rural areas where school completion rates are lower.²¹ In some of these areas, communities need to establish and run their own schools without support from the national Ministry of Education.²² In Shan state, literacy rates are at 64.6%, according to the 2014 national census, and 52% of rural women are literate.²³ But in the Wa Autonomous Self-Administered Division (ASAD) – a predominantly rural, isolated and conflict-affected area within Shan State – only 16% of rural women are functionally literate.²⁴ While those with core reading skills can learn basic mobile use, illiteracy prevents those who could benefit the most from tech access and skills from doing so.

These national statistics divide Myanmar's population into two distinct groups – literate and illiterate. But in reality, literacy is a spectrum.²⁵ Since school is where most

people learn to become literate, Myanmar's low school completion rates indicate that many literate adolescents and adults have only primary school reading and writing skills. This means that many people in the literate group do not have the skills they need to understand and interpret information they find online, or to write a Facebook post or email clearly so that others can understand.

Myanmar's 100 different languages and dialects only complicate the literacy question.²⁶ Although a 2014 National Education Law permits ethnic language instruction, national resources are primarily dedicated to the majority Myanmar language.²⁷ States with minority language speakers have implemented various independent efforts to support mother tongue literacy. In ethnic conflict ridden regions, minority language education is not only valuable for early literacy – research shows that children learn to read better in second languages when they first become literate in the language they speak at home. Mother tongue language instruction is also a symbolic tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion.²⁸ But the few existing resources that exist in local languages are low quality, culturally irrelevant translations of Burmese texts.²⁹ This means that even when young women in these communities do get online, they cannot access relevant content in the language that they speak at home.

²¹UNFPA, *Myanmar Census Highlights Report*, 2014.

²²Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Free Education Costs in Myanmar," *Asia Times Online*, June 22, 2010.

²³UNFPA, *Myanmar Census Highlights Report*, 2014.

²⁴UNFPA, *Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Shan State*, 2014.

²⁵Douglas Belshaw, *The Essential Elements of Digital Literacies*. Belshaw is Web Literacy Lead for the non-profit Mozilla Foundation.

²⁶UNDP, *About Myanmar*.

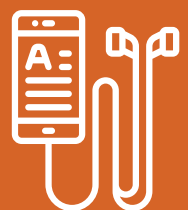
²⁷National Education Law, 2014.

²⁸UNICEF, *Language Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative*, 2016.

²⁹USAID/Asia Foundation, *Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother-Tongue-based Teaching in Myanmar*, 2016 and Swan Ye Htut, "Former Speaker, ethnic MPs push solidarity through literacy," *Myanmar Times*, 10 August 2016.



Detailed Recommendations



Detailed Recommendations

IREX recommendations are meant to be practical and feasible, and are targeted at implementers and donors who seek to leverage technology to promote increased income and better educational opportunities for young women in Myanmar.



1

Initiatives to expand technology and internet access must target young women with skills and support services

Knowing that girls are falling behind in opportunities to develop digital skills, the Myanmar government could target investment from the upcoming Universal Service Fund (USF) toward meeting this need.³⁰ USF funding, to be introduced in 2017, could support local initiatives that ensure safe, friendly spaces are available for public access and training, and that they offer necessary skills to young women. Without a substantial commitment to public access, this window of opportunity may be closing.

Office jobs are highly sought-after by young women from both rural and urban areas, but human resource capacity remains a barrier to realizing the potential of many recent positive reforms. The Government of Myanmar and the private sector need a qualified 21st-century workforce. But mobile data and phones are not sufficient to realize that need.

Although costs are decreasing, mobile data represents a significant proportion of income for poorer people, including agricultural or garment factory workers who may earn only 3,000 to 4,000 MMK (2-3 USD) per day. Cost concerns are more likely to impact women, as they are more likely to prioritize the needs of the family over their own information needs and are likely to be paid less than men even in the same job.

- ✓ Fund free public access to computers and fixed-line broadband in venues such as schools, libraries, youth centers, and pagodas.
- ✓ Ensure that public digital skills training programs are eligible for support under the USF.
- ✓ Collaborate with Myanmar government to fund integration of technology tools and training in public schools.



³⁰For more on Universal Service and Access Funds, see the Alliance for Affordable Internet, *Universal Service and Access Funds in the Broadband Era: The Collective Investment Imperative*, 2015

Detailed Recommendations



2

Local and relevant training and services must be offered in places that are safe and convenient for young women.

All young women need safe spaces where they can access internet and technology, develop new skills, and share with their peers and their communities. But as in many other countries, young women in Myanmar do not have access to the same venues as young men. They are not typically able to go to tea shops, gaming centers, or cyber cafes to get online with their friends. Community hubs like libraries are inclusive spaces with trained infomediaries who already support community information needs.³¹ When equipped with appropriate technology, internet access, and additional training opportunities, libraries and other open community spaces can support young women to achieve their personal and community goals.

- ✓ Provide free online safety training at public access points to ensure young women and their families know how to protect themselves from online dangers.
- ✓ Partner with local employers to assess their needs, then adapt training curricula and support services accordingly.
- ✓ Collaborate with the Myanmar Library Association to integrate the draft National Library Strategic Plan into Ministry of Information strategy.
- ✓ Offer both coeducational and single-sex digital skills training so that young women have a safe space to build self-confidence.³²



³¹Working in public access venues, infomediaries leverage training, coaching, and technological resources (including internet, computers, and tablets) to meet public information needs. For more on infomediaries, see *Infomediaries: Brokers of Public Access*, University of Washington, 2013.

³²UNESCO's Connect to Learn program team reported that participating teachers were trained to call on both girls and boys to assist in setting up classroom technology equipment instead of waiting for volunteers, because boys nearly always volunteered for these roles.

Detailed Recommendations



3

Implementers should consider gender norms and integrate soft skills into digital skills curricula

Sociocultural norms governing acceptable roles and expectations for girls and boys underpin the digital divide in Myanmar, reinforcing educational and occupational segregation, limiting young women's opportunities to develop employment competencies, and leading to lower confidence in their technology skills. To counter these effects, digital skills programs should incorporate gender awareness exercises that help women and men recognize how sociocultural norms may constrain their education and employment choices, albeit in different ways. While young women face unique challenges such as discrimination in pay and hiring practices, young men also face gender-based occupational segregation and generally complete school at lower rates because of pressure to earn an income for the family.

In addition to gender awareness exercises, digital skills curricula should incorporate soft skills training to address the effects of sociocultural norms. Traditionally, young women passively receive information and guidance from authority figures, so they need additional practice applying critical thinking and leadership skills. In general, women also lack confidence in their technology skills compared to men. Activities that promote a positive self-concept help ensure that women can effectively apply their new digital skills at home, in school, or at work.

- ✓ Train teachers to incorporate gender responsive classroom best practices, such as providing balanced opportunities for boys and girls to demonstrate mastery of new skills.
- ✓ Offer both gender responsive digital skills training for mixed-sex groups and female-only workshops that combine technical skills with leadership & soft skills.
- ✓ Connect young women with female mentors who serve as positive role models and provide ongoing support and connections to the workforce.
- ✓ Convene online and offline support networks to provide young women with a safe space to share their experiences, ideas, and challenges.
- ✓ Integrate soft skills training to promote critical thinking, leadership, and self-confidence.

“ Traditionally, females are learning by heart, while males are learning to think. ”

— Interview with education official



Detailed Recommendations



4

Donors, implementers, and government should drive creation of digital local language content that is relevant to young women's needs, skills, and interests

After lack of access and skills, one of the biggest barriers to internet use is the belief by some potential users – most often women – that the internet does not have anything to offer them. To address this barrier in Myanmar, donors, implementers, and government need to promote the creation of content in local languages that is relevant to the needs and interests of women.

Recognizing that women are especially motivated by economic incentives when deciding to invest in technology access, content needs to provide opportunities to improve skills, increase income, and better support their health and their family's needs. The most effective way to ensure that content is relevant to young women is to enable young women to create content for themselves. This means content creation and sharing should be a core part of any digital skills training.

- ✓ Incorporate content creation as core components of digital skills training.
- ✓ Ensure government content is freely available in local languages.
- ✓ Implementers should survey community needs to assess young women's content interests.
- ✓ Promote content creation in local languages among youth and gender focused NGOs.
- ✓ Libraries and other public access venues should promote local content creation by hosting regular events for young women to develop skills to create and share digital content.
- ✓ Empower local female journalists to ensure that women's voices are represented in local and national media.



Methodology and Rationale

This research, conducted in a handful of Myanmar's 330 townships, is an important step in understanding the barriers young women face and the opportunities they gain when they have core digital skills and support services. But this study also highlights the need for more data to uncover the specific gender nuances, digital skills needs, and employment trends in each community — particularly among the most marginalized — in order to maximize the impact of this study's recommendations.

Findings result from desk research and a qualitative research study conducted in townships throughout Yangon, and in Taunggyi and Nyaungshwe in Shan state. IREX focused its field work on key informant interviews and focus group discussions, primarily with women.



About IREX

IREX is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to building a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information. Since 2013, IREX has promoted equitable access to quality information and technology through 90 public libraries in partnership with Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF).

In 2016, IREX and MBAPF began implementation of Tech Age Girls in Myanmar. The year-long program is equipping 100 women aged 16-20 to use technology as a tool for leadership and community development. IREX has implemented Tech Age Girls (TAG) in nine countries since 2008. Upon completion of the program, TAG participants join a global network of over 1,000 alumni and become mentors for future cohorts, supporting the continued development of young women and communities in Myanmar and around the world.

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