

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS AND ENABLERS OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN MONYWA, MYANMAR

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Myanmar has been successful in closing the gender gap between girls' and boys' education with younger generations.
- In Myanmar society, parents play an influential role in children's continuing education.
- Overall, irrespective of socioeconomic status parents in both rural and urban Myanmar perceive education as important for both girls and boys and related to their aspirations for successful future for their children.
- Cost and location (distance) were two barriers that parents perceived as common barriers for schooling for both boys and girls
- For parents, concerns about safety and location of school emerged as a barrier specifically for girls' continued education.
- Proactive school administrators in the community and the availability of hostels were found to be two significant enablers for impacting girls' continued education.

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The gender gap in educational attainment

Education is very important for all people. Accordingly, there should be no difference in the educational attainment of boys and girls. And yet, girls in some countries are still denied educational attainment. “Despite progress, as many as 48.1 per cent of girls remain out of school in some regions. Gender gaps in primary and secondary enrolment rates have nearly closed, on average. Yet 15 million girls are not in primary school right now, compared to 10 million boys. In adolescence, higher numbers of girls often drop out of secondary school for reasons including early pregnancy and the expectation that they should contribute to household work.” (UN Women, SDG 4).

Education is key to economic development and also a peaceful life. According to the World Bank (2006), investment in female education can

lead to increased labor force participation and subsequent expansion of the economy. However, gender inequalities in both learning and earning outcomes persist (Tembon and Fort, 2008). According to Cin (2017), education allows women more freedom and economic independence, especially in cultures where there is inequality. Education contributes to women’s capacity to participate in democratic life, develop authentic and expressive voices, and to construct a life they value living.

In Myanmar, the female population exceeds the male population. The overall literary rate is 90

Currently, in Myanmar, there are no significant gaps in literacy rates for boys and girls in the age group 15-19 years and educational attainment between boys and girls at the primary school level. However, the gender gaps are more prominent in high school and university completion rates. After primary school the percentage of girls who never attend school is higher than that of boys who never attend school.



Photo by May Kyi

percent: 93 percent for males and 87 percent for females. Half a million children 7-15 years old have never attended school (the rate of non-attended is 2 percent in urban areas and 6 percent in rural areas). For those 25 years and above, the no-schooling rate for males is 13 percent and for females is 19 percent. For 70-year-olds, the literacy rate for males is 87 percent and for females is 67 percent. For the young, however, the literacy levels of boys and girls are almost equal (MOLIP, 2017). Clearly, Myanmar has been successful in closing the gender gap between girls' and boys' education with newer generations, especially at the primary school level, although the gap persists and widens with older generations.

In Myanmar, there are no significant gaps in literacy rates for boys and girls in the age group 15-19 years. However the gap gradually increases after the age of 19. Given that both boys and girls access the same education system, it seems external factors (e.g. family) may influence girls' higher education choices more than internal factors (e.g. education system). The table shows that there is no gap in educational attainment between boys and girls at the primary school level. After primary school, however, the percentage of girls who never attend school is higher than that of boys who never attend school.

Globally there has been much research done on the role and attitudes of parents towards girls' education. For instance, research in India by Chingtham and Guite (2017) found that parents from urban area of Manipur have more positive view on the girls' education than the parents have from rural area. Additionally, parents who were uneducated themselves were found to be less likely to see the importance of education for their daughters (Chingtham & Guite, 2017).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, Regasa and Taha (2015)

Methodology

- This study uses qualitative methodology to investigate parental perception of the importance of education and girls' and boys' schooling in Monywa, Myanmar.
- The study covered one village and one city.
- Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions.
- Snowball sampling method was followed to recruit parents of school-age children.
- Secondary data was collected from relevant government ministries and departments.

Respondents

In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 fathers and mothers (12 in rural area and 6 in urban area). The criteria of selection of the respondents included:

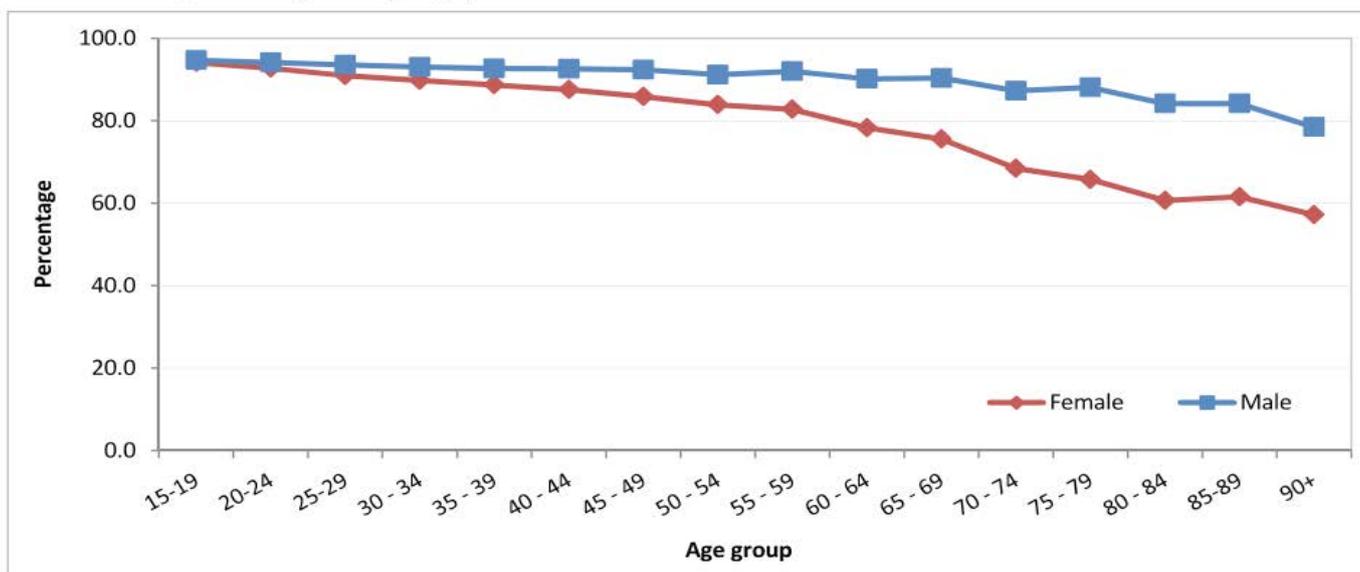
- Mothers/fathers of children aged 5-24 years.
- Having either sons or daughters or both (the number of children is not limited).
- Parents who may be married or widowed or divorced.

Additionally key informant interviews were conducted with respondents who were community members and specialists with relevant knowledge on the issues covered in the study. They included:

- Teachers (working in both public and private schools), village leaders, elders and other knowledgeable people.
- Township education officers (for their experience and especially as sources of secondary data).

There was no discrimination on the basis of religion, occupation, age or ethnic group.

Adult literacy rates by sex by age, 2014 Census



found that the perception, attitudes, and opinion of parents towards female education negatively affected the academic performance of female students and academic achievement. Parents' perception was that daughters will be married at her early age and therefore they were typically only interested for her to learn housework rather than attending school. In other words, parental perceptions have been identified as one of the influencing factors, for girls continued education and is a focus of this study to understand parental attitudes and perceptions of enablers and barriers to girls' schooling.

Objectives of the study

In Myanmar society, most parents decide whether their children go to school or not. It is therefore important to identify the factors, especially parental perceptions, influencing girls' schooling and continued education, as these may go on to shape their choices in adolescence and adulthood.

The general objective of this study is to ex-

plore parents' attitudes towards girls' and boys' schooling in Monywa, Myanmar. More specifically, it tries to:

- Understand parental perception of the importance of education;
- Examine any differences in parental perception of girls' and boys' schooling;
- Analyze parental perception of the enablers and barriers to girls' and boys' schooling.

Parental perception of the importance of education among school-going children

Overall, the findings show that education was universally perceived as important among both rural and urban respondents and especially acknowledged as important by parents who were unable to complete their own education. Additionally, community norms appear to play a significant role in influencing parents on the importance of education.



All respondents said they wouldn't hesitate to send their children to school, even when faced with challenges like low family income. They believe education alone can upgrade their children's life. As one female respondent from an urban area says: "I don't want them to drop out. Even if there are difficulties, I will try my best to send my children to school. If my income is low, I would prioritize sending them to school."

Several respondents discussed how they felt education was important to be able to get jobs and live a comfortable life. One male respondent from a rural area said: "Nowadays, I think education has become more important among people. The educated can certainly get comfortable jobs. The lives of educated persons are pleasant. So, I want my children to be educated."

One female respondent from a rural area said: "Now it is difficult to earn by farming. Thanakha cultivation is also not that profitable. Job opportunities are rare. When I got married, I lived in

Sithar village, which is an agricultural village, not a traditional loom-weaving one. I didn't need to at first because my husband worked as a manual laborer. But when my daughter was one or two years old, I had to start working. There are fewer jobs than before so now people need to be educated to work."

The majority of respondents in this study have not completed their own schooling, dropping out of school at an early age due to various factors. They accept that their lives have been challenging because they had no education and, therefore, they want better for their children and recognize the importance of sending their children to school. As one female respondent from a rural area says: "My parents did not allow me to continue school. In our time, most parents sent their son to university, but girls were allowed to study till the 10th standard. They worried about girls attending school because we had to go to another town to attend grade five and above."



Photo by May Kyi

Differences in parents' perception of girls' and boys' schooling

Overall, both urban and rural respondents appeared to be in agreement that education was equally important for girls and boys. One male respondent from a rural area said: “My wife agreed with me. She also wanted our daughter to be educated. Although the cost is not small, we can spend it for our daughter.”

However, one of the rural respondents made an interesting observation: that girls' education was more likely to be prioritized if the girl was smart, while boys' education was likely to be prioritized regardless. One father from a rural area said: “The boys are the priority. They say they would let the girls finish their studies if they are smart.”

While there was typically agreement that education was important for both daughters and sons, some gendered differences emerged on why education was important for girls and boys. The justifications for girl's education ranged from more

stereotypical views on the capacity of men and women, e.g. that girls need to be educated because they are not naturally likely to succeed compared to boys (who have innate leadership capacity and can succeed irrespective) As one female respondent from an urban area says: “In my opinion, education is more important for girls... When girls are educated, their critical thinking can also be developed, and if they are not educated, they may misbehave. I think in this way they can be different. The boys already have the things that they need to lead. I have also met men who are able to lead even though they are not educated. I think boys have leadership skills. For instance, like my brothers, although they are educated, they can do things well.”

Another discussed normative gender roles and the importance of women's economic independence as reasons for need for education for girls. One female respondent from a rural area says: “A wife in a household can get a job, manage her home, and nurture her children to be educated... My daughter will not feel inferior if educat-

ed. Compared with my own experience, she can stand on her feet and earn a living, even if she has no husband. Men can do manual labor and work even if they are not educated.”

Parental perception of the enablers and barriers to girls' and boys' education

Cost

Although Myanmar's education system supports education for every child at very low cost especially at primary school level, most parents found higher education to be costly. Despite the challenges relating to income, most parents try and ensure their children receive the best education. As one male respondent, with an income of 150,000k per month, from a rural area said: “My third daughter attended our village school till seventh grade. She went to Kyaukar to attend eighth and ninth grades. At Kyaukar, I sent her to a privately-owned student hostel. I paid her boarding fee. It is a little expensive.”

Distance

The location of the school determines how easily children can access their school. A school in the village makes it easier for girls to attend school. Students in Monywa have to go to the nearest town to continue their schooling after grade seven. Travelling to and from school places an additional burden on parents in terms of cost and safety.

Safety

All parents want their children to be safe. However safety concerns for daughters are different than for sons and particularly prevalent for the parents in rural areas who have to send their

children to a school far away from the village (often residential) for higher education

One male respondent from a rural area said: “Yes, of course. They are young. If they travel alone, they can face any danger such as road accidents as there are a number of cars on the road. So, we are worried for them. And yet we send him to school...”

One male respondent from a rural area made hostel arrangements for his daughter in the city: “I believe my daughter is clever, therefore, I sent her to Kyaukar and put her into a student hostel because I believe she is safe there when she is away from home. Moreover, all the students like her also stay at the hostel and can take care of each other.”

Another male respondent from the rural area similarly remarked about his concerns for his daughter when she was in high school, “I met with her once a week. I brought her back home once a month. I never let her go back alone because I feel my daughter is too young to go alone. Now she is a University student. She goes to the University by motorcycle.”

Parents in the urban areas also worried about the safety of their children, although the nature of their concern were different for their daughters compared to their sons and revealed the prevalent gender norms and stereotypes. “I worry about social problems in university life. After graduation, she will be mature enough and I feel comfortable with it. ...I don't worry much about my son. We also taught him carefully. The only concern regarding my son is about drug abuse.”

Similarly another female respondent from an urban area said: “I worry about my daughter. I



worry about my son, too. I worry she will go in the wrong direction instead of finishing her studies. As for the boy, I worry that he will fall into wrong company.”

Encouragement from school administrators and community leaders

In villages with a school, where children study up to the seventh grade, it becomes easier to encourage parents to support further schooling when the community leader and school administrators play a strong role. A fine example is the village school in Sithar where the headmistress bridges the gap between the value of education and the attitudes of the villagers. She holds regular meetings with teachers and parents, imparting information on the importance of education and how to nurture young minds. As one male respondent from the village said: “The headmistress usually invites community leaders and parents and holds meeting with us and shares how education is important for the young. She guides us on how to nurture our children. She opens our eyes to how important education is in life.”

One woman in a focus group discussion said: “The headmistress of our school is very smart. We have not seen anyone like her. She visits students who are either ill or absent. She insists students attend class regularly and that parents send their children to school. She invites the parents as well as the village leaders, elders, and community leaders to monthly or quarterly meetings teaches us about the education system and the school.”

Improved infrastructure and private schools

Public education in Myanmar has improved greatly in terms of school infrastructure and facilities and also the number of schools and teachers.

One male respondent from a rural area said: “For the last twenty years or so, my village had a primary school. It has been upgraded to an associated middle school and students can attend classes till seventh grade... My third daughter attended the village school till seventh grade... children can attend the local school without having to travel a distance. Parents also don’t need to put in too much effort for their child’s education.”

Conversely, respondents from urban areas do not like the public education system; they prefer private schools even though they are more expensive. For them, the public school system offers poor quality education and their children have to take extra classes or tuitions to keep up with their curriculum.

Hostel system

After children finish grade seven at the village school, they move to the city to complete high school in Kyaukar or Monywa cities where hostels or boarding schools offer safe and affordable accommodation. Parents from rural areas trust the student hostels.

One male respondent from a rural area says: “As she is now in grade eight, we sent her to a private school in Monywa which also has a hostel. We think it is a better place for her. No more pick-up is required. Everything (including hostel and meals) is prepared for the students so that she can study well according to the timetable set by the school... She has to stay at a hostel. She has to follow the timetable and rules of the school... As she has other classmates, she has to study like them. She can focus more on the studying now.”

Conclusion

This study finds both rural and urban parents equally in favor of educating both daughters and sons, even when it is a financial struggle for the family. Education was especially strongly valued by the parents who themselves had dropped out early from school due to various reasons. Also,

with Myanmar’s economy changing since 1979 to a market economy, there is a shift from traditional economic activities to new businesses and salaried jobs. Parents realize there are other opportunities for their children to earn a living and that an education is the only way forward. Higher education for their children was a challenge in particular to the respondents in the rural areas (for both sons and daughters) due to barriers of cost and location, with children having to travel or relocate to hostels in distant towns to complete high school. For parents, concerns about safety with respect to location of the school and commute emerged especially as a barrier specifically for girls continued education. Conversely, proactive school administrators in the community and the availability of hostels were found to be two significant enablers/influencers for impacting girls’ continued education.

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