



**The Republic of the Union of Myanmar**

2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census

# Policy Brief on The Older Population



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





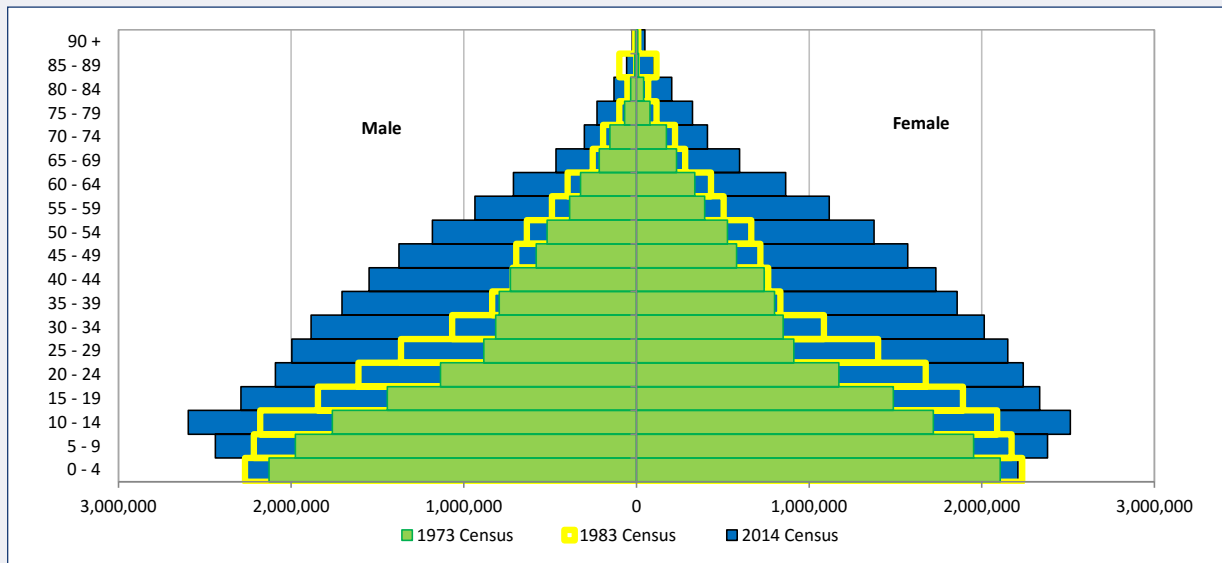
## Key points

- (1) There are 4.5 million people aged 60 and over in Myanmar, making up or 8.9 per cent of the population. By 2050 there will be 13 million older people representing almost 20 per cent of the population. The older age dependency ratio will rise from 14.5 in 2015 to 33.6 in 2050.
- (2) Myanmar must take advantage of the demographic advantage afforded by the relatively large proportion of prime working age adults whilst preparing for the effects of population ageing.<sup>1</sup> The government must review policy mechanisms that exist to ensure fully funded and comprehensive frameworks on ageing are in place that adopt an integrated approach across all policy areas.
- (3) Older people's needs and ageing issues should also be mainstreamed into population-wide policy; older people must be able to participate in the country's economic and social development and share in the benefits, in line with the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- (4) Policy must consider how growing numbers of older people will be looked after in later life and how responsibility will be shared between the state, the individual and the family. A comprehensive strategy on the development of care and support systems must be developed, alongside the adoption of policies that encourage and support family carers. The welfare of older people who have no family support must be ensured.
- (5) Older people are not a homogeneous group and policy should reflect the diversity of their needs and the multiple and often intersecting vulnerabilities they face. Different groups of older people should be addressed specifically in policy, including the oldest old and older women. All policies must also be responsive to how the needs of future generations of older people might differ from those of older people today, for example in income security, health, and care and support.
- (6) Policy must enable older people who wish to work to be able to do so. For those who cannot work, support mechanisms must be in place. The development of social protection, including the introduction of a sufficient universal social pension as outlined in the National Social Protection Strategic Plan 2014, must be prioritised. The expansion of contributory and employee pension schemes that give people the opportunity to save for later life should also be promoted.
- (7) A 60 year old in Myanmar can expect to live an additional 16.3 years. However, there are sharp differences between groups, including between women and men and urban and rural populations. Investment in the development of health systems and the delivery of universal health coverage (National Health Plan 2017-2021) is essential. This must be matched with the introduction of comprehensive social protection systems, education for all, and inclusive development.
- (8) In 2014, nearly one-quarter of older people in Myanmar had at least one form of disability. In 2050, estimates suggest there could be 10 million people in Myanmar with some form of disability, including 7 million older people. Efforts to promote healthy ageing and Non Communicable Disease (NCD) prevention across the life course must be prioritized, alongside the development of integrated health and care systems which are accessible, affordable and which meet the needs of increasing numbers of older people with disabilities and more complex conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> A relatively large proportion of prime working age adults compared to non-working age groups presents the opportunity for economic growth.

**Figure 1: Population pyramid showing 1973, 1983 and 2014 populations**



## Population ageing in Myanmar

**a) The size and growth of the older population.** The world's population is rapidly ageing as a consequence of declining fertility and mortality. This is also true for Myanmar. The 2014 Census shows that since 1983 the population of people aged 60 and over has risen from 2.2 million older people, making up 6.4 per cent of the population, to 4.5 million, making up 8.9 per cent.

Together with an increase in the number of older people, the population of Myanmar is also ageing - these are related but are not the same. Population ageing occurs when the proportion of older people in a society increases in relation to other groups. While over the last 40 years Myanmar's population has been gradually ageing, in the next forty years, population ageing will be much more rapid. By 2050 Myanmar is projected to grow from the current 4.5 million to 13 million of people in this age group, making up almost 20 per cent of the population.

Understanding population ageing is important because of the wide-ranging effects it has on all aspects of society. The government must ensure that fully funded, up-to-date and comprehensive policy frameworks are in place in order to address the needs and rights of older people and to prepare for demographic change. This should include a national policy outlining the government's broad vision for older people and ageing, addressing all major thematic areas related to later life. National action plans or strategies detailing how each policy objective will be achieved should follow, together with legislation to underpin policy and secure older people's rights.

Policy instruments that already exist in Myanmar, including the National Action Plan on Ageing and the National Law on Ageing should be reviewed following

the publication of the forthcoming National Ageing Policy, ensuring that appropriate mechanisms are in place for its successful implementation. Issues related to ageing and older people should continue to be mainstreamed into population-wide policy, including national development plans, social protection strategies, health policies and disaster risk reduction.

**b) Population projections.** The future age structure in Myanmar can be seen by looking at Figure 1. The expanded width of the working age population in 2014 is particularly noticeable. It is this swelling of the population pyramid, combined with fertility decline, that will result in rapid population ageing in the future. This growth in the older population will result in more older people than children by 2050.

**c) Dependency ratios.** In the future, while the number of children supported per 100 adults in the 15-59 age group will decline, the number of older people per working age adult will increase. By 2050, the older age dependency ratio (the population over 60 per 100 persons aged 15-59) will rise from 14.5 in 2015 to 33.6, while the total dependency ratio (the population over 60 and children aged under 15 per 100 persons aged 15-59) will rise from 60.4 in 2015 to 66.6 in 2050.

While these figures should not be considered definitive indicators of dependency - many older people are still economically and socially active while not all people of working age necessarily are - they are helpful tools to explore the potential impact of population ageing.

In the short term, Myanmar must take advantage of the demographic dividend afforded by the relatively large size of working age adults in order to prepare for changing dependency ratios and their effect on the economy and society more broadly. This

demographic dividend can be magnified by investing in education, health and economic opportunities.

For the future, a critical question is how more older people will be supported by a shrinking number of working age adults. Policy must address how responsibility for older people's well being will be shared between the state, the individual and the family, and how younger people can be enabled to plan for their later life. At the same time policy must ensure older people are supported to remain active, independent and able to participate in and contribute economically and socially for as long as possible.

**d) Age and sex composition of the older population.**

The older population is also ageing as the proportion of people aged 80 and over within this group increases. In 1973 only 6.5 per cent of the older population was over 80 years old; in 1983 this figure had risen to 8.0 per cent and by 2014, this group represented 12.7 per cent of the older population. Furthermore, because females have lower mortality rates at all ages, there are more women than men in older age groups. Policy must address the particular needs of the oldest old who are likely to be less functional and require more care and support. Equally, older women will have different needs from older men that must be considered - for example, there are marked gender differences in economic activity, literacy rates and educational attainment.

**e) Comparisons with ASEAN countries.** Table 1 compares population ageing in Myanmar to other ASEAN countries. Myanmar remains a relatively youthful population, experiencing a slower rate of population ageing. Myanmar's gradual fertility decline gives the country greater opportunity to plan for the effects of population ageing. Policy makers should draw upon the experience of other countries in the region to learn from. Thailand, in particular, provides valuable examples of good practice in ageing policy.

**Table 1: Indicators of population ageing for ASEAN countries compared to Myanmar, circa 2015**

Country	% of total population aged 60 and over	Older age dependency ratio	Median age
Singapore	17.8	26.8	40.0
Thailand	15.8	23.7	38.0
Viet Nam	10.3	15.4	30.4
Malaysia	9.2	13.8	28.5
<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>8.9</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>27.1</b>
Indonesia	8.2	12.8	28.4
Brunei Darussalam	7.8	11.3	30.6
Philippines	7.3	12.0	24.2
Timor-Leste	7.2	14.3	18.5
Cambodia	6.8	11.0	23.9
Lao PDR	6.0	10.1	21.9

**Social characteristics of older people**

The situation of older people is an accumulation of life experiences but is also directly affected by current social and economic realities. Older people are not a homogeneous group and policy should reflect their diversity and consider the multiple and often intersecting vulnerabilities they face. Policy should also be responsive to changes in the situation of older people and how the needs of future generations may differ from those of older people today.

**a) Place of residence.** Myanmar remains a predominantly rural society but it is gradually becoming more urban. The percentage of older people living in urban areas increased slightly more than the total population between 1983 and 2014, from 24.1 per cent to 30.5 per cent, meaning urban areas have aged more quickly. However, in the future, the urban population is projected to become younger than the rural population based on assumptions of a decline in rural fertility and movement of young people to urban areas.

Like the rest of the population, half of the older people in Myanmar live in several of the largest States and Regions. The proportion of older population in each area can be seen in Table 2. In future, it is expected that the central States and Regions will experience the highest growth rate of the older population 60 and over to 2030, accompanied by a declining total population.

Where someone lives impacts upon many aspects of their life, including access to employment, education, public services and infrastructure, demographic trends and variations in the situation of older people should be monitored and policy tailored to population need. Age-friendly, enabling and supportive environments should be promoted. Older People's Self-Help Groups have been found to empower older people to meet their own needs by designing and implementing programmes such as home-based care; health awareness and self-care; age-friendly livelihoods; disaster risk reduction; microcredit; and rights and entitlements. These should be replicated in all communities.

**Table 2: Percentage distribution of the total and older population by State and Region, 2014 Census**

State/Region	Total population			State/Region	Population aged 60 and over		
	Number	%	Cumulative %		Number	%	Cumulative %
<b>Union</b>	<b>50,279,900</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Union</b>	<b>4,474,408</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Yangon	7,360,703	14.6		Yangon	645,329	14.4	
Ayeyawady	6,184,829	12.3	14.6	Mandalay	580,359	13.0	14.4
Mandalay	6,165,723	12.3	26.9	Ayeyawady	569,906	12.7	27.4
Shan	5,824,432	11.6	39.2	Sagaing	495,140	11.1	40.1
Sagaing	5,325,347	10.6	50.8	Bago	472,847	10.6	51.2
Bago	4,867,373	9.7	61.4	Magway	424,498	9.5	61.8
Magway	3,917,055	7.8	71.1	Shan	405,631	9.1	71.3
Rakhine	2,098,807	4.2	78.8	Rakhine	206,515	4.6	80.3
Mon	2,054,393	4.1	83.0	Mon	203,481	4.5	84.9
Kachin	1,642,841	3.3	87.1	Kayin	122,317	2.7	89.5
Kayin	1,504,326	3.0	90.4	Tanintharyi	109,051	2.4	92.2
Tanintharyi	1,408,401	2.8	93.4	Kachin	102,612	2.3	94.7
Nay Pyi Taw	1,160,242	2.3	96.2	Nay Pyi Taw	83,747	1.9	96.9
Chin	478,801	1.0	98.5	Chin	35,796	0.8	98.8
Kayah	286,627	0.6	99.4	Kayah	17,179	0.4	99.6

**b) Marital status and numbers of living children.**

The Census recorded 73.9 per cent of older men as married in 2014 compared to only 44.1 per cent of older women, while 17.4 per cent among the older men are widowed and 45.7 per cent among women of the same age group. Widows are a vulnerable group as loss of a husband can result in poverty where they have been the main earner.

The 2014 Census asked all ever married women living in conventional households how many children they ever had. The majority of older women (64 per cent) reported having three or more living children, while 18 per cent have no living children at all. This, together with the rising proportions of women never married, suggests that in the future there will be many more women with no living children to support them. The government must ensure the welfare of these groups, including through targeted programmes where necessary.

**c) Literacy and educational attainment.** The older population have lower levels of education and literacy than working age adults: people who are not able to read or write comprise 11.2 per cent of older men and 28.0 per cent of older women. Among today's youth, literacy and at least one grade of primary school attendance is nearly universal, meaning there is potential for information and advice and public education to promote income security and healthy ageing. For older people today, the impact of illiteracy and low levels of education must be considered when designing policy.

**Living arrangements of older people**

The vast majority of the older population in Myanmar live in conventional households and almost three-quarters of these co-reside with one or more son or daughter or son- or daughter-in-law. Only 15 per

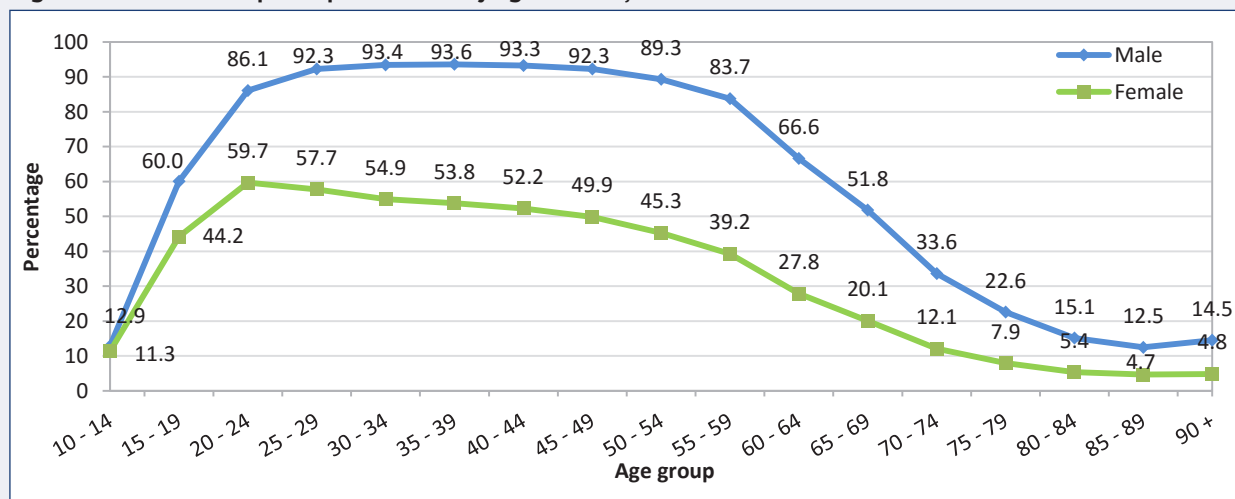
cent of older men and women live alone or with only a spouse. These figures show that despite concern that fertility decline, urbanisation and economic growth will erode cultural values and lead to more older people living alone without the support of their children, cohabitation is still the norm. For the future, policy and programmes that encourage and support families to look after older people should be adopted, including intergenerational exchange, benefits and incentives for family carers, home- and community-based care programmes, older people's self-help groups, and the development of enabling and supportive environments.

**Economic conditions of the older people**

**a) Labour force participation.** Limited coverage of pensions and other social security schemes in Myanmar means that many older people continue to work for as long as possible. In 2014, 30.3 per cent of people aged 60 and over (17.8% of women and 46.8% of men) were recorded as being in the labour force, as shown in Figure 2. Older people are more likely to be employed in agricultural work than people in the working age, possibly because employees in the formal sector are expected to retire at or soon after age 60.

However, Census data reveals a decline in agricultural employment for all ages since 1983. Policy makers should consider how, in the future, if people are increasingly employed in non-agricultural occupations, these industries can accommodate older workers. Policy tackling age discrimination and promoting positive attitudes to older workers should be implemented together with the removal of default retirement ages and measures to increase older people's employment opportunities. For those who cannot work, support mechanisms including comprehensive social protection systems should be

Figure 2: Labour force participation rates by age and sex, 2014 Census



put in place. The introduction of a non-contributory social pension for those aged 65 and over, as detailed in the National Social Protection Strategic Plan, is crucial. The commencement of a cash transfer to those aged 90 and over in April 2017 is a positive start. Alongside this, expanding contributory and employee pension schemes in the formal and informal sector so that people have the opportunity to save for their later life must be prioritised.

**b) Household's economic condition.** Lack of rural infrastructure and low agricultural productivity means that many rural households with an older member live in dwellings not suitable for habitation and lack access to electricity, improved sanitation, communication devices or means of transport that are common in urban households. However, the 2014 Census suggests that for most characteristics, households with an older member are more advantaged than households with only younger members and are more likely to be in the higher wealth quintiles than the households without an older member, as long as there are three or more people in the household. The most disadvantaged households, on the other hand, are those where an older person lives on his or her own or without an employed person of working age.

the shortest life expectancy, followed by rural men, urban women and rural women. Policy makers should consider how inequalities in life expectancy can be addressed. Investment in the development of health systems, in particular the strengthening of primary care and the delivery of universal health coverage (National Health Plan 2017-2021) is essential. This must be matched with comprehensive social protection systems that support people across the life course, with the promotion of education for all, and with inclusive development.

**b) Disability.** Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) make-up an increasing proportion of deaths and are resulting in higher rates of chronic conditions. The 2014 Census found that nearly one-quarter of older people in Myanmar have at least one form of disability and nearly six per cent have a moderate or severe disability. The prevalence of disability increases with age and is more common among women, rural populations and the poorest older people. Estimates suggests that in 2050 there could be as many as 10 million people in Myanmar with a disability. Improvements in life expectancy and in disability-free life years will be dependent upon concerted efforts to promote healthy ageing and NCD prevention across the life course.

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