

Equitable access to digital skills is a universal public good, but Myanmar's rapid growth in mobile access has been uneven and risks deepening existing inequalities. IREX recently conducted a study on the mismatch in skills and opportunities that young 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. These preliminary findings will be followed by a full Political Economy Analysis and detailed recommendations in early 2017.

## Why young women need digital skills now to participate in Myanmar's new information society

Myanmar's rapid growth in access to mobiles and digital skills brings with it new economic, social, and educational opportunities — along with a risk of deepening existing inequalities. Although mobiles will become even more affordable and coverage will 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. Though

subtle, the gender-based differences in acquisition of digital skills and perceived benefit of ICTs are both systemic and detrimental to women's full participation in development processes. In some ways they are even more detrimental because they are widely perceived to be normative and personal choices. Challenges multiply for young 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.

Coupled with women's strong labor force participation — as high as 75%<sup>1</sup> — improvements on measures like educational parity show that women represent untapped potential to drive Myanmar's growth. Young women who plan to participate in the paid labor force are more likely to be granted access to technology tools and skills training by family, but this is still not translating into equal access to opportunities. Although institutional reform 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.



<sup>1</sup>DFAT, *Women and the Economy in Myanmar*, 2016

# What did we find?



These 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.



## Finding 1

**Early adolescence is the key stage to target women with skills and support services**



## Finding 2

**Young women need more — and more local — digital skills training in order to participate fully in the 21st-century economy**



## Finding 3

**Literacy, numeracy, and fundamental soft skills, such as leadership and communication, are vital for young women to benefit**



## Finding 4

**Use Myanmar's pending Universal Service Fund to ensure that public access internet and technology is available to all, and specifically target youth and women**



## Finding 5

**Make use of Myanmar's expansive public library network, as safe spaces for young women to access technology, digital skills training, and support services**



## Finding 6

**Build gender sensitization activities into training and support for adolescents**



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## Early adolescence is the key stage to target women with skills and support services

It is not enough to provide adult women with skills and support services. Young women — particularly adolescent girls — need targeted opportunities to build digital skills. In early adolescence, young women and their families are making decisions about education and future employment, while expectations about young women's roles in family and society are becoming fixed. This is when specific skills and support services have the greatest lifelong potential to impact women's access to opportunities. Without the necessary support or skills, they risk losing out. The behavior patterns set during adolescence can have long-lasting effects — both positive and negative — on young people's futures.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup>UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2011 Executive Summary: Adolescence An Age of Opportunity*, 2011.



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## Young women need more — and more local — digital skills training in order to participate fully in the 21st-century economy

Internet access — particularly on personal devices — does not equal digital inclusion. In Myanmar, young women depend more on formal training opportunities while young men have the chance to experiment with computers, get online, and share with their peers in spaces like tea shops, cyber cafes, and gaming centers. Since skills training is not available in schools, young women depend on formal training centers that can be difficult to access because of their cost and location. This dependence on training centers also reinforces occupational segregation patterns, with girls self-selecting and being guided toward finance and administrative office positions instead of seeking out more advanced skills or leadership opportunities.

### What are key digital skills?



Foundational computer and mobile skills, such as typing, using a mouse, and accessing the internet



Online privacy and security



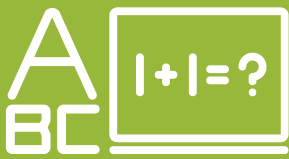
Searching for quality information online



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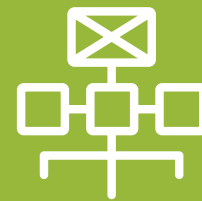
## Literacy, numeracy, and fundamental soft skills, such as leadership and communication, are vital for young women to benefit

Young women need literacy and numeracy, but they also need soft skills like communication and leadership in order to participate in the modern workforce and to take advantage of Myanmar's rapid expansion in technology and internet access.



### Literacy & Numeracy

While Myanmar's official national literacy rates are high, at 89.5%<sup>3</sup>, literacy and numeracy can still be a challenge for those residing in rural areas where school dropout rates are higher. In Shan state, literacy rates are at 64.6%. Without those core literacy skills, young women cannot navigate the menus on their mobile phones, or read the news on their Facebook page, or contribute local language content to a discussion in an online forum. While those with limited reading skills can learn basic mobile use, this limitation prevents those who could benefit the most from tech access and skills from doing so.



### Soft skills

Young women in Myanmar need soft skills like leadership, problem solving, and critical thinking in order to build their confidence and sustaining learning as their information needs evolve. "Soft skills rival technical skills in fostering workplace success," according to a recent report by Child Trends. Without soft skills, young women cannot benefit fully from any digital skills or access that they obtain. 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.

### What are soft skills?

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

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

<sup>3</sup>UNFPA, 2014 Myanmar Census Highlights Report



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## Use Myanmar's pending Universal Service Fund to ensure that public access internet and technology is available to all, and specifically target youth and women

Knowing that girls are falling behind in opportunities to develop digital skills, the Myanmar government could target investment from the upcoming USF toward meeting this need. 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.



### Mobile data is not enough

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 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.



### Computers and fully equipped tablets

For those who do understand the benefits of technology access, computers and fixed line broadband are vital in addition to mobile phones and data. Office jobs are highly sought-after by young women in 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 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce.



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## Make use of Myanmar's expansive public library network, as safe spaces for young women to access technology, digital skills training, and support services

All young women need safe spaces where they can access internet and technology, develop new skills, and share with their peers and their communities. In Myanmar, young women 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. 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.



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## Build gender sensitization activities into training and support for adolescents

While most respondents believed that Myanmar has achieved gender equality, young women tend to lack confidence in their own digital skills, particularly when they compare women's skills with those of men. 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 tech training programs — say they would seek the advice of men in their 20s. These gender norms are particularly important in informal skills sharing, particularly among those who do not invest in formal skills training, such as older women, those residing in rural communities, or ethnic minorities. Coupled with low confidence, this fixed concept of gender roles creates even more barriers for young women to develop the skills they need to help drive Myanmar's development and growing economy.



## What's next?

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 is 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.



## 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.

For more information on our work and the next phase of analysis, please contact [beyondaccess@irex.org](mailto:beyondaccess@irex.org).

