

# EDUCATION FOR WOMEN & GIRLS

By the year 2000, [the government pledges to provide] universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80% of school-age children both through formal education and non-formal education, and, to reduce the dropout rate to 16%.

## - National Action Plan for Women

Discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many areas, owing to customary attitudes, early marriages and pregnancies, inadequate and gender-biased teaching and educational materials, sexual harassment and lack of adequate and physically and otherwise accessible schooling facilities. Girls undertake heavy domestic work at a very early age. Girls and young women are expected to manage both educational and domestic responsibilities, often resulting in poor scholastic performance and early drop out from the educational system. This has long-lasting consequences for all aspects of women's lives.

## - Beijing Platform For Action, Paragraph 71

Leanness is the splendour of ascetics;

Plumpness is the splendour of quadrupeds;

Learning is the splendour of men;

Marriage is the splendour of women.

## - Lawkaniti 96<sup>1</sup>

To promote women's rights, both men and women must have a proper education so women will understand their own rights and men will support us in promoting our rights. In fact, education is the most important thing in order to promote women's rights. CINT 276

## OVERVIEW

Education is a prerequisite to improved standards of living for all citizens of Burma and particularly for improving the status of women. It is intrinsic to strong economic development of the country. The UNDP Human Development Index rates Burma 121<sup>st</sup> among 174 countries.<sup>3</sup> The failure of the government over decades to provide opportunities for development has created a human resource problem that promises to burgeon with time. With the "brain drain" of older educated people who have left the country over the past four decades, and the dearth of learning opportunities for younger generations, Burma today lacks, and in the future will continue to lack, educated, skilled people prepared to tackle and solve its developmental problems.

Traditionally, people in different cultures in Burma have put a very high premium on education for its own sake, as well as for the perceived employment opportunities that it provides. At the same time, for

generations girls have had fewer opportunities to complete their schooling than boys. Women deprived of the chance to complete a primary education and acquire literacy suffer diminished income-generating opportunities and decreased access to information, which affects not just them but also their families for the rest of their lives.

While nationally averaged attendance figures camouflage regional gender disparities, the fact remains that in many areas of the country, girls' opportunities today are frequently restricted, just as their mothers' were. With little government spending on education and widespread corruption, children's schooling is now beyond the reach of many families. High costs and poor coverage in the education system have badly affected all children's access to learning, but continue to have a greater impact on girls, particularly in rural areas. When families are short of resources, boys' education takes precedence, since they are seen as more employable outside the home, while girls are given responsibility for domestic chores, including care of younger siblings. Where school

coverage is low, the risks associated with travel to school further restrict girls' access, particularly in rural and conflict areas.

At higher levels, government policies have further served to limit women's tertiary completion and to support rather than demolish gender stereotypes in education. In universities, which have been closed repeatedly over the previous decade in response to student protests, women face differential admission procedures to traditionally male-dominated fields. The curriculum and the system as a whole do not present models that encourage women to have careers or see themselves as actors in the public affairs of their communities. With limited vocational training opportunities outside of the formal education system, women denied an education early in life have little opportunity to make up for it later.

### WOMEN & ILLITERACY

The 1983 census is the most widely quoted source of demographic information, and its figures for illiteracy, in the absence of others, continue to be used by many UN agencies. At the time the census was conducted, the measured literacy rate for men was 82% and for women 71.3%.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not known to what degree these figures accurately reflected the situation in rural areas, since many areas had been excluded from assessment for decades by poor infrastructure and civil war. As the education system has deteriorated over the past 16 years since this survey was taken, it is likely that these figures do not reflect present levels of literacy. UNICEF estimated in 1995 that overall literacy had dropped to about 55%,<sup>5</sup> and reiterated a figure of between 50 to 60% in its 1999 "Situation Analysis," on the basis of the "significant proportion of adults who claim they have never been to school."<sup>6</sup>

All figures appear to conceal significant variations not only between the sexes but also between different areas of the country. The 1983 census shows male to female literacy rates of 86% : 77% in the predominantly Burman divisions, compared to 65% : 50% in the predominantly ethnic states. Community leaders in some border areas, where there is very little data available, have estimated a female illiteracy rate as high as 80%.<sup>7</sup> Surveys conducted in the mid-1990s in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border showed that less than 50% of Mon women between the ages of 20 and 30 were literate, and

that 50 to 60% of Karenni women in all age groups were literate. Among both these ethnic groups, rates of literacy generally decreased with age, evidence that more young women are gaining access to education with time, a reason for cautious optimism. However, in both ethnic groups and among all age categories, male literacy remained notably higher than female, usually by 10% or more.<sup>8</sup> Surveys conducted in Karen refugee camps during the same period showed similar results to those of the Karenni, with average literacy rates among women 20 to 40 years of age slightly over 60%, while men in the same age groups averaged nearly 75%.<sup>9</sup> These studies also indicated that women's illiteracy inhibited their access to non-formal education, including various kinds of training offered in the camps.<sup>10</sup>

According to the women we interviewed, illiteracy in Burmese is prevalent in areas of Burma where ethnic languages are more commonly used, particularly among women who rarely leave their villages. Since teaching of ethnic languages is discouraged in many areas, for students, learning to read and write Burmese often means studying a second or third language. Even literacy in women's mother tongues often is not perceived to be important in farming communities where it does not always serve any immediate purpose in terms of vocation or life skills.

None of the parents can read and write and we don't know anything, but if we really need to know something, we ask the children who have gone to school. Even though we didn't go to school, we can count money. It's not that bad. No one can cheat us. But if someone has a lot of money, maybe they can't count it. They can mostly add up to 10. Or maybe up to 100.... There are some Burmese teachers and some Karenni, but the teachers don't like to teach Karenni language so much. They want to teach only in Burmese. CINT 233

The majority of people in my village were illiterate. We had only one teacher whom we hired and paid with about 3,000 kyat per year in donations and rice collected from the villagers. He could only teach the children how to read and write in Lahu, so most people couldn't read or write Burmese. CINT 56

I can read and write Matupi Chin, because we studied it in Sunday school. But for Burmese, I only studied up till 2<sup>nd</sup> standard, so I can read and write a little but I can't understand the meanings of all the words. CINT 192

The most common reasons behind high illiteracy rates among women are non-attendance and drop out. Government attendance surveys in 1991 showed that one third of the population overall had not completed any standard of schooling, and only 7% had completed 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> standards, with much lower attainment for women than men.<sup>11</sup> Again, significant differences were recorded between urban and rural areas. Almost 77% of women in urban areas attended school compared with less than 56% of rural women.

I never went to school. I wanted to at first. But there was no one to take care of the babies at home. I have two younger brothers, one older sister and me. One of my brothers was able to study up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard in Rangoon, but only because my uncle could afford to support him in school. CINT 212

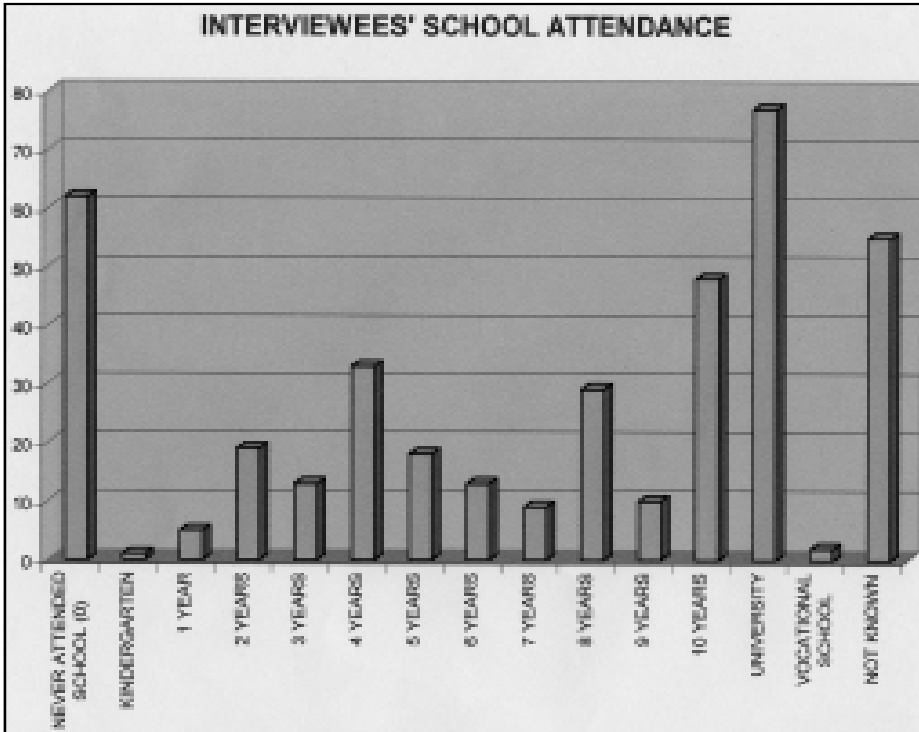
cited the inability of families to pay the necessary fees, and the need for girls, especially if they were the oldest daughters, to work, taking care of other children or supporting the family with whatever income they could provide, as the reasons they dropped out or did not attend school. Often, girls were forced to drop out after one or both of their parents had died. Underlying these reasons are cultural norms that education for girls and women is not important.

In Burma I studied up to 6<sup>th</sup> standard. Then my father died and my mother had no money to support me for school. I really wanted to continue my studies. Later my mother found a job outside, and I could have continued up to 10<sup>th</sup> standard. But I could not buy enough schoolbooks. Then I got married and I have two children now. At that time, I thought

that after I got married my husband was going to support me to further my studies. But he never did. CINT 176

I never went to school, because I was an orphan. I was five when my mother died, and seven when my father died. My relatives brought me up. There was a school in the village up to 4<sup>th</sup> standard, but I couldn't go. CINT 170

I wished to continue my education but my parents could not send me any further and I left school from the 4<sup>th</sup> standard and worked for my family's survival. CINT 194



Almost a fifth of the women we spoke with had never attended school at all. Another 20% had started school, but were unable to continue beyond a primary level, or had dropped out somewhere between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> standards. At the same time, more than 20% of the women we spoke with had attended university, probably because of the large number of exiled urban students and professionals we interviewed relative to the general population.<sup>12</sup>

Among the adult women we interviewed, most

I started working in a textiles factory when I was thirteen years old. At that time I was studying in the 2<sup>nd</sup> standard. I had to leave school because of my family's economic problems. When the government demonetized the country's currency [in 1987], all of our money became useless. We were left with only 35 kyat for the whole family. CINT 195

I stopped studying in 8<sup>th</sup> standard, because my father was a farmer, and I had to work at home when my mother passed away. CINT 202

My elder sister got married and I had to take care of all the housework, so I couldn't go to school after 8<sup>th</sup> standard. CINT 71

There has been relatively little research to date on how illiteracy affects women's lives in Burma, apart from their health. (See *Women's Health*.) Among the women we spoke with, many made anecdotal mention that greater educational attainment would have allowed them more employment opportunities. (See *The Economy & Women's Labour and Migration & Trafficking of Women & Girls*.) There is also a perception that lack of education limits a woman's opportunities to participate in public fora and community decision-making. Many of the women we spoke with explained the lack of a female presence in refugee camp leadership affairs by citing women's lower educational attainment, admitting at the same time that men also often had little education, but did not face the same barriers to public office. (See *Women's Participation in Politics*.)

Adult education is usually not an option because few women have time outside of household work and paid employment to study, and even when they do, are often expected to stay at home. While the following statement is from a Muslim woman, the situation she describes is also encountered by women in non-Muslim communities.

Women in [the Muslim] community don't have a high level of education. Men don't think about our children's levels of education, either. They spend the money on other things, and the women can say nothing. Women want to continue in our education, but the men won't give us the opportunity. It is not possible for married women to attend the religious school. Before we could go, but right now, the men do not allow married women to attend. When a husband arrives at home, he wants to see his wife there. CINT 235

To our knowledge there are currently very few programs in place in Burma to provide further education to adult women who had to quit school early or never attended. None of the women we spoke with made mention of such programs or had participated in any. In the National Action Plan, the government expressed aims to reduce female illiteracy to 11% by the year 2000.<sup>13</sup> That these aims have not been fulfilled is hardly surprising given that there is no national adult female literacy campaign. Furthermore, with the lack of accurate, up-to-date literacy statistics, in expressing these ambitions, the govern-

ment has no gauge of the extent of the problem, and thus cannot begin to adequately address it.

## CURRENT ATTENDANCE & DROP OUT

Children belonging to ethnic minorities in many countries are ... especially at risk of being denied access to adequate education. In some countries, they may be relegated to sub-standard educational facilities, poorer quality of instruction, fewer teaching materials, and fewer opportunities for higher education than for the rest of the population.<sup>14</sup>

### - Human Rights Watch

Country-wide figures for attendance and retention of students in primary school are improving slowly. In the early 1990s, UNICEF estimated that 40% of Burma's children never attended school at all.<sup>15</sup> By the year 2000, enrollment had increased, with only 25% of children aged five or older never attending.

Attendance and enrollment figures are greatly skewed toward urban areas and the earliest years of attendance. With each subsequent year of schooling, overall enrollment diminishes, leaving fewer eligible students in the classrooms. Despite a compulsory education law, a quarter of all students fail or drop out in their first or second years. Repetition rates are highest in kindergarten. Less than 50% of children enrolled complete the five-year primary school course to 4<sup>th</sup> standard and enroll in middle school. Only a quarter of these students will enroll in high school, meaning 50% of children do not attend school at any given time.<sup>16</sup>

Of the 750,000 children who drop out of primary school each year, 630,000 are rural students.<sup>17</sup> Government figures show that 84% of the annual drop-outs from primary school are in rural areas, with the lowest enrollment for the primary level age group in eastern Shan, Karen, and Arakan States.<sup>18</sup> NGO workers implementing education programs claim that while enrollment is increasing in stable urban communities, growing displacement, both voluntary and forced, makes it more and more difficult for many families to send their children to school. Country averages often hide the disparities that exist among the regions.

The government claims that 40% of all children finish primary school, but I think the figure is actually lower than that. In rural areas, a large percentage of people are mobile, as labour migrants driven by poverty or internally displaced

### DROP OUT & CURRICULUM REFORM

While financial concerns are the major factor affecting attendance, children also drop out by choice because of poor performance and dissatisfaction with school. High annual failure rates, repetition and lack of enrollment at the early stages of education have been common for many years. Inappropriate curriculum design combined with a system of rigorous national examinations at primary, middle and high school levels annually eliminated many candidates for promotion. Such intrinsic problems point to a failure within the system rather than with the children.

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Reform was initiated under the Continuous Assessment and Progression System (CAPS), instituted on a trial basis in some areas since 1998, abolishing final examinations in favour of more frequent testing and other assessment means. Under this system, teachers are told to pass all students at a primary level through to 6<sup>th</sup> standard. It is too early to say whether or not the CAPS system is effective in meeting students needs. However, it is feared that unless the teaching materials and techniques are substantially revised along with assessment methods, while student retention rates may be greater, the curriculum may not be any better suited to students' learning needs. Simply permitting the students to pass does not solve the problem but rather masks it within the education system. Some parents have accused the SPDC regime of valuing quantity over quality and complained that under the new system, the results are worse, since students are no longer assessed on the basis of scholastic competence.

people. These people, many of whom are women and children, are not counted in the statistics of the government, for instance for primary school enrollment, because they are not registered anywhere. Their children usually don't go to school anyway, even though labour migrants may move to another part of the country for a period varying from three months up to three years. CINT 255

### BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Unfortunately, many of the same barriers that have prevented children, especially girl children, from

getting an education in the past continue to be a problem today. Rural women and girls have consistently less opportunity to get an education than their urban counterparts as a result of poverty, poor school coverage, and prevailing notions of the value of education for women. The deterioration of the education system in the recent past gives little hope that this situation will change in the near future. Since many of the problems in educational access affect boys and girls equally, it is necessary first to understand the failure of the system as a whole, before examining the specific problems that exist for girls.

### School Coverage

Social spending is not prioritized by the government in Burma, and the education system as a whole is poorly supported in terms of funding. Sadly, the situation appears to be worsening rather than improving.

Current government spending in education as a share of national income is among the lowest in the world. Official data shows that real public spending per child has fallen from about 1200 kyat per child (five to nine years of age) in 1990/91 to a dismal 100 kyat (less than US\$0.30) in 1999/2000.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, nationwide school coverage is low, especially in rural and ethnic areas. Many villages have never had a school; others have primary schools that do not teach beyond 4<sup>th</sup> standard. Children wishing to continue middle (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> standards) and high school (9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> standards) must travel to other villages or towns, a major expense and a further disincentive for schooling where education is sometimes already not prioritized by parents. At present, there is a national average of one primary school per every two villages. UNESCO estimates that there are approximately 2,000 villages more than three kilometers from any school, even without accounting for difficult terrain and lack of transportation in many of these areas.<sup>20</sup>

There is no school in my village and only a few people are educated. The school is at the other side of the river, which runs very high sometimes, and most people dare not send their children to school because they are afraid of the danger of the currents. If they send their children to school they have to use a rowboat to go and come back everyday. But children who are living near the school can go to school.

I went to the primary school and finished 4<sup>th</sup> standard, but I wasn't able to attend middle school. But by the time we moved to the city, I was too old to go back to school and I had to help my parents do business. CINT 285

[I]n my village they needed to build a school. Everyone in the village had to build the school using their own materials. Then they [SPDC] said that the villagers were responsible for paying and feeding the teacher. After a couple of months, it just became a house for the soldiers to live in and get fed. There was nothing being taught, yet it was a school and the SPDC could say that they built a school. CINT 12

My daughter is already big but she is only in 4<sup>th</sup> standard because when we were in Burma, there was no middle or high school in the place where we lived. We must send our children to another village to study. I did not have enough money to send my children to another village to study. I always keep her with me so she has not studied further than 4<sup>th</sup> standard and she has left school because she is 13 years old already. CINT 67

**There are less than 1,600 high schools servicing the entire population. Even in urban areas, schools are often overcrowded and lack basic amenities, such as furniture.**

**Some communities build and staff their own schools, paying teachers a very small annual stipend or simply supplying such daily needs as rice.**

## Cost

### Section 20

- a) Every child shall:
  - i) have opportunities for acquiring education;
  - ii) have the right to free basic education (primary level) at schools opened by the State
- b) The Ministry of Education shall:
  - i) have an objective of implementing the system of free and compulsory primary education;
  - ii) lay down and carry out measures as may be necessary for regular attendance at schools and the reduction of untimely drop out rates;
  - iii) make arrangements for literacy of children who are unable for various reasons to attend schools opened by the State.

**- The Union of Myanmar, The State Law and Order Restoration Council, The Child Law, 14 July 1993**

Given the harsh economic conditions suffered by people in Burma, education for many has been

## A VILLAGE TEACHER

The village people are poor. The school is a long wooden building, roofed with nipa palm leaves. The roof is always leaking, and this wets the dirt floor. Children have to study in rain and mud. There are no benches or desks at school. Children have to carry small tables from their homes. The school children in cities can wear school uniforms, but the village children don't have uniforms. Some don't even have plastic thongs to wear. They come to school covered in mud.

... If some children do not come to school and we ask them why, they say, "Please excuse my absence today teacher, because we have nothing to eat at home, so we went to catch fish. Please give me leave for few more days." We can't take any action against them because we know that they really don't have food at home, so they have to go to find food. We feel sorry for them. And then even if they are studying in school, they usually try to study only up to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> standard, so they can merely read and write. It doesn't matter for them if they don't pass 4<sup>th</sup> standard. If they can communicate with others, that is enough.

Although we teachers came from places far away, the local authorities did not provide a hostel for teachers, so we stayed at our students' parents' houses. We stayed with village people and we also had to help them in their work. The authorities can't provide sufficient books to the children. We teachers have textbooks but since we have to teach the children who don't have books, the children have to study like parrots, just reciting and learning by heart. The children also do not have enough exercise books.

Also, the education system is always changing. Sometimes the authorities ordered teachers not to teach this subject, or to teach another subject suddenly at mid-year. The subjects and syllabus can always change, increasing or decreasing. There are various religions among the students. Before the class begins, the authorities forced all children to worship in the Buddhist way. It is difficult for Muslim students. They don't want to do it, but they are forced to. CINT 267

rendered a luxury rather than a necessity. Although the government has pledged to provide free primary education for all, in reality the high cost of schooling works as a major disincentive to school attendance.

<b>ONE YEAR SCHOOL FEES IN BURMA<sup>21</sup></b> (in kyat)			
	<b>Primary school</b>	<b>Middle school</b>	<b>High school</b>
Enrollment fees	500	500	3,000
Parent-Teacher Assn.	200	300	not given
Textbooks	150	200	2,200
Exercise books	75	100	600/doz.
School building maintenance	100	200	not given
Furniture	200	300	not given
USDA membership	50	50	not given
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,275</b>	<b>1,650</b>	<b>5,800</b>

I went to school until 3<sup>rd</sup> standard. For 1<sup>st</sup> standard, the cost is 100 kyat, and for 3<sup>rd</sup> standard, it's 500 kyat per year. That's just the entrance fee. That doesn't include books or other things. There aren't many students, because those children who cannot afford to pay cannot go to school. Some children who got support from the Catholic bishop can go to school. CINT 233

In my village, there is only one school, supported by the community, not by the government. I studied there up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Then I went to Matupi town to study 8<sup>th</sup> standard. There is one army camp near Matupi. The soldiers often crossed our village and took so many porters. My father died when I was a child, and my mother had to take care of everything for us. My mother had to porter for the army, and she had no time to work. Because of that I faced so many problems for my education.

When I was at school, there were so many discriminations between the wealthy and the poor. The poor can never get opportunities, because they cannot pay for private tuition. Even if they are bright they cannot reach the top positions. When I was at high school, I already felt so angry with this government. We could not get proper education. They collected so many fees all the time. We girls felt so shy, shier than the boys, when we could not afford to pay the fees. The teacher scolded us and threatened to expel us from the school in front of the whole classroom. The boys did not care so much about that. CINT 169

**With little government spending on education, families bear the brunt of costs. The worst hit are families in rural areas where farmers have little cash income and where they are required to provide forced labour or fees in lieu of it. Even in primary school, which is said to be free under the Child Law, students are re-**

**quired to pay entry fees, monthly fees, book fees, special activity and sports fees, occasional fees for festivals, and to buy uniforms and school supplies. When these costs are added to the extra-session tuition fees in middle school and high school, this can bring family expenditures to thousands of kyat per child per year. According to the most recent figures from UNICEF, the average family spent 1,740 kyat on "direct educational costs" such as fees, books, and other materials in 1997. Other unpublished studies conducted around the same time found most family spending on education fell between 900 and 3,000 kyat per child per year. Given that estimates by NGOs during 1996 placed the average monthly wages for an estimated 99% of the population (excluding the very rich) at between 2,000 kyat for rural and 3,000 kyat for urban families,<sup>22</sup> school fees place an enormous burden on families.**

I left school this year [1999]. I passed 7<sup>th</sup> standard, but my father couldn't send me to school because the costs of studying were too high. In middle school it was only 400 kyat. But for high school, now we have to pay 10,000 kyat for each year from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> standard. CINT 145

**While the government claims that they are offering scholarships and distributing free textbooks, no one we spoke with was aware of these programs.**

They never helped the poor students. They lied about these programs. The only programs for assisting students who couldn't afford to go to school or giving free textbooks were actually from the UN, but the government said they were doing them. When I was studying at high school in Mandalay, UNICEF gave us school books, really nice textbooks, but we were never allowed to use them. They kept them locked up

in a glass case and we were only allowed to touch them when the district education department officials visited. Then they would take them out. But as soon as they left the books would go back into the case again. CINT 244

Especially in peri-urban townships (resettlement communities), financial hardship prevents schooling because the child's contribution to the family income is required to make sure everyone in the household can eat. Various studies by UNICEF, UNDP, and INGOs have identified parents' inability to pay school costs and the need for children to work to provide the family with income as major reasons for children dropping out or not attending school. Working children often drop out by choice, because they feel a responsibility to their parents to assist them in whatever way they can. In these situations, boys are sometimes more disadvantaged than girls, since it is more socially acceptable for boys to work outside the home. However, with no overall statistics on child labour and non-attendance or drop out rates, it is difficult to generalize. It appears that expectations that girls will assist by performing household tasks may work to exclude them from schooling in equal numbers.

I studied only up to the 1<sup>st</sup> standard. I felt sorry for my mother and I stopped going to school, because she wasn't able to send me. We had no money at that time. My mother was a widow and we couldn't support ourselves and pay the school fees and buy the books. I was 13 when I stopped because I started late. I think boys are more interested than girls in studying. I think girls have more sympathy for their parents and they understand their parents' difficulties more than boys do. So they stay with their parents and help do the housework. CINT 275

### Corruption & Tuition

Low teacher salaries have also contributed to corruption in the education system, driving costs higher. Many teachers "moonlight," or work second jobs, in order to make ends meet. When teachers are absent, students sit idle, waiting for instruction. To supplement their incomes, the same teachers often give extra-sessional evening "tuition," where the real learning of lessons takes place. The costs can add up to more than 2,000 kyat per student per month, an additional 20,000 kyat or more per year.<sup>23</sup> These classes put an additional economic strain on families, and further inhibit children from poor families.

### HSENG KHAM, 25

For me, I had a lot of problems to attend school. Many times my parents weren't able to send me money. I worked on other people's fields, planting and harvesting crops. I sometimes had to go ask my parents for money for tuition and books, things like that, but sometimes after I left, they couldn't send it. There were too many things at home that they needed the money for. So sometimes I really didn't want to leave school, I just wanted to stay there. In my village, no one had any general knowledge or education. The other people there didn't understand at all. In my mind, I saw them and I thought, is this what happens if you can't read and write? I wanted to stay in school. But I had to stay at other's houses, I had to work for them and I encountered a lot of problems. In order to graduate I had to face a lot of problems.

I had to work as a housekeeper to be able to go to school. I was so tired all the time, trying to go to school and do all the housework at the same time. I got up at 4:00 and after cooking and cleaning the whole house, at 6:00 I attended tuition until 7:30. Then I would come back, but the family I worked for had so many children, and often there was no food left for me to eat before I left for school. So at 8:00 I went to school without eating. School started at 8:45. At school we also had duties which were divided between us. The girls on one side had to clean the school and water the plants and things, the boys had to carry the water, like that. All the students from the villages staying in town had a lot of problems, and many of them just wanted to leave. So it was difficult for them to attend until they finished. I was always tired. But if I went to my parents and explained how tired I was, they would tell me just to stay at home. So I wouldn't say, and they would tell me to back to school and I never dared to tell them the truth. I never imagined how much I would have to bear in order to get an education. It was the same for other children who came from the villages to study in town. So most left at 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> standard, maybe 8<sup>th</sup> standard. Those who left started working, the girls took husbands, started having children, and then that's it! You're finished. You don't know anything. You go back and live in the village, take care of a house, and your biggest desire is to be able to buy new clothes sometimes. They don't know anything, just the planting and harvesting cycle. I thought, how awful! For the whole year, only that. It's not a full life. CINT 245

While until recently, tuition was common only for secondary students, now reportedly even primary students attend tuition in many areas in order to graduate and be accepted to middle school. Private teaching has become a prerequisite to ensure promotion to the next grade.

We used to have seven periods at school before the SPDC times. We used to get lectures every period from the teachers. But lately, the teachers get such small salaries, they don't teach for the whole school day anymore. They only teach for two periods. Sometimes, they take turns coming to school so they can go out and work other jobs during the day. So the quality of education we got was really bad. None of the students were interested in studying anymore, so many students stopped coming to school and went out to try to find work instead. CINT 89

Even the children who can afford private tuition cannot always pass government examinations, which are given at a district level in 4<sup>th</sup> standard and at a national level in 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> standards. Many people claim that without cheating, it is impossible to pass. Entrance into various post-secondary fields is determined wholly on the basis of examination scores, and students are told what fields they may enter.

When I was in the city, students had to pass exams in the end of the year so you could go on to the next grade. If you didn't pass the exams then you could pay money to the teacher and pass. Many of my friends did this, I know for sure. The teachers did this because they only get a little bit of money from the government. They have families and need to survive. Almost all teachers, they take money for private lessons. If many students don't have money, how can they

give this money? Many students want to go to school, but they cannot because they have to work. CINT 09

As for the private tuition classes, the cheapest are 1,000 per person per month. Of course again, the rich students can go, but those who don't have money can't afford to attend. Those who attend can pass the examinations. Even if you're really intelligent, if you don't attend tuition, it's difficult to pass the exams because of the quality of instruction in class. And that's how you enter university. So the people who have money can get everything. They can go to tuition, they can buy their exams. They can even pay someone else to write their exams. If you are rich, it's easy to enter university. And then the rich can buy their jobs when they get out. CINT 89

### Armed Conflict

Often the denial of education is directly linked to civil and political rights.... [E]ffective protection of children requires addressing these rights issues for children simultaneously.<sup>24</sup>

- Human Rights Watch

Political unrest has profoundly affected access to education in Burma. In areas of armed conflict, primary, middle and high schools have had to close repeatedly because of fighting or forced relocation. Karen and Karenni children in particular, both in the past and the present, have been denied education because of the civil war in their areas.

I studied up till 4<sup>th</sup> standard. Since the Four Cuts program began in 1974, my parents were not able to support me to study at school, because that year was a crisis of famine and flooding. I remember I was nine years old at the time.

We had to eat only porridge and potatoes for almost four months until we could harvest our rice crop. CINT 147

I went to school but from kindergarten to 2<sup>nd</sup> standard we didn't have full time study. We studied for three or four months and then we had to stop. We had always to be wary when we were studying, because the Burmese soldiers shot at our place with heavy weapons once every month. In some months they shot their heavy weapons at





our place two or three times. So we had to run away all the time, and finally we weren't interested in studying. CINT 75

People in my village had no chance to study because the Burmese soldiers came and burned down the village rice barns, so everyone had to flee to the jungle to hide. I went to a school in my hill village when I was young. There weren't enough notebooks or teachers. I think it was better in the schools in town, but we couldn't go there because there were battles going on. Most of the other parents didn't encourage their daughters to study. They used to say, "You can eat rice whether you can read or not," so they mostly sent their sons. But my mother wanted all of us to study because she was illiterate and she thought if we got some education, we wouldn't have to do hard labor like her. CINT 24

I studied for four or five years, until 3<sup>rd</sup> standard. Since the Burmese troops destroyed my village, we had to try to avoid them, so we ran to the jungle and sat our exams under the bamboo together with my schoolmates and teacher. At that time, my parents arranged for food to be sent to me. Our school was damaged by the fighting, and after that I couldn't continue studying. From that time until now, we have been persecuted. CINT 146

**In areas close to borders that have seen fighting for decades, instability prevents government schools from opening at all. Some opposition groups have administered their own schools, but they are typically critically under-resourced: often without books, and staffed by voluntary teachers who themselves sometimes have not passed 10<sup>th</sup> standard. In Karen state, there are several hundred schools maintained by the KNU, but the teachers are sometimes paid no salaries at all, and the villagers are often not even able to provide rice because of their own dire economic circumstances.<sup>25</sup>**

**Some other ethnic opposition groups continue to operate schools in remote rural areas under cease-fires, however they are still plagued by problems arising from insufficient funding.**

I was a teacher in a KNU Middle School. After I passed 10<sup>th</sup> standard, I became a teacher without any training. Then after four years of teaching, I got one year's teacher training at the Karen Teacher Training College. After that, I taught for another two years until I left to Thailand. I left because the salary was too low. CINT 132

If I teach for the KIO school, the salary is not enough for me to feed myself. That's why I don't want to do this job, and no one else wants to do it either. CINT 118

**While travel risks and school closures in conflict areas frequently prevent girls from going to school, areas of particularly protracted conflict often prove the exception to this rule. In these cases, girls are actually more likely to be educated than boys, because many boys and young men have been conscripted into military service, and the only males in the community are infants and old men. Whether the total number of girls educated in the community increases, though, or just the ratio of girls to boys, is not clear.**

Before, they used to take the young boys, seven or eight years old, especially the MTA, Khun Sa's army. In that time, they would come and conscript the young boys. Even when they were really young. Their parents couldn't say anything. So especially since then, there have been fewer boys in the schools than girls. CINT 244

I studied at Wangkha till 10<sup>th</sup> standard. In primary school, there were the same number of boys and girls, but in high school there were more girls and fewer boys, because during our school days, there were battles between the KNU and the SLORC so often. So when the boys completed 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> standard, they joined the army because they wanted to help fight. The girls couldn't go to the frontline, so we continued to study. CINT 75

**Boys' attendance is still significantly less in some areas where cease-fires have been signed, such as Kachin State, where the KIO ceasefire with the SLORC in 1993.**

In 5<sup>th</sup> standard, there are 26 girls and 16 boys. In 6<sup>th</sup> standard, there are 12 girls and 10 boys. There are more girls than boys because all the boys join the Kachin army. There

are about 10 in 500 students who quit school every year. They have no money, that's why they have to quit. CINT 118

### High School & University Closures

The possibility of tertiary education exists for only a small percentage of Burma's student population. As enrollment decreases at all levels with age, only a very small percentage of the public attend higher educational institutes. Extrapolating from 1991 figures,<sup>26</sup> there are currently approximately 10.5 million people between the ages of 15 and 24. Figures from the Ministry of the National Public Education Department in 1997-98<sup>27</sup> indicated that of these, there were a total of only 374,112 students at the country's 53 post-secondary institutions

The government's frequent closures of high schools and universities in response to popular uprisings have meant that the education system as a whole has deteriorated dramatically, and people throughout the country between the ages of 14 and 40 have had little chance to complete their studies without interruption. This has further greatly reduced girls' and women's opportunities for post-secondary education.

Universities and colleges were open for a total of only 30 months between the SLORC's seizure of power in September 1988 and the student uprising of December 1996. In August 1998, universities were reopened for one month, after which students were called to write examinations. Finally, in the last week of June 2000, universities re-opened country-wide. Those who had been attending university when the schools closed in 1996 were called back to sit entrance examinations, and 60,000 or more new students were admitted to further study, provided they signed disclosure forms guaranteeing they would not partake in political activities, including holding membership in any political party. Furthermore, students were not entitled to register where they wanted but rather told which campuses they would be able to attend, prompting the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to comment:

[The UN Commission on Human Rights welcomes] the re-opening of some university courses, but remains concerned that the right to education continues to be a right that is only exercised by those willing to refrain from exercising their civil and political rights and concerned at the reduction in the length of the academic year, the division and separation

of the student population to distant campuses, and inadequate allocation of resources....<sup>28</sup>

When post-secondary institutions reopened in 2000, an estimated 400,000 eligible students who graduated from high school in 1996-97 were still waiting for the chance to be admitted.<sup>29</sup> With the large backlog, it is still likely that many of these expectant students will give up before their turn for admission comes. Throughout the period of school closures, military academies, colleges and institutes remained open.

### DISCRIMINATION IN GIRLS' SCHOOLING

Girls make up two out of every three children of school age in the developing world who do not receive a primary education (73 million of the 130 million out-of-school children).<sup>30</sup>

#### - Human Rights Watch

The Committee notes with concern that the information provided on primary education is insufficient, in particular in regard to the enrollment of girls.... The Committee requests the Government to include more information and data with regard to primary education in its next report. The Committee also recommends that the Government set numerical targets for enrollment in primary education and that it report on the results of the implementation of such targets.

#### - Concluding Observations and Recommendations of the CEDAW Committee

Not as many girls drop out of school as they did 20 years ago. But still a lot drop out now, because they have to work on the farm and be porters for the army. That's why they're happy to get an education if they can. And more boys attend school than girls. For the girls who drop out, most try to attend till the 8<sup>th</sup> standard, but more boys can finish the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. CINT 201

There is no doubt that barriers to education affect both boys and girls in Burma. UNICEF claims that nationally averaged gender disparities are not significant.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, inadequacies in the Burmese education system, while often not gender-specific in themselves, when combined with cultural factors, often result in gender discrimination. It remains particularly alarming that the reasons girls drop out or do not attend school appear not to have changed much in decades. The high cost of education means that often families can only afford to educate some children, and in this case, they usually favour males. Cultural stereotypes still depict women's roles as in the home, rendering education of girls a waste of resources. Female protection takes

**LEH WAH, 21**

When I was young, my mother was a school teacher. My father was dead. My aunt and my grandparents were illiterate. Eventually, my mother started working with the Karen Women's Organization, and she moved far away from our village. When the government found out, they wanted to arrest my mother and my whole family. Luckily, we found out ahead of time. At about three a.m., we took our bundles of household goods, what we could carry. We had to move to a village quite far from ours.

I was only in the 5th standard, in a government school. I had to leave in the middle of school term. The village that we moved to had a school far away, a Kawthoolei [KNU] school that went up to 7th standard. I wanted to continue my education. We had to cross streams on the way. My grandparents didn't allow me to go to school anymore. I cried! I wanted to finish school. My grandparents said, "You have to go far away. Go there only next year." I told them, "Next year you're going to say the same!" I didn't think they would allow me to go to school. I begged them.

At that time, there was a guy at the other end of the village. He went to the school far away. My mother felt sorry for me. She went to discuss with the parents of that guy. We were teenagers. She said to them that her daughter would also like to go to school and asked them if I could follow their son. They said it was okay, no problem. I was very happy. We went to their house first and then went to school. It was far away. We had to walk about three hours. We also had to go across the streams. We used rafts. I was fine as long as I could attend school. So I started to go to school again. But it was different. I copied the lessons. My friends helped.

When I was in the government school, we didn't study Karen language. In the new school, we studied Karen language. I had to work hard. Once it rained heavily and the streams flooded. The friend I used to go to school with didn't go to school one day. We had a raft. He knew how to use the raft. I thought I could use the raft. School was going to start, so I went by myself. I was in the middle of the stream and the bamboo pole went under the raft and I lost it. First I screamed, and then I was able to retrieve it.

Later I got used to going all by myself and didn't need his help anymore. Sometimes I got scared. When it rained, there would be lightning and I was alone. I cried. Since it was windy I couldn't use the umbrella. I had to walk in the rain. I went to that school for a year. I passed the exams. I worked hard. I went up to the 7th standard. If I wanted to go to the 8th standard, I had to go to the government school. My family were outside and I would have to go back in. I had to change my name. I had to write down different names for my parents' names too. So I went to school up to 8th standard.

After the 8th standard exam, my mother became more active. The army was after my grandparents. At that time, I passed the 8th standard and I was about to go to the 9th standard. My grandparents didn't dare to stay there anymore. At that time, my mother was going back and forth between the border and our place. My grandmother was also scared of being arrested and beaten up. And so my grandparents told my mother that they heard there were refugee camps. We didn't dare to stay there anymore and decided to move to the refugee camp. It was the year I was in the 9th standard. My teachers didn't want to let me go. But we had to come to the refugee camp and I continued to attend 9th standard. I passed the 9th standard exam and took the 10th standard exam. Then I went for a medical training. It was far away, near Battalion 6. I went there for two years, and I was able to become a medic.

I thought that if we have education, we can do something. My parents were not educated. If I had listened only to my parents and my grandparents, I would have had to leave school by the 4th or 5th standard. But I thought to myself that my grandparents are uneducated, and they cannot decide, because they're uneducated. That's how I really felt. I thought it's bad if we're not educated. So I took a risk. Many times I missed my family and my mother very much. I cried from loneliness. But I am very glad I got an education, because now I am able to do many things for our people.

CINT 103

### LIFE SKILLS PROGRAMS

Some international organizations working in partnership with the government have created school programs dealing with healthy living, adolescent health, sexuality and values, but they are not yet being used in all schools. It is hoped that the government will invest time and resources in further developing the curriculum at all levels to encourage young women to have greater self-confidence and pursue higher education, and to play an active role in all parts of their societies.

We produce books for children under seven who cannot yet read, because very few materials exist for them. We make these books together with several other organizations, and they are meant to teach young children how to cope with their emotions, their identity and environment, fear of separation from loved ones. We try to keep the books free from bias in gender, ethnicity, class, and so on, and avoid stereotypes. We try not to depict women only in caring roles and show that men and boys can also take care of children. Many comic books for children are very gender stereotyped; they focus on boys and their experiences and activities, while girls only appear as minor characters. Nowadays, parents are increasingly aware of the importance of books for children, but I'm not sure if they see it just for learning to read, while it's also important for their intellectual and emotional development. Your values are primarily formed during childhood and even things adults say inadvertently may influence the values, perceptions and attitudes of children. That's why it is so important to show good values in books. CINT 254

We have a life skills education programme for school-going children, in which skills such as logical thinking, problem solving, sense of community and working together are stressed. Health and AIDS prevention are also included. Teachers are trained to impart the curriculum, to explain the books we publish. Even for them, the stress on logical thinking is difficult because our education system is geared towards factual knowledge. CINT 255

precedence where travel to school would make girls vulnerable to harassment or injury.

When families have to choose between educating daughters or sons for economic reasons, especially

beyond primary level, most continue to choose to educate their sons.

In a poor family, if the parents can only afford to send one child to school, they never choose a daughter. They say, "Girls are for others"...If a girl can read and write a letter, that is enough. CINT 169

When my husband left [for Bangladesh], I sold my house to get money. My son was in 9<sup>th</sup> standard and my daughter in 4<sup>th</sup> standard. For education, we have to pay 500 kyat for 9<sup>th</sup> standard and 150 kyat for 4<sup>th</sup> standard for private tuition. We also had to pay admission fee of 1,500 kyat per year per child and this includes books. Because of that, priority goes to boys. My son is older and in a higher class. I should give the same to both, but because of the economic situation of our family, it is difficult. CINT 176

**Cultural barriers in Burma that discourage girls' education exist among all Burma's ethnic groups. While they sometimes appear to persist more strongly in non-Burman communities, this is more likely a result of the greater concentration of Burmans in many urban centers, where schools are more accessible. Among the women we spoke with, it was generally agreed that enrollment of boys and girls at primary level is similar, but that girls begin to drop out in middle school and rarely reach high school, particularly in rural areas. Traditional perceptions that women do not need to be educated in order to do housework, and that they require only basic literacy, are common. As a result, many rural girls are not sent to school beyond 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> standard.**

In my village in Sagaing Division, most people don't want to put their daughters in school. The people in my area are really narrow-minded. Because of that, most of the time, the eldest daughters can't go to school. They have to help with the household, because the parents are really busy worrying about the family's income. But most at least go to primary school. If they can read and write that's enough. That's what they think, most people. CINT 90

If we have to choose, we chose to educate men. In our Kachin society, men have to look after all the family. Women we have to give to another family. Men have the responsibility to look after the members of the family who are unable to take care of themselves and to look after the older members. Women may also look after the family if they are capable, but the main responsibility is the men's. That is why the men have the opportunity to go and get education. CINT 107

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH MON WOMEN ON EDUCATION

**1<sup>st</sup> woman:** At the primary level, there are more girls than boys. But at the middle and high school levels, there are more boys than girls. This is because the parents keep girls out from school so that they can help them at home. They believe that it is enough for a girl to learn how to read and write.

**2<sup>nd</sup> woman:** But in some families, also boys leave and go out to get jobs, because it is easier for them to earn money. So in the end, I think that girls and boys are quite equal regarding schooling, as *both* end up out of school.

**3<sup>rd</sup> woman:** No, I don't agree. Girls have less chance to study because girls are usually not encouraged by their parents. They think they girls will not support the family, as this is considered the husband's duty. Thus the parents see no reason for their daughter to continue studying. A woman has to follow her husband.

Among educated people, there are fewer women than men. This is because of our culture. Because parents teach their daughters that one day they will have to do housework anyway. It is only good for them to learn how to read and write, nothing more. According to our traditions, our children are taught that men are very good and that women are inferior to them. I used to be a teacher in Rangoon before. In urban areas, education is better. No one wants to go and teach or live in the rural areas. I went to teach in Kawkareik later on. I believe the most important thing is to organize the parents. Otherwise the situation will never improve. When the parents cannot afford to educate all their children, boys always have better opportunities than girls. Also, more training is organized for boys. CINT 135

When we are children, we know that we would like to grow up and get an education, but girls and women don't have time to attend class. Girls and women have to take care of the family, and they don't have time to spend on education or politics. There are many reasons. In Karen culture, parents don't want girls to study. They think women are soft and weak, and they only encourage sons. They think boys are active and strong. CINT 286

Since I was old enough, I always looked after my brothers and sisters. I wanted to go to school, and I carried my brother on my back and went to school while my parents were working on the farm. I looked after them one by one until I stud-

ied in 4<sup>th</sup> standard, then I left for Rangoon and served as a housemaid for two years. I didn't like doing it, but since I was the eldest daughter, I had to. I had an older brother, but he just went around with his friends all the time. CINT 147

I had no education. I only learned about the Koran from the mosque. There was a school in our village, but my parents did not allow me to go to school, because I was a girl. They only taught Burmese there, but some Rohingyas went. CINT 187

**Studies in Karen, Karenni and Mon refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border show increasing female dropout rates at middle school and beyond, in areas where primary enrollment of the sexes is similar.**

The sex differences start to occur at ages where children are entering middle school but are most pronounced at high school ages. It appears that boys are given preference in access to education at higher levels. Two possible reasons for this increasing gender disparity by age are that females tend to get married younger than males and that where there is no local middle or high school, parents are more reluctant to send their girls away to study than boys.<sup>32</sup>

**The lack of school coverage also works hand-in-hand with cultural notions to directly disadvantage girls. Parents whose children study outside their village must support their costs for transportation, lodging and food, as well as books and other fees. Many parents are also afraid to send their daughters to study in other areas, and will often do so only if extended family members, however distant, can provide them with board and care while they study.**

Most of the girls in my school could only attend up to 4<sup>th</sup> standard because the middle school was in a different town. Parents are always more worried about their daughters. CINT 169

**While women from various ethno-religious groups remarked on the reticence of parents to send daughters to distant schools, Rohingya Muslim women face particular restrictions. Most of the Rohingya women we interviewed had never been to school and were illiterate, having married at about the age of 14, the onset of puberty. In areas where refugees have been repatriated to Arakan State from Bangladesh, the UNHCR is now conducting an incentive program aimed at increasing girls' attendance at primary schools. The "Food for Activity" program encourages families by providing extra rice rations**

for those sending their daughters to school. The program has reportedly been successful in the areas where it has been implemented; however, its sustainability is questionable, as it depends on continued external monetary support.

In Maungdaw town, both Rohingya boys and girls can go to school. But in the villages, very few girls can go to school, mostly because their family is very poor and are uneducated. Most of the poor girls go and get firewood in the jungle, and sell it at the market. Now UNHCR has a program to give education as well as rice to the girls' family: it is much better. CINT 177

**However, Rohingya women still face obstacles, cultural and political, in accessing education, especially at higher levels.**

In Muslim communities, more men than women are university graduates, because the men can travel to any place they want to. The women are not like that. They cannot go to every place they want to because the parents worry that they will be raped. So the reason why only a few women are graduated is because the parents always keep them close to the home. CINT 67

Rohingya girls want to go to school. Previously, students received a student card when they were attending school. For them it was like having an ID and it allowed them to move around. But since a year ago, they no longer give any student cards to Muslim students. My eldest daughter is in 6<sup>th</sup> standard. They stopped giving her a student card. So now it is a problem to travel, and she cannot travel to continue her studies. CINT 178

## **INCENTIVES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

...at every festival there is a cultural fashion show and body beauty contest for girl students. The beauty queen is awarded with a golden crown, golden sceptre and scholarship for her study at tertiary level.<sup>33</sup>

### **- Union of Myanmar, Report on the CEDAW**

The Committee urges the Government to modify the policies on restricted admission, noting that the women themselves should be entitled to decide which subjects they wish to study and professions they wish to pursue.

### **- Concluding Observations and Recommendations of the CEDAW Committee**

Government "incentives" to encourage continued

study, such as scholarships for beauty pageant winners, indicate that scholastic diligence and achievement are not necessarily the attainments for which girls are usually rewarded. Likewise, the government school curriculum contains little to specifically encourage female advancement in the education system. Female role models are noticeably absent. One university lecturer we spoke to said the only women who figured in the school curriculum were a traditional dancer and a woman who started a home for the indigent aged (CINT 99). If these are the role models girls encounter, it is not surprising that young women do not always wish to continue their education.

Because the education system is so bad now, young women aren't interested in studying. They only want to become fashion models or work in a company where they can get money to buy clothes and other things. CINT 73

Young women also complained that the lack of clarity and choice in the system serve as further disincentives to study. Burmese activists in exile have criticized the SPDC and its predecessor SLORC regime for six arbitrary overhauls of the primary and secondary education system since the 1965, instituting changes confusing to both students and parents. These have included changing the medium of instruction at high school level from English to Burmese and back again in some cases, and changing the division of subjects into arts and sciences, in preparation for streaming students toward tertiary education programs. Repeated curriculum revisions have made it more difficult for all students to pass examinations and have contributed to high repetition rates. Some women we spoke with also related their poor performance in school to lack of interest in the subjects, which were not of their choosing.

When we were studying in high school, the system was divided into two parts, Arts and Science. My marks were only high enough for me to take Arts, and since I wasn't interested, I didn't pay attention much. When I was studying in 9<sup>th</sup> standard all the subjects in the Sciences were taught in English. But in 1987, when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, all subjects changed [when the two-track system was abolished], and it caused a lot of trouble for other students and for me. It was very difficult to understand everything. Many students had to find tuition classes to keep up in the new education system. Students even had to study Burmese in tuition classes. That year my parents sent me to study at Rangoon's St. Mary's High School, because they thought that the education level in Rangoon would be higher than in my town. In

**MINIMUM MARKS REQUIRED FOR ENTRANCE<sup>35</sup>**

	Male	Female
Medical University	402 and above	415 and above
Institute of Technology	390 and above	400 and above
Computer Science	380 and above	380 and above
Economy	345 and above	370 and above
Yae Sin University	330 and above	330 and above
Forestry	330 and above	330 and above

the village school there are no teachers that have graduated from university. There is only voluntary teaching. But the problem was that in Rangoon everyone had to spend quite a lot of money to go to school. Later, my parents could not afford it. I failed my 10<sup>th</sup> standard examination in Rangoon and had to take it again. Eventually, I majored in history at university, but I dropped out after one year. I wasn't interested in History actually. I was interested in Science, subjects like chemistry and physics. But anyhow, we must study under the rules that the authorities make for us. We must stay where they put us. CINT 282

**Young women are not always motivated to complete their secondary matriculation, since hard work is perceived to provide little benefit, and what benefit does accrue can often be bought.**

The education system is so bad now, no one knows anything about what is happening in the rest of the world. We don't know about the world. We know what happens in our own village, that's all. CINT 243

Even though you pass 10<sup>th</sup> standard in Burma, it's not useful for your life. That's why we try to study and learn something outside, rather than in school. Especially these days, girls are not interested in education. They are interested in being beautiful and in competing with each other as rivals. CINT 245

### Obstacles to University Entrance

Statistics from the Departments of Health and Education in 1996 estimated that there was 40.9% female enrollment in technical and vocational schools and 57.8% in universities nationally.<sup>34</sup> The greater numbers of women at national universities may be in part due to the higher admittance of men at the country's military institutes. Women have also suggested that higher female enrollment reflects the greater difficulty young women face in finding jobs, leading them to study instead. The sex-disaggregated

figures for the different institutes and university faculties are unknown.

While the government maintains that women choose to enter traditionally female-dominated fields of study, for example nursing, teacher training and domestic science, in fact entrance criteria restrict students' choice of study to subjects designated for them by the government. For the most prestigious subjects, the professions, which have their own institutes (for example, medicine, dentistry, and engineering), a limited number of seats are available, and students are required to have the highest cumulative scores in the country to qualify for admission. Other subjects offered through arts faculties such as history and geography, and some science subjects like zoology, which are less likely to lead to careers, accept the students with lower scores.

I wanted to be an engineer when I was younger. I was very good at practical things and I liked it. But I couldn't, that is why I became a teacher. My scores were very high. I was competing with boy students, those boys that received lower scores could join the engineering but I couldn't. At that time, I also applied for dentistry. I wanted to be a dental surgeon, but they only accepted 50 candidates a year, only 20% of the seats were for women. They already have set quotas for everything. For a math major, there are lots of girls. For majors [in the faculties of Arts and Sciences], they don't have discrimination. So for general studies, no problem, like chemistry, math. But for professional degrees like engineering, there are problems. CINT 10

**Women face differential admission procedures and standards, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields. The list included here shows the minimum marks required for admission in major areas of study in March 2001.**

In the engineering institutes, only a small portion of the seats is available to women, who must graduate at the top level of all the students competing. This means that in order to enter engineering, a woman must not only score higher than other women, but also score higher than many of the male students who are accepted. As a result, men who score lower than women may be admitted, while women scoring equally well must often enter one of the other institutes with higher admission criteria, such as economics. The economics institute annually has a much higher

### enrollment of women than men.

I wasn't lucky enough to enter the engineering college. But if I were a boy, I could have entered according to my marks. So girl students, they must get higher marks. If a boy gets 400 marks total in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, they can enter engineering college. But for a girl, they had to get 420, they have to have higher marks. So I couldn't study at engineering college. I had to take my second choice, economics. CINT 94

**Geology is also said to have restrictions on the number of women students admitted, though some claim this is because students must prove they are physically capable of taking part in field trips, which may include hikes of thirty miles. The different criteria and complicated admission process sometimes result in uncertainties and confusion about what women can and cannot take.**

Generally female students do not have equal chance with male students. It is prohibited for them to study forestry, and for other subjects, such as engineering and geology, only 10% of the students' quota is for women. CINT 177

In addition to these regulations, the cultural obstacles girl students face at the primary and secondary levels are no less prevalent in the higher education system. Parental reluctance to send their daughters away to study and the high costs of tertiary education also prevent many female students, particularly those from towns and villages, from attending university. The problem has become more acute now that universities have reopened, as students have been assigned to often distant campuses. Being forced to travel considerable distances daily or to relocate to be nearer their schools may curtail young women's study opportunities yet again.

Women have problems in their family, because even if a woman passes 10<sup>th</sup> standard and wants to do further study, she cannot. Mothers and fathers of women do not want them to go away and study. CINT 286

In engineering college there are very few female students, even though they want to study, firstly because they must get higher marks, and also because their parents think that engineering as a career is only appropriate for men or boys, because it means being transferred to other towns. CINT 94

When I attended the Government Technical Institute, because I stayed in a hostel I had to pay 500 kyat per month rent, 3,000 kyat for food and 200 kyat for school fees. More-

over, we had to pay other various fees such as for the teachers' welfare and so on every month. Since I am poor and from a rural area, it was very difficult to find the money to pay these fees. Similarly, there were many outstanding students who left school because their parents were not able to send them school. CINT 226

Women in the city have more opportunity to study. If women in the country come to study at university, they need a place to stay like a hostel, but since there are few places available, many must rent more expensive accommodation. Their parents will give more opportunity to their sons than their daughters, because boys can live anywhere. So it's more common for girls to take Distance Education or just stay home and help with the family business. CINT 73

**Many female students attend distance education courses instead. Although correspondence courses have long been part of the tertiary curriculum, they became even more popular during the period when the universities were not in regular session because of government closures. Programs are given through many of the regional universities in a limited number of subjects, but the quality of instruction is questionable. Students receive their textbooks by post, and, apart from this, get little specific instruction while they remain at home. Science students are required to attend laboratory practicals and lectures for five months on weekends. Arts students only study on campus for one month of the year, while the regular university classes are not in session, prior to their examinations. In fact, during this session, students attend just 10 days of classes, the only instruction they receive before being examined.<sup>36</sup>**

Since I was born until now, I'm the only person in the village who went to university, to the distance university. After our names were registered on the list, they did send us textbooks, but just the books. We could look at them, but we didn't understand them. We had no idea how to use them. When we came for one month to the campus, it was to write our exams. They told us what would be on the exams probably. So if there were 10 things, we would learn especially about these 10 things. The rest, we didn't understand. Even going to university, we understood nothing. I studied history. They would say, we will study these 15 things, and of them 9 or 10 will be on the exam. So we also went to tuition, in order to pass. If there were 15 things we needed to know per subject, we would focus on five of them in tuition. And those five would be enough that we could pass. So in the end, we had to pay a lot in order to pass. Basically I could say I had to learn 25 things in order to pass my exams, all of

them. CINT 243

The damage done by a decade of interrupted university sessions for the students who were unable to study during this time should not be underestimated. The school closures of the 1990s had profound social effects for girls and young women, extending beyond immediately restricting their vocational choices. Some women married earlier, and in turn had children earlier, and in greater numbers, than they would have had they been able to attend tertiary schooling. Early assumption of these responsibilities in turn has often meant that these women will never have the chance to complete their studies. By the time schools reopened in 2000, many students of the early 1990s found the courses of their lives had changed, and the options available to them in their late teens and early twenties were no longer possibilities. This is particularly true for students who were politically engaged, many of whom are now in exile.

I couldn't finish my education. Especially women students who were involved in politics usually couldn't complete their degrees because they keep us from finishing school in different ways. We were friendless and isolated, because the authorities threaten those who are not politically involved to keep away from those who are, so we got very discouraged. In my case, the MI were shadowing me to arrest me, so I couldn't finish school. (1<sup>st</sup> woman)

My sister was a second year medical student. She attended her first year medical college in 1989-90. It was the SLORC time so the school was closed and open and then the school was open for two or three months and the students were given "pass" in the examinations. So she did not want this kind of doctor degree... [She] realized that it's no use to become a doctor when the school is closed all the time. So [she is] interested in doing other jobs like a job in a company or entering into modeling world, which is very popular in Burma at present. (2<sup>nd</sup> woman) CINT 73

Ineligible for many jobs, since the employment market in Burma often requires that applicants have university degrees, many young women left their communities in search of work in other areas, including neighbouring countries. Most have not been able to enroll in programs of studies overseas, not only because of the prohibitive cost, but also because they have been unable to obtain passports allowing them to legally emigrate. (See *Migration & Trafficking of Women & Girls*.) Mothers also remarked that school

closures and scarce employment opportunities have contributed to depression among youths.

Because there is no school, some of our children are spoiled by drugs, and by drinking. And the young girls are spoiled. They sell their bodies for money. They want money to buy clothes, to buy cosmetics. They want to earn money like others with jobs. But there is only this way. This way is easy to get money. CINT 112

With the depressed job market that exists in Burma today, it remains debatable how valuable a university degree really is to a young woman. Many office jobs only accept applications from graduates, though this does not imply that skills and knowledge acquired in study are directly applied to work situations. While there are estimated to be equal numbers of women and men in the medical field, the majority of women who graduate with a Bachelor or Arts or Sciences have few vocational opportunities apart from teaching and clerical positions in the civil service. The other options, positions in retail sales or foreign companies, are difficult to come by without connections. As a result, on a practical level, the incentives for women to pursue specialized fields of tertiary education are few.

It is our tradition to value education. In cities a higher degree is often necessary if you want to get a job. That's why young people go to school or study at the university for distance education. At the same time, young people are losing faith in education and its use. Especially in conflict-torn areas along the borders, schools close frequently. Also, the universities have been closed, and for some young people it is easier to cross the border and find employment abroad, where they can earn more. What we learn in school is not relevant to our daily life experiences and needs. Knowledge of facts is emphasized instead of learning useful skills and attitudes. We don't know how to apply the things we learn at university or school in our lives, because they are so alien to our real needs. Our real needs are skills like logical and organized thinking, problem-solving, information seeking, good writing in Burmese (not just in English, which is stressed a lot), *functional* literacy (for example, writing official letters), interpersonal skills, expression, critical discussion, independent learning. CINT 254

Even though I have a law degree, if I went back now [to Burma], I think the only thing I could do is sell vegetables. CINT 25

With this education, I can't do anything to earn a living. ... As a woman, I went to school, I received my degree but there's

no guarantee for my life.... Education in Burma is only show education, fake education. Degrees were received without skills, abilities or qualities in the subjects. CINT 73

**Nonetheless, many parents hope that their daughters will be able to attend university. When asked what she thought her daughter might do after she graduated, one trader from Monywa replied,**

Then she can work as a trader. CINT 237

## VOCATIONAL TRAINING

To improve women's access to vocational training, vocational training programmes such as sewing classes, embroidery classes, livestock breeding training are held in collaboration with UNDP and UNESCO as part of Human Development Initiative Programme.<sup>37</sup>

### - "Presentation by U Win Mra"

With fewer opportunities in the regular school and university systems, and diminished income-generating opportunities, there is certainly a need for vocational and adult training and literacy programs in Burma. At present, few programs exist. Those that do, follow the prevailing cultural dictates that women should learn skills such as tailoring. Very few women we spoke with had ever heard of such programs, and only one had attended a government vocational school, to study weaving.

There are five government [weaving] factories in Burma: Sagaing, Ywa Thit Gyi, Shwedaung, Meiktila, and Palate. All these factories are really far from where we live in Chin State. I studied weaving for two years in Phalam. I studied at a government school. It is the only vocational school in the whole of Chin State. In order to do the training, you must be attached to one of the factories. I was chosen by the authorities at the factory, because I was working at the government textile factory at that time. Anyone who had passed the 8th standard and was accepted after the application and interview could attend. All the students were women. We had to fill out and submit an application form. And then afterwards they did an interview with me. They asked who our parents were, and which political party we were from, that's all.

We paid 300 kyat per month in fees. In addition to the fees, we had to pay for all our own food. There were 30 of us and we all lived together and cooked for ourselves. I worked at the factory as an apprentice for a month and a half after I finished weaving school. Once I finished studying, my par-

ents were afraid for me travelling and working so far from home. So they asked me to leave, and finally I came here [to India] instead. Now I work as a maid in someone's house. CINT 230

In Ye, there is now a three month course in home economics, only for women. Also in Moulmein. It's provided for free, but women must pay for food and material. Not everyone is able to attend. Moreover, it is difficult to get admission. And the government does not advertise this course. CINT 127

Were more such vocational training courses available in areas where women were able to attend them, there would certainly be women eager to enroll. During workshops, women in refugee camps and migrant communities consistently mentioned the need and desire for more non-formal training with a practical orientation, in order to allow women to learn income-generating skills. The most popular training courses for women currently offered by groups working in exile include sewing and weaving. These courses undoubtedly provide women with skills and income they otherwise would not have, especially given the curtailed opportunities available in refugee camps, for example. However, again, there is a danger that these programs in themselves reinforce women's traditional occupational roles.

Women's organizations often provide other trainings, for example literacy classes or management, in addition to or alongside acquisition of skills such as handicraft production. Others give workshops about women's human rights or other international human rights concepts, sometimes to both women and men. Some young women advocate human rights education, within the primary school curriculum and at adult levels, as the single most important contribution to increasing women's overall education levels and their status in their communities and societies.

I believe we need to let children, boys and girls, know from the time they are very young about human rights, including women's rights. CINT 286

## FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Article 10 on Education stipulates that discrimination that prevents women and girls from accessing education of all levels and types (formal, non-formal, and vocational training) should be eliminated. Also under Article 10, stereotyping in education is to be

eliminated by assuring women and girls the same career and vocational opportunities, adapting teaching methods, and revising school textbooks and programs.

The education system in Burma has been failing girls and women for decades. The many adult women in Burma today who have not completed primary education and cannot read and write are deprived of opportunities for work, and have diminished access to information that affects their enjoyment of health, ability to participate with confidence in public life, and leisure activities. Gender stereotypes discounting the importance of education for girls and requiring young women to devote their energies to tasks around the home continue to prevent girls today from attending school and graduating, just as they prevented their mothers in the past.

The government needs first to assess and admit the problems of female illiteracy among the adult population, and under-enrollment and drop out of girls, before appropriate programs can be created to suit female educational needs. New country-wide surveys, disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and region, providing accurate data on which to base conclusions would greatly enhance program planning.

Legislation decreeing that primary school is free has done nothing to relieve parents of the burden of costs of direct and related fees. Given that government under-funding of school programs is the primary reason many girl children are forced to quit school, reallocation of budgets away from military spending and towards social programs, including education, should be a government priority. Endemic corruption, which puts school costs out of the reach of many families, can only be eliminated if civil servant wages are put at reasonable parity with the cost of living, allowing teachers (who are also mostly women) a means of survival besides relying on graft. At the same time, every effort should be made to ensure that existing programs by international agencies and NGOs to assist needy students are really reaching those in greatest need.

Extension of the primary education system to rural areas is imperative if today's (and tomorrow's) girls are to receive a basic education. Providing rural girls with food or scholarships that allow them to travel to study, and safe quarters for boarding, may be a provisional solution until local services can be furnished in villages that lack them. Given that poor infrastructure

and armed conflict have also contributed to the dearth of primary schools in underdeveloped areas, efforts should be made to allow assistance to reach those areas where the government system does not operate.

Reducing the number and amount of fees payable for secondary and tertiary education and providing scholarships would greatly facilitate attendance and completion of all students, but especially of girls at a secondary level. As many young women are unable to attend school because of work responsibilities, out-of-school programs and adult literacy programs need to be designed and implemented particularly in villages and peri-urban townships, with curricula appropriate to individual target groups.

Public education campaigns stressing the importance of school attendance for all children need to be enacted, alongside other awareness-raising efforts to change stereotypes regarding the value of education for girls and women. If women were more commonly portrayed as public actors and paid workers, greater priority would be given to their needs for education. Additionally, the school curriculum at all levels should be revised to include role models for young women that promote women's participation in diverse occupations and public life.

Differential admission criteria and curricula that do not encourage women to explore non-traditional fields leave women with little incentive to pursue career-oriented paths. As a result, young women still do not receive adequate opportunities for education to allow them to realize their full potential. In addition to removing quota that restrict the admittance of girls to technical and traditionally male-dominated subjects such as engineering, affirmative action programs temporarily increasing the number of female students should be considered. With the reopening nationwide of universities, consideration should be taken to ensure that female applicants have access to programs near their homes where possible. Efforts should also be made to extend vocational training programs for girls in such fields as mechanics, industrial and computer science, so that women are not restricted solely to traditional fields such as weaving and sewing.

#### NOTES

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2. Human Rights Watch, "Promises Broken: An Assessment of Children's Rights on the Tenth Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child," December 1999, <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/promises/education.html>.
  3. UNDP, 1998 United Nations Development Programme Report (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 21. The rating is a composite measure of life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, combined school enrollment ratio and adjusted per capita income in PPP\$ (purchasing power parity dollars).
  4. Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, "Myanmar National Plan for the Advancement of Women," August 1997, p. 3.
  5. UNICEF, "Myanmar-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation 1996-2000: Master Plan of Operations," Yangon, 1995, p. 3.
  6. UNICEF, "Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Myanmar," Yangon, August 1999, p. 75.
  7. C. Chelala, "What's ailing Burma? The state of women and children's health", Burma Debate, Vol. V, No.2, Spring 1998, p. 34.
  8. "Educational Assessment of Mon and Karenni Refugee Camps on the Thai/Burmese Border," Report, prepared for the Burmese Border Consortium, September 1995, p. 13.
  9. "Educational Assessment of Karen Refugee Camps on the Thai/Burmese Border," Report, prepared for the Burmese Border Consortium, March 1996, p. 15.
  10. "Educational Assessment of Mon and Karenni Refugee Camps on the Thai/Burmese Border," p. iii.
  11. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, A Demographic Perspective on Women in Development in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Vietnam, Asian Population Studies Series No. 148, p. 84.
  12. It is not known exactly how these figures compare with male school attendance in women's own communities, since we were not able to collect this data. Women sometimes said that few members of their communities, male or female, had any chance to go to school.
  13. Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, "Myanmar National Plan for the Advancement of Women," p. 3.
  14. Human Rights Watch. "Promises Broken: An Assessment of Children's Rights on the Tenth Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child." December 1999. <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/promises/education.html>.
  15. UNICEF, "... 1996-2000: Master Plan of Operations," p. 3.
  16. UNICEF, "Strategy Paper for Myanmar-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation, 2001 - 2005," Yangon, August 1999, p. 13.
  17. UNICEF, "Situation Analysis," p.79.
  18. UNICEF, "Situation Analysis," p. 78 - 79.
  19. Bradley Babson, "Talking Points [on the World Bank's report] for Burma Roundtable at Human Rights Watch," 16 December 1999.
  20. UNICEF, "Situation Analysis," p. 81.
  21. Primary and middle school figures from Foreign Affairs' Committee of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, "The Current Education System in Burma," (Part 1, Chapter 2), Education Report, (June 2000), p. 3; high school figures from the same, Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 4.
  22. David A. Chandler, "Health in Myanmar: An Interpretive Review of Data Sources Collected with the Assistance of Unicef Myanmar, the Ministry of Health, World Vision International-Myanmar, and other organizations," A paper presented at an HID conference, December 5 - 7, 1996 (Final Revision February 11, 1997).
  23. Foreign Affairs' Committee of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, "The Current Education System in Burma," Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 4.
  24. Human Rights Watch, "Promises Broken: An Assessment of Children's Rights on the Tenth Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child," December 1999, <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/promises/education.html>.
  25. Unpublished report by the Karen Teachers' Working Group, 1999.
  26. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, A Demographic Perspective on Women in Development, p. 67.
  27. Given that universities were closed during this period it is unclear how these figures were reached.
  28. "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar," Economic and Social Council Resolution on Burma at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights 2001, Fifty-seventh session, Agenda item 9, 12 April 2001.
  29. All Burma Federation of Student Unions, "Statement on the Long-Term Closure of Universities and Colleges in Burma," 25 November 1999.
  30. Human Rights Watch, "Promises Broken: An Assessment of Children's Rights on the Tenth Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child," December 1999, <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/promises/education.html>.
  31. UNICEF, "Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Myanmar," Yangon, August 1999, p. 78.
  32. "Educational Assessment of Karen Refugee Camps on the Thai/Burmese Border," p. 32; very similar statements appear also in "Educational Assessment of Mon and Karenni Refugee Camps on the Thai/Burmese Border."
  33. Union of Myanmar, "Report on Convention on the

- Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women," Yangon, March 1999, p. 29.
34. Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, "Status of Myanmar Women," March 1998, p. 5-7.
  35. Foreign Affairs Committee, All Burma Federation of Student Union, "Enrollment for Higher Education" (statement), 18 March 2001.
  36. All Burma Federation of Student Unions, "What is Distance Education?," in "The Current Education System," Education Report (June 2000), Part 1, Chapter 5.
  37. "Presentation by His Excellency U Win Mra, Permanent Representative of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations and Leader of the Myanmar Delegation to the Twenty-Second Session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)," New York, 21 January 2000, p. 8.