

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG THE YOUTH ATTENDING YANGON UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS



KEY FINDINGS

- The youth are the key players in a country's development.
- The sustainable development of Myanmar in the future depends on the participation and civic engagement of its youth.
- Civil and political engagement of the youth in Myanmar is quite limited.
- The lack of openness and transparent flow of information in politics are barriers to youth engagement in political activities.
- Social norms and cultural barriers apply more to women than men and limit, in particular, female civic engagement.
- The youth are influenced by traditional and conservative parental attitudes toward civic and political engagement.

- Aung Ko, Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics
- Myo Win Tin, Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics
- Ei Ei Phyo, Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics
- Benjamin Thulayphaw, Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics
- Zin Zin Moe Nyo, Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics

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were 1.2 billion youth between the ages of 15 and 24 globally in 2015, accounting for one in six people worldwide. By 2030, the target date for the sustainable development goals (SDGs), the number of youth is projected to grow by 7 per cent, to nearly 1.3 billion (UN, 2015). Clearly, the youth are the world's largest population group and global leaders need to focus more on young people and involve them in their country's development.

Civic engagement is defined as “the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future” (Adler and Goggin, 2005, pp. 236-253). Studies have shown that civic engagement is key to sustainable development and to healthy affairs of the state. It helps create a sense of citizenship and promotes a shared sense of contribution to a community's future. By participating in civic activity, both collectivities and individuals can benefit physically or materially thereby improving infrastructure and creating socio-economic growth and enhancing skills.

“Focusing on youth will ensure the sustainability of these investments in civic engagement and will facilitate the current generation's transition to adulthood by equipping them with the skills and abilities to thrive in the setting of rapid and uncertain transformation” (Etra et al., 2010, p. 4). According to Htun Tin Htun (2015), the youth are “key agents for social change, and are providing the energy, creative ideas and determination to drive innovation and reform.” As the youth are key players in the further development of a country, we need to understand the extent of their civic engagement (out-of-school participation) in terms of nonpolitical (participation in activities relating

to charity, education, social service, etc.) and political participation (involvement in public policy, political institutions, and formal and informal political reform activities). Also, we need to identify the gender differences of youth civic engagement and the factors relating to this gender inequity. The sustainable development of Myanmar in the future will depend on the participation and civic engagement of the youth, the largest group of people in the country's population.

Objectives of the study

This study focuses on the civic engagement of youth attending Yangon University of Economics (YUE) in Myanmar, with the aim of understanding the gender differences in leadership and civic engagement activities. To this end, this study:

1. Examines the attitudes of young women and men toward civic engagement;
2. Addresses the involvement of male and female youth in civic engagement;
3. Identifies the barriers to civic engagement among participant and nonparticipant male and female youth.

Attitudes of the youth toward civic engagement

Youth attitudes to civic engagement are a reflection of society, parental attitudes, social and cultural norms, the availability of civic education before or after attending university, and awareness on gender issues. Youth attitudes toward civic engagement activities are also linked to the type of organization or association. Involvement

in government-led youth engagement activities is limited. Our respondents preferred youth-led groups or associations.

Our interviews reveal that the youth are more inclined to participate in nonpolitical activities of a social, religious or cultural nature rather than political activities. Female students prefer engaging more in religious or cultural activities, while male students are more inclined toward economic activities (an extension of Myanmar’s societal belief that men are the primary earners). It is also understood that female students prefer to focus on their studies rather than getting involved in civic activities and leadership roles.

We found that a majority of female students avoided taking on leadership roles. Even though male youth are a minority at YUE, they still hold leadership positions. Some respondents suggested that female students do not volunteer to become leaders and tend to not speak in public because the general perception is that women do not become leaders later on (after marriage or childbirth) or they may not be recognized as such.

As one female respondent said: “What I think is, traditionally, old people in Myanmar accept the belief that women should stay home, cook and look after the household. When the times come, they will get married.” Another female respondent said: “Female students don’t become chairwoman of the students’ union because they don’t put themselves on the list for leader selection and they don’t want to do leadership work, which is why they avoid being selected.” These statements clearly show the attitude of female students toward leadership roles and the accompanying responsibilities—how they shy away from them—and how parental attitudes and societal norms underline this thinking. Traditional gender norms make change difficult, though we

found some exceptions. One female student, a class representative, says: “Women don’t become leaders because of tradition. I think my idea is different from all my other friends; they don’t dare to talk to strangers, like in this interview. Tradition is very conservative.”

Our study indicates that both male and female students are wary of engaging in political activities. The influence of family—many are rural with more conservative attitudes—plays a significant role. The students in our sample had no political experience, with the 2020 election being their first experience in voting. They are passively

Methodology

- The study uses a qualitative research method.
- Primary data was collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.
- A purposive sampling technique was also used.

Respondents

- The study focuses on undergraduate students (16-24 years) studying at Yangon University of Economics in Myanmar.
- The study included 36 respondents: 19 men and 17 women.

RESPONDENTS’ AGE GROUPS

Gender	Age group	No. of respondents	%
Male	16-19	7	19.4
	20-24	12	33.3
Female	16-19	7	19.4
	20-24	10	27.8
Total		36	100

aware of politics, especially through the information readily available online, and are influenced by what they read. Many young people feel the information available to them online is not reliable. One female respondent, who wanted to stay in the big city rather than in the provinces under the control of her parents, said: “Honestly, I don’t know about politics. My parents say not to learn about politics. They are worried that if I get involved, I might be in trouble later [...] My parents are conservative. I prefer to stay here in Yangon and discover more. That is why I don’t want to go back.”

Involvement of the youth in civic engagement

For the most part, some of the respondents engaged in volunteer work, which was accepted, but very few were involved in political activities as people still associate this type of engagement with political problems in Myanmar. The respondents steered clear from saying they were involved or had knowledge of politics.

The youth attending YUE participate in some civic engagement activities. These activities can range from part-time or occasional volunteer work (education activities, donating money, blood donation, waste management, etc.) to part-time paid jobs, in addition to extracurricular activities. Most students restrict their engagement to nonpolitical activities. One of the male students said: “As we come from outside Yangon area, all are new for us. We prefer getting involved more in extracurricular activities.” Most students usually end up with

temporary part-time jobs and volunteer work. A student involved with a charity association said: “We donate the little money we collect every month to some monastic schools. Sometimes we teach classes. This makes us happy as we can showcase our ability and also feel satisfied with our involvement.”

Even though there is a general mistrust of political activities, some youth in the study have experience of student union elections, student associations and other school activities. These activities might improve their knowledge and skill with regard to political engagement at a later point, but this research does not have enough information to link these student activities with more political activities.

Barriers to civic engagement

Social and cultural barriers: From our discussions and interviews, it is clear that the social norms and cultural barriers apply more to women than men. Myanmar society places limitations on the movement of women, especially when they return to their villages. Men had fewer time constraints and were more free to roam. For safety and security reasons, female students do not venture

too far away without a companion. In most rural areas, parents do not allow their daughters to go out alone. As one female student says: “There are difficulties when we travel to distant places. Many people do not dare go alone; women will travel with their friends.”

We found that students are more free to discover the world with an open mind when they

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are on their own, but when they return to their hometowns in the provinces, they behave in the way their parents expect them to, especially female students. One female respondent said: “In Myanmar society, parents are more worried for female students because Myanmar is not that safe. Our security is not guaranteed like in other countries. There is no CCTV on the roads, no lamp posts; it is not ok for women to work late till 10 p.m. or 11 p.m.”

Outside Yangon, educated parents are more accepting of their children’s journey of self-discovery and their exploration of the world. However, most parents are conservative. As one male student mentioned: “In the provinces, my parents will say, don’t go there, don’t do this. Now I am alone in Yangon, I dare to go alone.”

Our research study indicates that social and cultural norms, time and mobility restrictions and security concerns get in the way of women’s civic engagement.

Political barriers: Civic engagement is very vulnerable to political conflict. One of the few studies in Myanmar (Larkin and Baskett, 2014) found little citizen engagement due to poor information, lack of freedoms, and overall restrictive norms. Currently [prior to 2021], Myanmar is in a period of transition politically. During the military regime there were limited civic engagement activities, whether political or nonpolitical. There were only government-led civic engagement activities. There was also a lack of openness and transparent flow of information. With politics in Myanmar more open now than in the past, and

with information and news more freely available, especially online, some of the youth might be willing to engage in political activities. However, as Turcotte (2015) says, younger people are less likely to be interested in politics compared to older counterparts; instead they are more likely to participate in public affairs. However, the growth of social media has also led to multiple channels of information and it is difficult to distinguish fake or misleading news from the truth. For the youth who are just starting to engage, political news and information is confusing with their limited knowledge. One female respondent said: “In my view, Myanmar politics is not open. You can’t know about it directly. It is always indirect. Most information is rumor. There is nobody who will clarify doubts. I would not want to do any politics if I don’t know... things exactly.”

Conclusion

Civil and political engagement among the youth in Myanmar is quite limited, although many students engage in volunteer work which is viewed as nonpolitical. Overall, women face a lot more barriers, making their civic engagement even less likely. The general population’s conservative and traditional attitude did not help and underlines further the youth’s views on civic and political engagement. There are political, cultural and social barriers limiting the ability of youth to engage. We recommend addressing gender stereotypes to increase the civic and political engagement of the youth, especially young women.

Note: This study was conducted in 2019 and its recommendations reflect the pre-coup period in 2020.

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