

SUMMARY BRIEF

Uneven Burdens: Women in Myanmar's Crisis Economy

June 2026



INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is facing a complex and protracted crisis, marked by deepening poverty, rising displacement and severe strain on essential services. The crisis is not gender-neutral and women and girls bear a disproportionate burden — not only as those most affected by conflict and economic contraction, but also because household coping pressures fall disproportionately on them as services and livelihoods deteriorate. While women’s roles in sustaining families and local economies have expanded during the crisis, their access to livelihoods, income, assets and decision-making power are deeply unequal, constraining women’s economic empowerment and undermining household resilience. These dynamics are not unique in themselves, but their intensity and interaction in a context of prolonged conflict and service disruption create particularly acute constraints for women. Hence, in 2023, the country ranked 118th out of 172 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII value: 0.478)¹, reflecting both structural gaps and crisis-driven disruptions in employment, income, education and representation.

This brief summarizes the report ‘Uneven Burdens: Women in Myanmar’s Crisis Economy’, which is based on a nationally representative survey of 5,405 individuals conducted jointly by UNDP and UN Women between January and April 2025. It examines how prevailing gender norms, unequal care responsibilities and conflict interact to shape women’s labour force participation, income, access to productive assets and food security outcomes and what these patterns mean for inclusive, gender-responsive recovery in Myanmar.

¹ UNDP (2025). Myanmar: Human Development Reports. United Nations Development Programme.



Norms, Care and Conflict: Shaping Women's Economic Participation

Gender Norms & Economic Roles

35% of men
33% of women



believe men should be paid more than women for the same job

46% of men
36% of women



believe men should make major household decisions.

Employment Gaps

64%

Women with children



82%

Men with children

Unpaid Care as a Barrier



78%

of women outside the labour force cite caregiving as their main activity, compared to only 26% of men.

Unequal Time Burden



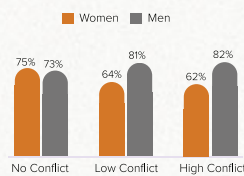
Women spend 4.3 hours/day on unpaid household and care work, compared to 2.4 hours for men.



Women carry nearly double the unpaid workload.

Conflict & Unemployment

Unequal Employment Rates



In no-conflict areas, women's employment rate is slightly higher than men's

20-percentage-point gender gap in high-conflict areas.

Deeply embedded gender norms continue to constrain women's economic empowerment by shaping how roles, resources and decisions are allocated within households and communities. While one in ten men believe married women should not work outside the home, 35 percent of men and 33 percent of women believe men should be paid more for the same job, pointing to deeply entrenched attitudes that normalize economic inequality between women and men. Decision-making power also remains gendered, with nearly half of men (46%) and 36 percent of women believe major household decisions should be made solely by men.

These norms translate into stark differences in time use and labour participation, with unpaid care responsibilities remaining the primary barrier to women's labour force participation. Seventy-eight percent of women outside the labour force cite caregiving as their main activity, compared to only 26 percent of men. While women spend an average of 4.3 hours per day on unpaid household and care work, it is only 2.4 hours for men. Hence, for many women, work is not just about finding a job, but also about finding time. Critically, entering paid employment does not reduce women's unpaid care responsibilities, with employed women working an average of 9.6 combined paid and unpaid hours per day across the week, compared to 8.5 for men.

Nearly half of men (46%) and 36 percent of women believe major household decisions should be made solely by men.



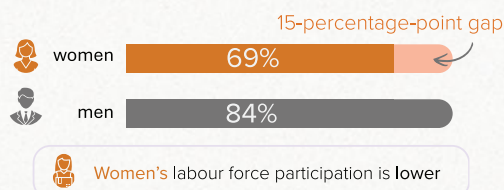
These inequalities are most pronounced among households with children, where the gender employment gap widens to 18 percentage points (64% for women with children versus 82% for fathers), underscoring how caregiving responsibilities disproportionately constrain women's labour market engagement.

Conflict conditions further amplify these structural inequalities. In high-conflict areas, women's employment falls to 62 percent against 82 percent for men — a 20-percentage-point gap — compared to low-conflict areas, where women's employment (76%) marginally exceeds men's (73%). This indicates that conflict, through mobility restrictions, service withdrawals and heightened care demands, directly widens gender employment gaps.

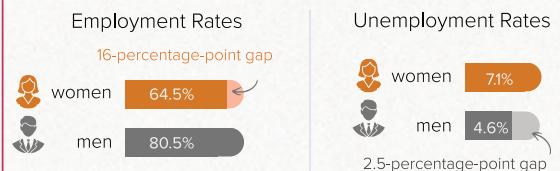


Labour Market: Persistent Gender Gaps

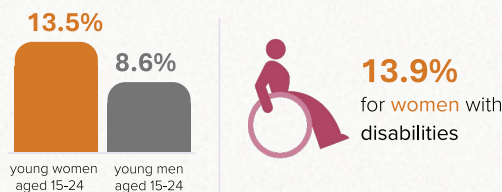
Labour Force Participation Rates (aged 15-64)



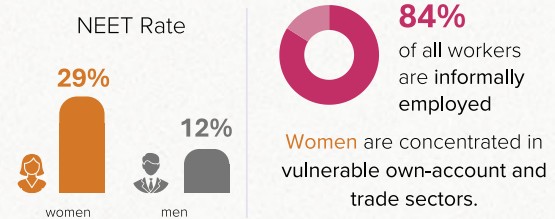
Employment and Unemployment Rates (aged 15-64)



Unemployment Rates among Younger Cohort and Women with Disabilities



Labour Market Exclusion and Informality



Gender gaps in labour force participation remain significant and persistent. Only 69 percent of women aged 15–64 participate in the labour force² compared to 84 percent of men, while employment rates are 64.5 percent for women and 80.5 percent for men. This 16-percentage-point employment gap persists across age and education levels, indicating that women’s disadvantage is driven by structural barriers such as unequal care responsibilities and discriminatory norms rather than differences in education or skills.

Women’s employment rates remain consistently lower than those of men across education and age groups.

Geography and conflict deepen these disparities further. In Kayah, one of the most conflict-affected states, only 38.3 percent of women are employed compared to 67.3 percent of men, a 29-percentage-point gap. In contrast, in areas with no direct conflict exposure, women’s employment reaches 75.5 percent, slightly higher

than men’s 72.5 percent. This illustrates how conflict and displacement compound existing gender inequalities and constrain women’s economic participation. At the same time, women’s concentration in vulnerable sectors increases exposure to shocks. In the garment industry, where women make up around 80 percent of the workforce, employment has declined by 50 percent since 2021.³

Labour market exclusion is most acute among the most vulnerable. Unemployment among young women aged 15–24 reaches 13.5 percent compared to 8.6 percent for young men, rising to 13.9 percent among women with disabilities, leaving the most marginalized further behind. Beyond unemployment, nearly 29 percent of women are not in employment, education or training (NEET)⁴, more than double the rate for men, while informality affects 84 percent of all workers, with women disproportionately concentrated in vulnerable own-account and trade sectors, limiting their access to stable earnings and social protection.

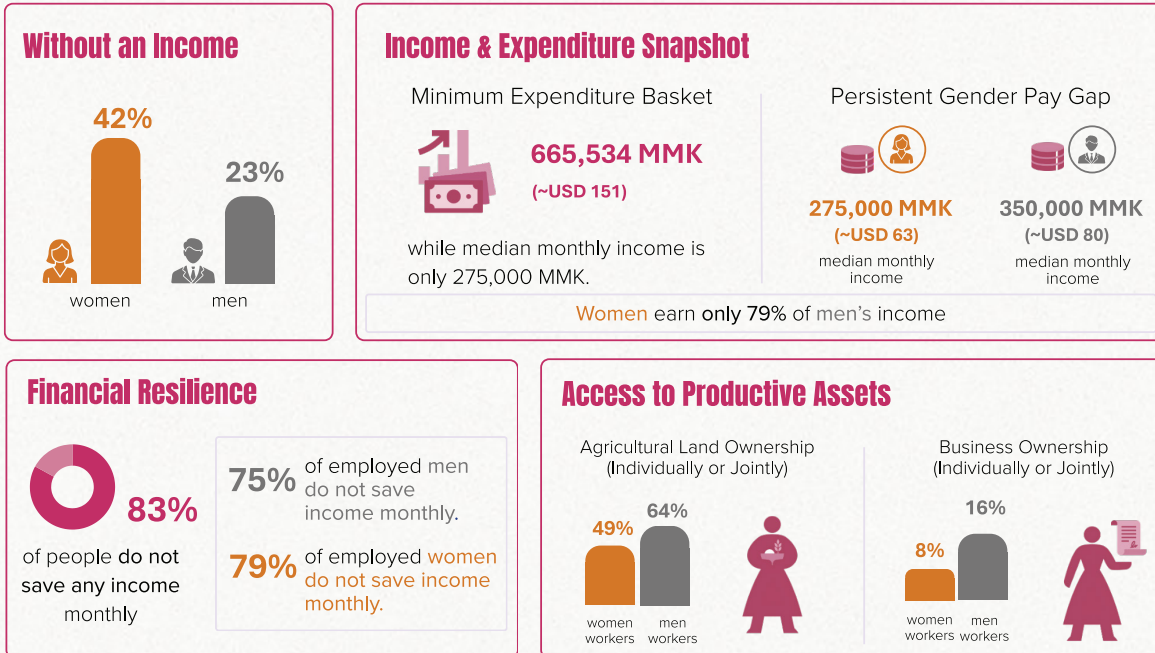
² The labour force participation rate reflects the share of the population aged 15–64 that is either employed or actively seeking work.

³ UNDP (2025). Stitches of Struggle and Hope: The Realities of Garment and Apparel Workers in Myanmar. United Nations Development Programme.

⁴ NEET refers to the share of young people aged 15–24 who are not in employment, education or training, providing a broader measure of labour market disengagement beyond unemployment alone.



Income and Assets: Unequal Access and Control



Even when women work, they are pushed into the margins, and income disparities between women and men are significant and widespread. Forty-two percent of women report having no income at all, compared to 23 percent of men, rising to 57 percent among women in Rakhine, one of Myanmar's most crisis-affected states. Among those who are employed, women earn a median of 275,000 MMK (~USD 63)⁵ per month compared to 350,000 MMK (~USD 80) for men, meaning women earn only 79 percent of men's income. This persistent gender pay gap reflects structural labour market segmentation and occupational inequalities.

These income levels fall critically short of minimum living standards. The median monthly income of 275,000 MMK is well below the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB)⁶ of 665,534 MMK (~USD 151), requiring an average of 2.4 income earners per household to meet basic needs. This underscores the depth of economic vulnerability facing the majority of households.

42% of women report having no income compared to 23% of men.



Limited incomes translate directly into constrained financial resilience. Eighty-three percent of people do not save any income monthly, rising to 79 percent among employed women compared to 75 percent of employed men. Women's economic vulnerability is further compounded by unequal access to productive assets. Among agricultural workers, only 49 percent of women own land compared to 64 percent of men, while business ownership stands at just eight percent for women versus 16 percent for men. Decision-making over land and businesses often remains male-dominated even in cases of joint ownership, and these disparities limit women's ability to generate income, accumulate wealth, and build long-term economic resilience.

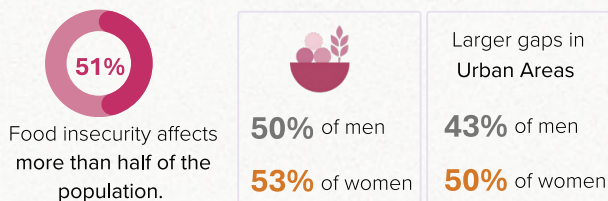
⁵ USD equivalents are approximate and based on an exchange rate of 4,400 MMK/USD at the time of the survey.

⁶ The Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) is established by the Inter-Agency Cash and Markets Working Group and reflects the minimum monthly cost of meeting basic food and non-food needs for a household. The MEB figure cited here (665,534 MMK, ~USD 151) reflects the November 2024 update applicable at the time of the survey. It was subsequently revised to 741,967 MMK (~USD 186) in January 2026, reflecting inflation and changes in the cost of living.



Food Security: Gendered Economic Constraints and Vulnerabilities

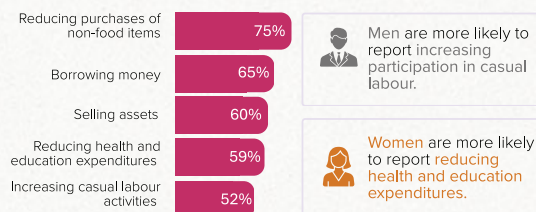
Widespread Food Insecurity



Food Insecurity & Disability



Common Coping Strategies



Risks for Children



Education as Protective Factor



The aforementioned economic strains are feeding a broader crisis called food insecurity. Food insecurity affects more than half of Myanmar's population. In this case, women fare worse than men nationally (53% versus 50%), with the gap widening in urban areas. In conflict-affected states, the situation is particularly acute. In Rakhine, only 19 percent of women are food secure compared to 30 percent of men, while in Kayah just 12 percent of women are food secure, reflecting the compounding effects of conflict, displacement and constrained livelihoods on women's food access.



In Rakhine, only 19 percent of women are food secure, compared to 30 percent of men; in Kayah, the figures are 12 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

Intersecting vulnerabilities deepen food insecurity for the most marginalized. Only one in five people with disabilities⁷ are food secure, facing considerably higher risks of severe food insecurity. Education, however, serves as a critical protective factor. Completing high school increases the probability of being food secure by 17.4 percentage points for women, underscoring the importance of sustained investment in girls' education as a long-term resilience strategy.

As food insecurity intensifies, households rely on a range of coping strategies to manage economic stress. Women are more likely to reduce essential expenditures, such as health and education, while men are more likely to increase labour participation. In severely food-insecure households, 11 percent of women resort to 10-11 coping strategies compared to only four percent of men, and 57 percent report a household member migrated as a distress response,⁸ against 43 percent of men. The consequences of food insecurity extend to children. In severely food-insecure households, 32 percent are pushed into work and 24 percent drop out of school. These patterns reflect cumulative economic strain and reduced access to basic services, with long-term implications for human capital development.

⁷ Disability status is assessed using the Washington Group Short Set of questions on disability, which measures functional limitations across six domains. Responses are self-reported by survey respondents and figures should be interpreted with caution.

⁸ The survey does not distinguish between temporary, seasonal or longer-term migration. The figures should therefore be interpreted with caution in terms of the duration and nature of mobility.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings presented in this brief point to a consistent and deeply structural pattern of gender inequality across Myanmar's crisis-affected economy.

- **Perceptions regarding household decision-making and economic activities limit women's roles in society.** Discriminatory norms, limited decision-making power and heightened exposure to violence, in addition to a segmented labour market, already constrain women's economic participation, limit their access to income and productive assets, and heighten their vulnerability to food insecurity.
- **Gender inequality is structural and intensifies under crisis conditions.** Pre-existing gaps in norms, care burdens, and access to resources are not created by conflict, but are systematically deepened by it.
- **Women's economic empowerment is not only a matter of reducing disadvantages.** It is central to building more resilient households, communities and recovery trajectories, particularly in the context of sustained crisis.
- **Recovery that does not address structural constraints will reinforce inequality.** Expanding livelihoods for women is insufficient; gender-responsive recovery requires addressing care systems, access to assets, gender barriers across labour markets, food systems and social protection while also promoting more equitable norms around decision-making and resource control.

Recommendations

Invest in women's economic empowerment.

Expand access to decent, stable and adequately paid work through targeted skills development, job placement programmes and support for women-owned enterprises. Support women's entrepreneurship through business incubator models, small-scale grants and access to finance, and strengthen women's collective economic platforms such as self-help groups and informal networks as mechanisms for income generation and peer support.

Expand access to education and lifelong learning.

Promote second-chance education and adult learning programmes for women and girls who missed formal schooling, and support gender-responsive skills and digital literacy training to improve employability and economic resilience.

Recognize and address unpaid care constraints.

Integrate care-sensitive design into social protection and cash assistance programmes, support community dialogues on more balanced sharing of care responsibilities, and increase investment in childcare and eldercare infrastructure where feasible.

Strengthen women's land ownership and access to productive resources.

Support awareness of joint land ownership provisions, strengthen inclusive land governance practices, and integrate gender considerations into agricultural programming including access to inputs and markets.

Address food insecurity and household resilience.

Integrate gender analysis into food security assessments and programmes, target support to women-headed households and women with disabilities, and expand community-based nutrition and cash assistance initiatives with attention to gender-disaggregated outcomes.

Strengthen participation, voice and inclusive norms.

Support initiatives that promote gender-equitable attitudes and engage men and boys alongside women, strengthen women's leadership in community organizations and peacebuilding, and mainstream gender analysis across humanitarian, development and peace interventions.



