Data Impact on Gender Equality in Work: Introducing the 19th ICLS Definitions of Work in **Myanmar**

Summary

Myanmar has made a strong commitment to empowering women in the world of work as part of its goal to achieve gender equality. National strategies for women in the economy include safe and healthy working conditions, non-discriminatory pay scales, and social protection schemes. Key actors are the Myanmar National Committee on Women (MNCW), Myanmar Women Enterprise Association (MWEA), and the Business Coalition for Gender Equality (BCGE), which work across government, civil society, and with development partners to promote women's economic participation.

In 2015, Myanmar was one of the first countries to apply the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) resolution on measuring work, employment, and labor underutilization. This introduced new definitions for employment and unemployment and methods for measuring current and potential involvement in the labor force. The international standards—originally adopted in 2013—can support countries to produce more detailed information about the types of paid and unpaid work people are engaged in.

However, the new definitions did not have much impact on the key labor force indicators in Myanmar. The biggest change is that from 2016, slightly less of the population is unemployed, a higher proportion of men are now outside the labor force (neither employed nor unemployed), and slightly more women are classified in paid employment. The changes are subtle.

What may be most important for gender analysts is that the new definitions provide data on labor underutilization, showing that women are much more underutilized than men. The data also reveals women's concentration in the informal sector and in service industries, including in clerical jobs and in health and education. Other gender gaps show that when it comes to child labor, boys are more involved than girls. Across all sectors, women remain underrepresented in management roles and are disadvantaged by a clear gender pay gap.

About this case study

In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians agreed upon a new definition of work with subcategories relating to both paid and unpaid working activities.[i] The changes narrowed the definition of employment to work for pay or profit only. People who produce goods for subsistence, volunteer, or work for training are no longer classified as being employed, which in some countries was a significant part of the labor force.

As the table below shows, the changes to the definition of employment were significant.[ii]

Labor Force before the 19th ICLS		Labor Force after the 19th ICLS	
Employed	**Not employed**	**Employed**	**Not employed if they exclusively:**
▪ All who work for pay ▪ All who work for profit ▪ All who work for training ▪ All who work to produce goods for own final use ▪ All who volunteer for organizations ▪ All who volunteer to produce goods for households	▪ Everyone else whether or not they: ◆ Provide services for own final use ◆ Volunteer providing services for households	▪ All who work for pay ▪ All who work for profit (employers, own-account workers, contributing family workers, etc.)	▪ Provide services for own final use ▪ Volunteer providing services for households ▪ Work unpaid for training ▪ Produce goods for own final use ▪ Volunteer through/for organizations ▪ Volunteer producing goods for households

The changes also introduced new measures of underutilization. They go beyond unemployment to measure how many people meet the new definition of employment but are not working for as many hours as they want to be (underemployed). Statistics are also produced on how many people are not employed or unemployed but are either actively seeking employment or are available to start (potential labor force).

Combined, the new definition and measures of work provide a different but more relevant picture of a country's labor force and the types of work people are engaged in. From a gender perspective, this was a landmark step towards making the work that women typically do visible. The 19th ICLS framework puts more emphasis on measuring all forms of work including:

- Crucial caring and domestic activities that women are overwhelmingly responsible for, that households and economies rely on to function (own-use production of services);

- Work women do to produce food and other goods which enable them and their families to survive (own-use production of goods);

- Work women do for pay or profit (formal and informal employment); and

- Volunteer work and work in exchange for training.

Widespread adoption of these new definitions has not yet been achieved and policy implications remain uncertain. Data2X has found case studies of first movers to be an effective tool to inspire similar data collection efforts in additional countries and to open dialogue on policy impact. The case studies seek to achieve these outcomes for the measurement of women's work.
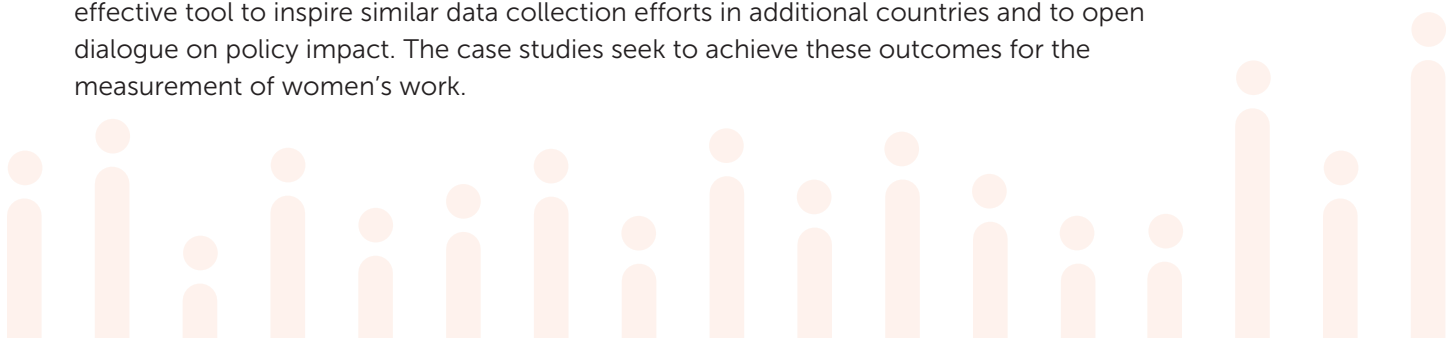
Background

Myanmar is a lower-middle income country in East Asia. In 2020, it had an estimated population of 54.8 million people (52 percent female, 48 percent male) with a fertility rate of 2.0 children per woman.[iii] The population is relatively young, with 40 dependents for every 100 people of working age (15–64). Children (age 0–14) comprise a quarter (27 percent) of the population (above the regional average of 20 percent) and older persons (age 65 and above) are 6.6 percent of the total population.[iv] Myanmar is close to a demographic dividend, or the potential growth that can occur in the economy when the proportion of working-age people exceed that of non-working age. Developing human capital and opportunities to engage both women and men in decent work is essential for reaping those benefits.

For a long time, the labor market in Myanmar has been segmented in three ways: individuals were considered (1) employed, (2) unemployed, or (3) inactive. In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS)—the international body that oversees standards in labor statistics—agreed that these categories failed to accurately capture all the ways that individuals engage with the economy and labor market. They agreed on the first international statistical definition of "work," including five major activities that individuals can be involved in:

1. Own-use production work: work to produce goods or services for own use.

2. Employment work: work performed for others in exchange for pay or profit.

3. Unpaid trainee work: work performed for others without pay to acquire workplace experience or skills.

4. Volunteer work: non-compulsory work performed for others without pay.

5. Other work activities not defined above, such as unpaid community service ordered by a court or similar authority.

From a gender perspective, this was a landmark step toward making all the work that women do visible. All forms of own-use production work, such as producing goods or services, became a distinct category separate to employment work. Previously, some forms of own-use work—such as subsistence agriculture—had been considered employment in many countries, while other forms, such as unpaid care and domestic work—of which women continue to do the majority share—were not.

Supporting women's empowerment and gender equality in Myanmar

Myanmar ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 committing to equal pay for equal work for women, social protection, and balancing women's productive and reproductive roles through maternity leave, family-friendly work environments, and childcare facilities. Since then, Myanmar has been establishing an enabling environment for gender equality in paid and unpaid work through national strategies and mechanisms that support women's economic empowerment (Table 1).

Table 1: Enabling environment for gender equality in paid and unpaid work

Strategy or mechanism	Description
National Strategic Plan for Advancement of Women (NSPAW) (2013-2022)[v]	• One priority area is "Women and Economy." • It follows principles of CEDAW which makes the state party obliged to ensure safe and healthy working conditions, non-discriminatory pay scale, social protection schemes, etc.
Decent Country Work Programme 2018-2021[vi]	• Includes promoting gender equality and non-discrimination as a cross-cutting priority. • Implementation should ensure that all measures developed under the program are gender-sensitive to ensure that needs, constraints, and different impacts on women and men are considered. • Gender-sensitive indicators and targets are included.
Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT) Strategy 2019-2023[vii]	• Focused on internal and international migrants. • Establishing conditions for decent work within Myanmar's labor market. • Improved gender-responsive public sector policies, programs, and expenditure.
Myanmar National Committee for Women (MNCW)	• National mechanism for integrating gender across all sectors. • Formed in 1996. • Led by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.
Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation[viii]	• Government-resourced and staffed non-government organization that assists the MNCWA to implement CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action nationwide. • Established in 2003.
Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Co-ordination Group (GEWECG)	• Coordination mechanism that sits under the national Development Assistance Coordination Unit (secretariat is the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations). • Aims to coordinate development partner technical and financial support for the implementation of NSPAW. • Includes a Technical Working Group (TWG) dedicated to promoting women's economic participation.
Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA)[ix]	• Promotes maternal and child health and well-being in remote areas • Established in 1991. • Regional/ District/ Supervisory Committees and Township. Associations are being formed to effectively implement the needs of women.

Gender Equality Network (GEN)[x]	- Network of more than 100 civil society organizations and technical resource persons working to bring about gender equality and the fulfillment of women's rights in Myanmar. - Formed in 2012.
Women's Organizations Network (WON)	- Network of 30 organizations set up to support women's community groups across Myanmar. - Formed in 2008.
United Nations in Myanmar	- UN Women co-chairs the inter-UN agency gender group and a chairs wider donor group dedicated to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. - These groups coordinate activities to promote gender equality, create synergies, and avoid duplication of work.
Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs' Association (MWEA)[xi]	- Founded in 1995. - MWEA is the strategic alliance of women in business and academia. - Establishes a firm foundation for developing women and meeting the challenges of a global society.
Business Coalition for Gender Equality (BCGE)[xii]	- Non-profit association and coalition of companies committed to promoting gender equality in the workplace. - Founded by seven leading businesses in Myanmar (City Mart Holding Limited, KBZ Bank, KBZ MS, AYA Bank, FMI, Parami Energy Group of Companies, and Shwe Taung Group). - Advocates for gender equality practices and serves as a center of excellence to support the private sector in Myanmar.

The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022) (NSPAW) is the overarching strategy supporting women's empowerment. It includes achieving safe and healthy work conditions, closing the gender pay gap, and providing women with social protection. It covers the activities to strengthen systems, structures, and practices to ensure fairness and equal rights for women. Priorities include:

1. Practical initiatives that focus on livelihood initiatives that provide equal access to employment and resources; promote balance between household work and income generation; promote quota systems for women in economic management and implement workplace policies about equal pay for equal work and non-harassment.

2. Increasing the number of women participating in decision making related to the economy and development projects.

3. Projects that give specific priority to economic opportunities for women.

4. Service centers where women, including women with disabilities, can access employment opportunities and get information.

The Myanmar Decent Country Work Programme (2018–2021) sets out the strategic priorities for work in Myanmar and includes gender as a cross-cutting priority. Its monitoring framework has gender-sensitive targets and indicators that are intended to support a gender-sensitive approach (Figure 1). Indicators include tracking vulnerable workers in self-employment (own account workers) and people who work without pay in a family business (contributing family workers).
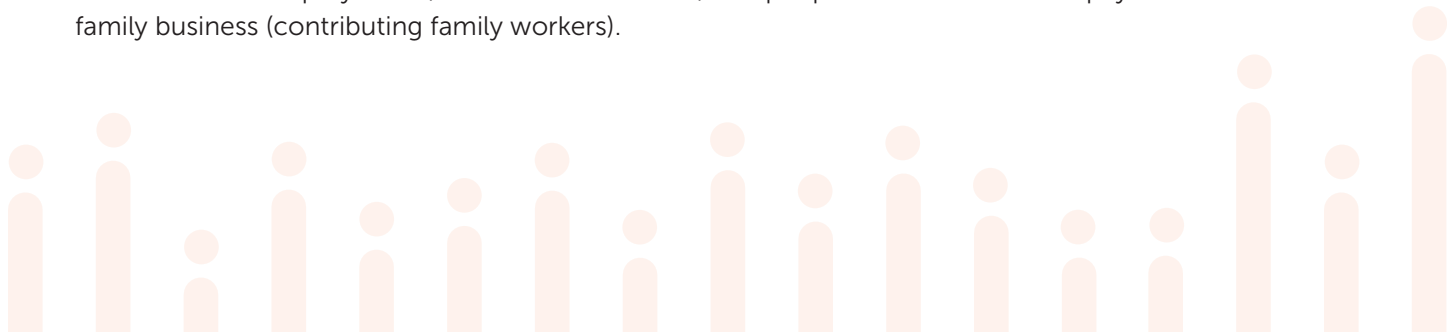
Figure 1: Example of gender-sensitive indicators and targets in the Myanmar Decent Work Country Programme 2018–2021

Indicators	Targets
Indicator 1.1.1: Percentage increase in number of vulnerable workers with decent jobs.	**Target 1.1.1:** By 2021, 20 percent increase in number of vulnerable women and 15 percent increase in the number of vulnerable men workers with decent jobs.
Indicator 1.1.1: Percentage increase in number of women workers with decent jobs.	**Target 1.1.2:** By 2021, 40 percent increase in number of women workers with decent jobs.
Indicator 1.1.3: Percentage increase in number of additional jobs created as a result of small and medium-sized business creation and expansion.	**Target 1.1.3:** By 2021, at least 30 percent increase in the number of people employed by small and medium-sized enterprise, at least 30 percent of whom are women.

> **What is "Decent Work"?**
>
> Decent work involves *"opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men."*
>
> (Myanmar Decent Work Country Programme 2018–2021)

Institutional mechanisms for women's economic empowerment include the Myanmar National Committee for Women (MNCW), an inter-ministerial policy-related mechanism established in 1996 and reestablished in 2012 to implement the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Co-ordination Group (GEWECG) under the Development Assistance Coordination Unit (DACU) coordinates development partner technical and financial support for the implementation of NSPAW. Four Technical Working Groups (TWGs) have been established to deal with specific technical issues including women's economic empowerment and eliminating violence against women.

The Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation was established in 2003. It is a voluntary non-governmental organization for the advancement of women in Myanmar. The Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) was established in 1991 to promote maternal and child health and well-being in remote areas. Regional/ District Supervisory Committees and Township Associations are being formed to effectively implement the needs of women.

Civil society organizations are active in Myanmar and work related to women's economic empowerment is organized through the Gender Equality Network (GEN). Formed in 2012, GEN is a diverse and inclusive network of more than 100 civil society organizations and technical resource persons working to advance gender equality and the fulfillment of women's rights in Myanmar. Further to this, the Women's Organizations Network Myanmar (WON)—a network of 30 organizations that was formed in 2008—was set up to support women's community groups across Myanmar working to contribute to the well-being of women and men across the country.

There are two private sector associations key in supporting gender equality in work: the Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs' Association (MWEA) and the Business Coalition for Gender Equality (BCGE).
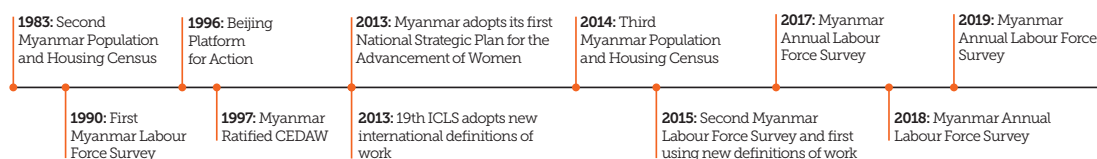
Data sources for labor statistics in Myanmar

The main sources of statistics on paid work have been the population and housing census and now annual labor force surveys. Population and Housing Censuses were conducted in 1973, 1983, and 2014, and the first Myanmar Labour Force Survey (LFS) was conducted in 1990 by the Department of Labour.

In 2015, a second LFS was conducted, this time using the new 19th ICLS measures of work and employment. The survey aimed to support a gender analysis of the labor market and compile national and sub-national level statistics on employment, including informal employment, income from employment, and unemployment. Since then, the Department of Labour has repeated the LFS annually in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Other household surveys have also adopted the new definitions of work. The Myanmar Living Conditions Survey in 2017 used the new definitions following recommendations by UNDP and the World Bank. Also, the 2019 Intercensal Survey has adopted the definitions as recommended in the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Census (Revision 3).[xiii] Figure 2 illustrates the timeline of milestones related to measuring women's work in Myanmar.
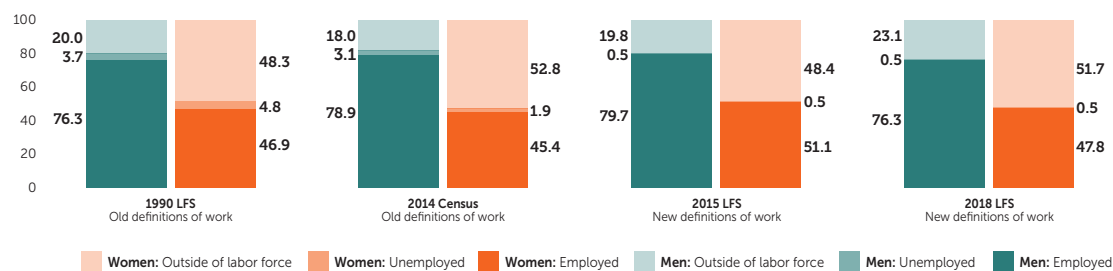
Figure 2. Timeline of milestones in Myanmar relevant to measuring women's work

1983: Second Myanmar Population and Housing Census

1996: Beijing Platform for Action

2013: Myanmar adopts its first National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women

2014: Third Myanmar Population and Housing Census

2017: Myanmar Annual Labour Force Survey

2019: Myanmar Annual Labour Force Survey

1990: First Myanmar Labour Force Survey

1997: Myanmar Ratified CEDAW

2013: 19th ICLS adopts new international definitions of work

2015: Second Myanmar Labour Force Survey and first using new definitions of work

2018: Myanmar Annual Labour Force Survey

Changes following introduction of the 19th ICLS framework

The new definitions of work have not had much impact on employment related statistics in Myanmar. Nor have rates of labor force participation changed much for men or women since 1990. Around half of women are in employment—46.9 percent in 1990 (based on old definitions) compared to 47.8 percent in 2018 (based on new definitions). The biggest impact the new definitions have had on the statistics is to reduce the percentage of the population who are unemployed to almost nothing (0.5 percent for both women and men in 2018), increase the percentage of men outside the labor force (neither employed nor unemployed), and slightly increase the percentage of women in paid employment.

Figure 3. Distribution of employed, unemployed and outside the labor force before and after the new definitions of employment were introduced in Myanmar, by data source

Women: Outside of labor force   Women: Unemployed   Women: Employed   Men: Outside of labor force   Men: Unemployed   Men: Employed

Unemployment rates are typically low in developing countries. The 2015 LFS report explains that the unemployment rate in Myanmar is particularly low as a lack of social protection means that people have no choice but to find employment. More importantly, the new definitions support the production of data on labor underutilization—8.1 percent of women were underutilized in 2015 and 6.0 percent of men. This fell slightly to 6.5 percent for women and 5.5 percent for men in 2018. Labor underutilization indicators are more useful for policy formulation in Myanmar than unemployment statistics alone.

The data has revealed that gender gaps persist in labor force participation, and women are more concentrated in the informal sector and in services industries. Few women are involved in construction, transportation, mining or quarrying, real estate, public administration, and defense. They are more concentrated in clerical jobs and in health and education. When it comes to child labor, boys are more involved than girls. Women are underrepresented in management roles and are disadvantaged by a clear gender pay gap.

Impact of new data on advocacy, policies, and decisions

Labor force statistics paint only a partial picture of women's work, but they do provide a solid evidence base for action. Sex-disaggregated data on work and labor force participation has been used in many areas of national policy and decisionmaking. It has been used to develop relevant indicators for achieving the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan and informed implementation of the NSPAW (2013–2022). The data has been crucial in supporting Myanmar to report on international commitments such as the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW. Data has been the catalyst for establishing a technical working group on women's participation in politics and economics. It is also used in policy briefs and advocacy work.

Gaps in participation and earnings sparked an assessment of women's entrepreneurship in Myanmar. The study highlighted that while Myanmar has an emerging ecosystem for the support of entrepreneurship and enterprise development, there are few gender-responsive programs in place. It explained that cultural norms and attitudes are the leading impediment to women's entrepreneurship in Myanmar, in particular:[xiv]

- The double time burden of paid work with unpaid domestic and care responsibilities;

- Families discouraging daughters and wives from becoming entrepreneurs; and

- Mobility restrictions that constrain women's access to markets, such as places where women cannot go and security issues.

Civil society organizations in Myanmar have also been using the labor force data in their work. Aside from evidence for advocacy, they include it in shadow reports and policy briefs related to commitments such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. UN Women has been supporting civil society organizations to develop capacity to access and use statistics.

Recently, civil society and United Nations partners have used employment data to advocate for gender gaps to be integrated in COVID-19 response plans and policies. Figures showing the percentage of women in the informal sector and in sectors heavily impacted by COVID-19, such as health and tourism, were used extensively to advocate for gender-sensitive responses.

Finally, labor data has been used by the United Nations system to identify needs, prioritize support and advocate for policies and programs that further empower women. UN Women used the data in formulating its country strategic paper. In 2019, they also supported the government to submit its first five-year report on the Beijing Platform for Action using LFS data to show the status of women's economic participation.

Key Highlights and Lessons Learned

1. Many people are unfamiliar with the new definitions of work and their relevance to gender equality.

Statistical literacy is low in Myanmar, likely stemming from recent decades when there was a lack of data. Most of the people interviewed for this case study were aware of national labor statistics, but few knew about the 19th ICLS definition of work and its impact on measuring the paid and unpaid work of women and men. Data users identified women's labor force participation and employment status in formal and informal sector as key measures, but were not aware how these and other indicators—for example on labor underutilization—could be better used to inform policies.

To increase awareness of and use of gender data in Myanmar, global evidence, case studies, success stories, and regional good practices could be presented together with national data. This could support improved understanding and guide the use of data in the policy cycle.

2. There is demand for new data on volunteer work, unpaid work, and time use.

Statistics on both paid and unpaid work are important. With no national time use survey undertaken yet, there is currently a lack of data on unpaid domestic and care work in Myanmar. There is support for collecting such data as well as research on the barriers and solutions to boost women's labor force participation. If data is available on how many hours women spend on domestic and care work compared to men, it will be possible to develop informed policies and initiatives to support a more equitable division of labor. Men can share the burden of domestic and care work and women can be empowered to develop skills for paid work.

> *"Housework—currently primarily done by women—is a measurable contribution towards national economy. Care giving and cooking for family and community events is time consuming and important but is not being captured in the statistics as work."*

3. Explaining breaks in statistical time series is a challenge.

The national statistics system has found it difficult to explain measurement concepts such as the unemployment rate to data users. The differences in the old and new definitions were hard to clarify and some users were not convinced, insisting that the rates should be the same as they were produced by the same ministry.

Some users emphasized that indicators produced from national surveys and censuses should be standardized as much as possible to show trends, facilitate comparison, and to avoid confusion for data users. It was a challenge to convince them of the need and benefits of the new approach.

The lessons learned emphasize the importance of consultations and communication with data users and policymakers before, during, and after making significant changes to official statistics. Materials that can support national statisticians to communicate the changes clearly in a way that makes sense and appeals to data users are also needed.

4. Data users need support to discuss, interpret, and apply statistics on work.

There is a weak relationship between data producers and data users, particularly policymakers, planners, and decisionmakers. Awareness of the available data in the country needs to be raised and policymakers and data users should be consulted and kept informed. Stakeholders interviewed for this case study identified data literacy as a priority.

The culture of evidence-based policy making is still developing in Myanmar. Methods for the dissemination and communication of labor statistics need review and redesign to be more effective. One idea is to improve online access to data; there is support for the national statistical office to take the lead. The statistical office could build on the strong investment in disseminating population and housing census results and apply the lessons learned to the LFS and other surveys.

> *"A comprehensive electronic platform should be established to ease access to official statistics for the data users in different sectors. The Central Statistical Organization can take responsibility to strengthen the existing system as national coordinator and lead authority for statistics."*

Studies and research on gender equality are tapping into available data, but this has not extended to the policymaking process yet. There is also an opportunity to conduct deeper analysis of existing data sources to produce new statistics on the intersectionality of issues such as the status of elderly women, women with a disabilities, women from hard-to-reach locations, ethnic minorities, and women from different levels of economic status.

In the future, UN Women aspires to support the Central Statistical Organization to conduct more gender analysis of labor force survey and other data to support data-driven policies in Myanmar. UN Women in partnership with the government of Myanmar plans to use established national gender fora as places to present and discuss the data and increase its relevance to policymaking. Other development partners interviewed suggested the need to explore methods to measure time use and to continue to fill gender data gaps with regular household surveys. Continued investment will help ensure the data collected is systematically analyzed with a gender lens and the resulting statistics made readily accessible.

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