

Population & Societies

Myanmar's first census in more than 30 years: A radical revision of the official population count

Thomas Spoorenberg*, **

According to the 2014 census conducted in Myanmar (also known as Burma), the country's population is 15% smaller than indicated by official estimates based on the previous census which dates back more than 30 years. Another reason for this discrepancy, as Thomas Spoorenberg explains here, is the fact that these estimates greatly underestimated the extent of fertility decline and emigration in recent years.

In 2014, Myanmar organized its first population census since 1983. The census results shed new light on the demography of a country for which very little information was previously available (see Box). [1] According to this new census, the country had 51.5 million inhabitants in 2014, ⁽¹⁾ 15% fewer than the official estimate (61 million in October 2012). How can this large discrepancy be explained?

The population pyramid changed shape between 1973 and 2014

The population pyramid based on the 2014 census is very different to that of 1973 (Figure 1), which was shaped like a pagoda. Its broad base reflects the high fertility of the 1970s and the decline in child mortality observed in the decades preceding the census. The narrowing at ages 25-30 is produced by the deficit of births during the Second World War and the period of upheaval that followed independence in January 1948. Slightly more than 40 years later, in 2014, the population pyramid shows that mortality has declined at all ages thanks to improved health and social conditions in the country. Its narrower base reveals a decline in fertility, and its lopsided shape points to a gender imbalance, with just 24.8 million males counted in the census, versus 26.7 million females. [1] This deficit is found

mainly at adult ages, and is explained largely by men's greater propensity to emigrate. ⁽²⁾

The official estimates that gave a population of more than 60 million – in contrast to the 51 million actually enumerated in 2014 – were based on an extrapolation of the 1983 census figures that did not take account of recent demographic changes, notably the fertility decline that began in the late 1970s, and migrant outflows to other countries of Southeast Asia. [2, 3]

Fertility decline, a forgotten factor in official estimates

Fertility has fallen to almost a third of the level observed 40 years ago (Figure 2). In the 1970s, women in Myanmar had almost 6 children on average, while the 2014 census gives a figure of just 2.3 children per women in the early 2010s.

* Population Division, United Nations, New York.

** The author takes sole responsibility for the opinions expressed in this article, which do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

(1) This figure includes an estimated population of 1.2 million, i.e. 2.3% of the national total, for the unenumerated zones in the states of Rakhine, Kachin and Kayin.

(2) These phenomena are observed in numerous censuses and are not specific to Myanmar.

Myanmar

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is slightly larger than France, with a surface area of 676,578 sq.km. Once an independent kingdom, the country was colonized by the British in the nineteenth century, becoming a province of the Indian Empire in 1886. Seventy years later, on 4 January 1948, Burma regained its independence, after being occupied by Japan during the Second World War. The early years of the new constitutional republic were marked by frequent insurrections, often led by communists. This period came to an end in 1962 with a military coup which brought General Ne Win to power. He ruled the country until 1988. Following the coup, his new government adopted a disastrous economic development plan known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, that turned Burma into one of the world’s poorest countries. The military junta remained in power until it was finally dissolved in 2011. Since then, a process of political and economic reform has been implemented.

Since its independence in 1948, the country has been afflicted by a series of interethnic and religious clashes which make it very difficult to collect social and demographic data in certain regions. The last three censuses could not be conducted across the entire national territory due to security risks in certain areas or provinces. The 2014 census did not include certain northern zones of Rakhine State, home to the Muslim Rohingya minority who are considered to be illegally present in Myanmar by the government, and some villages in the states of Kachin and Kayin. For Rakhine and Kachin, the population of the unenumerated areas was estimated using lists of households recorded during the cartographic studies that preceded the census. For Kayin, the Kayin National Union provided a count of persons living in the areas under its control. [1]

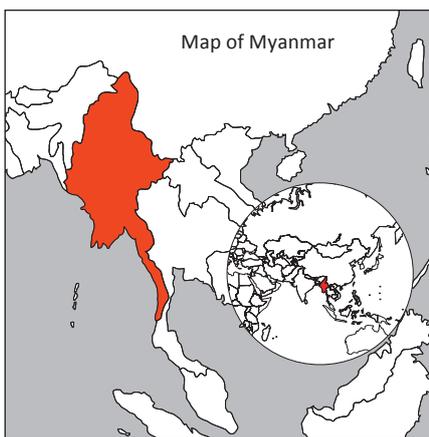
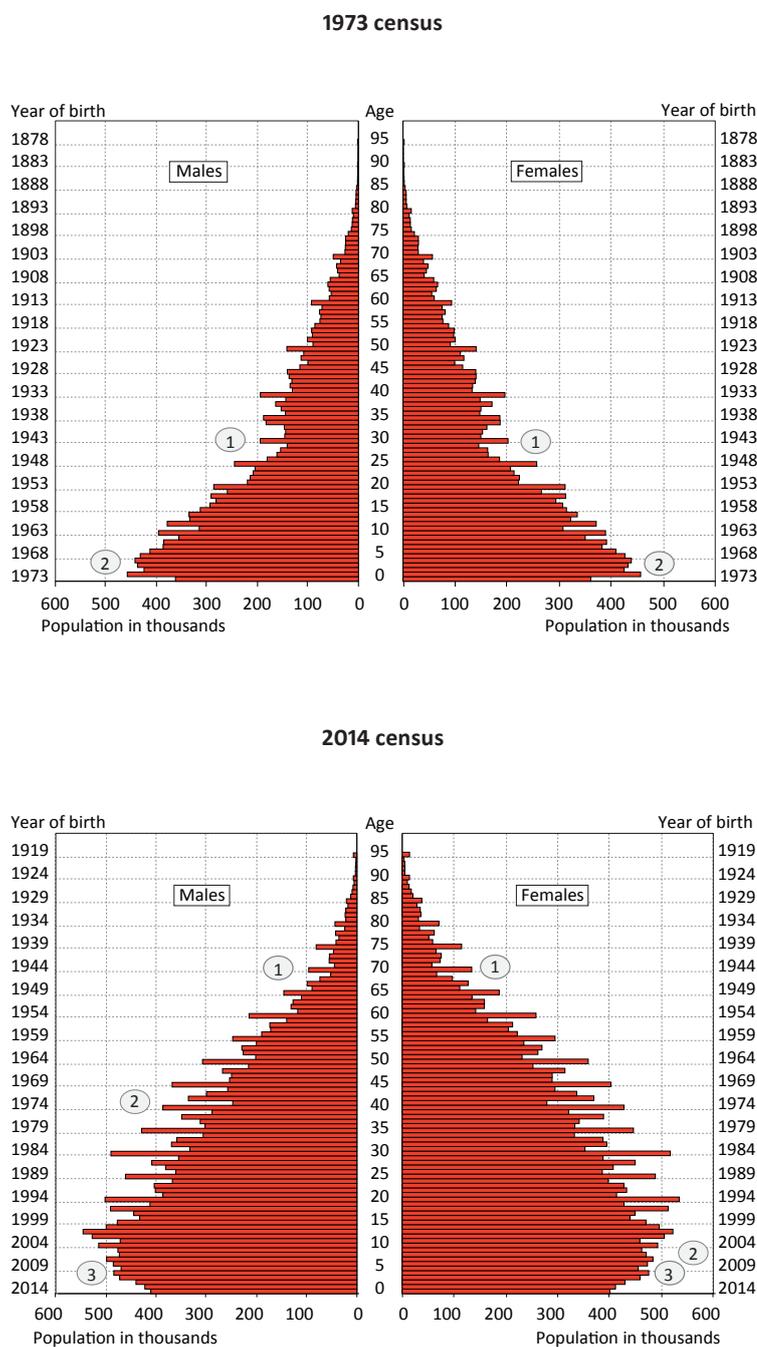


Figure 1. Population pyramid of Myanmar in 1973 and 2014



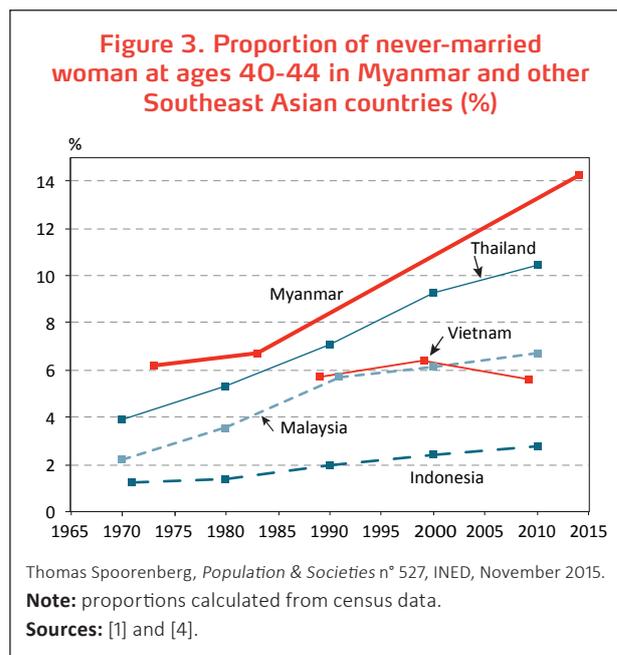
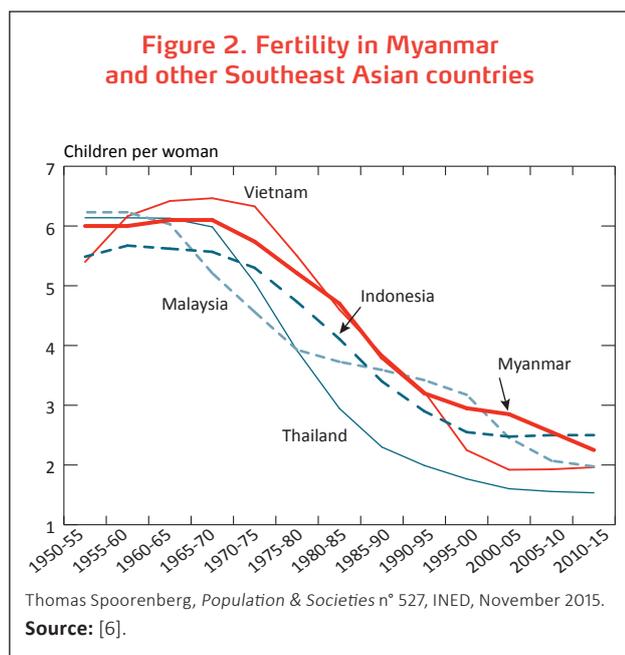
Thomas Spoorenberg, *Population & Societies* n° 527, INED, November 2015.

Legends:

- (1) Deficit of births due to the Second World War and independence in 1948.
- (2) Under-enumeration of young children due to omissions and biases in age reporting.
- (3) Effect of fertility decline to near-replacement level.

Notes:

The population pyramids reveal a tendency to age heaping, with a preference for ages ending in 0 or 5, and an under-enumeration of young children due to age reporting bias and their omission by the household head. Censuses in developing countries are frequently affected in this way.



The fertility decline can be attributed mainly to the increase in women’s age at first marriage, and to the fact that a large share of women – currently almost 14% at ages 40-44 – remain unmarried. This is one of the highest proportions in Asia, and sets Myanmar apart from the other countries of the region with similar fertility levels (Figure 3). In Thailand, the proportion of never-married women is also very high, but fertility is much lower, at around 1.4 children per woman. When fertility in Thailand was at the level currently observed in Myanmar, the proportion of never-married women at ages 40-44 was 7%, half that of Myanmar. Permanent singlehood in Asia is generally explained by the difficulty of reconciling, education, employment and family life. Myanmar is no exception to this rule, although the proportion of single women is surprisingly high, even among the least educated. [5]

If fertility is so strongly influenced by nuptiality, it is because women in Myanmar do not give birth outside marriage. Moreover, the country’s Buddhist culture places less social pressure on women to marry than elsewhere. Singlehood is socially accepted, and even seen as a pathway to spiritual development. These factors are compounded by the economic problems that delay marriage and childbearing. [5]

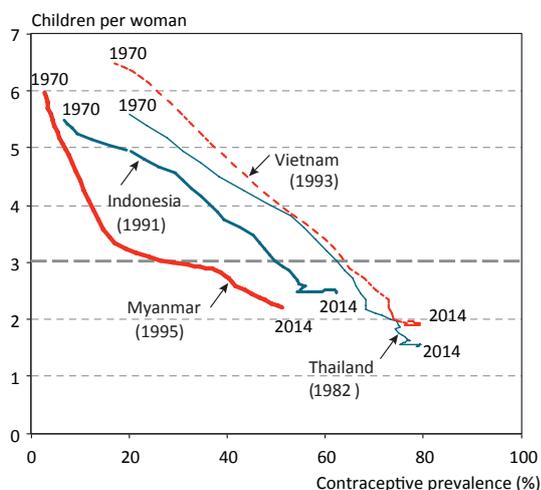
Most of the fertility decline in Myanmar occurred in a context of low contraceptive prevalence compared with other Southeast Asian countries. For example, when fertility fell below the threshold of 3 children per woman, only 29% of women in Myanmar were using contraception, compared with 50% in Indonesia and more than 60% in Thailand and Vietnam (Figure 4). It was not until the 1990s that family planning became widespread in Myanmar and contributed to the ongoing decrease in fertility.

Mass emigration, another forgotten factor

International migration is another factor that was overlooked in official population projections. Until recently, Myanmar was one of the world’s most closed-off countries. After General Ne Win came to power in 1962, many people left the country to escape from deteriorating living conditions, civil war, poverty, underemployment and political repression, and to look for a better life elsewhere. The majority went to Thailand, a country whose economy was expanding rapidly at that time, though total numbers are difficult to estimate. [2] To get a clearer idea of emigration flows, the 2014 census included questions on former members of each household who had emigrated abroad. Information was recorded on each emigrant’s kin relationship with the household head, his or her age, sex, year of departure and current country of residence. According to the census, there are more than two million Myanmar emigrants, the majority of whom live in Thailand and Malaysia (85%). Some 60% are male, and 71% are aged 30-54. More than two-thirds of them left Myanmar in the four years preceding the census.

These figures underestimate the actual number of emigrants. For example, when an entire household leaves the country, none of its members are counted in the census. And even in households where some members are still in Myanmar, emigrants may have been under-reported for fear of government reprisals. According to an official source, around 2.3 million Myanmar workers were living Thailand in 2013 (legally and illegally), [8] two-thirds of whom had entered the country over the previous ten years. More than 90% live with their spouse, and among the almost 69% who are parents, more than 55% have their children with them. If we make the simple

Figure 4. Fertility and contraceptive prevalence in Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia, 1970-2014



Thomas Spoorenberg, *Population & Societies* n° 527, INED, November 2015.

Sources: [6] and [7].

Notes:

The year in which fertility fell to 3 children per woman is given in brackets.

Contraceptive prevalence is the proportion of women, among those aged 15-49 with a husband or partner, who currently use a contraceptive method of any kind.

hypothesis that Myanmar workers in Thailand have just one child, and that this child was born in Myanmar, then the number of Myanmar nationals in Thailand will be 5.2 million. Emigrants from Myanmar living elsewhere in the world must also be added to this total. In other words, the estimated number of people who have left Myanmar in recent decades is equivalent to 10% of the country's current population. By omitting these departures, the official projections severely overestimated the country's current population size.

References

[1] The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2015, *The 2014 Population and Housing Census. The Union Report. Census Volume 2*, Nay Pyi Taw: The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Immigration and Population, Department of Population.

[2] Spoorenberg Thomas, 2013, "Demographic changes in Myanmar since 1983: An examination of official data", *Population and Development Review*, 39(2), pp. 309-324.

[3] Spoorenberg Thomas, 2015, "Provisional results of the 2014 census of Myanmar: The surprise that wasn't", *Asian Population Studies*, 11(1), pp. 4-6.

[4] United Nations Population Division, 2013, *World Marriage Data 2012*, New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (POP/DB/Marr/Rev2012).

[5] Jones Gavin W., 2004, "Not 'when to marry' but 'whether to marry': The changing context of marriage decisions in East and Southeast Asia", in Jones Gavin W., Ramdas Kamalini (eds.), *(Un)tying the Knot. Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage*, Singapore, Singapore University Press, pp. 3-56.

[6] United Nations Population Division, 2015, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*, New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, available online at: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DVD/>

[7] United Nations Population Division, 2015, *Model-based Estimates and Projections of Family Planning Indicators 2015*, New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, available online at: http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/family-planning/cp_model.shtml

[8] IOM, Country Mission in Thailand and The Asia Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University (2013), *Assessing Potential Changes in the Migration Patterns of Myanmar Migrants and Their Impacts on Thailand*, Bangkok, International Organization for Migration, Country Mission in Thailand.

Abstract

According to official statistics, Myanmar had a population of 61 million in 2012. These figures were obtained using population projections based on the most recent census conducted in 1983. A new population census conducted in Myanmar in April 2014 shed light on the extent of recent demographic changes in the country. Confirming the distinctive childbearing behaviour of Myanmar women and the scale of international migration, these new census data reveal that the population is 15% smaller than indicated by earlier official estimates.



Ined: 133, boulevard Davout, 75980 Paris, Cedex 20
 Director of Publications: Chantal Cases
 Editor-in-chief: Gilles Pison
 Editorial assistant: Marie-Paule Reydet
 Translator: Catriona Dutreuilh
 Layout: Isabelle Milan
 Printer: Jouve, 75001 Paris
 D.L. 4th quarter 2015 • ISSN 0184 77 83
 No 527 • November • Population & Societies
 Monthly bulletin of the French Institute for Demographic Studies

Every issue of *Population & Societies* is immediately accessible on the INED website: www.ined.fr/en/publications/

For an e-mail publication alert (11 annual issues): www.ined.fr/en/publications/population-and-societies/

For a postal subscription to *Population & Societies (in French)*: www.ined.fr/en/publications/abonnements/abonnements-population-et-societes/