One in every five households in Ayeyarwady had a migrant – the lowest number among surveyed states and regions – with the vast majority migrating internally (89%), mainly to Yangon (65%). Only 25 per cent migrated within the region, and very few migrated abroad.

A majority of migrants (65%) were not in the workforce prior to migrating, with a significant number of women (45%) in unpaid housework at origin. Overall, most women and migrants moved into formal paid work or found stable employment at destination.

With few assets and incentives to remain at origin, individuals from landless and small farming households were much more likely to migrate than those from households with large agricultural lands. These individuals, along with the small number of people in stable employment prior to migration, mostly (54%) worked in agriculture. This remained hardly so at destination, with only 9 per cent of migrants remaining in agricultural work.

Most Ayeyarwady migrants, both internal (77%) and international (84%), actively send remittances home. Both men and women send remittances, but the amount that women send is slightly lower, most likely because they receive smaller salaries than men.
Background

Lying between the Bay of Bengal to the west and Andaman Sea to the east, the Ayeyarwady ‘Delta’ Region shares internal borders with Rakhine State, Bago Region and Yangon Region. The National Census reported the population of Ayeyarwady as 6,184,829 ranking it second only to Yangon Region in population size. ¹ It is the third most densely populated state/region in Myanmar with 176.5 people per square kilometre, 88% of whom live in rural areas – making it the state/region with the lowest urban population in the country.

Ayeyarwady has long been known as the rice bowl of Myanmar due to its extensive rice cultivation and fishery industries – an important source of food, income and employment. However, the effects of climate change – including water drainage, salt intrusion and flooding – make its communities increasingly vulnerable. The Ayeyarwady Region experiences high out-migration levels and the 2014 Census found that, after the intra-regional migration within Yangon (much of which is considered residential migration), Ayeyarwady produced the second highest number of internal migrants in the country. A significant proportion of migrants from Ayeyarwady Region also head to Yangon – far outweighing the number of migrants from other states and regions.

This brief presents findings from the CHIME study relating to migration in and from Ayeyarwady Region. It begins by presenting findings related to

*drivers and patterns of Ayeyarwady migration. This is followed by sections on remittances, poverty reduction and welfare, precarity during migration, and social impacts. It concludes with considerations for future action.*

Patterns of migration in Ayeyarwady

The study found that the percentage of migrant sending households in Ayeyarwady is lower than the other surveyed regions and states. One fifth of Ayeyarwady households have at least one migrant, whereas the average across studied regions is one quarter. The percentage of Ayeyarwady households with migrants is similar to the 20 per cent estimated by the World Bank QSEM studies. Ayeyarwady migrants overwhelming head towards internal destinations (89%), the highest rate of internal migration among surveyed states and regions. In the small number of cases where they migrate abroad, they mainly head to Thailand.

Women’s migration may be overtaking the migration of men in Ayeyarwady Region. The study recorded more women migrating from Ayeyarwady overall, and women also outnumbered men among those who migrated for work. One reason for this phenomenon is that the industrial zones in Yangon Region have created plenty of job opportunities for women who are less likely to be income earners at origin. Many young females from Ayeyarwady Region work in the garment and textile industries, and these are regarded as safe and decent jobs by their families. Women and girls who have worked in the cities may
recruit their sisters or peers from their villages to work in the same factories. Through their social networks, more young females migrate out of their villages to the cities.

**Migrants from Ayeyarwady are the only group whose main destination was outside of their own region.** 65 per cent of internal migrants from Ayeyarwady in this study headed to Yangon, followed by 23 per cent who moved within Ayeyarwady. The popularity of Yangon as a destination for migrants from Ayeyarwady is likely influenced by the geographical proximity of the two regions, as they share a border.

Ayeyarwady Region data shows higher mobility among individuals from landless or small farming households than among households with large agricultural land. The ability of individuals from households with a lesser livelihoods assets base to migrate is also linked to the proximity of Ayeyarwady to Yangon, as this keeps the cost of migration relatively low.

65 per cent of migrants from Ayeyarwady were not in employment prior to migration. They were not in employment mainly because they were in school (49%) or because they were engaging in unpaid family labour (41%). The majority of those engaged in unpaid family labour were female. 80 per cent of migrants from Ayeyarwady were found to be migrating for the first time.

As in Rakhine, Ayeyarwady saw a pattern of sharp decline in the proportion of people engaging in agricultural employment after migration. The rate of employment in agriculture among people from Ayeyarwady prior to migration was 54 per cent, and it dropped to 9 per cent at destination. Internal migrants were found to most often work in manufacturing (20%) and other service activities (17%).

**Migrants from Ayeyarwady are more likely to have stable employment at destination than migrants from the other surveyed regions and states.** The reason for this is plausibly a combination of geographical proximity of Ayeyarwady and Yangon and the greater availability of employment in non-agricultural sectors in the latter. 66 per cent of migrants who were in unstable employment prior to migration moved into stable employment at destination, acquiring job and income predictability.

**Drivers of migration**

Consistent with other surveyed regions and states, seeking an improvement in employment or income is the most often-cited reason for both men and women from Ayeyarwady to migrate (62% of men and 57% of women cited work/income as a primary reason for migration). As mentioned earlier, Ayeyarwady was the only surveyed region/state where there were more women than men migrating for work, and this was reflected in the drivers of migration as well.

In-depth interviews also show that migration is used as a way out of poverty and debt. Debts were incurred for a variety of reasons: to cope during the lean season, when employment is scarce; to cover education and health expenses; and to fund migration. Families borrow money from multiple sources, including relatives, employers, microfinance institutions and private money lenders, and attempt to repay their debts through a variety of means. The case study in Box 1 illustrates the practice of issuing wage advances for future work in agricultural fields during the peak

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2 ‘Other service activities’ includes a variety of personal service activities not covered elsewhere in the Industrial Standard Industry Classification (ISIC) classification.
In these cases, people become trapped in a cycle of debt where, because there is little work in the lean season, they use advance payments from “patrons” (i.e. employers) to meet daily expenses.

**Box 1: Migration from debt and dishonour to peace of mind**

The respondent is a 52 year old woman from Ayeyarwady with eight children. She owed money to several people and had to sell pieces of her land to pay back her debts. Apart from these debts, she also borrowed from other farmers under the promise to pay back the debt by working on their farms during the peak season. She mentioned the people who she owed her farming labour to, came to scold and fight with her. She described this arduous and difficult period in her life:

“People came from here and there to ask for money back and I do not even want to talk about how much I cried. I had to apologise to this person and that person. We were in so much trouble as they would not let us go without paying back. We were in debt for about 12 acres and, during the harvest time, a farmer came to call us but we were already working for other farms to whom we were indebted, and these farmers fought over our labour. Everything turned out to be okay when two of my daughters went to work in Yangon. We did not have to work in someone else’s farms anymore. Our minds are in peace now and before I was almost going crazy. Despite our difficulties, I must help my other children go to school. Because if they are not educated they will be in trouble. That is why we have to think of ways to ensure their education.”

At the same time, some migrants end up in debt bondage-like and dependency relationships with their employers, resulting in extreme hardship as illustrated in the case of an Ayeyarwady fishing family. The respondent’s husband worked on a fishing boat for a trader who recruited him under the promise of paying him a lump sum in advance. However, the trader did not always pay the advance at the promised time. The respondent’s husband stayed with the trader for over nine years and did not leave, even though he knew this trader paid less than other traders.

**Economic drivers are often cited along with other social drivers**, such as supporting the education of younger siblings, or paying for the medical treatment of sick family members. Aspirations for modern employment and life styles were also cited, including the acquisition of new attitudes and social skills, as shown in the accounts below:

They become a bit more open-minded. They gain new knowledge. Before, they didn’t have experience of travelling alone and didn’t dare to speak confidently. Now they can speak, travel and communicate better. They respect our culture. They don’t swerve off course. (A 52-year-old female respondent in Ayeyarwady region)

Some people think of them (her two sons) as doctors since they are good looking and sell products at the hospitals. . . . He (referring to her elder son) wears a white shirt and long pants at the office. . . . They look inspired and I’m happy at seeing my children dressed nicely. (A 62-year-old female respondent in Ayeyarwady region)

**Remittances**

The study found that the majority of Ayeyarwady migrant workers actively send remittances home, and this applies to both women and men, as well as to those migrating internally (77%) and internationally (84%). Women migrant workers on average send slightly less remittances than men, and this may be attributed to the fact that women receive smaller salaries than men, as attested to by a number of women migrant worker respondents.3

Remittance-receiving households (especially among those receiving internal remittances) in Ayeyarwady most frequently used remittances on food. Ayeyarwady was the only surveyed region where the second most frequent use for internal and international remittances was as a source of productive investments; between 24 and 29 per cent of households receiving internal and international remittances used them for productive purposes. Some migrant households also recounted how they spent remittances on repaying debts, household appliances, renovating houses, buying land and other status-enhancing uses, as the case study in Box 2 illustrates.

**Box 2: Remittances bring gradual improvement to families**

A 49-year-old father in Ayeyarwady with a daughter working in Yangon, used the remittances sent by his daughter to buy household appliances, pay back some debts, as well as to support his younger daughter’s education, thus bringing about a gradual improvement in their lives:

There were a few changes after she left. Our livelihood improved a little bit. We could manage to live a simple life. We bought things we need for this house. Now we also save money, we get enough to

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3 See CHIME thematic brief on Gender for more details on the gendered pattern of migration and employment.
While it was not possible to identify a causal impact of migration and/or remittances on household welfare from the data collected, the data suggest that remittances are an important channel through which migration benefits families at home. However, the data also suggests that internal remittances do not have as much of an effect on poverty reduction as international remittances, due to lower amounts remitted by the former. As reported earlier, Ayeyarwady is a region much more likely to produce internal migrants, but at the same time, Ayeyarwady migrants are also more likely to remit than migrants from other surveyed regions and states.

The combinations of these factors, as well as a complex set of other factors, including but not limited to the role the migrant played in the household economy before migration, the contribution they make as a migrant to the household economy, and how the household adapts after migration, have implications on the welfare of families back home.

**Poverty reduction and welfare**

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The study also documented a number of stories where migrants become trapped in precarious, informal and poorly paid jobs with little means to seek redress in case of exploitation, accident and deception at the workplace. Precarity also exists beyond the workplace, as migrants, in order to save and remit more money at destination, often compromise their living conditions, rest time, safety, and food. While successful migration stories may result in an upgraded social status for migrants and migrant sending families at origin, a deterioration of social status may occur while migrants work at destinations under a subordinate status.

Migrants spoke of hazardous working conditions and of feeling degraded by their jobs and their employers' attitudes, but also mentioned carrying on because they saw migration as the only way of paying off debts, meeting their spending needs, and securing stable livelihoods at home, as illustrated in Box 3.

**Enduring precarity and discrimination during migration**

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**Community impacts**

The in-depth interviews showed numerous and diverse impacts at the community level emerging from migration, including shifting gender dynamics, labour shortages, the development of a parallel system of loans and financing, investments in infrastructure and education, as well as changes in attendance to public events. The interviews also recorded resourceful ways in which villagers and migrants adapt to such changes.

While it is difficult to say whether migration has resulted in a permanent transformation in gender roles or the division of labour and assets within households, it is clear that migration has opened up new opportunities for women. Young women migrants' opportunities are not only work-related. Through migration, young women migrants also experience new opportunities for education, personal growth, dress and lifestyle, whilst back home, their social status within the family sees changes too. Men's migration similarly causes social change, and there has been a shift in tasks previously performed by village adult men: now young boys, as well as wives and mothers, carry out such tasks. The case in Box 4 is illustrative.

**Box 3: Humiliating treatment by employers**

A 60-year-old return migrant respondent in Ayeyarwady had accumulated extensive migration experiences over two decades. The respondent described how his employer in Thailand, whilst paying the respondent well and showering him with benefits for his son's novice monk initiation ceremony, would not allow him to step inside the employer's house and pointed towards things with his feet (a sign of disrespect). The respondent felt discriminated, insulted, and described experiencing feelings of being trapped and of being vulnerable to being arrested as an irregular migrant. Nevertheless, he encouraged his children to return and to work for the same employer because of the decent pay, and because he knew that such migration could bring positive changes in their family’s life at home.

**Box 4: Wife representing the household in the absence of her husband**

A 39-year-old Ayeyarwady woman – a mother of six and wife of a fisherman who is often away for three months at a time – described how, in her husband’s absence, she managed the household finances, sometimes pawning jewellery to pay workers. She described her responsibilities:
Many respondents also felt that out-migration had led to labour shortages in their home villages, and that this had impacted agricultural work and participation in important social occasions. But from the left-behind families’ perspectives, the impacts of migration on the village’s labour allocation for social events was of greater concern. This had increased the burden on the remaining villagers and, because many people had migrated, they had to take on greater responsibilities and additional work when organising or coordinating social occasions and religious affairs. On the other hand, a very small number of left-behind family members mentioned difficulties caused by labour shortages on agricultural work. This may perhaps be because most migrant-sending households are either smallholders or landless.

When asked about migration’s impact on their communities, a number of respondents expressed feeling a sense of nostalgia when recalling the previously richer social life of their villages. Other respondents were more positive about the social impact of migration on their communities, and expressed that remittances contribute, financially, to a wide range of social occasions and community affairs, such as weddings, funerals, religious activities, repairing roads, cleaning villages, supporting educational projects and community infrastructure.

What was ultimately highlighted in this study, are the different ways in which both migrants and villagers who remained in the community, remain resilient and respond and adapt to the changing demographic and economic conditions that migration is bringing about.

From evidence to action: what can we learn from CHIME’s findings?

1. The study highlights strong regional differences in the migration patterns and outcomes, confirming the need for regionally tailored policies that factor regional migration dynamics into development planning and interventions.

2. The data demonstrates how young women, in migrating from Ayeyawady and into (mainly) Yangon, leave behind situations of unstable or no employment and become formal income contributors to their families. In this process of migration, they are exposed to multiple experiences and opportunities for empowerment, but they also face familial pressure and high expectations to succeed. Interventions to mitigate the risks associated with migration by supporting young women to build mutual support networks, should be formulated to facilitate a rewarding and empowering migration experience.

3. In general, future programming should work to reduce the incidence of migration failure and increase avenues for safe and gainful migration for migrants and their families, allowing the benefits of migration to be felt more strongly and the costs to be mitigated as much as possible.

4. Respondent’s feedback on the community impact of migration varies, with some respondents expressing concerns about the impact migration had on the social life of their community, while others see migration and remittances as a net positive for the development of the village. While the possibilities of migration for remittances and poverty reduction were a central question of CHIME, further research is needed to understand and formulate interventions to support local communities to adapt to, as well as to harness the benefits of, the rapid rural-urban migration that Myanmar is currently undergoing.

This brief is based on CHIME research conducted by Dr. Priya Deshingkar, Dr. Julie Litchfield and Dr. Wen-Ching Ting.

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