



# Migrant Employment

Migration dynamics, patterns and impacts from the CHIME research project

A street seller carrying brooms in Kyauk Padaung, Mandalay Region.  
 © Metta Development Foundation 2017/Ko Oo

## Highlights

- ▶ Both young and old aspire to more modern lifestyles away from physically demanding work “under the sun”, the young for themselves and the old for their children.
- ▶ Rakhine migrants are more likely to move into precarious employment with irregular incomes than migrants from any other region.
- ▶ Employers use dubious ‘contracts’ and withhold wages to prevent workers from withdrawing their labour and employ workers in dangerous and exploitative conditions.

## Background

Migration brings opportunities for migrants and their families but also comes with risks, including low pay, precarious working conditions, exploitation and a lack of social security. In recent years, there has been increased international urgency to promote decent work and deliver quality jobs for workers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

## About the CHIME project

This briefing paper is based on research conducted as part of the “Capitalising Human Mobility for Poverty Alleviation and Inclusive Development for Myanmar” (CHIME) project.

The project was implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the University of Sussex, Metta Development Foundation, and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population of the Government of Myanmar.

Financial support for the research was provided by the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT).

The research was conducted in four regions/states – Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Rakhine and Shan – in spring/summer 2017. Using mixed methods consisting of household surveys, qualitative interviews, and community discussions, CHIME explored the complex relationships between migration, poverty and development.

The total sample covered in the quantitative household survey (3,116 rural households) is regionally representative for Mandalay and Ayeyarwady but not for Shan or Rakhine due to varying degrees of access to sampled villages.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines decent work as work that is productive, delivers a fair income and security in the workplace, as well as social protection for families, prospects for personal development and social integration.<sup>2</sup> Decent work means equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. It offers dignity, equality, a fair income, safe working conditions, protection from exploitation, and gives workers the freedom to express concern, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing paper presents findings from the CHIME study related to migrants' employment, with particular attention to the decency of their working conditions. We begin with a section on the social drivers of migration, which highlights the central role of aspirations. This is followed by sections on migrant regularity/irregularity, precarious employment, working conditions, and gender inequality. The penultimate section then draws attention to some of the effects of indecent work and, in the final section, we outline a series of considerations for future action.

## Aspirations and reality

**Migrants move in search of better jobs and higher incomes at the destination rather than because of a shortage of work at home.**

In fact, only in Rakhine do a sizeable proportion (33%) of migrants report a lack of work at home.

**Migration decision-making is inextricably tied to aspirations for a 'better life'.** This includes further education and modern lifestyles, especially among younger migrants who express a desire to “not work under the sun” or “in the mud”. Both young and old aspire for more modern lifestyles away from physically demanding work “under the sun”, the young for themselves and the old for their children.

**Older generations aspire to better lives for their children.** When their children obtain higher levels of education, parents begin to aspire for more comfortable life and decent jobs for them, with better pay and conditions. Parents whose children had migrated to the city, were pleased that their children no longer had to participate in physically demanding rural labour. Although there were sometimes tensions around changes brought about by migration, they were generally pleased to see their children dressing smartly and using modern appliances. Some also expressed pleasure that their children's skin colour had lightened as a result of the changing nature of their work.

## Regular and irregular employment

**Once at destination, the majority of migrants move into regular employment** (defined as having a steady working pattern



Labourers hopping on a mini bus on the way to work in Kyauk Padaung, Mandalay Region. © Metta Development Foundation 2017/Ko Oo

Two workers shoveling gravel in Ywangan, Shan State. © Metta Development Foundation 2017/Ko Oo

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

but not necessarily that they have formal contracts) and this pattern generally holds across the regions. Through migration, 66 per cent of Ayeyarwady and 56 per cent of Mandalay migrants who were engaged in irregular employment prior to migration moved into regular employment. At 43 per cent, the percentage was lowest among Rakhine migrants who were also most likely to take up other forms of employment (such as performance-based).

**Despite the overall pattern of finding regular employment, there are important regional variations to consider.** The data suggest that migrants from Ayeyarwady have a higher probability of having a regular job in destination (82%) than migrants from the other study regions (at 62-70%). Meanwhile, migrants from Rakhine have much higher probabilities of irregular employment. Of the Rakhine migrants surveyed, 26% were working irregularly in destination (33% of international migrants and 20% of internal migrants). The high percentage of international Rakhine migrants working irregularly is exceptional as generally migrants were more likely to secure regular employment through international migration (79%) than internal (69%). For international migrants from other states and regions, irregular employment is relatively rare (1-4% in Mandalay and Ayeyarwady).

CHIME research also suggests that a collusion between brokers and employers may be channelling disadvantaged migrants into some of the worst 3D (“dirty, dangerous and demanding”) jobs at destination.

## Precarious employment

According to the 1993 international classification of status in employment (ICSE), workers in precarious employment include those in casual, seasonal or temporary employment where the contract of employment allows the employer to terminate the contract at short notice/at will. In other words, employment in insecure conditions, where workers can be dismissed without recourse to protective legislation and are only paid for the hours worked, without cover for sickness or injury.

Jobs typical in urban locations include work in eateries, guesthouses or construction projects, and growing numbers of young women are also

migrating to Yangon for new jobs in the city’s garment factories. Although migrants’ families often regard these jobs as decent and safe, they can be extremely precarious. Meanwhile, older kinds of migration such as rural-rural migration of men as gold and gemstone miners and women as local farm labour continues.

One of the most common challenges migrants face is securing stable earnings and vulnerability often emerged from irregular working patterns and employers’ practices of withholding pay (Box 1). The situation is especially difficult for irregular migrants who have even less recourse to social protection and redress mechanisms. If migrants can stay with members of their wider kinship network, they are protected against some kinds of risks but exposed to others (e.g. exploitative domestic work and isolation).

Although precarity exists at all stages of migration, and some migrants fall prey to extreme vulnerability and uncertainty, many still benefit from migration. Relatively speaking, migration can be seen as a way of accessing more decent work, particularly if a full spectrum of working conditions is considered. This is despite the fact that at destination migrants tend to take up the least paid “3D” work.

### Box 1: Precarity

A 57-year-old male return migrant in Rakhine State went to work in Thailand together with friends in 2006. Friends in Thailand arranged transportation across the border and found fishery jobs for them; however, the working conditions were below his expectations so the man shifted to masonry work. He needed to wait about 20 days before he could get the other job, and then had to wait until the end of the month to be paid. By the time he was paid in the new job one and a half months had passed. He recalled hiding in the jungle from the police’s investigation at this time:

*When I moved from one job to another, I had to wait about 20 days and spend all the money I have earned by then. Since we were not legal workers, we had to flee when the police came to our work site. We had to stay 2, 3 days in the forest.*

An accident broke the man's hand and he was hospitalised for 20 days. His employer allowed him to stay without working for 3-4 months but would only pay him 3,000 Bahts (less than 150,000 Kyats) per month. It was difficult for the man to survive in Thailand and he decided to return his village. He explained that irregular payment made migrants more vulnerable in the foreign countries and said that his daughter faced similar issues in China where her wages did not even cover her expenses:

*With my daughters, their factory was not running well and they could not work full days. They were paid only for the days they worked. They could work only 10 days in a month. The wage they earned could not cover their expenses. So, they could not send money.*

## Dangerous working conditions

Some migrants' occupations such as gold mining and unregulated manufacturing units such as steel cutting units and slipper-making factories are very high risk and a lack of safety and employment regulations puts migrant workers in danger. The kind of conditions presented in Box 2 are not unusual. Many migrants end up working in jobs that are invisible, hazardous, inadequately protected by labour laws, and highly vulnerable to exploitation. The dangers faced are compounded by the precarity of migrant workers, especially irregular workers.

Several cases, including that of the 39-year-old gold mine worker (Box 2), illustrate the dire consequences of migration failures of households. Having financed migration through mortgaging of the family land, he returned after 8 months work with earnings of just 200,000 Kyats. 50,000 Kyats of this was spent releasing the family's land; the rest was used to support the family for a next month and a half. As their house was dilapidated, the man subsequently decided to migrate to China to help pay for a new house.

### Box 2: Dangerous working conditions

→ A 24-year-old Rakhine man in Yangon was working at a steel cutting factory where the pay was 60,000 Kyats per month, with free

accommodation and food. He faced precarious working conditions cutting and soldering iron sheets. Five months into employment, he suffered a serious injury to his leg and was hospitalised for three months. He had no idea about his rights. The employer paid for medical treatment and his salary but there was no compensation.

→ A 39-year-old Rakhine man found a job in a mine through social networks together with two others from his village. The miners used mechanical diggers but the workers had to pay for their own food, petrol and the cost of using the machines. The mine was highly susceptible to erosion and collapsing sides. When this happened work had to stop; however, earnings were based on the amount of gold found so workers would dig despite poor conditions, and even in the dark. A collapse did occur and two workers were killed. The respondent decided to return home but, after 8 months work, brought only 200,000 Kyats with him.

→ A 27-year-old female migrant from Rakhine works at a slipper-making factory in Yangon. Her job is to apply glue in the manufacturing process. The fumes from the glue and paints were extremely strong and made her sick, forcing her to take two days off. The employer deducted her salary for both days (36,000 Kyats) and cancelled the employees' production bonus. Although she had contributed towards the government social security system for factory employees every month, she only obtained the social security card 6-7 months later meaning that she could not afford private medical treatment and had to buy medicines from a pharmacy instead of visiting a doctor. The factory talked about compensating them if any accident occurred at the factory but two months previously, when a female co-worker was injured, the respondent suspected she was dismissed without compensation.

## Brokerage and bonded labour

When asked why people continue using brokers, respondents noted their ability to connect migrants to employers and the greater selection of opportunities available through brokers:

*When we go with broker, we don't have to contact the employer directly. Well, if we go with a broker then we can choose the work we want to go to and the broker will help us to get that job. If we go by ourselves without a broker, then we need to have people who stay there and who know things there.*

However, when migrants rely on intermediaries to help with migration costs, it brings risks of being exploited or cheated, particularly for irregular migrants. Although uncommon, there were cases where cheating had occurred, with serious consequences for migrants. In order to escape poverty at home, migrants may accept broker arrangements that expose them to new forms of domination, constrained temporally and spatially at destination. The examples in Box 3 exemplify how employers use dubious “contracts” and/or withhold wages to prevent workers withdrawing their labour.

## Gender inequality

One of the principles of decent work is equality of opportunity and equal treatment of women and men. However, gendered inequalities are clearly seen in migrant labour markets at origin and destination. In Myanmar, as elsewhere, there are sharp culturally-determined gender differences in the remuneration of male and female labour for equivalent jobs. These are based on stereotypes of what women are capable of, and what it is socially acceptable for them to do. “Women’s work” is typically regarded as lighter by employers (who are often men) and therefore deserving of lower wages, even if it is equally, or more, physically demanding and highly skilled. However, while women generally earn less than men, men are more likely to be working in irregular employment; 81 per cent of migrants with irregular income in our study were men.

### Box 3: Bonded labour

A 24-year-old Rakhine man migrated to Yangon because his father’s sickness had created financial difficulties for the family. He stayed with his sister who had worked at a sewing factory in Yangon. He spent 6 months as a security guard with very low pay (30,000 Kyats per month, with free accommodation and food). The company kept his ID card and asked him to sign a contract stating that he could not quit until after a certain period of time, otherwise he would not get paid in full. However, the company failed to pay him as they initially agreed and eventually he had to quit without payment and without getting his ID card back.

The respondent is a 41-year-old woman in Rakhine State. Her 18-year-old daughter migrated to China five months ago in a group of 12 via a broker. The villagers had contacted him because they wanted to find work in China. The broker did not charge them but the daughter has to repay the costs of migration through work. However, once the daughter left the village, they lost contact. The mother was extremely worried and when she finally heard from her daughter she said she had been cheated by the broker:

*She said that the broker deceived them and took all my daughter’s salaries in advance. She said: “Mom, we had to work at water purification factory. But, the broker took all of our salaries in advance. We didn’t get our salary. That is why all of us (12 persons) ran away from the factory with a Chinese guy. Fortunately, we accidentally met a Rakhine guy asking us where we were going. The Rakhine guy helped us and searched for a new job for us at a fishing factory.”*

## Effects of indecent work

Initial disadvantages, costs and risks of migration can be gradually replaced with more prosperity for the migrant and their family – debts may be repaid, food security improves, siblings are educated, elderly parents are cared for and the social standing of the family rises. Migrants with more skills and/or with well-paid jobs in destination can effect these changes faster. For those trapped in poorly paid and indecent jobs at the bottom of production chains, however, change can be slow or imperceptible. A number of families also reported being adversely affected by the irregular income and periods of unemployment associated with indecent work. In some cases, this led to more debt and the sale of assets (Box 4).

There are also important psychosocial benefits of indecent work. While successful migration may raise the social status of migrants and their families at origin, at work in destinations, migrants themselves may experience deteriorated and/or subordinate status. One 60-year-old return migrant, described how his employer in Thailand would not allow him to step inside his house and pointed to things with his feet. He felt insulted and discriminated against but as an irregular migrant was also trapped and vulnerable. The man also recognised that the employer paid well and had showered him with benefits for his son's novice initiation ceremony. Despite the problems, he encouraged his children to work for the same employer because of the good pay and because of the changes migration could effect on the family's life at home. Thus, while migrants sometimes felt degraded by the jobs they were doing and the attitudes of their employers, they carried on because it was their only means of paying off debts, meeting their spending needs and securing stable livelihoods at home. For these migrants, the psychosocial costs are thought to be worth the gains.

### Box 4: Sale of assets and mounting debts

The respondent is a 45-year-old woman in Shan State with six children. The two middle

sons are migrating to Thailand and two other younger children are still studying. Her elder son went to Thailand through his uncle's network. Initially her son got a job at a tofu shop but changed to a painting job. However, uncertain working days led to unstable earnings, which created problems for the family.

*We do not own farmland anymore. Our family was not doing well so my son went to Thailand three years ago. Since we didn't have money to invest, we borrowed money from other people with 10 per cent monthly interest. He sent a little bit of money once in a while but it was all spent to pay for the interest. He hasn't sent us money in one year because he was not doing well, and so we had to sell our farmland to pay back the debt as it kept growing.*

Another respondent – a 20-year-old male from a poor Rakhine family – explained how his brother migrated to Thailand through a broker to improve the family's financial situation. He paid 500,000 Kyats, of which his parents had to borrow 300,000 Kyats from friends and family. The brother worked at an iron factory and sent remittances twice, allowing the family to start repaying the loan. However, this came to an abrupt end when an iron bar fell on him, causing serious injury. He is unable to work or send more money back, forcing the family to mortgage their house and land.



A cook chopping meat at a local street restaurant in Lashio, Shan State. © Metta Development Foundation 2017/Ko Oo

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

1. The study highlights the need for better information about job availability and opportunities to connect migrants in origin to employers in destination, as well as information campaigns on migrant rights, wage rates and conditions of work that would help migrants choose wisely.
2. Barriers to safe and regular migration appear to make migration more hazardous and risky rather than controlling the flows of people and, therefore, should be relaxed. Tightening restrictions on migration will only push more people into irregular routes, increasing the risks and costs of migration, as well as reliance on brokers.
3. There is a need to improve the working conditions of migrants in urban areas and to promote decent work practices, especially in 3-D (“dirty, dangerous and demanding”) jobs. Improving safety and working conditions will help to reduce the incidence of migration failure, limiting the costs to migrants and their families. There is also a need for more disaggregated data on low-paid migrant occupations so that targeted interventions can be developed.
4. Migrants’ access to government services and social protection needs to be increased. This would help migrants who fall into situations of precarity due to exploitative employment practices or illness and who may fall through gaps in existing provision. At the same time, since there will always be cases where things go wrong, there is also a need to improve mechanisms for exploited migrants to seek redress.
5. Interventions that work toward structural gender equality, and especially equal pay, would increase female empowerment while also increasing the amount of remittances sent home by women, increasing the benefits of migration for families and communities
6. Given the particular likelihood of irregular employment among Rakhine migrants, and especially Rakhine men, there is a need for research and policy to focus on this group in order to increase the potential benefits of their migration.

The CHIME study is available in the following formats in English and Myanmar:

- Full report
- Regional Report (Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Rakhine)
- Thematic Report (Gender, Agriculture, Urbanisation, Poverty and Indebtedness, Remittances, Social Impacts)

For more information about the CHIME study, please email [iomyangon@iom.int](mailto:iomyangon@iom.int)

### **IOM – International Organization for Migration**

**Address** – No. 50-B , Thiri Mingalar 2nd Street, Ward 8, Kamayut township. Yangon, Myanmar.

**Office phone** - +95 9 73236679 – 80 , +95 1 532279, 523509

**Fax** - +95 1 532279

**Email** – [iomyangon@iom.int](mailto:iomyangon@iom.int)