



# Social impacts of migration in Myanmar

Migration dynamics, patterns and impacts from the CHIME research project

Family going fishing near Myaung Mya, Ayeyarwady Region.  
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## Highlights

- ▶ Migrants face daunting challenges in the initial phases of migration, finding suitable housing and stable, regular employment. It is also a difficult period for families at origin as the costs of migration are felt but not countered by gains.
- ▶ In most cases, the initial costs of migration are replaced with more prosperity for the sending family. Debts are repaid, food security improves, siblings are educated, elderly parents cared for and home improvements made, all resulting in raised social status for the family.
- ▶ While successful migration raises the status of migrants and their families at origin, migrants experience subordinated status on route and in destination and, in cases of migration failure, the family may fall further into poverty and lose social standing.
- ▶ Successful migrants are investing in community infrastructure and contributing to social events. Villagers generally express appreciation of migrants' remittances, however, some believe migration has adversely affected village social life.

## 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.

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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.

- ▶ Gender norms related to labour force participation and the division of family labour seem to be shifting due to migration, as well as wider changes in society.

## Background

In 2014, at the time of the last census, there were around 9.39 million internal migrants in Myanmar, equivalent to 20% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Internal migration towards Yangon, in particular, has increased – with new jobs in the garment industry, small-scale manufacturing and informal services. Myanmar has also become the most significant migrant source country within the Greater Mekong Sub-region with 4.25 million Myanmar nationals estimated to be living abroad.<sup>2</sup> Such large-scale migration has important social effects, not only on migrants and their families but on society as a whole. Given the scale and significance of migration flows, it is important to examine these impacts, and not only as they relate to economies.

In this briefing paper, we present extracts of the CHIME study relating to the social impacts of migration in Myanmar. By connecting economic and social factors, the findings enrich our understanding of the long-term impacts of migration and remittances. The briefing has four main parts – impacts on individual migrants, impacts on their families,

impacts on sending communities, and wider social impacts – and concludes with some considerations for future action.

### Box 1: Lack of accommodation in the city

The respondent is a 27-year-old female from Rakhine who migrated because of family poverty. Three out of four siblings are now in Yangon. Upon arriving in Yangon, the woman had a wait of a month before being able to find a job. During this time, she had to move three times because she could not afford to rent accommodation. Once she got a job and found a place to stay, she had to pay the rent of 70,000 Kyats in advance. She borrowed money from her aunt but the flat was already crowded with the aunt's family and her own siblings.

## Impacts on individual migrants

**Migrants perceive many social benefits from their migration, including changes in lifestyle that they believe open up new opportunities for them and their families.** Young migrants working in urban destinations gain new knowledge, skills and experiences, and many migrate to either further their own education and career prospects or to support the education of siblings. Respondents spoke of their desire to “not work under the sun” or “in the mud” and of aspirations for fashionable



Family moving by boat during a flood in Nyaung Oo, Mandalay Region.  
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Woman seeding a field near Nyaung Oo, Mandalay Region.  
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iom.int/countries/myanmar>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



clothes and hairstyles. Although these aspirations often came to fruition, the changes were not immediate and migrants often faced daunting challenges in the initial phases of migration.

**One of the most pressing difficulties is finding affordable accommodation.** Housing poverty is a well-recognised phenomenon among rural-urban migrant<sup>3</sup> and overcrowding is very common. Where migrants stay with members of their wider kinship network, they are protected against some risks. However, such arrangements introduce other risks, for example, exploitative working patterns and isolation. Staying with members of kin networks is rarely a long-term solution, as the example in Box 1 illustrates. In cases where finding accommodation is difficult, migrants may also accept precarious jobs, which often come with offers of accommodation. In a majority of cases, initial difficulties faced by migrants improved with time, although the speed at which change occurs depends on the skills and education of the migrant, as well as the job and destination, and some problems extended well beyond the initial stage of migration.

**CHIME's qualitative research finds both internal and international migrants suffering at the hands of precarious conditions of employment.** In several cases, migrants' work was not only insecure and badly paid but actually unsafe and sometimes deadly. In all cases, the risks associated with dangerous work are compounded by the lack of social protection available to migrants (Box 2).

### Box 2: Dangerous work and lack of security

A 27-year-old female migrant from Rakhine State works at a slipper-making factory in Yangon, applying glue in the manufacturing process. The fumes were extremely strong and made her sick forcing her to take two days off. Her salary for those days (36,000 Kyats) was deducted and the employees' production bonus was cancelled. The respondent had to contribute towards the cost of the government social security system for factory employees every month but she obtained the social security card only 6-7 months later. As she could not afford private medical treatment, the respondent bought medicines from a pharmacy

instead of visiting a doctor. The factory had talked about compensating workers if any accident occurred at work. However, the respondent suspected that an injured co-worker had been dismissed without compensation.

**Much of the international migration from Myanmar is irregular and for these migrants there is the additional risk of arrest, fines, imprisonment or deportation, and increased risks in transit.** Although the majority of passages arranged through brokers are uneventful and successful, without causing injury or harm to the migrant, the risks are greater where migration is undertaken through unscrupulous brokers. Migrants face devastating impacts if they are cheated out of their money by brokers and also risk exposing themselves to debt bondage in accepting brokerage arrangements.

**At home, migrants' social status within the family is often improved.** Families articulated pride in their migrating children's achievements and respected their sacrifices and contribution as income earners. Parents were also proud of new attitudes and skills acquired by their children, which they believe will help them adjust to modern life. Parents perceived migrants becoming more open-minded, polite, understanding, and having more sympathy for people in need, and suggested that migrants had learnt better communication skills and become more active (Box 3). Visible consumption also represents migrants' increased 'purchasing power' and some parents valorised the whitened (from working indoors) skin of their children who are engaged in office work.

### Box 3: Attitude changes perceived at origin

*Even the way she talks has changed. When she was at home she was a shy and silent person. Now, she is smarter. She has more general knowledge and understands more about social relation (male, 55, Mandalay)*

*They become a bit open-minded. They have got more knowledge. Before, they didn't have experience of travelling alone and didn't dare to speak bravely. Now, they can speak, travel and communicate better (female, 52, Ayeyarwady)*

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wang et al (2010) Housing Migrant Workers in Rapidly Urbanizing Regions: A Study of the Chinese Model in Shenzhen. *Housing Studies*, 25(1), 83-100.

While successful migration may raise the status of migrants and their families at origin, many migrants are subordinated and degraded on route, by the jobs they were doing, and by the attitudes of their employers (Box 4). However, despite the psychosocial impact of such treatment, migrants often continued, driven by the long-term benefits offered by migration and the need to pay off debts and meet spending needs at home.

#### Box 4: Degraded on route and at work

A 42-year-old man from Rakhine described how on route to Thailand, the brokers hid them in the forest without providing any food. They linked up with brokers from Thailand and communicated with each other in Thai. The respondent could not understand what was being said but he felt they were checking them for their physical strength. He recalled that they were made to stand in a line and the Thai brokers checked their hands and legs and marked their hands with the letter and number “C2”. He described his experience as akin to buffalo trading where the animals are sorted before being sent.

A 60-year-old return migrant in Ayeyarwady described how his employer in Thailand would not allow him to step inside his house and the employer pointed towards things with his feet. Although the employer paid well and showered the respondent with benefits for his son’s novice initiation ceremony, the respondent felt discriminated against and insulted. As an irregular migrant, he described feeling trapped and vulnerable to arrest. Despite this, he encouraged his children to work for the same employer because of the good pay and because their migration could effect change at home.

### Impacts on migrants’ families

**Many positive impacts of migration emerged through the receipt, allocation, and use of remittances. However, remittance receipt often followed difficult periods during which the costs of migration are felt but not countered by gains.** As discussed earlier, the initial period of migration is usually the hardest and it is common for migrants to not be able to send remittances for at least the first 5-6

months. Although we find that sending families are largely aware that there may be a long “gestation” period between the migrant departing and them starting to recover their investment or see any gains from the migration, it does not make the strain any easier, especially for those families who reported going further into debt to finance migration.

**Once migrants are established at destination and able to start sending remittances, families report spending on household appliances, education, home renovations, medicines, and land, while also paying back debts.** One 62-year-old woman in Ayeyarwady, explained how remittances sent by her two sons in Yangon had brought about significant changes for her family, including changes in their living conditions and lifestyle:

*They repaired the ceilings and bought us some TVs, batteries and solar panels. They even bought us a bike and a machine and they bought them all, not us. It was once a wooden house and not beautiful like this. My husband built the wooden house and when my sons sent back money, we were able to renovate the house beautifully like this. It has changed because of them as you can see now. They just told me to use (remittances) anyway I like. [...] They even took me to the Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) Pagoda.*

**Migrants believe strongly in education as a viable pathway to facilitate socioeconomic mobility and use their remittances to support the education of their siblings and/or younger generations.** A 49-year-old man in Ayeyarwady described the gradual improvement brought about by his daughter’s migration to Yangon, including their ability to invest in education:

*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 to eat enough. Do we have debt? We do but the amount of our debt is different now. My migrating daughter can help every month even*

*even though it is not a big amount of money and it can help us reduce our debt. She helps her youngest sister with everything about her education. When her youngest sister wanted something like a new clothes she would buy it.*

The initial disadvantages, costs and risks of migration are, in most cases, replaced with more prosperity for the sending family. Debts are paid, food security improves, siblings are educated, elderly parents cared for and home improvements made. These expenditures raise the social status of migrant sending families and can increase their bargaining power within the local community, as some cases show (Box 5). However, family social status does not upgrade automatically on migration. Social standing only improves when migrants have successful migratory stories (i.e. when they receive remittances, repay debts, prove higher purchasing power or contribute to village activities and projects). In cases of migration failure and/or where migrants face sudden periods of unemployment (e.g. as a result of injury, which is relatively common in certain sectors), the family's social standing is not raised and migration can impact negatively on the family and push people into greater poverty (Box 6).

### **Box 5: Successful migration and higher recognition in the villages**

One Rakhine woman with two migrant sons noted a change in behaviour after her neighbours learnt of her sons' migration. Whereas no one would lend them money before, she said people were now willing to do so. She is now asked to donate money and is invited to more social events. She feels that her sons' migration has made her more respected and included in her community and had shifted her from lower to middle class.

### **Box 6: Sudden shock and injury**

A 20-year-old male respondent belongs to a poor family of eight in Rakhine. His brother migrated to Thailand to improve the family's financial situation with a group of villagers. They each paid 500,000 Kyats to a broker, for

which the parents had to borrow 300,000 Kyats from friends and family. The brother worked at an iron factory. He sent remittances twice, allowing the family to repay part of the loan. However, this came to an abrupt end when an iron bar fell on his leg, causing serious injury. The man was unable to work and even though he remained in Thailand he has not sent back any money so the family were forced to mortgage their house and land.

Within migrant sending families, there can also be conflict around changing gender roles and care arrangements, as well as around the changing appearance of young migrants. Although parents were generally pleased that their children were adapting to more modern lifestyles, there was sometimes tension, especially with fathers who do not approve of daughters' short hair, dyed hair, short skirts and fancy shirts. Such changes convey changes to lifestyle and values associated with successful migration but are nonetheless resisted by more conservative parents. There was often, however, an eventual acceptance of change.

*A Burmese lady must be Burmese. She must wear htarmain (Burmese skirt). Hair style must be Burmese. Look at me how I keep my hair style [...] Our daughter wanted to dye just two strings of her hair this summer. I told her "Your father will not tolerate that". She said "just two strings of hair, could you ask Dad's permission to do that", so I risked to ask the father's permission and said "Your daughter is asking you to let her dye just two strings of her hair." [...] It was like red, yellow or gold colour. Just one or two strings. Not many. Not that visible. One may not notice at the first look. I gave a glimpse just for the sake of seeing it. Nothing wrong. She did not dye like others who put the whole head really red. It was just one or two strings and I had to understand it from the view point of modern youngsters (female, 48, Ayeyarwady).*

## **Impacts on sending communities**

**Migration appears to be having both positive and negative impacts at the community level.** On the one hand, we find migrants



have also set up offer low-interest loan facilities for villagers who wish to set up new businesses and are helping to fund those with serious injuries. Several villagers expressed their appreciation of migrants' remittances:

*Those who are working in other places, they don't hesitate to donate for social occasions of their village and we can ask for money if necessary (male, 43, Ayeyarwady).*

*When they are away, they provide us with some money; which enables me to do more volunteer work (female, 53, Ayeyarwady).*

*By working there, many people could support village social or religious matters financially (female, 46, Ayeyarwady).*

However, some interviews suggested that migration has adversely affected village life and commented that social life was richer in the past:

*Before, there were many people participating in the social matters and it was much more fun. Now, we have less people and it is a bit boring (female, 46, Rakhine).*

*When it comes to social events, there are a few losses. There is something different from the time where we used to having a lot of people in the village. If there is a wedding we used to have a lot of people and everybody was united to participate and help but now we don't have that much strength anymore (female, 33, Mandalay).*

While some villagers attributed the changes to migration, similar changes are observed in society as a whole and other villagers were unperturbed by the changes. One woman, for example, explained that the remaining villagers would simply share responsibilities and, in another case, the respondent noted that the village had overcome labour shortages by inviting people from other villages to collaborate to participate in events.

**A small number of family members at origin mentioned during the in-depth**

## **interviews the difficulties of labour shortages in agricultural work.**

Nonetheless, from the perspective of families at origin, impacts on the labour allocation for social events appeared to be of greater concern as it had increased the burden of the remaining villagers.

## **Changing roles and social norms**

**While changes in young women's appearance and dress are pushing boundaries of gender norms, out-migration has led to shifts in the gender and generational division of labour in rural communities and households.** In

some cases, tasks previously performed by adult males have been transferred on to young boys while, in others, women are taking up traditionally male roles and responsibilities (Box 7). Younger generations of women are migrating to the cities in growing numbers, taking new opportunities in factories and services and leaving older women in the community to handle care duties. Through migration, young women gain new opportunities for education, dress, and lifestyle and, at home, their position within the family may also change as they are increasingly respected as household income earners.

**Although changes in gender roles and division of labour may be temporary and revert to the conventional relations when migrants return, many women seem to gain an autonomy in decision-making and social participation in the absence of their husbands** (Box 7). While similar accounts were heard elsewhere, it is not possible to say whether a permanent or broader shift in gender norms is occurring.



Qualitative researcher interviewing respondents at Myaung Mya, Ayeyarwady Region. © Metta Development Foundation 2017/Ko Oo

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

1. CHIME's research evidences the sacrifices made by individual migrants and the negative impacts of migration on their health and wellbeing. Although in most cases the costs and risks of migration are considered to be worth the longer-term economic and socio-cultural gains, future programs should seek to improve employment safety and standards and ensure better provision of social services for migrant workers. This would improve the living and working conditions of migrants, facilitating access to greater migration and employment options, enabling them to seek protection and redress, and support their increasing role in the household decision making around the use of remittances.
2. CHIME data show how rural lives and livelihoods are inextricably bound with urban economies and non-farm employment within the country and beyond through migration. Any interventions must consider migration holistically rather than focusing on rural, urban and international migration separately and ensure that one is not bolstered at the expense of the other. Programming must attempt to reduce the shocks and costs of changing rural landscape brought about by large-scale out-migration, while helping rural communities to manage and invest migrant remittances for longer-term sustainable development.
3. It is important to generate more evidence on where migration impacts on structural gender role shifts in order to make the positive changes in gender roles brought about by migration more sustainable, e.g. empowering women as formal contributors to their households' finances and increasing the role of women in household and community decision-making.

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)

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