



Documenting Myanmar returning migrants' experiences through a gender lens in the context of covid-19 pandemic





## Documenting Myanmar returning migrants' experiences through a gender lens in the context of covid-19 pandemic

*Narratives and an analysis of experiences of returning men and women migrants in Myanmar*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global public health crisis that has also shocked the economies of countries around the world with a particularly harsh impact on international migrant workers. Many migrant workers faced higher risks of contracting/spreading the illness through crowded living and working conditions or lost their jobs because of national shutdowns of the economy beginning in March and April 2020. Migrant workers were often forced to embark on dangerous journeys to home countries with limited transport options and then quarantine in facilities that did not have adequate time or resources to prepare for them.

Throughout 2020, Myanmar has welcomed home an estimated 190,000 workers from abroad (only counting those returning via regular channels), many of whom had spent many years working outside the country. Myanmar was forced to not only rally resources to protect itself from the spread of COVID-19 spreading among its local population by the entry of returning migrants, but as the pandemic persisted, to consider how to facilitate the reintegration of former migrants. The government of Myanmar has been forced to assess how to best secure livelihoods to support not only the returning migrants themselves, but also their families who have been heavily reliant on their remittances for household and living expenses.

In considering responses to this crisis, it is critical to employ a gender lens to examine potential differences in the cycle of migration for women and men migrants and ensure any response supports interventions that address unique challenges facing women and supports their empowerment.

In response to the record numbers of migrant workers returning to Myanmar, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) along with its partners throughout different states and regions in Myanmar completed a quantitative assessment with returning migrants in communities of origin in June-July 2020. This focused migrants' experiences abroad, the reasons for return, the immediate and medium-term needs, as well as intentions for the months to come.

From April to June 2020, UN Women partnered with Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Myanmar, to conduct semi-structured interviews with international migration returnees to complement the quantitative data set with qualitative research focusing on a gender-based analysis of the needs and recommendations. UN Women followed up on these interviews with in-depth look at the situations of 6 migrant workers with journalistic feature stories to spotlight certain commonly faced issues.

By analysing the findings of the quantitative assessment of 1,591 (732 women, 852 men) international returned migrant workers and responses from 53 semi-structured interviews (35 women, 16 men) along with feature stories, this report examines the gendered-impact of migration on men and women from Myanmar. The report strives to provide the Government Myanmar insight on how to design and implement initiatives for reintegration that will support and benefit women migrant workers.

IOM's quantitative assessment's focus on COVID-19 specifically helps to frame the key needs of the populations seeking to reintegrate into Myanmar as a result of the pandemic and

who face an uncertain of future for how long they will remain in Myanmar and the possibilities of re-migrating. The quantitative assessment did not reveal significant variations between the responses on men and women on key questions assessing their reasons for return and current needs.

Men and women returned home because they lost their jobs or fears associated with COVID-19, their primary concerns in quarantine were similarly access to protective items and hygiene (masks, soap, water, sanitizer), WASH facilities, and supplies (food and non-food). There was a recognition amongst both genders for the need for psychological care. For their needs upon returning to home communities, men and women both prioritised livelihood support and food security and reported similarities in rates of debts and the amount of savings. These answers for both men and women showed that while not all were in dire straits, the pandemic posed concerns for rapidly decreasing savings and/or increasing debt.

The assessment emphasized the equal concern of men and women over securing future sources of income in Myanmar, particularly if forced to remain in the country and unable to re-migrate.

The semi-structured interviews, which invited interviewees a greater opportunity for reflection on the totality of their migration experience, demonstrated that despite the significant benefits of migration in improving the quality of life for their families in Myanmar and enabling them to purchase key assets such as land and homes, many women returnees do not recommend migration to other women considering leaving home. Although considerable numbers of women who migrated believed their ability to earn income increased the respect they commanded from their communities at home, within the family, or confidence in themselves, few were forthcoming about specific negative experiences abroad but still warned of the dangers of migration. They stressed ways women need to protect

themselves, both in the migration journey itself and while working in the country of destination.

These interviews reinforced the need for information on safe migration, gender-segregated orientations to provide a safe space to educate on issues such as violence against women, greater access to information pre-departure on recruitment agents and employers, and language skills training. The response also underpinned the benefits of local ties and networks in the country of destination to ensure a positive migration experiences for women. Responses from both men and women migrant workers also demonstrate that they would benefit from labour rights training in Myanmar before going abroad as to better identify violations of their rights and avenues of recourse.

The semi-structured interviews also offered insight into the types of work and skills gained while working abroad and the opportunities and challenges to generating income in Myanmar. Some women migrant workers learned skills that were atypical for women in Myanmar, such as in masonry, that while considered a transferable skill to use in Myanmar, but women may face barriers in pursuing occupations utilizing the skill because of gender discrimination at home. Others felt that the work they did abroad did not advance their skills or knowledge base or the opportunities for similar work in Myanmar were unavailable.

However, many women interviewed expressed entrepreneurial aims and specified interest in gaining skills in establishing and running small shops in their communities, food and beverage services, and other vocational trades. Both assessments lead to important take-aways for several stakeholders, including the Government of Myanmar, donors and Civils Society Organizations (CSOs) on the need for start-up capital for returnees to embark on small business ventures as well as financial literacy trainings as a short and long-term strategy. Furthermore, women migrant workers would

benefit from the trainings in how to establish savings cooperatives, how to build small business start-up capital, and upskilling to include trainings on how to run small businesses.

Both assessments also bolster growing recognition of the need to provide psych-social support to migrant returnees as part of the reintegration process and the importance of

increasing access to regular channels of migration with affordable costs through gender-responsive initiatives. The report suggests the need for further research to fully understand how migration shifts gender relations or norms and to explore opportunities for sustainable advancements the income of remittances in Myanmar.



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## FOREWORD

Over 4 million Myanmar migrants work abroad, in countries like Thailand, Malaysia, China and Singapore. These women and men leave their homes, families and everything that is familiar to seek better opportunities. They want to earn more so they can send back money to support their families, give their children better futures, build houses for their parents, and save enough to take control of their own lives when they return to Myanmar.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of these migrants to return home sooner than planned. Some were laid off, some did not get visa extensions, and others returned out of concern for their security. Official records show that from 22 March to end of December 2020, a total of estimated 190'000 migrants returned to Myanmar from Thailand, and another 44,051 from China. It is likely that the total number of returnees is considerably higher because many returned through irregular channels. Myanmar set up over 7,000 quarantine facilities, where the returnees stayed for 21 days before returning to their home communities.

This report combines findings from a questionnaire-based assessment that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) did between April 2020 and July 2020<sup>1</sup> with 1,591 international returning migrants and oral interviews that UN Women and Helvetas Myanmar did between April and June 2020 with 51 returnees. These two assessments -- one quantitative and one qualitative -- served to identify the needs of the returnees.

This report builds on the two assessments and documents the commonalities and differences in

the experiences, perceptions, needs and aspirations of female versus male returnees.

**Part A** provides a gender-based analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered by the three agencies. The analysis examines how the current environment enables or deters female and male returnees in their efforts at socioeconomic reintegration in Myanmar. It analyzes the quantitative and qualitative data to detail the gender-specific impacts of migration. It assesses the different needs and aspirations of female and male returnees and makes recommendations for more gender-responsive migration policies.

**Part B** comprises six human interest stories of female and male returnees: stories of abuse and discrimination, of perseverance, courage and dedication to families and home communities, of newly acquired skills and economic independence, plans for the future. By having worked abroad, many of the migrants gained more confidence in themselves along with entrepreneurial ambitions. Poverty and the lack of economic opportunities drove these people abroad, and many of them are ready to go back abroad when the pandemic allows.

The COVID-19 crisis has created an unprecedented challenge for migrants. They have suffered severe economic impacts, and with travel restrictions and bans still in place, they are left with limited options.

Helping the migrants will require coordinated efforts by international agencies, local community-based organizations and the Government of Myanmar.

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<sup>1</sup>IOM Rapid Assessment for Returning Migrants 2020 (internal document awaiting publication)

To those returnees who can leverage their work experience abroad, we should provide start-up capital and financial skills training so they can set up and run small businesses. To help other returnees find work, we should offer vocational training.

The Government should ensure that its policies to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic take into account the needs of the returnees, including needs specific to the female returnees.

And we have to better prepare and protect those who wish to return abroad after the COVID-19

pandemic resolves and those planning to go abroad to work for the first time.

The Government should expand access to formal, safe work migration channels so the migrants are not exploited by shady “brokers” We should educate the migrants about labour rights and gender-based violence so they can avoid abusive conditions at their overseas workplaces.

UN Women, IOM and Helvetas Myanmar are committed to working with the Government and other partners to protect the country’s migrant workers, particularly the vulnerable women.

Nicolas Burniat,  
Country Representative  
UN Women Country Office Myanmar

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ILO	International Labour Organization
Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation	Helvetas Myanmar
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MERRP	Myanmar Economic Relief and Recovery Plan
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of women
WON	Women's Organization Network Myanmar



# INTRODUCTION: EXAMINING MIGRATION THROUGH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

As the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted countries worldwide to shut down economies and close borders, migrant workers have been among the hardest hit groups. They often work and live in crowded conditions where the virus easily spreads. Many have lost their jobs and immigration statuses and have had to return to their home countries, often on crowded or hard-to-find transport. During the week of 22 March 2020, when infections were spiking globally, tens of thousands of workers returned to Myanmar from Thailand at all border crossings, official and unofficial.

For the people of Myanmar, migration is a survival and poverty reduction strategy, a search for refuge and for livelihoods. Over 4 million Myanmar nationals work overseas. Nearly half of them work in Thailand, and significant numbers in China.<sup>2</sup> Thailand and China have historically hosted large populations of Myanmar migrants because they share land borders with Myanmar.

Migrant workers returned from Thailand during the pandemic because they had lost their jobs or they feared the pandemic would worsen and they would soon lose their jobs. Also, the work permits of many migrants who had their immigration status regularized under a nationality verification system were set to expire. When Thailand on 26 March 2020 announced an emergency decree to tighten shutdown and travel restrictions, many Myanmar migrants rushed home before the decree was enforced instead of waiting until their usual annual journey in April to celebrate the water festival (ILO, 2020a, p. 2).

Official records show that from 22 March to end of December 2020, a total of estimated 190'000 migrants returned to Myanmar from Thailand, and another 44,051 from China. Myanmar set up

over 7,000 quarantine facilities, mostly for returning migrants. Two-thirds of the returnees were men (ILO, 2020a, p. 3), although anecdotal reports across countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) suggested that more women than men were crossing borders irregularly, outside official checkpoints. That may have been because, as research has shown, more female than male migrants in ASEAN countries tend to have irregular status (ILO and UN Women, 2020, p. 5).

Interviews done in an International Labour Organization (ILO) study of returnees to Myanmar during the pandemic showed that immediately upon returning, migrant women took up responsibilities in the household that men did not (ILO, 2020a, p. 7). Pre-COVID-19, recent studies in the Asia-Pacific region showed that women spend four times as much time as men in caring for the elderly, the sick, and children (ILO and UN Women, 2020, p. 7). Women are more likely to care for household members with COVID-19 or to care for children who must stay home because of school closures. Such responsibilities can increase emotional and mental strain on women (ibid.).

Returnees who do not have a new source of income and families who had relied on their remittances from abroad now face economic hardships, particularly food insecurity. Job opportunities in Myanmar, already limited pre-COVID-19, have shrunk further because of global shutdowns, with factories, hotels and other businesses laying off workers. While the Government of Myanmar before the pandemic already had begun steps to support migrant workers reintegrate, the country was not prepared for a return of this scale with such limited notice.

<sup>2</sup> After Thailand, Malaysia is the second most popular country of destination, according to official statistics.

## RATIONALE FOR ASSESSMENT

Women and men experience migration in different ways. They make different migration decisions and face different challenges of reintegration. Thus it is important to consider how gender shapes who migrates and where, when and how they migrate, as well as how migration affects men and women differently.

In partnership with Helvetas Myanmar, an office of the Swiss-based development organization, UN Women did a *qualitative* assessment to

From April to June 2020, UN Women and Helvetas Myanmar did semi-structured in-person interviews with 51 migrant workers -- 35 women and 16 men -- who had recently returned to Myanmar due to COVID-19. Interviewees of diverse ethnicities, ages, home communities, overseas migration destinations and types of jobs were sought. The interviews were done while the workers were in quarantine centres or after they had returned to their homes from the centres. The quarantine centres where the interviews took place were in Kachin State, Taninthayi Region and Mon State, which all border Thailand, and in Kachin State, which borders China.

The interviews were done orally based on a set of 12 questions developed by UN Women. The questions centred around their experiences at three different stages: before departure from Myanmar, during their stay abroad, and upon

their return home. It was decided not to use the interviewees' names in this report for confidentiality purposes.

From June to July 2020, IOM undertook a quantitative assessment with both returning internal and international migrants -- the latter numbered 1,591 -- in broader areas of Myanmar; a little less than half of these migrants were women. In 2017, IOM completed research on

complement analysis of the International Organization of Migration's (IOM) larger

*quantitative* data set of returnees. The aim was to do an overall, gender-based analysis of the experiences of migrants who had returned to Myanmar due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis centres on international rather than internal migration, on the specific hardships of working outside Myanmar and returning home because of COVID-19.

how migration affected poverty and development in Myanmar for the Human Mobility for Poverty Alleviation and Inclusive Development for Myanmar (CHIME) project. It found that few migrants returned home, and there were 10 times as many current migrants as returnees. This highlighted a trend of strong net migration out of rural Myanmar in recent years (IOM 2017a, p. 3).

With the big increase in the number of returnees due to COVID-19, the two recent assessments offered an opportunity not only to evaluate the needs of migrants currently, but also to broadly analyse the migration experience of Myanmar migrants, many of whom have spent much of their lives abroad, and the challenges they must deal with back in Myanmar.

By examining the qualitative and the quantitative assessments together, UN Women and IOM sought to evaluate how migration affected men and women differently in Myanmar. This evaluation tries to understand the ways in which migration is similar for men and women and the ways in which it is different. It tries to identify the unique benefits female workers gain from migration and the unique challenges they face. And it makes recommendations on: What actions can be taken to empower women throughout the entire

migration cycle? How can migration policies be improved?

UN Women and IOM shared their initial findings in a presentation to the UN Core Group on

Migration and COVID-19 in mid-October 2020. The Group includes representatives from the UN multilateral organisations and non-governmental organisations working on migration in Myanmar.

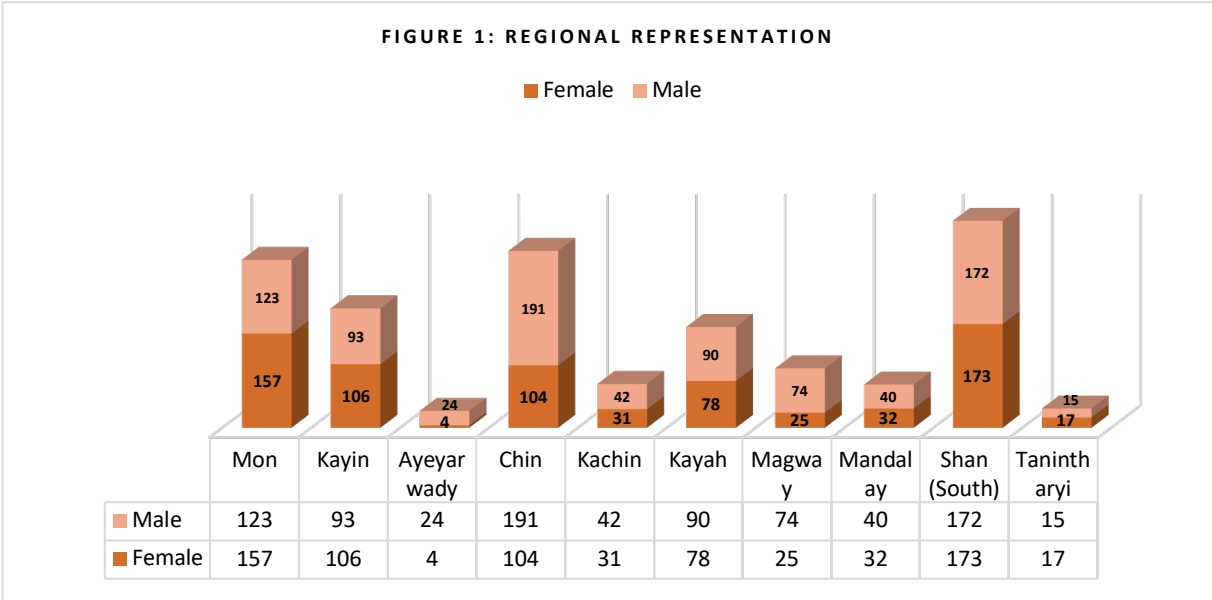
# DEMOGRAPHICS OF INTERVIEWEES

## The UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews

The 51 interviews were done with a total of 35 women and 16 men. Most were done in Mon State (23 women, 16 men -- 39 total). The other interviews involved six women from Kayin State, five women from Kachin State, and one from Taninthayi Region. The five women from Kachin State had returned from China and one man from Mon State had returned from Malaysia. All the others (45, or 88 per cent of all interviewees) had returned from Thailand (see Figure 3). The average length of in stay in Thailand was eight years (same for men and women) and the median age was 32 (women ranged from 20 to 53, and men from 22 to 41). 83 per cent of the women and 75 per cent of the men were married.

In comparison, the average length of stay in China for the five women from Kachin State was one year. The median age was 28 (ranging from 21 to 45), and four out of the five were single. (The male returnee had spent 11 years in Malaysia.)

The interviewees did not say precisely how they had migrated, though nearly all those who had returned from Thailand said they had travelled freely there because they had a passport. Some interviewees mentioned an earlier period when they feared travelling because they did not have a passport at the time. These people may have regularized their status in Thailand after having entered the country irregularly. The respondents from Kachin State who had travelled to China could only have done so irregularly as there are no regular channels.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> There are no regular channels of migration between Myanmar and China. However, migrants in Ruili (Dehong prefecture border area) can regularise their status by taking a health examination and getting a health certificate, stay permit and work permit with the support of

Chinese employers, after entering China on a one-day multiple-entry border pass. The Foreigners’ Service and Administration Center of Ruili provides these services. Migrants are only allowed to work in designated areas in Ruili.

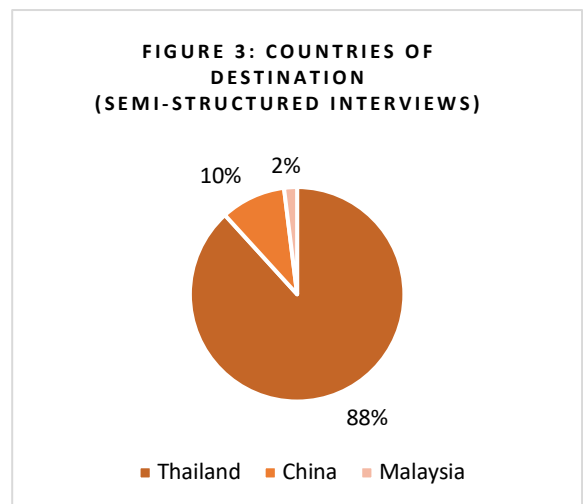
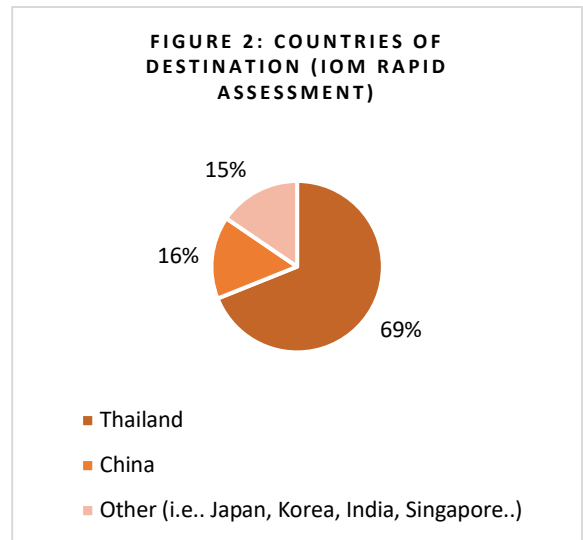


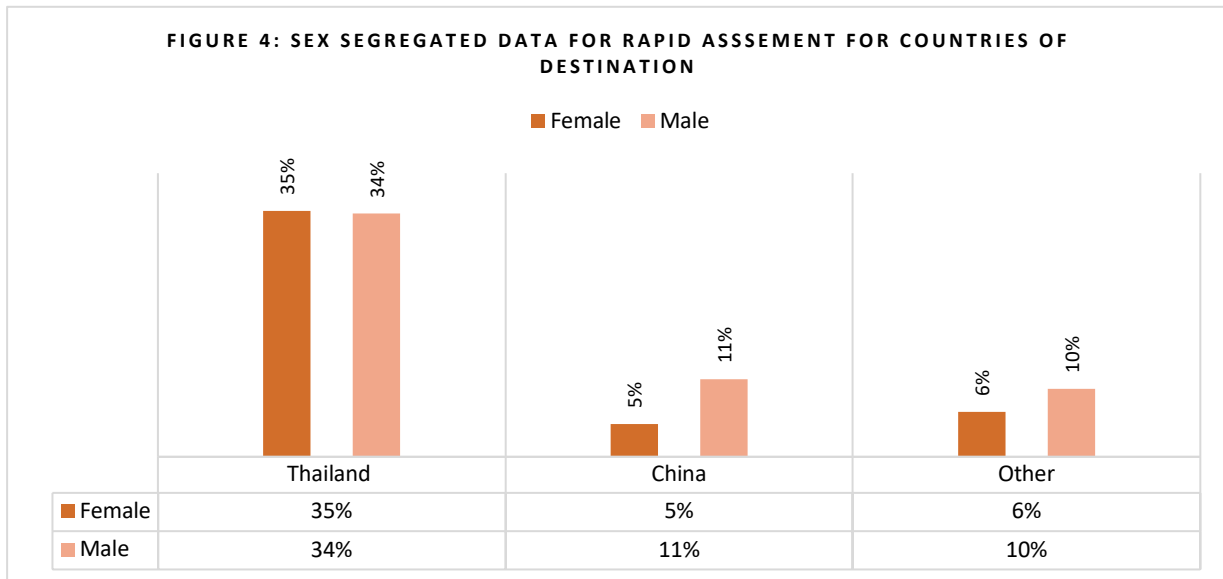
### IOM's quantitative assessment

This assessment was much broader in scope, involving 1,591 international migrant returnees from 10 states and regions of Myanmar. 46 per cent were women.

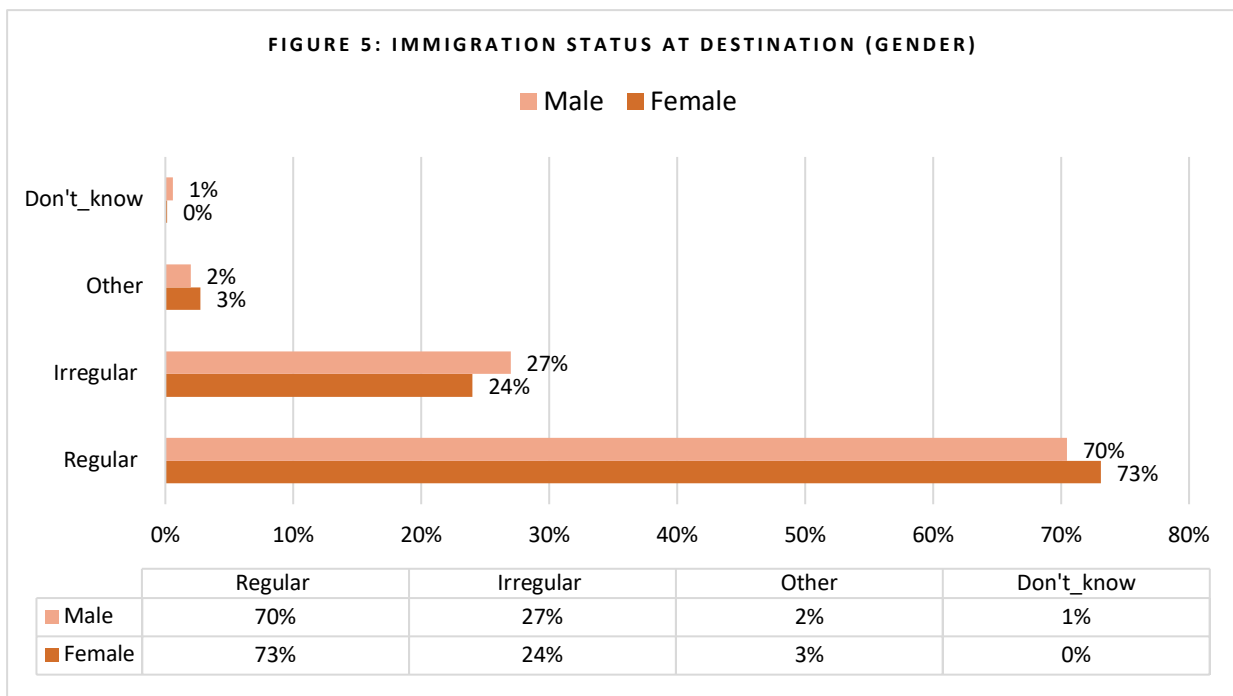
Most of these returnees had worked in Thailand; the second-largest group had worked in China (*Figure 2*). The number of men and women who returned from Thailand was about the same, while there were more male returnees from China and other countries (*Figure 4*). Many migrants from different regions of Myanmar and from ethnic minority groups live near the land borders. That explains why in the UN Women - Helvetas Myanmar interviews, the returnees from Kachin State had worked in China and nearly all those from Mon State had worked in Thailand.

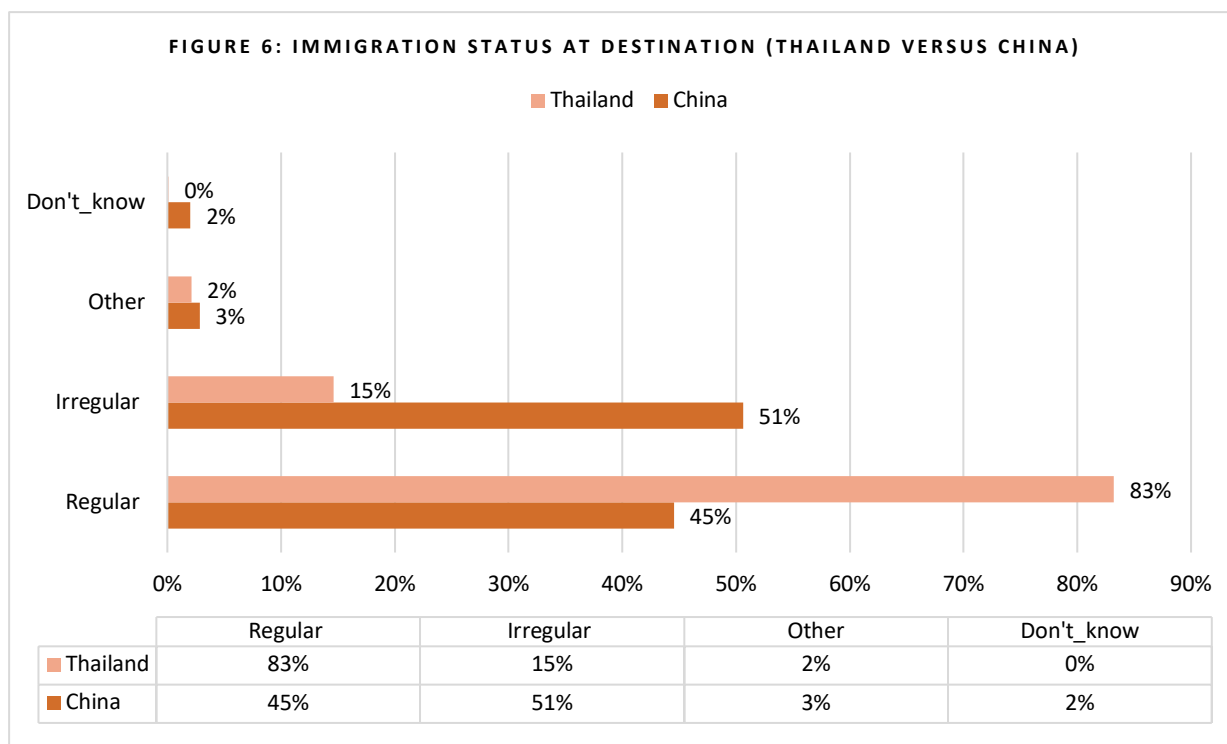
Thailand has been allowing migrant worker registration and nationality verification in the past decade, so that migrants who had entered the country irregularly can regularize their status and get work authorization. *Figures 5 and 6* show the returnees' self-reported responses on their work and immigration statuses and *Figure 7* shows how they had migrated.





The large data set in IOM’s quantitative assessment shows similarities in the immigration statuses of male and female returnees (*Figure 4*). 73 per cent of women interviewed and 70 per cent of men interviewed said they had regular status and 24 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men said they had irregular status.





The responses indicated that migrants were more likely to go to China than Thailand using informal means such as through a migration broker, and they were more likely to find employment there without work documents.

Women often migrate irregularly because of the high costs of regular migration, restrictions on their movements, and the lack of opportunities to migrate through regular channels. Women in the ASEAN region are more likely to migrate irregularly because the types of work typically available to them are in the informal economy, such as domestic or entertainment work, where there are limited opportunities to migrate regularly or to regularize one's status. Female migrant workers are thus paid less and have fewer legal protections (ILO and UN Women, 2015a, p. 3). This reflects an undervaluing of occupations that are traditionally viewed as women's work, as well as discriminatory practices in sectors that employ both women and men.

It is likely that more returnees interviewed in Myanmar had regular immigration status abroad than not because it is dangerous to travel with irregular status and difficult to cross via official checkpoints. Those without documents may have chosen to stay abroad and try to keep themselves undetected. If that is the case, and greater numbers of female migrants have irregular status and choose not to return to Myanmar, that could explain why similar proportions of the male and female returnees interviewed said they had possessed regular status.

No returnees who had worked in China said they used government-to-government recruitment, while 9 per cent of returnees who had worked in Thailand said they did so, likely referring to the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the two countries on importing workers. As of September 2020, 461,825 (around 30 per cent) of the 1,519,019 Myanmar workers in Thailand had migrated there through the MOU, the

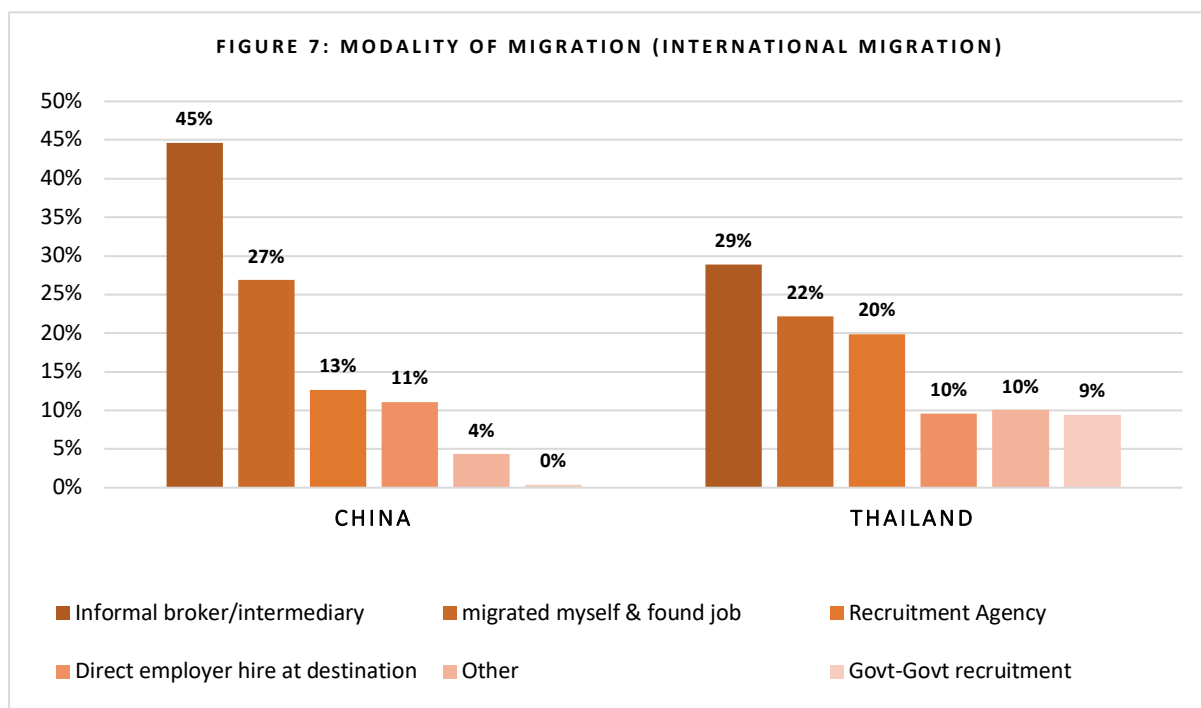
primary regular migration channel for Myanmar workers.<sup>4</sup>

The methods of migration are not mutually exclusive. For example, a person may migrate under the MOU through a recruitment agency while also using the services of an informal broker. Informal brokers are unregulated, and they can charge considerable prices or exploit migrants through other means.

In IOM’s 2019 CHIME study, almost a third of men and a quarter of women reported using brokers or recruitment agencies to migrate abroad. The report said brokers facilitated

migration in various ways. In some cases, family members may have already identified the prospective migrant’s destination and occupation but needed a broker to facilitate the process. In other cases, people may rely on brokers for all aspects of migration -- arranging travel, housing and employment in the destination country.

Brokers may also cover upfront costs, which they recover by deducting from the migrants’ wages. The IOM report says “these costs ... placed irregular migrants in precarious situations where they had little means of redress in case of deception and exploitation” (IOM, 2019a, p. 4).



<sup>4</sup> Office of Foreign Workers Administration, Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Thailand (October 2020).

# OVERALL REFLECTIONS OF MIGRATION EXPERIENCES – QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT/SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

## Improved standard of living and purchasing power back home

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, almost all respondents said their migration led to better standards of living for their families in Myanmar. All the women said their remittances helped their families financially; 80 per cent said this help was significant and 20 per cent said it was minor -- the latter women generally spent shorter periods abroad. This correlates with the 2019 IOM CHIME study, which said that “having an international migrant who sent remittances to the household back home was associated with improvements in subjective poverty and asset ownership” (IOM, 2019a, p. 5). In previous research published by IOM and ILO in 2017, one-third of migrant workers from Myanmar (out of 429 interviewed) said most of their remittances were used for household expenses and consumer products and to pay off debts, while 10 per cent went to children’s education and only 5 per cent to starting a business or for savings. “This is understandable given that, in many cases, remittances were the main or sole form of income for recipients,” (IOM and ILO, 2017, p. 67).

However, in the interviews done by Helvetas Myanmar and UN Women, nearly half of the female returnees said their earnings abroad helped in paying school fees for children, siblings or other relatives. A roughly equal proportion of men reported the same. In cases where returnees did not gain abroad skills that they can use back home, they can invest in future generations by helping pay for relatives’ schooling.<sup>5</sup> Several returnees also mentioned paying for medical fees, particularly for parents.

There is evidence that remittances are largely used for household expenditures in Myanmar. But it is notable that the returnees mentioned the use of their remittances for education and health care in regions where government services must be paid for or are insufficient, which is particularly true in Myanmar’s ethnic minority areas.

This picture complements the findings of a 2016 Asia Foundation report, “Strength in diversity: Towards universal education in Myanmar’s ethnic areas,” and recent reports by *Frontier Myanmar* newspaper. These reports say government-funded schools are largely unavailable in areas of civil conflict and in ethnic areas, and that some families prefer to send their children to ethnic community schools that the communities fund themselves. The Asia Foundation report says: “The majority of schools can be best understood as ‘community schools’, which are managed and maintained by a management committee or parent-teacher association made up of residents. There are also ethnic community schools in some fully stable government-controlled villages and towns where government schools are also available, but where some families prefer their child to attend an ethnic school. Community schools often rely first and foremost on funds provided by the communities themselves, through donations and student fees paid by parents” (Jolliffe and Mears, 2016, pp. 14-15).

A 2019 article based on reports by the World Health Organization and the World Bank said, “Coverage of even the most essential health services and interventions is generally low in Myanmar and it is highly uneven. They have also

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. Oct 7, 2020. UNICEF Working Paper “Children ‘Left Behind’”. “Notably, there is conflicting evidence on the impact of remittances on the education of children whose parents have migrated. In some

countries, remittances can increase the chances of children staying in school, but they can also tempt children to leave school and migrate themselves,” the report says.

resulted in out-of-pocket payments for health as a proportion of total health spending being among the highest in the world” (Ergo et al., 2019, p. 38). The article said that many parts of the country that are controlled by ethnic groups cannot be reached by government services and people there instead rely solely on basic services provided by ethnic health organizations, non-governmental and community-based organizations, or private providers. The private providers are largely unregulated, leaving patients “vulnerable to overpriced services of questionable quality”. The article says, “Low levels of government funding for health combined with the population’s heavy reliance on private health providers explain why household out-of-pocket payments remain the dominant source of financing for health. ... In 2015, such payments accounted for 74 per cent of total health spending” (Ergo et al., 2019, pp. 39-40). In this context, the use of remittances from migrant workers abroad for health needs makes sense.

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, seven women (20 per cent) and two men (12.5 per cent) said they were not able to make any remittances. Some said this was because of the high living costs abroad. Others attributed it to the short period of their stay and alluded to the need to first pay off debts from migration expenses.

The 2019 IOM CHIME study showed that women are just as likely as men to send remittances, but they tend to send less, possibly because women earn lower wages. Another global study said that, “Female migrants’ remittances are more resilient and reliable than those from male migrants. The altruistic behaviour of women, their duty towards their families, and the self-insurance motives encouraged by their precarious situations in host country labour markets explain this phenomenon” (Maelan Le Goff, 2016, p. 9). The IOM CHIME study says, “Given the large and growing significance of women’s migration, interventions that work toward structural gender equality, and especially

equal pay, will not only benefit female migrants but will also increase the amount of remittances sent home and their economic contribution to household finances” (IOM, 2019b, p. 6).

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, many of the returnees said they had used the income they earned abroad to purchase land and/or houses, gold, silver or jewellery, or motorbikes (and in one case, a car). In Myanmar, gold is seen as secure investment. Forty-three per cent of the women said they bought land, and 34 per cent said they bought a house. This was roughly the same for men. Both female and male migrants said that to pay for their migration costs, they had to borrow money, often with interest, or use money that was advanced to them and later deducted from their salaries. Given the enormous expense they must pay at the outset of their journeys, it is significant that the interviewed migrants were able to pay back their debts. Debts make migrants less able to escape exploitative situations and reduce their already low earnings. However, since the returnees from Thailand had spent an average of eight years in that country, they had a considerable amount of time to earn income to pay off debts.

A 2019 IOM study, “Debt and the migration experience: insights from South-East Asia”, said: “In transnational contexts, migrants often have little control over their earnings and are often subject to unpredictable, costly expenses associated with the regularization of their status. For instance, it is difficult for migrant workers to negotiate with and collectively bargain with their employers or change jobs in search of better employment. They often have limited access to formal grievance mechanisms and fear reporting labour rights abuses due to the possibility of retaliation by their employers. At the same time, migration policies in the region change regularly, and these changes are often associated with costs that are both unpredictable and exorbitant, especially considering migrants’ wages. Without the ability to easily increase their incomes, or to plan and budget for major

costs, indebted migrants are particularly at risk of over-indebtedness and financial insecurity” (IOM, 2019, p. 84).

Despite the financial burdens, migrant workers have demonstrated strong commitment to their families.

The 2019 IOM CHIME study said: “Striking in the accounts of migrants and their families was how migrant siblings supported each other and other members of the family back home, going beyond the support dynamics between parents and migrant children that is often assumed in household models of migration and remittances. Equally striking was the sense of obligation children feel towards their parents, where migration was seen as a way of supporting parents in times of difficulty or old age” (IOM, 2019a, p. 5).

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, some returnees also mentioned using some of their incomes to give back to their communities and to make donations.

One female returnee said, *“I used to work at a farm, and it was exhausting. I had debts. Now, I worked and could repay back the debt. Also, I can save money. I can spend and donate money.”*<sup>6</sup>

Another said: *“I am proud of myself because I can support my parents by working in Thailand. If they are sick, I can send money for them to go to the clinic as other people do. My parents can stay like other people in my village because of me.”*<sup>7</sup>

A third female returnee said: *“I am so proud of myself because I can donate to my village. The road in my village was very bad and I am so proud that I can donate from my income to my village committee to help rebuild the road. I can support my children for their education too.”*<sup>8</sup>

### Reasons for migration

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, female and male returnees gave basically the same reasons for migrating from Myanmar. Both focused on enablers: low or irregular income in Myanmar, lack of jobs (one woman mentioned lack of jobs for women specifically), and financial distress (e.g., due to a failed business). Others emphasized drivers: the ability to get job opportunities and more income abroad to support their families (e.g., with medical and educational expenses). Others were inspired by the success or increased incomes achieved by others in their communities who had made the journey.

The overwhelming majority of respondents, both men and women, said they themselves were responsible for the decision to migrate. This is significant in comparison to countries in other regions, such as South Asia, where women have less power over this decision. As a UN Women report noted, “All over South Asia, the ideal of *purdah* (seclusion of women) – which assigns a symbolic capital of honour and respectability to the control over women’s realms of action – has hampered women’s mobility” (UN Women, 2019, p. 5). In Sri Lanka, women must submit a gender-specific Family Background Report, signed by their husbands or another male family member, for permission to migrate. Those with children under five are subject to rejection (SAWF, 2016, p. 15). In Nepal, historically men have been the migrants - “The concept of migration is associated with men’s mobility” (Chapagain, 2015, p. 3). The proportion of female migrant workers, while increasing, remains very low in main destination countries such as Malaysia, Qatar and Kuwait (Simkhada et al., 2018).

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, four women said they had made the migration decision jointly with their husbands. The same percentage of men and women (four

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<sup>6</sup> 32 years old, Mon State

<sup>7</sup> 31 years old, Mon State

<sup>8</sup> 45 years old, Mon State

women and two men) said their parents or other family members decided on their behalf. Roughly half of male and female respondents said their families or friends had arranged travel for them. The 2019 IOM CHIME study said, “Women migrants rely more on families and relatives when making the decision to migrate, whereas male migrants are more likely to seek information from friends. There was a tendency for parents to get involved in decisions surrounding their daughters.”

### Negative experiences abroad

About 30 per cent of the interviewees said they had experienced mistreatment abroad (e.g., scolding, verbal abuse) and about 30 per cent had experienced poor working conditions (e.g., salary withheld, lack of sick days, long hours). Twenty-six per cent of the women said they had been discriminated against because of their national origin; here they often mentioned their inability to speak the language. Only two women (6 per cent) spoke of mistreatment due to gender.

One woman said: *“The boss also did not give me a full salary even though I worked full-time. Later, the boss did not pay me any salary. I did [not] have negative experiences related to being a female migrant. The reason was that I was not Thai citizen and I could speak the Thai language so other people did not give respect to me.”*<sup>9</sup>

Some of the other female returnees spoke in detail about other types of negative experiences abroad:

**Harassment and fear of speaking up:** *“There was a Thai man who was regularly drunk. He tried to grab my hands and hold me. When he started to take off his pants, I told him in Thai, “Wait for a while, wait for a while,” to delay him. After he freed me, I ran and called my husband who worked in the field next to us. It happened many times, but I could not tell my*

*husband about it. Mostly I tried to avoid it by myself. Even though the women are old [married], it is still very dangerous.”*<sup>10</sup>

**Exploitation by brokers and pressured marriage:** *“After we arrived in Thailand, the broker doubled the transportation costs. We did not have money to pay him. We did not get any salary because the broker took our salary every month for the transportation. The brokers would buy some food for us but we did not see money. Then the broker did not allow us to contact our family at home because he worried that we would run away without paying our debt. Because we could not contact our family, I was so sad and missed my mother a lot. My brother could not work there, and he ran away, so I was left to pay the debt of two people. I had to work very hard. Sometimes, I had to work from 3 a.m. until 6 p.m. I didn’t even get a break time for lunch, so I ate while working. The broker said I would get only 100 baht (\$3.3) per day even though I had to work very hard. One day, I met a man who said he would pay me 50,000 baht (\$1,651) if I married him. I agreed because I wanted to pay back my debt. But my marriage was not a beautiful one. I was able to pay off my debts and get a new job but my husband divorced me. I have two sons so I still work hard to support them.”*<sup>11</sup>

**Poor working conditions (China):** *“My salary was often withheld, and each day, I did not have enough food. We never got meat in any meals, and we were fed rice that was not cooked properly, But since we were working at a fishing site, we could eat fish. We were paid 800 yuan (\$100) per month, and there was no paid leave nor sick leave. If we could not go to work because we were sick, our salary got cut. We had to pay for our own medical expenses, and we had no insurance. There were no off days nor holidays too. The working hours were from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day.”*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> 43 years old, Mon State.

<sup>10</sup> 50 years old, Mon State

<sup>11</sup> 31 years old, Mon State

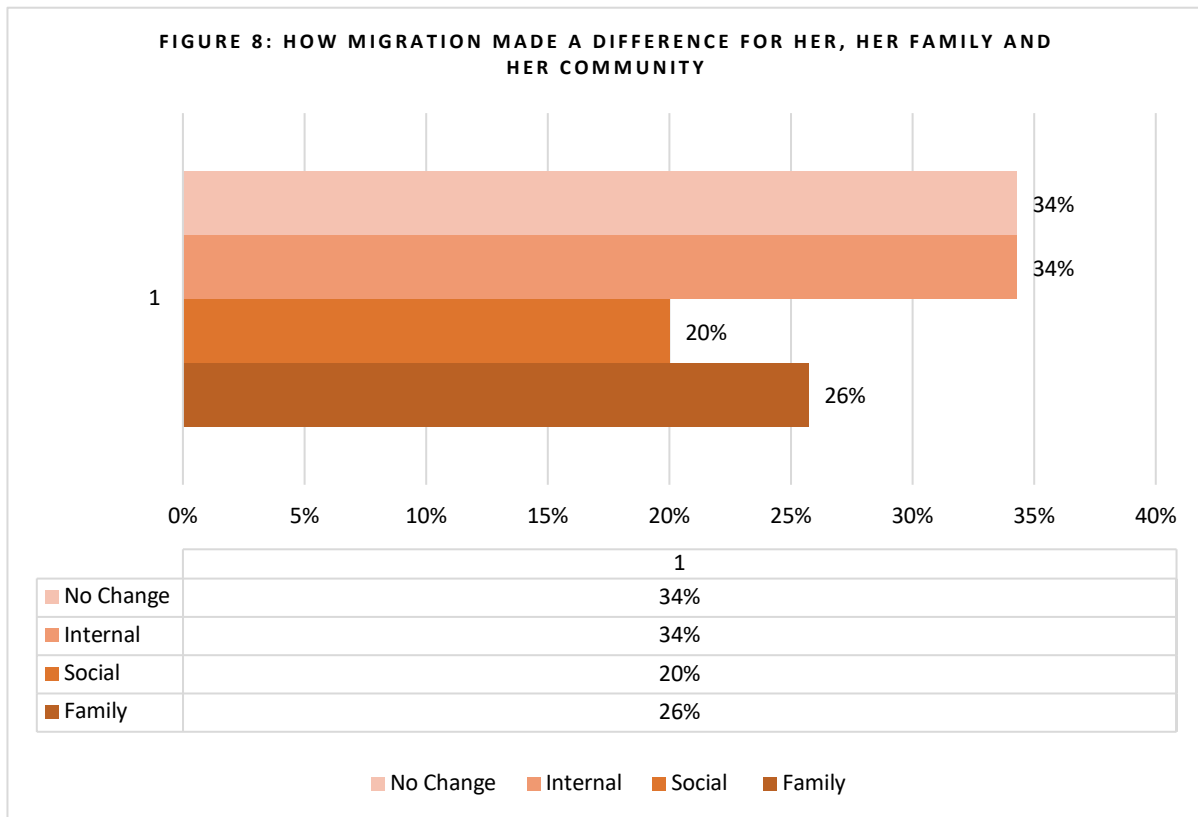
<sup>12</sup> 45 years old, Kachin State



In the small set of interviews with male returnees, the men made less mention of discrimination. Four of them mentioned bad working conditions, two mentioned mistreatment, two mentioned discrimination based on national origin, and two explicitly said their hardships were only language related. (However, some men may be reluctant to speak of hardships because of pressure to demonstrate masculinity.)

One man said: *“When I first arrived in Thailand, I could not speak and understand Thai language. I did not know how I was to do my*

*work? so the senior worker from the factory scared me. I had to work with fire and I once got burned. The boss did not take me to the hospital or clinic. I had to go to the clinic myself. I couldn’t work very well so the boss did not want to give me a salary. He would say that he would pay me next week, next month, but I did not receive my salary for a whole month. Sometimes I had to work overtime but they did not give me overtime pay. I worked together with Thai people who received 20 baht (\$.67) more than me. They gave me a place to stay but they took the accommodation fee from my salary. I had to work in a dangerous place.”<sup>13</sup>*



<sup>13</sup> 27 years old, Mon State

### Non-economic benefits of migration

One question asked of the returnees was, “How do you feel your migration made a difference for you, your family and your community?”

Women generally responded that they gained either:

- i. a greater social acceptance of them from their home communities (20 per cent); or
- ii. a greater voice within their families, and in decision-making (26 per cent); or
- iii. a greater personal sense of maturity, confidence, and decision-making abilities (34 per cent).

Some mentioned more than one of these (*Figure 8*). However, 34 per cent of the women said they did not feel any such changes from their migration. One woman said: “I feel I have more freedom when I am abroad. I feel more confident and economically independent, and I can decide what to spend on. I do not earn enough to invest but I have a stable earning. I also see more gender equality abroad.”<sup>14</sup>

The 2019 IOM CHIME study, which included both international and internal migrants, said, “The

interviews showed families articulating pride in their daughters’ achievements and respecting their contribution to the household as formal income earners” (IOM, 2019a, p. 5). This is a positive finding since female returnees sometimes experience greater stigma than respect upon their return home (SAWF, 2016, p. 13).

Only a limited number of men responded to this question; a few (25 per cent) said that their role as decision-maker increased. While women said their voices were given greater weight by their families, more research would be needed to see if this was vis-à-vis their parents, spouses, or other family members. Many of the interviewees were married. In order to assess how migration may have changed traditional gender roles, additional research would be needed on whether the couples lived together abroad or one of them remained at home while other migrated, et cetera. Additional research could also assess whether the migration experience changed the behaviour of men and women in such things as whether they were now signing up for services that they previously did not know about, such as social benefits.

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<sup>14</sup> 45 years old, Kachin State

## WARNINGS AND ADVICE TO FUTURE MIGRANTS

Even though all the women interviewed were able to increase their incomes, 25 per cent of them definitively advised that other women should not migrate. They alluded to dangers and exploitation during the migration journey as well as discrimination in their destination.

*“If they don’t have relatives, they should not believe the brokers and go. For the younger girls, the brokers tend to destroy them first, and send them,”* one female returnee said.<sup>15</sup>

*“They will be disrespected because it is not your country,”* said another. *“If you decide to go illegally, the broker will take you through routes that you have no idea about. The broker chose a road where there were no people, and no one could see us. If you are in a car, it will be overcrowded, it will be difficult to breathe, and it is dangerous.”*<sup>16</sup>

*“I don’t want others to migrate. You will not face discrimination working in our country,”* said a third female returnee.<sup>17</sup>

Even women who did not explicitly warn others against migrating all offered some form of advice or warning about migration. Around half said women should migrate only if they can do so regularly, with a passport. (This was also said by male returnees. When interviewed, returnees may feel pressured to endorse legal channels.)

Many female returnees stressed the need for migrants to acquire language skills or to do some research about brokers and employers before travelling so that they can avoid exploitation. One recommended that women who want to migrate to Thailand learn the language first;

make sure they know everything about each broker and then choose the best broker; find out what job they will have; and ask for more information about employers and choose one who will take responsibility if an accident happens.<sup>18</sup>

Others said women should have someone to accompany them on the migration journey. Or that they should only migrate if they have relatives or friends in the country of destination.

*“I would suggest those who are interested to migrate do so only if they have relatives or friends at their destination,”* one female returnee said. *“If there are uncertainties or ... no local contacts, one should not go. Having siblings or relatives staying in the destination country would be an advantage.”*<sup>19</sup>

*“I would suggest those who are interested to migrate (do so) with a companion or guardian,”* another said. *“I would not suggest young people to migrate alone. To look for a good broker is important.”*<sup>20</sup>

The 2019 IOM CHIME study also found that female migrants put more emphasis on the importance of having families and relatives in the destination country (IOM 2019a, p. 3).

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, two women from Kachin state who had gone to China warned women not to trust anyone.

*“I learned not to follow what other people do, no matter what the reason is,”* one said. *“You*

<sup>15</sup> 50 years old, Mon State

<sup>16</sup> 30 years old, Mon State

<sup>17</sup> 32 years old, Mon State

<sup>18</sup> 43 years old, Mon State

<sup>19</sup> 31 years old, Kayin State

<sup>20</sup> 45 years old, Kachin State

*cannot even trust your friend. Do not trust anyone easily.”<sup>21</sup>*

*“Never trust anyone abroad,”* the other said.<sup>22</sup>

When asked about their experiences before departure, 35 per cent of the women talked about the fears or dangers for women in the migration process; only one man talked about any concerns before migrating. Thirty per cent of women said that before departing, they had no information about the jobs they were going into, or the conditions of working or living abroad; only two men mentioned this as an issue. Around 30 per cent of the women said they were accompanied by a family member on the journey, whether a husband, sibling, cousin or parent; 20 per cent of the men mentioned this.

### **The overall picture**

It appears that the women were able to make the decision to migrate largely on their own or equally with a spouse. Male and female workers seemed to equally benefit financially from migration. But the responses suggest that there are greater dangers for female workers. Some women expressed a conflicted feeling -- that while they had endured hardship abroad, they also needed to take it in stride because that was still better than staying in Myanmar and not being able to earn any income.

In a feature story included in this report, Khin Lay Nwe is quoted as saying that, *“On the outside, people can see my big home, but nobody can see how much I suffered nor the insecurities and traumas that I had to go through.”* She was referring to sexual harassment by a Thai man while she was working at a rubber plantation in Thailand with her husband. The couple do not have jobs back in Myanmar but she says, *“While employed in Thailand, we lived full of fear wondering what would happen next and we didn’t feel safe. I would prefer to stay in the place that I feel safe in.”* *“If someone asks me whether my situation in life is better now, I will say yes,”* she says. *“But it isn’t fair compared to how much I have paid as an exchange. I don’t want my children to face what I did.”*

In another feature story in this report, returnee Yaw Mya Sar says, *“Here in Myanmar, I don’t know what to do for a living. For someone like me who is old and uneducated is there any job for me here?”* Even though in China she worked 14 hours a day every day for a year without even knowing what her salary was, Yaw Mya Sar still thinks that’s better than staying in Myanmar. She could afford a new kitchen and motorbike with her overseas earnings, while she sees no way to improve her life if she stays in Myanmar.

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<sup>21</sup> 28 years old, Kachin State

<sup>22</sup> 23 years old, Kachin State

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND RETURN TO MYANMAR – IOM’S QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

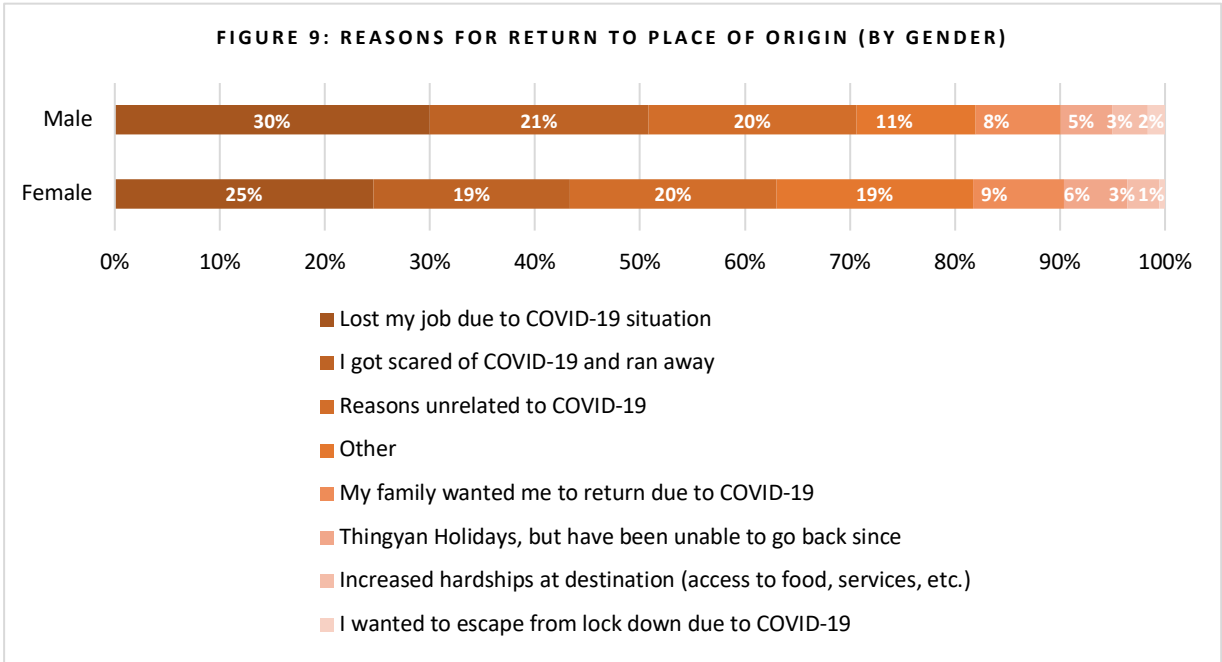
## Reasons for returning home

In the quantitative assessment of nearly 1,600 migrant returnees, the returnees were asked why they had returned to Myanmar. Many respondents said they had to do so because they had lost their jobs. Among male returnees, 30 per cent returned because they had lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and 21 per cent because they felt scared of COVID-19. Among female returnees, 25 per cent returned because they had lost their jobs due to the pandemic and 19 per cent because they felt scared of it (Figure 9).

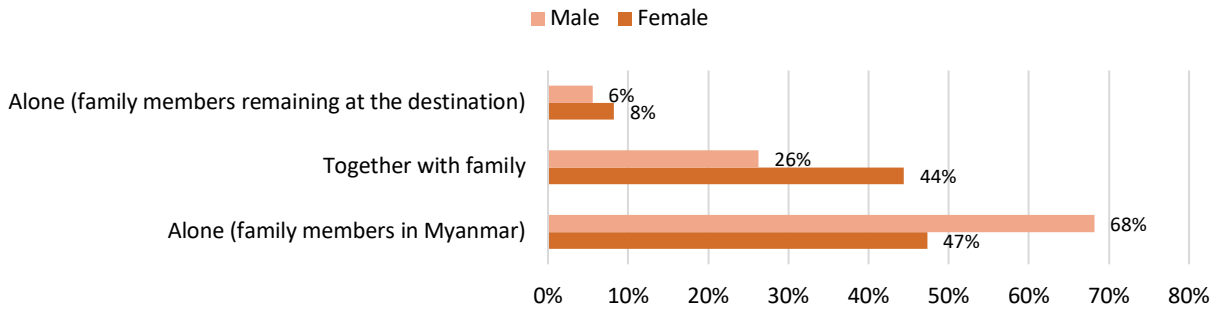
Roughly the same proportion of women and men said they returned because their families wanted them to (8-9 per cent); they wanted to be home for the holidays (5-6 per cent); and their hardships had increased (3 per cent). Forty-four

per cent of women and 26 per cent of men said they had returned home with their families. Sixty-eight per cent of men and 47 per cent of women said that they had returned alone, as their families were already in Myanmar (Figure 10).

Responses differed across different employment sectors. Losing jobs due to COVID-19 was the main reason cited by those in restaurant work (41 per cent), casual work (37 per cent), agricultural work (25 per cent), and factory work (27 per cent) (Figure 11). Encouragement by their families was the main reason cited by those in the fishing industry. Fear of COVID-19 was the main reason cited by those in domestic work, childcare and construction (Figure 11).



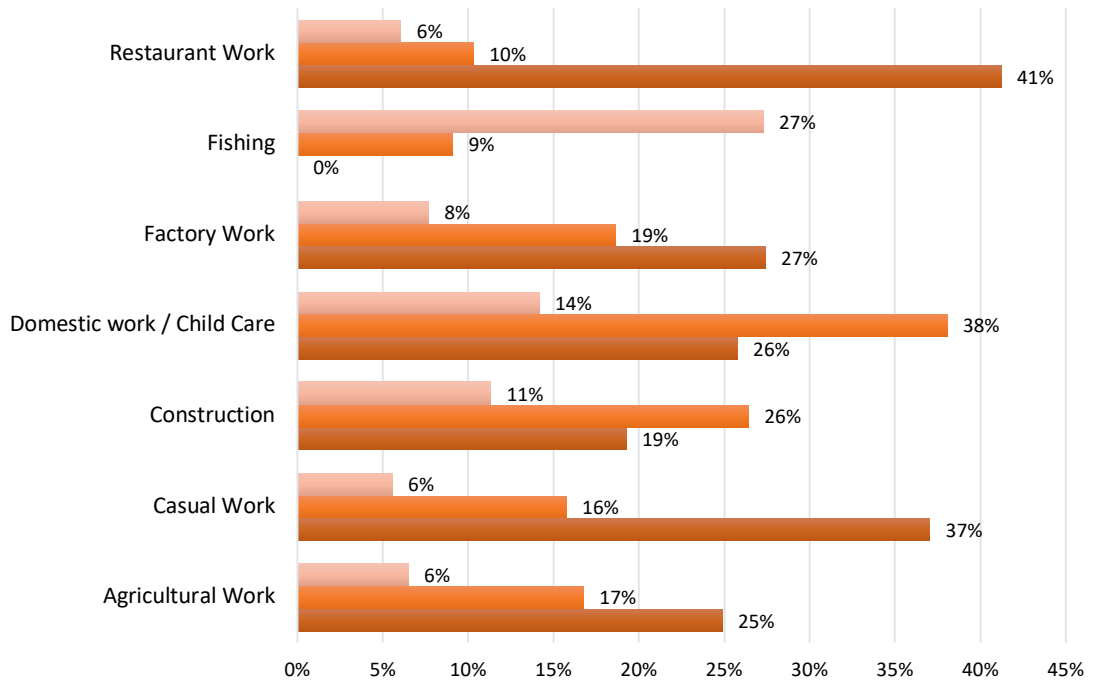
**FIGURE 10: HOW DID YOU RETURN (BY GENDER)**



	Alone (family members in Myanmar)	Together with family	Alone (family members remaining at the destination)
Male	68%	26%	6%
Female	47%	44%	8%

**FIGURE 11: TOP THREE REASONS OF RETURNING TO MYANMAR IN LIGHT OF COVID-19**

■ My family wanted me to return due to COVID-19 
 ■ I got scared of COVID-19 and ran away 
 ■ Lost my job due to COVID-19 situation

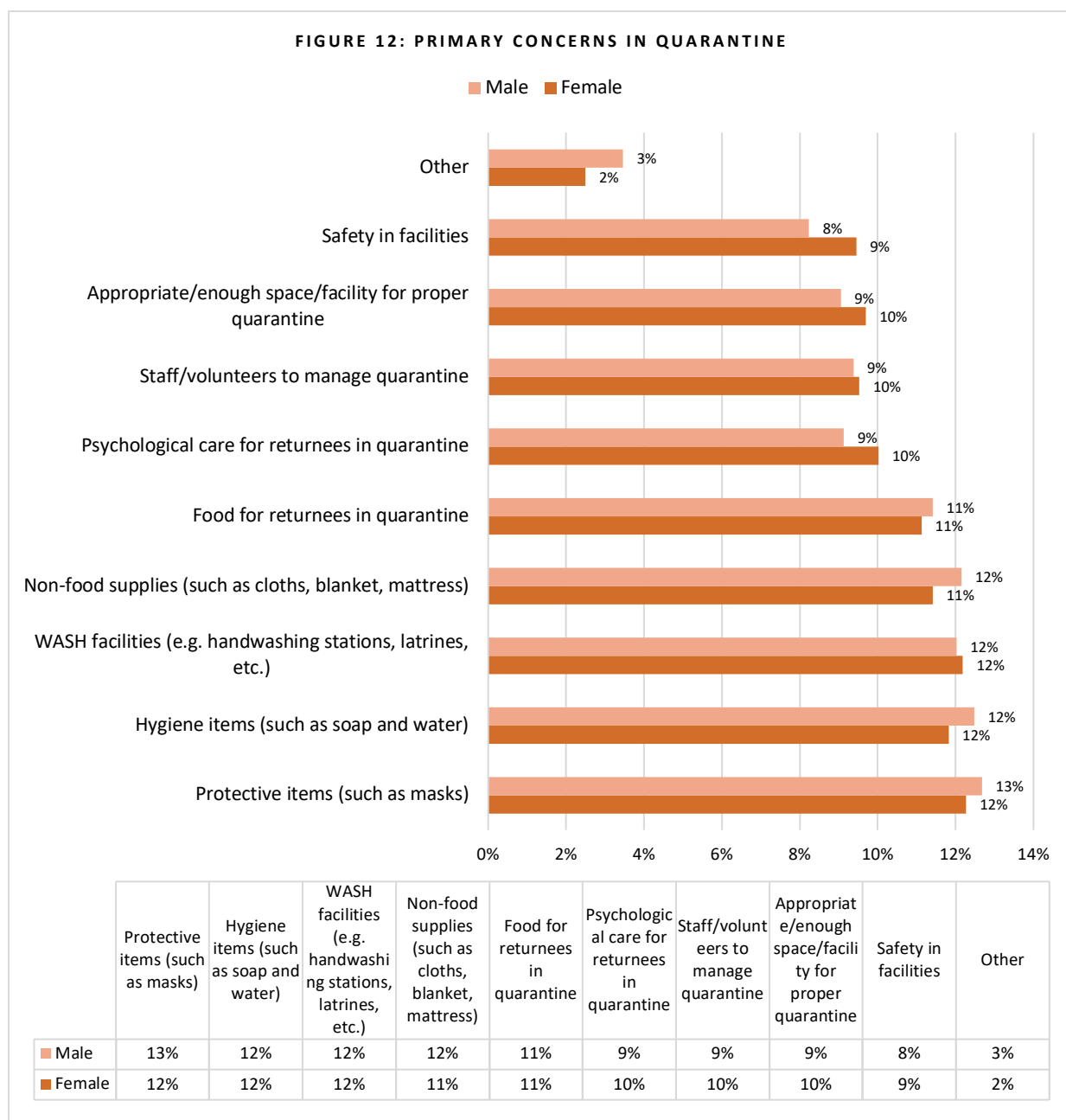


	Agricultural Work	Casual Work	Construction	Domestic work / Child Care	Factory Work	Fishing	Restaurant Work
My family wanted me to return due to COVID-19	6%	6%	11%	14%	8%	27%	6%
I got scared of COVID-19 and ran away	17%	16%	26%	38%	19%	9%	10%
Lost my job due to COVID-19 situation	25%	37%	19%	26%	27%	0%	41%

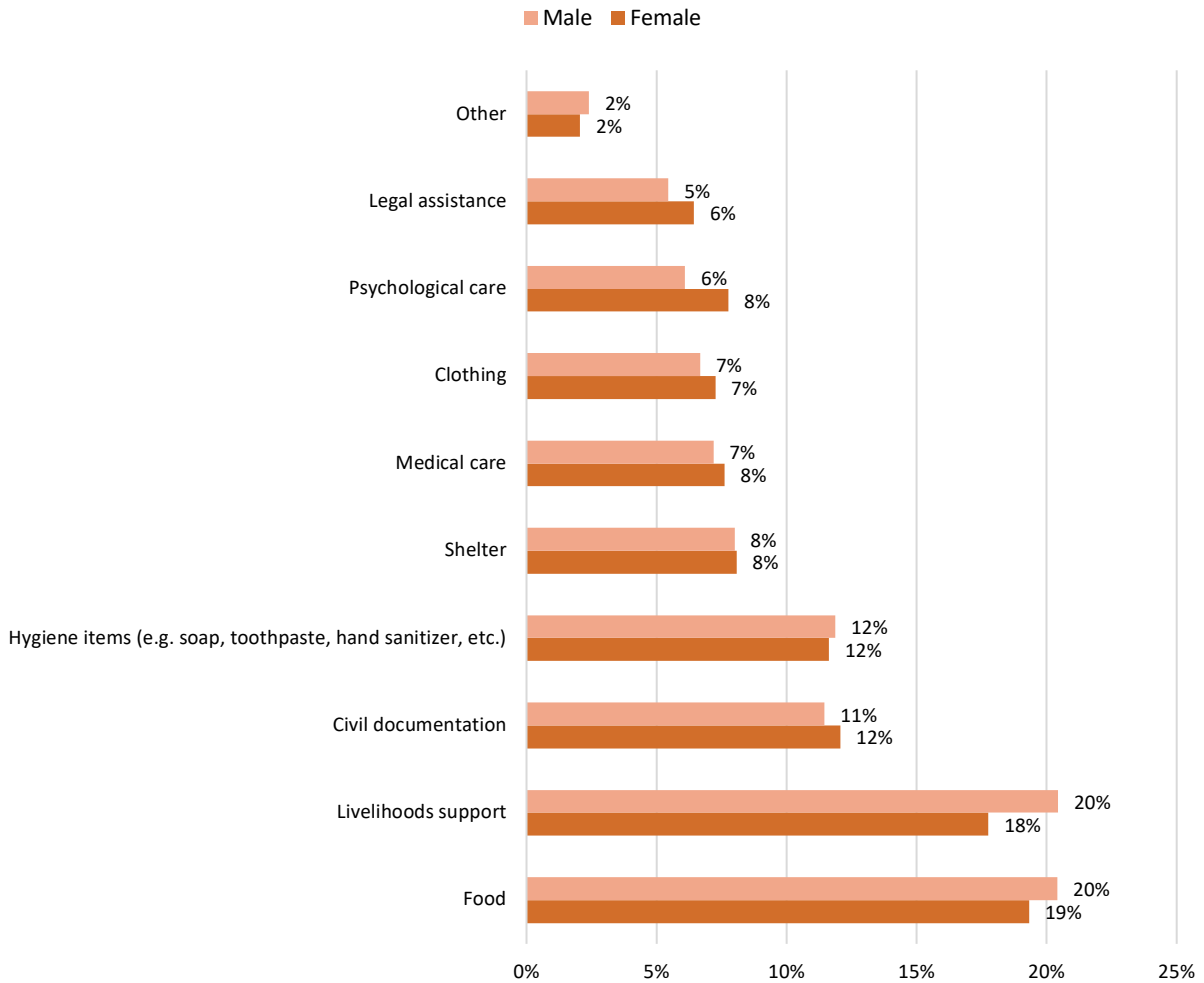
### Immediate needs during quarantine and after

When asked about their experiences in quarantine after returning to Myanmar, both men and women equally expressed concerns about insufficiency or lack of protective items such as masks; hygiene items such as soap and water; hygiene facilities such as handwashing stations and latrines; supplies such as cloths, blankets, and mattress; food; psychological care; the staff or volunteers managing the quarantine;

the space or facilities; and safety there (Figure 12). With regard to immediate needs after quarantine, men and women cited food and livelihood support as the main concerns, followed by civil documentation, hygiene needs, shelter, medical care, clothing and psychological care. There were no significant differences between women and men in expression of these concerns.



**FIGURE 13: IMMEDIATE NEEDS POST QUARANTINE**



	Food	Livelihoods support	Civil documentation	Hygiene items (e.g. soap, toothpaste, hand sanitizer, etc.)	Shelter	Medical care	Clothing	Psychological care	Legal assistance	Other
Male	20%	20%	11%	12%	8%	7%	7%	6%	5%	2%
Female	19%	18%	12%	12%	8%	8%	7%	8%	6%	2%



### Financial situation after COVID-19

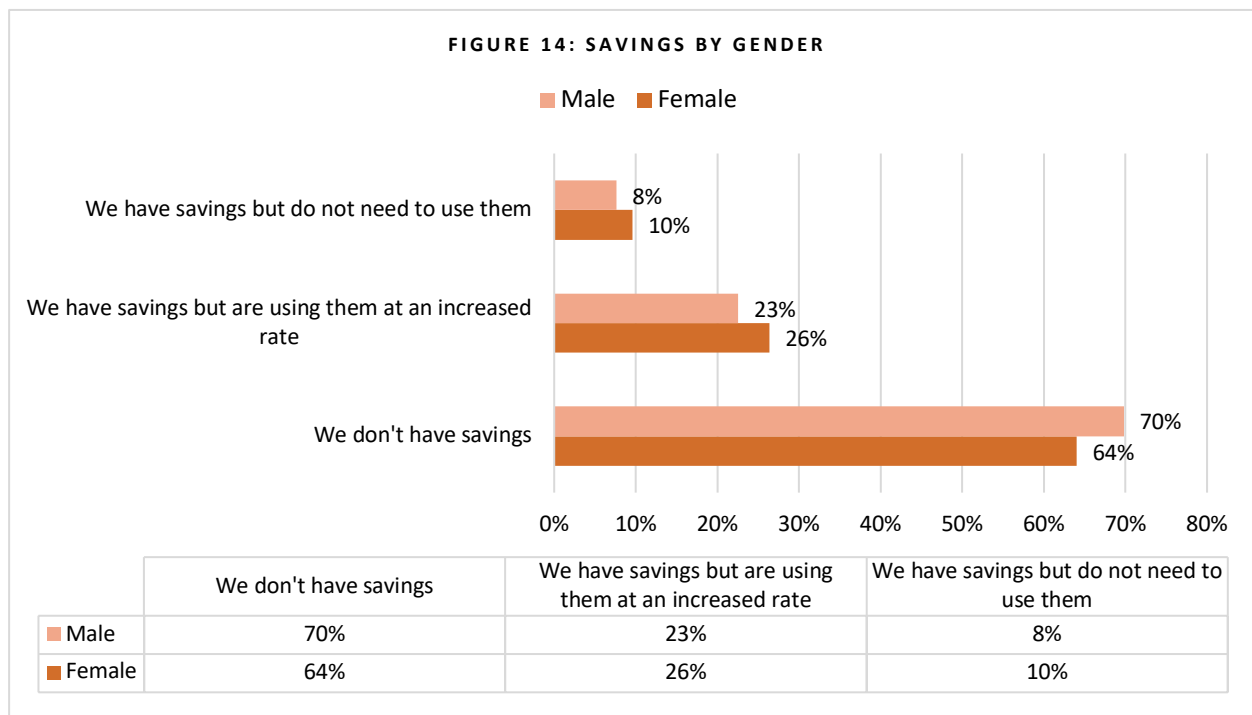
Regarding their financial situations since the pandemic started, there was little difference between the rates of savings and debt of female and male returnees (Figures 14 and 15), or the support that they desired longer-term. While over half (around 56 per cent) of returnees did not report being in debt currently, two-thirds (67 per cent) said they had no savings. One-quarter said they were using their savings more quickly because of COVID-19. Another quarter said they were in debt and it was worsening because of COVID-19.

There was a greater difference for those returning from Thailand versus China (Figures 16 and 17). Returnees from Thailand had significantly more savings and significantly less debt, and the amount of debt was less affected by COVID-19. This difference may be because the returnees from Thailand have generally spent a significantly longer time in the destination country than returnees from China.

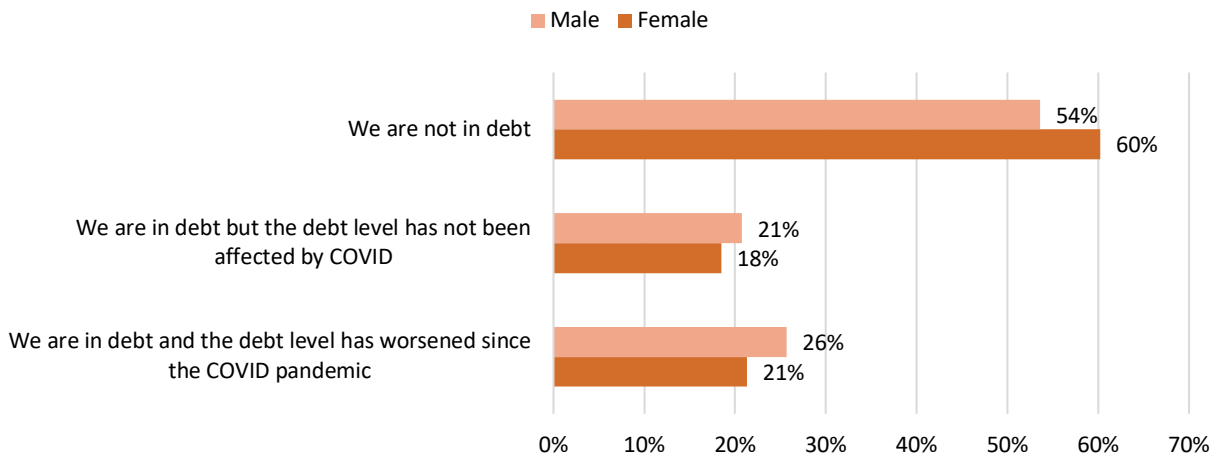
Since the returnees said their immediate needs are livelihood support, food and more savings, their financial situations of course will worsen with time if they are unable to find new sources of income.

For the longer-term, both men and women want business start-up support and skills training. Roughly equal numbers want help either with remigrating; finding employment overseas, in their hometowns or elsewhere in Myanmar (9-12 per cent); or with economic development/recovery in Myanmar (9 per cent as shown in Figure 18). Returnees seem willing to consider a range of options for new employment or sources of income.

Since many of the returnees have so little savings and rapidly increasing expenditures, donors and the Government could help by providing start-up capital and skills training. This is especially needed as formal-sector jobs in Myanmar are scarce and employment overseas may be challenging as borders remain closed due to the pandemic.

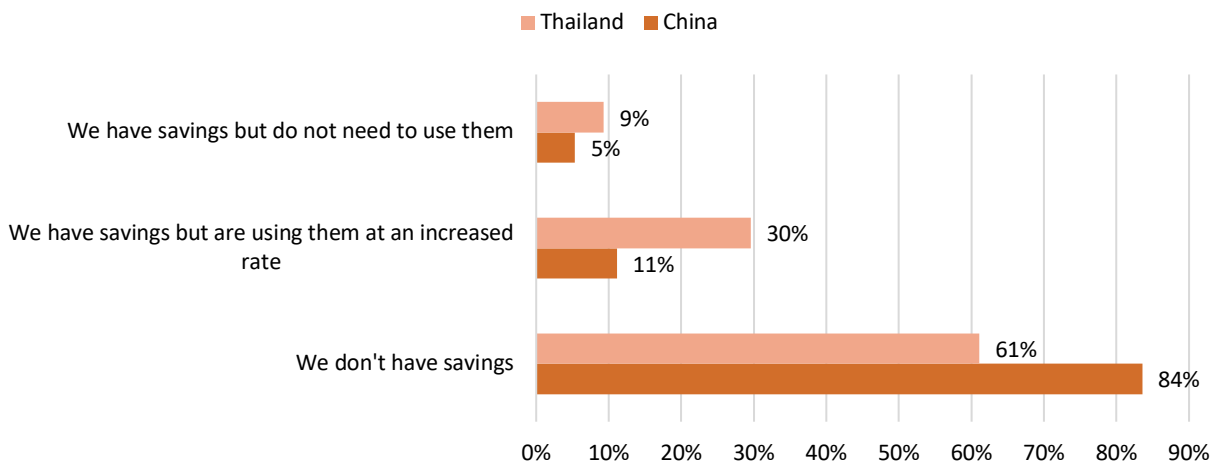


**FIGURE 15: DEBT BY GENDER**



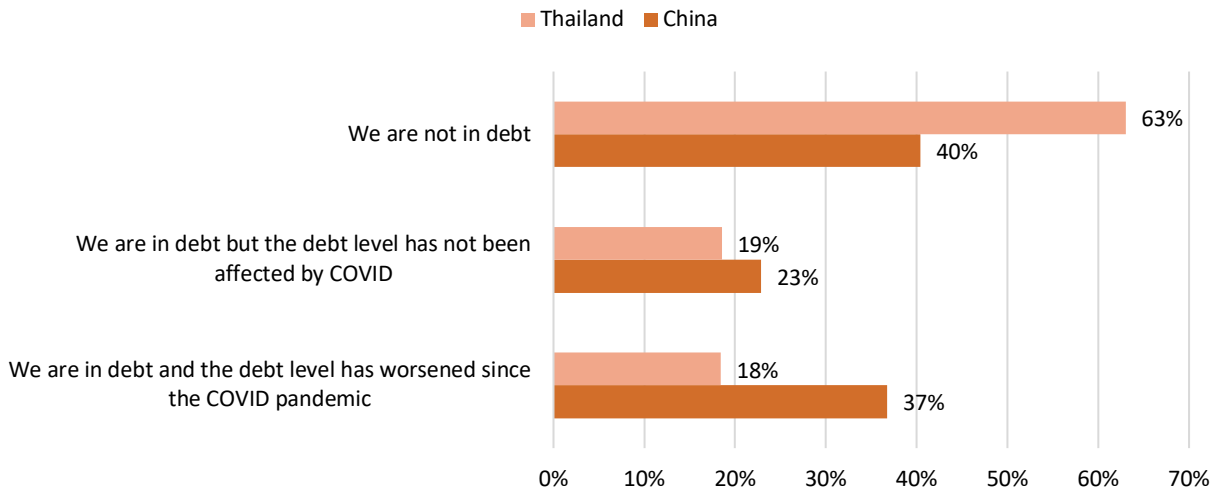
	We are in debt and the debt level has worsened since the COVID pandemic	We are in debt but the debt level has not been affected by COVID	We are not in debt
Male	26%	21%	54%
Female	21%	18%	60%

**FIGURE 16: HOW IS THE SAVINGS SITUATION OF YOUR HOUSEHOLD SINCE THE COVID PANDEMIC (ACCORDING TO PLACE MIGRANT HAS BEEN WORKING)**



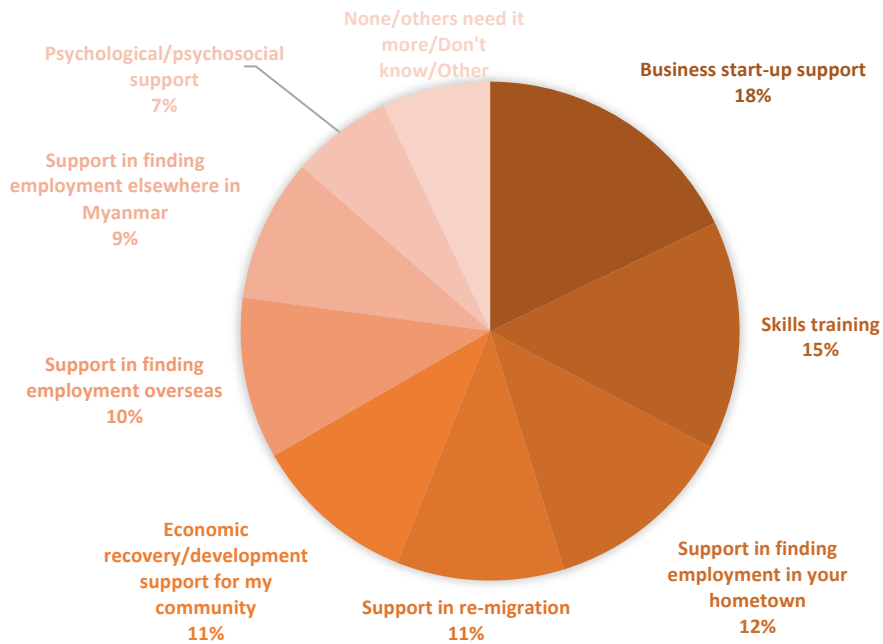
	We don't have savings	We have savings but are using them at an increased rate	We have savings but do not need to use them
Thailand	61%	30%	9%
China	84%	11%	5%

**FIGURE 17: HOW IS THE DEBT SITUATION OF YOUR HOUSEHOLD SINCE THE COVID PANDEMIC**



	We are in debt and the debt level has worsened since the COVID pandemic	We are in debt but the debt level has not been affected by COVID	We are not in debt
Thailand	18%	19%	63%
China	37%	23%	40%

**FIGURE 18: TYPE OF SUPPORT NEEDED LONGER- TERM**



### **Psychological support**

In IOM's quantitative assessment, 22 per cent of returnees (men and women) said they are facing increased psychological stress, though only 7 per cent acknowledged the need for psychological support. Asian cultures tend to undervalue psychological support needs. Women may experience greater psychological stress in times of crisis because they have a higher burden of household responsibilities and a greater risk of violence and harassment by employers, partners, law enforcement officials, and front-line service providers (ILO, 2020, p. 1, 7). The qualitative and quantitative surveys in Myanmar did not squarely address the issue of violence. However, Safe and Fair, an ASEAN-wide project run by UN Women and ILO says, "Increased risks of violence and harassment are interconnected with women migrant workers' job and income losses, lack of social protection and basic health care, increased debts, and a high risk of COVID-

19 exposure due to the nature of work or accommodation conditions" (ILO and UN Women, 2020, p. 10).

The quarantine centres provided an opportunity to raise the returnees' awareness about issues related to women such as gender-based violence. A staff member at one centre said: "Before COVID, many women did not understand their rights or the issues of violence against women, and none of the projects, none of the CSOs (civil society organizations) are working on violence against women as far as I know, in the village we supported. But now they have gained awareness about violence against women and are learning about the laws protecting women and punishing violence against women, (and about) where they can contact if they are victims of suffering from violations of their rights."

# SKILLS ACQUIRED ABROAD AND USEFULNESS IN MYANMAR – QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

## Women's skills

The UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews found that the female returnees did a significant variety of work abroad:

- service industries (restaurants, hotels)
- construction (masonry, laying bricks, grouting tiles)
- manufacturing (factories of many kinds: carrot jam, purified drinking water, seafood processing, garments)
- agriculture and agricultural processing (rubber plantations, scraping rubber, sugar cane, pineapple gardens)
- domestic help work
- other (gasoline shop attendants, teachers)

The most valuable and transferable skills mentioned by the women related to masonry and bricklaying, cooking foreign cuisines (Thai, Chinese, Indian), and sewing.

One woman who worked in masonry said she learned to *“draw arabesque and decorative work with stucco”*.<sup>23</sup>

Another said, *“I learned iron joinery skills when I worked in construction. These are unusual skills for Myanmar women to learn.”*<sup>24</sup>

While masonry was generally considered a useful skill along with other construction work, half the women said they could do similar work in Myanmar while the other half said it was not possible.

One woman said that in Myanmar, *“We hardly see women work as a mason.”*<sup>25 26</sup>

Six women said they had gained cooking skills and so could open their own food shops in Myanmar.

One said, *“I learned how to cook Thai food there. I think I can open a restaurant by cooking Thai food.”*<sup>27</sup>

While one woman who was a domestic worker said she learned cooking skills, three of the other four said they had no transferable skills and there are no jobs for domestic workers in Myanmar.

*“I was ... a housemaid, so it is not possible to work in my country,”* one woman who had returned from Thailand said.<sup>28</sup>

In a feature story that is part of this report, Khin Yu Wai said that in Thailand there was more willingness to do on-the-job training.

*“In Thailand, people don't ask you what you can do,”* she said. *“They show you how to do it first. I wish we could have a similar work culture in Myanmar.”*

The agricultural industry, which not many of the returnees had worked in abroad, also is large in

<sup>23</sup> 32 years old, Mon State

<sup>24</sup> 31 years old, Kayin State

<sup>25</sup> 32 years old, Mon State

<sup>26</sup> One said she will form a mason team -- “I can get all mason contracts.” Another said, “I can apply my skills as a bricklayer in

Myanmar but (there's) very low pay here. I also cannot start my own business as well because I do not have money to buy materials for the work even though I know how to build a house.”

<sup>27</sup> 45 years old, Mon State

<sup>28</sup> 30 years old, Mon State

Myanmar. For example, there are rubber plantations in Mon State.

One of the returnees there said: *“I can make raw rubber sheets from the beginning to the last step. I can get a scrapping rubber job. I can do all jobs related to rubber. If I want to work here, I can.”*<sup>29</sup>

Other women said their Thai language ability was the most useful skill they gained.

The women who had worked in factories said that they learned skills specific to the industry or to a single task, and that generally those skills cannot be used outside that particular factory and it is unlikely they could find related jobs in Myanmar. Four said that kind of the work is not available in Myanmar.

A woman who had worked in a fish can factory in Thailand said, *“I got some skills from Thailand but I do not think I can apply my skills in my country. I do not see that kind of work in my community.”*<sup>30</sup>

A returnee from China said that factory work for migrants is meant to be menial in nature.

*“I did not learn any new skills,”* she said. *“I think foreign migrant workers are not supposed to learn any new skills. If we were given the same opportunities at our origins (Myanmar) we would have better chances to learn new skills. But I learned how to complete a task slow but steady while I was working in China.”*<sup>31</sup>

Exceptions included two women who had learned to sew while working in the garment industry. But they were concerned about whether they could earn a living with this skill alone.

One said: *“I can apply my skills and experiences in sewing. I can help my sister-in-law in sewing*

*in our village. I am already old and it is not easy to open a sewing shop. And also, I don’t have any money to spend for the shop either.”*<sup>32</sup>

The other said: *“I know how to sew shoes, I know how to sew a T-shirt. But I don’t have money to start a business. I think I can find a job related to my experience in Myanmar.”*<sup>33</sup>

Some of the female returnees said that even though they had the requisite skills and there was a demand for their services, they lacked capital to start their own small businesses.

As one woman said: *“My work experience that I gained in Thailand, I cannot apply in Myanmar. I worked at a gas station but I do not have money to open a gas station even though I know my work very well. If I work as a worker, I do not see a need for a gas station worker. In my village, they only open gas stations for their family business and they do not hire other people. I also can’t open a small gas station because there are a lot of small gas stations in my village.”*<sup>34</sup>

### **Skills women want**

With regard to the skills they wanted to acquire or attend trainings for, 20 per cent of the female returnees said they wanted to learn how to run a business or shop or to do sales. One woman specifically wanted training in marketing. Another 20 per cent mentioned skills such as sewing, advanced training on skills they had previously learned, or skills to join the garment sector.

One woman said, *“I want advanced sewing trainings. I want to learn how to sew coats and dresses.”*<sup>35</sup>

Seventeen per cent of the female returnees mentioned skills related to food and beverage, so they could open their own café or food shop.

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<sup>29</sup> 31 years old, Mon state

<sup>30</sup> 31 years old, Mon State

<sup>31</sup> 50 years old, Kachin State

<sup>32</sup> 53 years old, Mon State

<sup>33</sup> 20 years old, Mon State

<sup>34</sup> Mon State 31 years old

<sup>35</sup> 34 years old, Kachin State

A few mentioned beauty parlour skills such as hair styling and make-up. Several mentioned language skills, though it was unclear if that was for the purpose of remigrating.

*"I would like to learn cooking and bakery," one woman said. "I want to do café shop business. I need coffee-making machines, and other kitchen utensils."*<sup>36</sup>

### **Comparison with men**

Most of the men interviewed had worked in factories; a couple had worked in construction and a few in restaurants or auto mechanic/gasoline shops. Nearly half of the men said that the skills they had learned abroad could not be used in Myanmar because there were no similar jobs. The exceptions were those who had learned masonry, furniture-building and automotive repair.

One man said he needed capital. *"If I had money, I could open a furniture shop. But I do not have money to open, so I have to go Thailand again to make more money to open that kind of shop."*<sup>37</sup>

The men did not express any need to learn business skills. They instead wanted training in automotive and mobile phone repair, electrician work, and in driving. Two also mentioned language skills. Almost 40 per cent did not express any desire for training or skills advancement. Thirty per cent said they had *"no problems"* currently. Three men said they had no plans yet. Only 20 per cent explicitly mentioned plans to remigrate. This contrasts with the IOM finding from the quantitative assessment that 52 per cent of men and women planned to remigrate. These men largely viewed migration as necessary but would prefer to stay and work in Myanmar.

In a feature story included in this report, Tin Lin Naing, who returned after 11 years working in a tea shop in Malaysia, said, *"I want to go back to*

*give my children an equal life in the new developing Myanmar."*

He hoped that political changes after the recent elections in Myanmar will result in more jobs, but for now Malaysia is more promising. In another feature story, Zay Yar Soe said he has no job prospects in his hometown except as a motorbike taxi driver. His village has a lot of educated young people but they face the same problem of no available jobs. He wished Myanmar offered him opportunities.

*"I don't want to be in debt, and I don't want to go to another country for the sake of repaying that debt,"* he said.

### **Gender-based analysis**

Overall, the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews show that the women have more entrepreneurial ambitions than the men. Women and men expressed desires to learn different types of skills; some of these preferences reflected traditional gender roles (women's interest in beauty, men in automotive repair). Nearly half of women said they plan to remigrate, are facing financial problems from being out of work, and need investment capital in order to earn income in Myanmar. Most of the women seem to understand there are fewer, if any, formal-sector employment opportunities in Myanmar and want to remigrate for such opportunities. If they were to stay in Myanmar, they would need capital to start their own small businesses. Only a few said they had no plans. In a feature story that is part of this report, returnee Yaw Mya Sar said she wants to start a pig farm but that would require start-up capital of 2 million kyat (about \$1,549), which she doesn't have.

While the returnees said they were able to save some of their earnings abroad and send remittances home, they repeatedly said they needed capital in order to start a small business in Myanmar. This suggests that they had saved very

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<sup>36</sup> 21 years old, Kachin State

<sup>37</sup> 22 years old, Mon State

little, whether it was because their families back home had already used up the remittances or because the migrants were suddenly forced back from Thailand/China or stranded in Myanmar by COVID-19 and so could not adequately prepare for their return. Both men and women would likely benefit from help with start-up capital and training in financial literacy, long-term planning and establishing cooperatives.

In an interview, a staff member of a quarantine centre said female returnees were less likely to want to go back abroad because they want to care of their children.

The staff member said: *“Most of the migrant men are ready to go back once the borders open. As for the female migrants, some are not going back anymore because they did not come back to Myanmar alone. They have children so they cannot go back. They must take care of them. They realize that it is good to work in another country and that the money is good, but at the same time, they have their family. So when we interviewed some of the female workers, they said that if they could get a better opportunity, they might go back but currently, they don’t want to go because of their children. If they had the opportunity to start a business, they could open a grocery store or beauty salon at the village level. So given a choice, most women don’t want to go back.”*

This anecdotal evidence, along with that in the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, are inconsistent with the IOM assessment that there are no differences between women and men in re-migration intentions.



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## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many migrant workers to return to Myanmar, where they face uncertainties about the prospects for remigrating and for economic opportunities abroad, along with tightened migration restrictions.

IOM's quantitative assessment of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 did not yield immediately apparent differences in the impacts on women versus men. Both women and men lost their jobs abroad and their primary concerns are food security for themselves and their families and re-establishing livelihoods.

In the UN Women – Helvetas Myanmar interviews, many female returnees alluded to women experiencing greater dangers and other negative aspects of migration. They stressed the need for better pre-departure information and safety measures. They acknowledged that their migration had financially benefited themselves and their families at home and that their ability to earn income had given them greater respect from their families and home communities and had increased their own self-confidence. But they said safeguards needed to be put in place to better ensure that the endeavour was worthwhile for future migrants. They also expressed hope that more opportunities would become available at home, where they may face less discrimination. The women emphasized the

importance of safe migration: migrating with family members; going to destinations where relatives live; finding trusted brokers and employers; and learning the language beforehand so as to avoid discrimination and mistreatment in the country of destination.

In the interviews, female returnees voiced entrepreneurial aims that differed from those of the male returnees. The women explicitly said they wanted trainings to improve their skills or to gain new skills that would enable them to run their own small businesses. Since in Myanmar they lack opportunities for formal-sector employment and face gender discrimination in fields like construction and masonry, the women spoke about using skills they had learned abroad to run their own shops or businesses.

One of the greatest challenges for many of the returnees, both men and women, seems to be that their earnings abroad did not result in much savings. Their families back home may have used up all the workers' remittances for their basic living expenses and even for the purchase of land and houses. Female migrant workers face enormous challenges in saving and planning for the future because of the gender wage gap and the lower wages in the informal sector where most of the women work. It is important to ensure that migrant workers, particularly the women, can earn fair wages abroad.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the Government of Myanmar, international organizations, community-based organizations and donors

**Help with start-up capital and financial skills training.** Many returnees feel confident that they can use some of their newly acquired skills to run small businesses, but they lack the capital and expertise to ensure success. Training on financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills can benefit the female returnees. This would include training on how to develop habits and facilities to save (e.g., personal bank accounts) and how to use their savings to invest in their own small businesses. Short-term capital support has been very successful in other parts of Asia, for instance with the Self-Employed Women's Association in India. Pre-departure training on safe and planned migration should include training on how the workers can save abroad and plan to return home with these savings, instead of perpetuating a never-ending cycle of unwanted work abroad.

**Set-up vocational training and certification and facilitate employment opportunities.** Vocational training should be set up as partnerships among community-based organizations, trade unions and business associations and Government based on national skills standards, or at the local level with the help of outside donors. Training on cooking could emphasize hygiene standards; training on sewing or other skills could emphasize occupational health and safety. Giving formal certifications to vocational training graduates would increase their self-confidence and help them demonstrate their qualifications to employers. In line with ILO's recommendation, this assessment similarly recommends that the Government set up systems to recognize and accredit the skills of returning migrants and support labour exchange offices to provide more career

counselling, job matching, and referrals to other employment services.

**Set up psychological support services.** It is important to establish services that are culturally appropriate, gender-sensitive and free of charge to help the returnees reintegrate and to ensure their well-being and that of their families.

**Offer outreach, education and training on safe migration and gender-based violence.** This is critical since the returnees expressed concern about having received little information on migration and the dangers for women before they left Myanmar. Female returnees said they knew very little about gender-based violence. Thus, education about safe migration should include discussions specifically focused on women's safety. The 2019 IOM CHIME study said, "With women being more likely to rely on families and friends during migration, interventions should foster networks that circulate accurate information and promote peer support prior to and during migration."

**Give training on labour rights and gender-based discrimination.** Some of the returnees said they had experienced poor and exploitative working conditions abroad. They also had limited understanding about what constitutes gender-based discrimination. The Government or organizations can partner with trade unions or labour groups to give migrant workers informational sessions before they depart Myanmar. These sessions should educate them about their labour rights; common issues for women (harassment, violence, pay disparity, maternity); the laws in the country of destination, and the organizations there, whether trade unions or

other NGOs, that can help them if they are abused or exploited.

**Support initiatives to invest in local communities.** While the Government should continue to build infrastructure in all areas of the country so people can access health care, education and other services, it should consider supporting initiatives by returnees to invest in their local communities. This can be in the form of matching funds. The female

## For the Government of Myanmar

**Promote safe and secure processes for migrant workers.** The Government should expand access to regular and affordable-cost migration channels such as by directly linking workers with licensed recruitment agencies and by decentralizing recruitment processes. It should ensure that recruitment processes give women equal opportunities to get employment abroad.

Continue efforts to strengthen gender-responsive migration policies at the national and bilateral level, building on recent good work in this area, including for example through the National Plans of Action on the Management of International Labour Migration and Combating Trafficking in Persons, as well as the mechanisms developed at bilateral level with key countries of destination (such as MOUs on employment cooperation and combating human trafficking with Thailand). Building on these good practices, the Government of Myanmar should continue efforts, in cooperation with international partners, at dialogue with key countries of destination towards further bilateral arrangements to support more effectively managed safe and regular migration pathways for women migrant workers.

Given the centrality of mobility to both the impacts of COVID-19 on men and women migrants, and potential recovery measures, the

returnees expressed pride in being able to use their savings to help develop their communities. This also gains them greater respect in their communities.

**Do research on possible transformation of gender norms.** Research should be done on how the experience and impact of migration may have changed traditional gender norms in families, married couples, local communities and Myanmar society in general.

Government of Myanmar should ensure that recovery and response plans are migrant-inclusive, mobility-sensitive and gender-sensitive. To the extent possible, it is recommended that the needs and vulnerabilities of returning migrants are mainstreamed into recovery efforts at the community, local, sub-national and national levels.

Maintain and upscale gender-responsive programming around migration and development in Myanmar, given the strong foundation built for work in this area in recent years and the potential for it to continue contributing to socioeconomic recovery and development efforts at multiple levels. This should include, among others, facilitate the continued and improved transfer and usage of remittances at minimal cost to migrants and households; and upscale efforts to harness the skills and knowledge of returnees towards local and national recovery efforts through knowledge sharing, skills certification/recognition of prior learning, job-

matching and entrepreneurial support. Such efforts should support, feed into and further build on related policy frameworks such as the 2nd National Plan of Action on the Management of International Labour Migration, as well as the Myanmar Economic Relief and Recovery Plan (MERRP).



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## SEARCHING FOR SAFETY AND SECURITY

*Do as Bayintnaung*, or “destroy the rafts”, is a familiar saying in Myanmar. It means to pursue your goals with full determination and without looking back, to go ahead and do it without thinking too much about the risks.

Khin Lay Nwe, now 50, regrets that she destroyed the rafts more than a decade ago, when she sold all her possessions and left her children in order to work abroad. It’s common for working-class families in Myanmar to go work in Thailand and Malaysia because of the better opportunities and pay there. After 12 years in Thailand, Khin Lay Nwe was able to build a house in Myanmar that is large enough for her children and extended family.

But she says, “If you ask me now whether I am still ready to go back there, I would say no. I also don’t want my children to work abroad.”

*“On the outside, people can see my big home, but nobody can see how much I suffered nor the insecurities and traumas that I had to go through,”* she says.

Khin Lay Nwe says she was sexually harassed several times by the Thai workers while she and her husband were working on a rubber plantation in Hat Yai in southern Thailand. The couple lived in a hut their Thai employer provided on the plantation, and because they lived alone and feared repercussions, they decided against reporting the harassment. Khin Lay Nwe says that sometimes she would shout at the men when they approached her, and if her husband or someone else was nearby, she would ask for their help.

Rubber trees are cut three times in a year or a season. For 12 seasons, the couple returned to Myanmar in between harvests to build their house. Hugging her young grandson, Khin Lay

Nwe says: “I wanted to give my children a good education, but the truth is I could only send them to the village school and only till the fourth grade. I

was not able to send them to the school in the city to pursue a higher education.

“If someone asks me whether my situation in life is better now, I would say yes. But it isn’t fair compared to how much I paid in exchange. I don’t want my children to face what I did.”

Khin Lay Nwe and her family live in Saw Ke village on Bilu Island in Mon state, southeastern Myanmar. With local employment and educational opportunities lacking, 80 per cent of the islanders go abroad to work. It is not uncommon to see well-built houses on the road -- a result of money earned abroad -- as you cross the General Aung San bridge from the state capital, Mawlamying, to reach the island.

Many of the islanders including Khin Lay Nwe returned home from abroad for Myanmar’s annual water festival and new year in April 2020. Then sudden COVID-19 travel bans and restrictions left them unable to go back abroad. Khin Lay Nwe does not want to go back to Thailand anyway. But her husband does, especially if they cannot find jobs in Myanmar that measure up to the benefits of working in that rubber plantation.

“Since we’ve been here, we have not had any jobs,” Khin Lay Nwe says. “But while employed in Thailand, we lived full of fear wondering what would happen next and we didn’t feel safe. I would prefer to stay in a place that I feel safe in.”

Yet she says she will weigh the options. If it becomes increasingly hard for the family to survive, she will have no choice but to return to Thailand. All the Bilu islanders want are jobs that provide regular and fair work and income, Khin Lay Nwe says as she finishes cooking dinner for the family.

“If I had a regular job, then I wouldn’t need to take risks,” she says. “I wouldn’t need to destroy the rafts, and I can live and be close to my family. I can do anything if someone teaches me very well.”



Photo: UN Women/Sandar Maw Lay

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## STRUGGLING TO SUCCEED, 17 YEARS ON

“Is there a job where I can earn about 400,000 kyat (\$309) per month, including room and board?” asks Min Min Htun, lamenting the poor opportunities in his homeland. For 17 years, he had worked on construction sites in Ranong province in southern Thailand; to him, the salaries in Myanmar are laughable.

At 43, Min Min Htun has spent his prime working years in Thailand and speaks the language fluently. With his earnings, he built a house large enough for his family and his aging parents in his village on Bilu Island in Mon State. He knows that his parents will be well-taken care of by his children. As for himself, he wants to settle down in Thailand.

It took him 17 years to get to where he is now and he is determined not to let things slide. Before leaving Myanmar, Min Min Htun had worked a series of part-time jobs. It was only during his time in Thailand that he became a skilled worker, and for that he is very grateful.

Min Min Htun returned to Myanmar in April 2020 to celebrate the annual water festival but could not return to Thailand due to the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns that were suddenly implemented. So he has since bought a pickup and has been working as a building contractor in Mawlamyine with his brother and a part-time driver. He has built two houses for customers. His income is not much, but he is able to pay his bills.

In Thailand, Min Min Htun lived in an apartment with his brother and worked as a contractor on site and managed a group of workers. It has always been his dream to set up his own construction company, but he still wants to work under someone from whom he can learn. And he wants to earn enough to build up some capital.

Min Min Htun was earning the equivalent of almost \$542 a month in Thailand, much more than he is now earning in Myanmar. The way of working also

is different, he says -- “In Thailand, you’re not allowed to slack off or be careless at work.” In Thailand he had the chance to learn first-hand

workplace discipline and professionalism. That gave him the self-confidence to lead his own venture in Myanmar.

Min Min Htun says he hopes that after setting up his business, he can return to Thailand. He feels more at home there. He values it as the place that helped him move on from what was a very tough life to a better one. Since he has a passport and a work permit, he even dreams of starting a business there. “If possible, I want to set up my venture in Thailand and I want to invest there because everything is systematic, including the legal frameworks,” he says, adding that he has connections in Thailand who can help him set things up.


“Leaving for Thailand was a good turning point in my life. I heard that some people face difficulties but personally, I did not,” Min Min Htun says.

Most workplaces in Thailand, he says, will need their Myanmar workers to come back soon. Although employment in construction is now uncertain, the Thai food industry, for example, relies heavily on workers from Myanmar.

*“Thailand needs Myanmar workers. We also need jobs very much,” Min Min Htun says. “But if the government does not allow us to work there, people will go there illegally like they used to do, and that will be alarming.”*

And here Min Min Htun feels conflicted. His old employer has been calling him to return to Thailand for the past couple of months and he is determined to go. But the pandemic restrictions prevent him from leaving through legal channels.

Illegal channels throw up uncertainties and Min Min Htun has heard stories of people being shot

A man with a mustache and goatee, wearing a red polo shirt with a small green 'BOSS' logo, is looking off to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a domestic setting with a purple patterned cloth hanging.

while using illegal routes to enter Thailand. He has also thought about using alternative channels but the rumours make him hesitate. At the beginning of September, about 6,000 people were arrested along the border while trying to enter Thailand illegally, the *Myanmar Times* reported. They can be detained for up to six months.

In the meantime, Min Min Htun says the workers who have returned from overseas need to save their money very carefully and wait and look out

for opportunities. Jobs are hard to find in Myanmar and while demand is too high, salaries are too low, so there will always be people who need to work abroad, he says.

“The current situation is a lesson for all migrant workers,” Min Min Htun says. “Instead of pursuing a lavish materialistic lifestyle, please save your earnings as this can help guarantee your future.”



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## CHASING THE FADING GLIMMERS OF A DREAM

Yaw Mya Sar went to work in China with a heavy heart.

As a widow, she had three sons, the eldest of whom suffered from a drug addiction. She wanted to make sure that she could not only support her family but also give her sick son professional care.

But the woman could not find any work in Myitkyina, her hometown and capital of Kachin State in northern Myanmar, so she and her second son left in October 2018 to go work in Cheng Tong in China's Yunnan Province. They left with a group of 45 people from different parts of the country; she and her son were the only ones from Myitkyina. The sick son stayed behind.

From the beginning, settling in China proved to be difficult.

"I felt very vulnerable and my son who was ill passed away," says Yaw Mya Sar. She firmly believes that if she had had a job and made enough money, her son would have had a chance.

"I would've been able to treat him and send him to a rehabilitation centre, and later send him to a place far from home where it is not easy to find drugs, for his studies and work, and to start a better life," she says.

Yaw Mya Sar's contract in Cheng Tong did not allow her to take leave during the first year of employment so she could not travel back to Myanmar for her son's funeral. Her neighbours in Myitkyina helped arrange the funeral.

In Cheng Tong, Yaw Mya Sar and her son both worked scaling fish from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day. At first they were only given 15 minutes for

lunch -- it was later extended to 30 minutes at the workers' request. However, they were not allowed to leave the premises during those 14 hours.

Yaw Mya Sar and her son lived in a small room their employer provided for them. They were only

allowed to go out once a week for a limited time, for personal matters or shopping. It was not easy to get clean or extra clothing or food, and the living environment was not sanitary at all, she says.

Yaw Mya Sar did her best to cope; her job was all that she had. She had left Myanmar with a lot of hope, and she didn't mind that she was doing hard labour for 300 days straight. The real problem was the salary.

"I am happy to work hard. Even for a small salary it is okay, but I could not live on what they gave me," she says.


All work-related matters were managed by a "labour leader" with whom she communicated through a translator. Yaw Mya Sar says that during her employment she did not even have the right to know what her monthly salary was.

In October 2019, a year after they had started working, Yaw Mya Sar and her son decided to return to Myanmar because they realized their employer was cheating them on their salaries. She found out her total income was only 12,000 yuan (about \$1,787). Although she is grateful that the money helped in building her kitchen and buying a new motorbike back in Myanmar, she had hoped for much more.

*"I was not able to achieve my dreams," the woman says.*

In their old home in Myitkyina, Yaw Mya Sar and her second son were reunited with the youngest son. Her second son, now 20, found work as a motorbike taxi driver. Yaw Mya Sar's plan was to start a pig farm but that would have cost 2 million kyat (about \$1,549) in capital, which she didn't have. So she took up work at a gems market. But selling gemstones does not earn her much income.

Living in an area of instability and conflict also makes life challenging.



Although Yaw Mya Sar's hometown is on the outskirts of Myitkyina and so not directly hit by the conflict, people there do suffer from the effects, such as a shortage of schools and educational centres. The lack of access to education is one reason communities like hers have difficulties moving forward and finding jobs with decent wages. Although people are willing to work hard, they are only offered odd jobs -- and even those are hard to get because so many people are willing to work for the lowest wages. Yaw Mya Sar, who is now 45, says she wants to return to China to find another job.

"There are plenty of times when I wonder whether I am still a human being," she says in a whisper. "Here in Myanmar, I don't know what to do for a living. For someone like me who is old and uneducated, is there any job for me here?"

"I want to see employment opportunities in Myanmar for people without education. I have worked in another country and it was very stressful. If there are jobs in Myanmar, I can do it. I am willing to learn."

*Note: In late 2020, a few months after this interview, Yaw Mya Sar's son said his mother had gone back to Yunnan, this time to work at a restaurant in Ruili county. He said he was preparing to join her.*

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## SAVING MY CHILD, MY TREASURE

Tin Lin Naing was 20 and studying for a law degree when his family's financial problems forced him to give up his education. He soon married and began to work a series of odd jobs – as a boatsman, at construction sites – but it wasn't enough to support his family. So with the help of his neighbours, in 2008 Tin Lin Naing left his home and his wife on Bilu Island in Myanmar's Mon state for Putrajaya, just south of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The trip to Malaysia was arranged by his two brothers, who had gone there through unofficial channels in 2003. The two brothers first worked at construction sites there before opening their own tea shop. Tin Lin Naing worked at a different tea shop in Putrajaya, owned by a Malaysian Chinese. In the beginning, everything was going well, but then his 11-year-old son back in Myanmar became ill and needed costly blood transfusions every month.

Tin Lin Naing's wife had given birth to that son in Myanmar, before she went to Putrajaya and worked in the same tea shop as her husband. Their extended family took care of the boy.

*"He is my treasure," Tin Lin Naing says. "Even though we cannot fully remove his disease, I want to treat him enough for him to be able to live like other children do."*

The treatment costs roughly 200,000 kyat (\$154) a month, making it exceedingly hard for Tin Lin Naing to save money. When Tin Lin Naing's wife was pregnant with their second son, the couple returned to Myanmar in March 2020 for the birth. They have been unable to return to Malaysia since because of COVID-19 travel restrictions.

The couple had felt very much at home working together in that tea shop. Tin Lin Naing says non-Muslim migrant workers in Malaysia are mistreated in many industries. But in that tea shop, Muslim and non-Muslim staff members were very accepting of each other and all the customers treated them equally, he says.

Tin Lin Naing's work visa for Malaysia will be expiring soon, and his employer has been calling to check when he would return. In Myanmar, he is struggling to pay the bills, including for his wife's delivery and for his other son's blood treatments. The family lives in the southern part of Bilu Island, where the only jobs are at construction sites. And because of the monsoon and COVID-19, there are not enough jobs to go around.

"I have many wishes that I want to achieve in my life and after working for 12 years, I can say most of them have been pursued," says Tin Lin Naing, holding his sick son in his arms in the house that he managed to buy. However, in these dire times, he worries he will not have enough money for his son's treatment.

Tin Lin Naing wants employers in Myanmar to provide more jobs in ports and to open other industries that provide jobs for local people. He believes that the country's recent general elections will help bring progress to the country and create more jobs.

Tin Lin Naing believes that all the sacrifices he has made will be worth it if his children could lead better lives and enjoy better opportunities. This is driving his determination to return to Malaysia by any means.

"I want to go back to give my children an equal life in the new developing Myanmar," he says.



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## A COW FOR A PASSPORT: I WANT TO GO BACK

“I applied for my passport hoping to go back but instead, I lost a cow for the cost of the passport application,” 25-year-old Khin Yu Wai says jokingly.

Through a broker in their hometown, Dike Oo township in Bago city northeast of Yangon, Khin Yu Wai and her husband and her siblings – about 10 people in all -- found a recruitment agency that got them jobs in Thailand and helped with the travel requirements. They each paid 800,000 kyat (about \$619) for migration fees -- only to find themselves all working in a launderette 18 hours a day without fair wages.

Over the years, Thailand and Myanmar have signed two agreements to create a safe and regular channel for migration of low-skilled workers. Some migrants have complained on Facebook about the service fees, but many others do not because they do not know what the actual fees, or they are willing to take the risk and pay the fees so they can go abroad.

Khin Yu Wai had to sell two acres of her parents’ farmland in 2018 to cover the migration fees, though with her savings from working in Thailand, she was able to pay back the debt and support her family at home. Eventually, Khin Yu Wai with her husband, and two of her siblings left the launderette and found jobs at a Chinese-owned garment factory. While the hours were equally long, she was paid a regular salary.

But in November 2019, the factory suddenly terminated their employment without any explanation. The factory sent Khin Yu Wai, her husband and 40 other migrants back to Myanmar and told them they would be called back later on. They were each paid 6,000 baht (about \$192) in severance.

“We did not know anything,” Khin Yu Wai says. “But we were all happy because we were going

back home. We also did not know why we were paid that money either.

“But now we have been waiting to return but we are still here.”

While still hoping to their jobs back, Khin Yu Wai bought two cattle with some of her savings and worked with her husband in their farming business. Then in early July 2020, the factory asked them to return to work. It was a prayer answered.

“Around 10 people who live nearby came together and we discussed returning to Thailand for work, but there were some people who believe there are no jobs there. About eight of us are still thinking about going back,” she says.

Khin Yu Wai has heard about the COVID-19 pandemic, job cuts and migrants being turned back at the border –all “unpleasant and unwanted” news, she says.

Still, she prepared documents to renew her passport and sold her cattle. But now her husband is unsure. He injured his hand in a farming accident and it would be a struggle for him to find work.

“I want to go back again if possible,” Khin Yu Wai says. “My husband does not want to go back and wants to do agricultural work here.”

“But our farm is not reliable,” she adds, gazing at the rice fields in front of her home.

Since her husband’s accident, Khin Yu Wai has been the breadwinner of the family. She has even worked as a motorbike taxi driver. She knows what she is capable of.

*"In Thailand, people don't ask you what you can do. They show you how to do it first. I wish we could have a similar work culture in Myanmar," she says.*

Although the couple have been saving for two years, they still do not have enough to buy a house, let alone to realize Khin Yu Wai's desire to set up a small tailoring business. Looking back at the last nine months, Khin Yu Wai's bright dreams of her own house and her own business have dimmed significantly. All she can hope for now is a swift return to Thailand.



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## WONDERING, “HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO MAKE A LIVING HERE?”

The once-thriving rice fields behind the great Bago Forest are now all yellowed and full of weeds. It is a reminder of the times. With COVID-19 restrictions in place and the markets quickly closed, suddenly the harvests had nowhere to go. There was so much that nobody would even take it for free.

“How are we supposed to make a living here?” asks Zay Yar Soe, 23.

His village, Aye Chan Su in Bago Region northeast of Yangon, largely depends on farming. But COVID-19 has caused a crisis for seasonal crops like rice, which needs a lot of cultivation and capital. With farmers unable to put in the time and the money, the rice fields went to waste.

Zay Yar Soe went to Thailand when he was 20, after passing his matriculation exam. He worked in a Chinese-owned garment factory on the outskirts of Bangkok that specialized in leather products. Every month, he sent around 300,000 kyat (\$232) to his mother back home.

After two years, in October 2019 the factory unexpectedly terminated his contract. The factory did not give him any compensation and made him sign a declaration that he had left the job voluntarily. Zay Yar Soe returned home, only to find things exactly the same as when he left. “Nothing had changed,” he says. “When I asked for tuition fees to attend a training course on repairing phones, my mother said she didn’t have the money. When I asked where the money had gone, she said it was used to pay back the debts from my travel expenses.”

“I was very surprised,” he said, lowering his head.

When Zay Yar Soe left for Thailand, he was told that the loan needed for his travel costs was

small. On his return, he found out that the actual amount was 1.2 million kyat (\$916 at today’s exchange rates) and that his mother had taken out an additional loan of 500,000 kyat (\$387). And as time went by, the interest grew.

“It took almost two years to pay back my travel expenses,” Zay Yar Soe says.

His village began to face an economic crisis in the early 2000s. People could not get work and in the decade that followed, they began moving elsewhere to look for jobs. Most of the younger people decided to move abroad.

As a young man, Zay Yar Soe is an able farmer and driver and like many of his generation, he has a basic working knowledge of computers. Unfortunately, he has nowhere to use his computer skills in his hometown. He bought a motorbike with his savings and now works as a motorbike taxi driver. He makes just enough to make ends since it is just him and his mother.

“I don’t want to go back to Thailand,” Zay Yar Soe says. “There is no guarantee that there will always be a job with a good salary. I have already experienced that.”

He says he would earn the same amount in Myanmar as he would in Thailand, especially after all the loans are paid. All he wants now is to find better work at home.

*“I don’t want to be in debt, and I don’t want to go to another country for the sake of repaying that debt,”* he whispers, looking at the two-storey house on stilts stained dark.

Zay Yar Soe says he wants to see more factories producing local products, factories that would employ young people like him. But that, he says, is something only the Government can make happen.









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