

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON RETURNING MIGRANTS SOUTHEAST ANALYSIS



Quarantine facility volunteer helping a returning migrant in Myawaddy, Kayin State. © IOM 2020

OVERVIEW

This rapid assessment was conducted by Mon Women's Coalition (MWC), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in collaboration with their partner Metta Development Foundation, with the technical support of IOM and in close coordination with the Department of Labour. The assessment covered eight townships of Mon State (Kyaikmaraw, Ye, Thanbyuzayat, Paung, Mawlamyine, Chaungzon, Mudon, Kyaikto), five townships of Kayin State (Thandaunggyi, Hpa-An, Kawkareik, Hlaingbwe, Kyainseikgyi), one township of Tanintharyi Region (Yebyu), and four townships of Kayah State (Loikaw, Demoso, Hpruso, Shadaw).¹ The objectives of the assessment were to:

1. Understand the experiences, challenges and future intentions of returnees and communities of return
2. Support an evidence-based response to the challenges faced by returning migrants as a result of the COVID pandemic

RETURN MIGRATION

Of the 2,311 returned migrants surveyed, 710 (373 women; 336 men; 1 responded "other") have returned to Myanmar's Southeast, comprising Kayin State, Kayah State, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Region.² Around 30 per cent of these returnees identified as ethnic Mon, 27 per cent as ethnic Kayin, 13 per cent as "other," 12 per cent as ethnic Bamar, and 11 per cent as ethnic Kayah. The remaining interviewees identified as some combination of the various ethnicity options.³ Over 90 per cent of migrants in this region had returned from working abroad.

33 per cent of returned migrants to Southeast said they returned because they lost their job due to COVID-19 (37% men; 30% women). 19 per cent returned for reasons unrelated to the pandemic and 14 per cent said that they returned because they got scared and ran away. A further 33 per cent cited "other" reasons why they returned home, including Thingyan holidays (6%) their family wanted them to

¹For detailed methodology and full findings see main report.

²For presentation purposes this brief presents percentage figures rounded to the nearest whole percentage. For this reason and due to the rounding of decimal points, not all totals add up to exactly 100 per cent.

³While the majority of respondents identified as either Mon, Kayin, Bamar or Kayah, others identified as a combination of ethnicity options, such as Bamar-Kayin, or Chin-Kayin. Further, as noted in the text, a comparatively high proportion identified as "other," denoting an ethnic group or combination of ethnicities not listed in the survey.

Funding for this assessment was provided by the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT)



Livelihoods and Food Security Fund



managed by UNOPS

return due to the pandemic (5%), increased hardships at the destination (3%), and reasons not cited in the survey (19%).

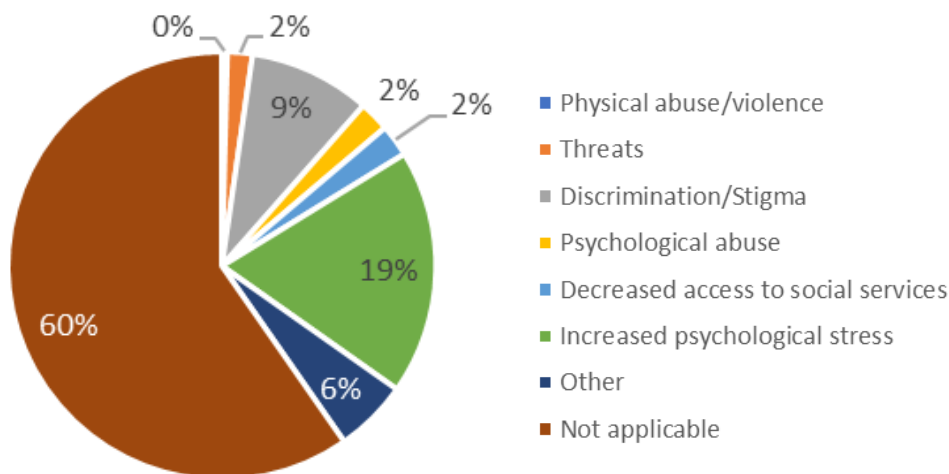
There were some differences by ethnicity in terms of reasons for return, particularly with regard to job loss: 34 per cent of ethnic Bamar, 27 per cent of ethnic Mon, and 40 per cent of ethnic Kayin said that they returned home because they lost their job due to COVID-19.

Prior to returning, 19 per cent (16% men, 21% women) of migrants from the Southeast said they had experienced increased psychological stress, and 9 per cent of men and women said they had experienced discrimination (Figure 1). 4 per cent of respondents said they had experienced some form of abuse, including threats, physical abuse/violence and psychological abuse. 6 per cent said they had experiences other than those listed in the survey,

stress. 26 per cent of ethnic Bamar and 34 per cent of ethnic Mon said that they had experienced increased psychological stress since to returning home, compared to 17 per cent of ethnic Kayin. Levels of stigma/discrimination appeared similar across ethnic groups, with 15 per cent of ethnic Bamar, 15 per cent of ethnic Kayin and 14 per cent of ethnic Mon reported experiencing discrimination/stigma. Kayah were particularly likely to report facing no challenges, with 97 per cent of ethnic Kayah, compared to 63 per cent of ethnic Kayin reporting that none of the options were applicable to them.

Upon arriving home, over 90 per cent of migrants from the Southeast were requested to quarantine in either in a community facility or at home (the remainder either did not remember what they were requested to do, or were not asked to quarantine), and a similarly high proportion (over 90%) reported

Figure 1: Experiences prior to return



and 2 per cent said they had experienced decreased access to social services. 60 per cent of respondents said that none of these options were applicable.

Since returning to the Southeast, migrants reported an increase in stressors, with 21 per cent saying they had experienced increased psychological stress (19% men; 23% women), and 11 per cent said they had experienced discrimination/stigma (11% men; 12% women). 4 per cent said they had experienced some kind of psychological abuse, threats or physical abuse and 3 per cent said they had experienced "other" challenges, 2 per cent cited decreased access to services, and 59 per cent said that none of the options were applicable.

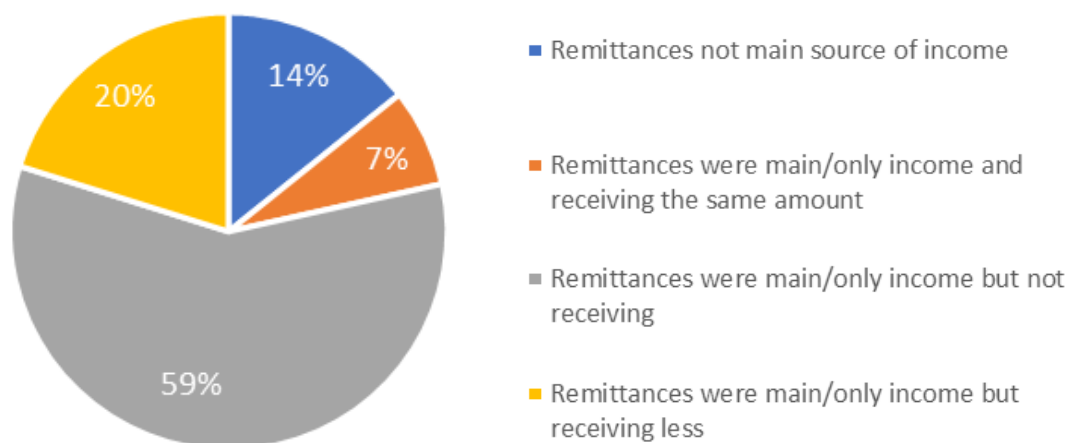
There were some differences in challenges experienced since returning across different ethnic groups, again particularly in regard to psychological

having done so. Of those who quarantined in a community facility, 22 per cent of both men and women said there was not enough protective items and hygiene items, 12 per cent reported that there was not enough food for returnees, and 11 per cent said the facilities were not appropriate for proper quarantine.

ECONOMIC SITUATION

Myanmar households have struggled with a loss of income since migrants returned home and the Southeast has been no exception to the resultant economic and social challenges. 59 per cent of surveyed Southeast returnees said their households were no longer receiving the remittances that had been their main/only source of income (57% men; 60% women) (Figure 2). 20 per cent said that remittances were their only source of income and they are receiving less (22% men; 19% women) and

Figure 2: Remittances



14 per cent said that remittances were not their main source of income (15% men; 13% women).

The impact of the pandemic on remittances was varied across ethnic groups (Figure 3). 79 per cent of ethnic Bamar, 65 per cent of ethnic Mon, 60 per cent of ethnic Kayin, and 38 per cent of ethnic Kayah said their households were no longer receiving the remittances that had been their main/only source of income. 12 per cent of Bamar, 27 per cent of Mon, 17 per cent of Kayin, and 26 per cent of Kayah said that remittances were the main/only source of income, but they were receiving less.

The loss of remittances has impacted on migrants, their families and communities in different ways. The ability to withstand sustained economic shocks

differs from region to region and household to household. 54 per cent of surveyed men and women in the Southeast said that their households did not have any savings. 36 per cent said they have savings but are using them at an increased rate. 10 per cent reported having savings, but not needing to use them. Men and women's responses to this question were identical.

Impacts on savings were similarly negative across all ethnic groups. Over 90 per cent of Bamar, Kayah and Mon, and 81 per cent of Kayin, said that either their households did not have any savings, or that they are using them at an increased rate (Figure 4). Mon were slightly more likely than other ethnic groups to have savings and be using them at an increased rate.

Figure 3: Remittance impacts across ethnic groups

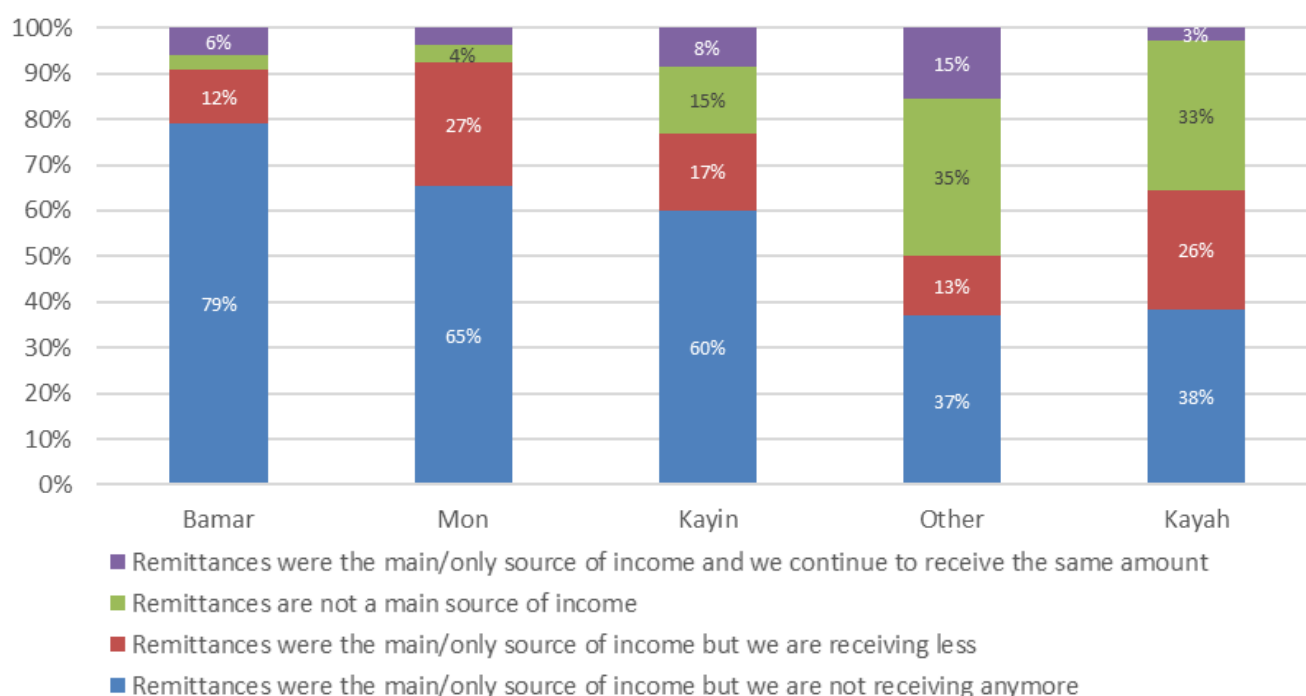
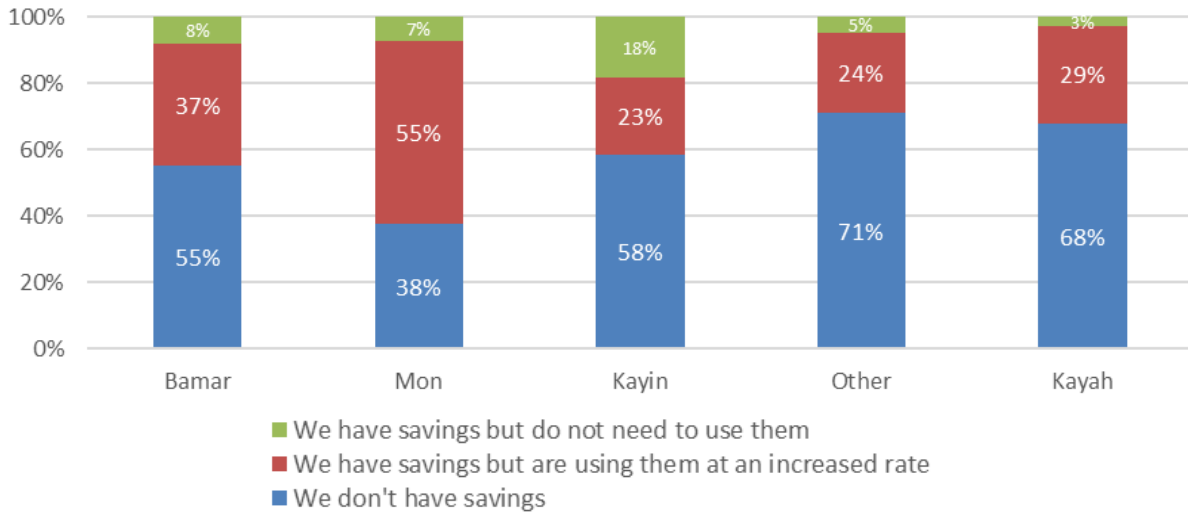


Figure 4: Levels of savings across ethnic groups



As remittances have dried up, households without an economic buffer have looked to outside sources for economic relief. Borrowing money in an effort to fill an income gap has created and, in some cases, exacerbated existing levels of household debt (Figure 5). 21 per cent of Southeast returnees surveyed said that their household is in debt and that the debt has worsened since the pandemic (19% men; 23% women). 17 per cent said they are in debt, but the debt has not been affected by the pandemic (19% men; 16% women), and 61 per cent of returnees said that their households are not in debt (62% men; 61% women).

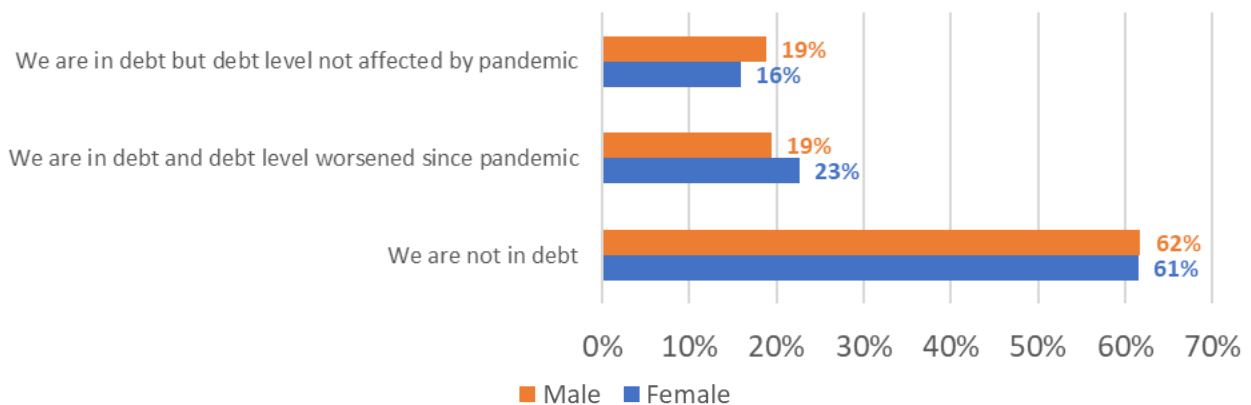
The proportion of those whose debt has worsened since the pandemic was higher amongst Bamar and Mon (26%) than other ethnic groups. However, a significant proportion of Kayin (71%), Bamar (67%), Shan (62%) and Mon (59%) reported that they are not in debt, while around half (55%) of ethnic Kayah said the same thing.

INTENTIONS

As the pandemic has continued, returnees are considering what they will do next. 408 (57%) of Southeast returnees surveyed said they plan to remigrate (56% women; 59% men). In Mon State, 71 per cent of respondents said that they plan to remigrate, in Tanintharyi Region 60 per cent, in Kayin State 56 per cent, and in Kayah State 36 per cent.

Of those Southeast returnees who plan to remigrate, 76 per cent said they plan to remigrate as soon as they can (74% men; 78% women), 5 per cent said they plan to remigrate within the next year, and 3 per cent said they plan to go in the next 1-3 months. A further 12 per cent said they do not know what they will do, and 4 per cent said they had other plans.

Figure 5: Debt by gender



82 per cent of Southeast returnees who plan to remigrate said that they intend to go back to the same place they were previously working (79% men; 86% women). 80 per cent said they intend to work in the same job they worked before the pandemic. Among Southeast returnees not intending to remigrate, 43 per cent of men and women said they plan to work in the agriculture sector. 19 per cent said they planned to find casual work (26% of men; 13% of women), 18 per cent said they plan to work in jobs not listed in the survey, 7 per cent said they plan to support their family's business, and a further 5 per cent said they do not know what they will do.

As returned migrants and their families wait to see what happens with regard to a lifting or loosening of COVID-19 related travel restrictions, they have immediate needs resulting from living without a source of income. 15 per cent of Southeast men and women surveyed said that food support is of greatest importance, 15 per cent said livelihood support, and 13 per cent said civil documentation was needed immediately. A further 9 per cent each said they needed medical care, shelter, psychological care and clothing, and 8 per cent legal assistance, as an immediate need (with similar needs expressed between men and women).

If the situation improves, there are a number of economic, social and psychosocial support interventions that will be required for returned migrants and their families, beyond satisfying immediate needs. The highest need expressed by 23 per cent of returned men and women to the Southeast, was for support in remigration and finding employment abroad. Additional needs were also expressed, including business start-up support (15%), finding employment in their hometown (13%), economic recovery and development support for their community (11%), skills training (11%), finding work elsewhere in Myanmar (10%), and psychological/psychosocial support (9%).



CONCLUSION

Findings on the experiences of returned migrant workers to the Southeast indicates that migrant workers and their households have been impacted economically and socially by a loss of employment and remittances and corollary psychosocial affects. Around a third of migrants surveyed had returned because they lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Both prior to and after returning to hometowns, returnees reported high levels of psychological stress and discrimination, particularly among ethnic Bamar, Mon and Kayin. A loss of jobs and wages has contributed to these stressors, with over 60 per cent of ethnic Kayin, Mon and Bamar saying their households were no longer receiving the remittances that had been their main/only source of income. Over 75 per cent of returnees to the Southeast see their return as temporary and around a quarter said they would benefit from support in remigration and finding work abroad. As such, migration is likely to continue representing a key poverty reduction strategy for households in this region.

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